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## **Methodological implications of studying customer orientation from a complex responsive processes perspective**

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**Abstract:** The whole body of literature linking employee customer oriented attitudes with desirable customer outcomes can be seen as lending support to the argument that customer orientation matters to organisations (Liao and Subramony, 2008). But as well as from literature as from my own experiences, it becomes clear that it is difficult to develop and implement customer oriented thinking in organisations. To study the emergence of customer orientation in an organisation methods are required that are consonant with the continuous processes of mutual adaptation, mutual anticipation and meaning making that occurs when people have to work together to achieve things (Mowles, 2011). This paper presents a perspective that acknowledges customer orientation as a social, rich, multifaceted and complex phenomenon. The methodological implications of this perspective are discussed, focusing on the explicit non-dualistic view in which personal experiences and reflections of the researcher are taken seriously.

**Keywords:** complexity; complex responsive processes; customer orientation; co-creation; human social action; narratives; reflection; social interdependency; structuration.

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**Biographical notes:** Jean Steevensz holds a degree in Engineering and Management Science (Marketing and Supply Chain Management). Besides his work, which comprises serving customers in a variety of complex industrial and high tech environments, he is an external PhD student at the Open Universiteit in The Netherlands. He investigates ways of understanding what is needed to consider the requirements of a customer more important in the work we do. His motivation comes from his amazement why it seems to take so much effort aligning different persons from different departments in an organisation to serve customers.

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### **1 Introduction**

In focusing on research, it is easy to forget that most of the information about customers and competitors comes from the experience acquired in the course of the everyday work

of salespeople, marketing people, project managers and the like. It may not be in the scientific sense but the information is rich and reveals information that cannot easily be elicited from statistics, surveys and interviews (Gummesson et al., 2014).

Over the years I experienced at different companies I worked for, that similar problems occurred with projects for customers. The purpose of the perspective described in this paper is to gain deeper insight into the practical judgments we are making together in ongoing organisational life when realising a complex innovative technical project for a customer and so enrich the understanding of how customer orientation emerges in an organisation. I aim to catch the reality of my daily working experience in flight as explained by Dawson (2003), with the purpose to gain an understanding *why is it so difficult to develop a customer oriented practice in organisations and to explore what is needed to consider the position of the customer more important in the work we do.*

## **2 Customer orientation – origin, definition and perceived advantages**

Customer orientation has been seen synonymous with the business philosophy called the marketing concept (Drucker, 1954; Levitt, 1960). The notion of putting the customer first is often traced back to Drucker's (1954) statement that the purpose of a firm is to acquire and keep customers (Berthon et al., 2002). The marketing concept holds that "the key to achieving organisational goals consists in determining the needs and wants of target markets and delivering the requirements more effectively and efficiently than competitors" (Kotler, 1988). Shah et al. (2006) define a customer centric orientation as aligning the activities and resources of an organisation to effectively search for and respond to the ever-changing needs of the customer, while building mutually beneficial relationships. Gebauer et al. (2011) state that customer orientation, combined with innovativeness, embedded in market orientation favours ideas that more accurately satisfy the increasing complexity of customer demands.

Saarijärvi et al. (2014) point to three main benefits that derive from customer orientation: better marketing programs, a greater likelihood of creating sustainable competitive advantage and the development of a distinctive and often difficult to imitate set of expertise.

The marketing concept states that if a business is to achieve profitability, the entire organisation must be oriented towards satisfying customers' needs, wants and aspirations (Blankson et al., 2006). This requires employees who embrace the importance of understanding and addressing customer needs and to align their everyday efforts with the ultimate goal of satisfying and retaining end-customers (Liao and Subramony, 2008). Customer oriented behavioural perspectives origin from the work of Saxe and Weitz (1982) who regard customer orientation as the manifestation of the marketing concept at the individual worker level. They defined customer orientation as the willingness of individuals, to customise their service delivery according to the customer's situation (e.g., needs, problems).

Beverland and Lindgreen (2007) argued that unless a certain attitude towards the marketing concept exists, behavioural initiatives towards a customer centric orientation will never emerge nor will these be effective.

Matsuno et al. (2005) found that even if a promoting environment exists, corresponding behaviour of employees does not necessarily take place. For example in my work as a sales manager I have to cooperate with engineers, purchasers, project

managers and general management. For them serving customers is not a primary objective. In marketing literature it is recognised that all employees of an organisation can be considered as internal customers. Every employee is both a supplier and a customer to other employees in the organisation (Conduit and Mavando, 2001). Internal customers generate goods and services for the end customers and are thus crucial to providing customer satisfaction (Conduit and Mavando, 2001).

### *2.1 Challenges to develop a customer oriented practice*

From the preceding discussion it is difficult to draw straightforward conclusions from literature about the steps to take to improve customer orientation in a company. Johannessen (2009) points to a deficit of much of the management literature which has proven to be of little practical relevance. According Saarijärvi et al. (2014) literature on customer orientation has paid attention to important matters regarding the enablers of customer orientation, what it requires and how to align the organisation accordingly. Gummesson et al. (2014) conclude that methodology in social sciences including marketing is preoccupied with fragments and a few variables as well as a desire to establish unambiguous and unidirectional causal relationships. They suggest to focus on all stakeholders and as a consequence on complexity and higher level theory generation. The move from a fragmented view of marketing to recognition of marketing complexity and diversity happens with the change from a single party focus (supplier) and a two-party focus (supplier/customer) to multiparty networks that take all market actors into account.

This new paradigm recognises a change in supplier and customer roles to be a focal issue. Goods and services are replaced by value propositions in which customers assume an active role as co-creators. Customers' active role as co-creators of value and resource integrators is gradually being recognised in theory [Gummesson et al., (2014), p.231]. Co-creation as a concept embraces the individual actions of suppliers, customers and other stakeholders and also the interactive relationships between them. In this way a supplier does a thing with customers and not to customers.

The recent study from Gummesson et al. (2014) is an important step towards a more practitioner oriented research of customer orientation. What is required to study the emergence of customer orientation in an organisation is described by Mowles (2011, p.85) as methods that are consonant with the continuous processes of mutual adaptation, mutual anticipation and meaning making that occurs when people have to work together to achieve things.

## **3 The nexus of structure and agency**

So far we have seen that most of the studies about customer orientation are aimed at behavioural aspects of individuals or at aspects of organisational structure. Theories that argue for the pre-eminence of structure resolve that the behaviour of individuals is largely determined by their socialisation into that structure. In social science, agency is the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices. In this view social structures are regarded as products of individual action that are sustained or discarded.

The nexus of structure and agency has been a central tenet in the field of sociology. Giddens (1984) developed his concept of structuration, where he argues that just as an individual's autonomy is influenced by structure, structures are maintained and adapted through the exercise of agency. This concept offers perspectives on human behaviour based on a synthesis of structure and agency effects, known as the 'duality of structure.'

Giddens (1984) structuration theory attempts to understand human social behaviour by resolving the competing views of structure-agency and macro-micro perspectives. This is achieved by studying the processes that take place at the interface between the actor and the structure. Structuration theory takes the position that social action cannot be fully explained by the structure or agency theories alone. Instead, it recognises that actors operate within the context of rules produced by social structures, and only by acting in a compliant manner are these structures reinforced. As a result, social structures have no inherent stability outside human action because they are socially constructed. Alternatively, through the exercise of reflexivity, agents modify social structures by acting outside the constraints the structures place on them.

Dom (2005) concludes that although the empirical usefulness of Giddens structuration theory remains vague, structuration theory served as an example for a substantial amount of researchers.

A perspective that draws on certain strands of thinking in sociology that stress human interdependence and regards individuals as social selves is the complex responsive processes approach, developed by Stacey et al. (2000). Similar to Giddens' structuration theory the complex responsive processes perspective does not separate the individual and the social, which implies a non-dualistic stance.

Giddens's framework of structuration shows three parallels with the complex responsive processes perspective which are to be found around the three kinds of structures Giddens (1984) identified in a social system. The first is signification, where meaning is coded in the practice of language and discourse. The complex responsive processes perspective is build on the work of Mead. One of his most influential ideas was the emergence of mind and self from the communication process between humans, also known as social behaviourism (Mead, [1934], 1962). Mead's theory of the social self is based on the perspective that the self emerges from social interactions, such as observing and interacting with others, responding to others' opinions about oneself, and internalising external opinions and internal feelings about oneself. In joint activities, which Mead called 'social acts', humans learn to see themselves from the standpoint of their co-actors. According Mead, ([1934], 1962) language develops the self by allowing individuals to respond to each other through symbols, gestures, words, and sounds. Mead's concept of the social act is relevant from the standpoint of a social process involving the interaction of many individuals.

The second social structure of Giddens is legitimation, consisting of the normative perspectives embedded as societal norms and values. Shotter (2005) explains that the shared background of normative expectations and anticipations embodied in our shared ways of acting; provide us with agreed criteria in terms of which we judge the meaning and value of each other's actions. The complex responsive process perspective regards organisations as iterated patterning of communicative interaction between interdependent employees (Stacey, 2011). Each of these employees belong to a group, e.g., sales people belong to a commercial department and engineers belong to the R&D department. Each of these groups give rise to 'we' identities of their members, providing them with a powerful sense of identity and corresponding norms and values.

Giddens's final structural element is domination, concerned with how power is applied, particularly in the control of resources. The complex responsive processes perspective refers to the work of Elias (1991), who argues that power is a structural characteristic of all human relationship. In Elias' view power is not something a person possesses. Instead power reflects the fact that we depend on each other and so enable and constrain each other. The basis of power is need. However this is never absolute, because the power of the more powerful depends upon the recognition of the less powerful. In addition power relations are dynamic: if others come to need us more than the power ratio shifts.

The foundational concepts of the complex responsive processes perspective originate from the complexity sciences (Nicolis and Prigogine, 1977). Complexity science is the study of complex systems that are characterised by strong (nonlinear) interactions between the parts as well as complex feedback loops that make it difficult to distinguish cause from effect. These characteristics result in scientists' inability to simply add up small-scale behaviour to arrive at large-scale results (Costanza et al., 1993). The essence of complexity science is the study of patterns and relationships and the focus on how order can emerge from a complex dynamical system (McDaniel and Driebe, 2001).

Insights from the complexity science were transferred to the social sciences. The concepts from natural science were applied to organisations, assuming that the human factor causing the complexity can be broken down into smaller bits that can be handled rationally. Abma (2011) points to the differences between complex systems in the social domain and in the world of physics. In the physical world, complex systems are limited, strongly integrated and visibly connected, whereas complex systems in the social domain are much more open with respect to their environment. The latter makes complex systems in the social domain less suited for a reductionist analysis as complex systems in the world of physics. Abma (2011) and Johannessen (2009) both point to the central importance of emergence or self-organisation in which irreversibility and novelty can be explained, without falling back on reductionist and control-oriented approaches. Interactions between actors in a complex system in the social domain are not visible or measurable compared to interactions in a complex system in the world of physics. A unique aspect of complex systems in the social domain, compared to complex systems in the physical world, is that the actors (individuals) feature representations (e.g., meaning, intentional action) of the emergent patterns. E.g., differences in communications may lead to different interpretation of emergent processes and thus to different outcomes.

A widely known example of transfer of insights from the complexity science is the complex adaptive systems (CAS). The CAS approach departs from an interventional perspective on organisations, assuming that human behaviour is somehow to be influenced to generate efficient social patterns. The complex responsive processes approach is a perspective, which departs from radically unpredictability, caused by the unpredictable nature of humans (Simon, 2015).

#### **4 Research from the complex responsive processes perspective**

Doing research from the complex responsive processes perspective, understanding an organisation is a "participative exploration of experience" (Stacey, 2010). This implies that the researcher cannot step outside the interaction with others. Change and organisational development are not conceptualised as a result of management plans or

organisational blueprints outside of the interacting members of the organisation (Mowles, 2011).

The importance of local interactive sense making in everyday experience is shared with auto ethnography, phenomenology, symbolic interaction and discourse analysis (Homan, 2014). What these different ontologies have in common is that a duality between the individual and the social is still recognisable, while the complex responsive processes perspective does not separate the individual and the social, which implies a non-dualistic stance. According Saunders et al. (2012) the complex responsive processes perspective can be characterised as a subjective ontology, which means that a separate and stable reality independent of human action and interpretation, available for observation and analysis is not assumed. The non-dualistic view of the complex responsive processes perspective has far reaching consequences for the way relevance, the external and internal validity of the research is established.

## 5 Implications

Weick (1995) postulated the question ‘how can we know what we do until we see what we produced’? This question is relevant for this study, while performing a research using the complex responsive processes approach is not a pre-designed research with clear conceptual categories, methods and phases specified in advance. The aim of many studies about customer orientation is to provide an objective description to a problem whereby the researchers are detached observers. In order to improve our insights Gummesson et al. (2014) recommend the use of participant observation. A difficulty however for managers is their paradoxical role, while they are part of an organisation and cannot be detached observers (Zhu, 2007).

Narrative studies offer the researcher an opportunity to be part of the field of research. According Donaldson (2013), narrative studies contribute to organisational learning, as well as help to understand organisational change as it really happens.

To perform a study from the complex responsive processes perspective, situations at work are described in the form of narratives. These are a description of personal experiences of my own daily working practice that forms the inquiry of raw data from which patterns and themes emerge for further reflection and research. These narratives can be shared with other participants in the described processes, however understanding that nobody interprets a situation exactly in the same way as the writer of the narrative.

A core element of the complex responsive processes approach is personal reflection on the everyday experience of organisational practice. Purpose of this reflection process is to discover in literature where the current way of thinking from the researcher comes from, how it is argued and how the way of thinking connects to the experiences of the researcher as a professional (Mowles, 2011).

Taking reflexivity as a point of departure for research is not without consequences. Within social sciences reflexive research represents a breach with modernistic scientific presumptions of objective observation. Reflection alone cannot qualify as research, because of the need for scientific facts. But what is a scientific fact? Fleck ([1935], 1979) stated that scientific facts are supposed to be distinguished from transient theories as something definite, permanent and independent from any subjective interpretation by the scientist. The critique of the methods used to establish this, constitutes the subject matter of epistemology (Fleck, [1935], 1979). At the same time he also argues that the

appearance of scientific facts as discovered things is in itself a social construction: a made thing.

Polkinghorne (2007) proposes that validating knowledge in narrative research is an argumentative practice. The purpose of the validation process in narrative research is to convince readers of the likelihood that the support for the claim is strong enough that the claim can serve as a basis for understanding of and action in the human realm. Narrative research issues claims about how people understand situations, others, and themselves (Polkinghorne, 2007). It is therefore mandatory for a researcher to be as much as possible explicit about his values and beliefs, and to describe the analyses and reflections made during the research process (Simon, 2015).

## **6 Outcomes**

The unit of analysis in the complex responsive processes approach is the experience of interacting with others in social settings. Here the concept of complexity is used as a fundamental attribute of the quality of the interaction of interdependent persons (Stacey, 2003). This implies that the insights of the research arise in the researcher's reflection on the micro detail of the researcher's own experience of interacting with others (Warwick, 2011). Reflexive narrative methods turns out to be helpful developing better understanding of one's own actions, especially when these reflections can be shared with others and are open for debate (Stacey, 2012). A careful description of the learning process of the researcher makes it possible for the readers to draw conclusions and make judgments, based on their own experiences.

Thomas (2010) described how this way of doing research leans towards phronesis or practical wisdom. One can learn the principles of action, but applying them in situations one could not have foreseen requires practical wisdom.

## **7 Conclusions**

The complex responsive processes perspective offers an alternative opportunity to perform a qualitative inquiry of everyday organisational life. By using this perspective I am able to investigate the prerequisites and obstacles for a customer oriented practice, i.e., how customer orientation emerges in ordinary daily organisational life, where different persons from different departments are working together to fulfil the requirements of a customer and where the customer has an active role as co-creator. In this research I focus on an understanding in action, which is quite distinct from the kind of cognitive and intellectual understanding that dominates organisational studies. Shotter (2005) named the knowledge gathered with this kind of research, a practical knowledge from within.

Studying customer orientation from a complex responsive processes approach is according to Agar (2013) a 'lively science', while the researcher is in constant interaction with other agents. Staying close to the original experience as described in the narrative allows reflective research to be a vehicle to gather new insights about human social action (Homan, 2014).

An important issue to consider methodologically is how come I have experienced similar problems in different organisations? This resonates with generalisation of the

particular of which Mead ([1934], 1962) is talking about and which can defend doing research from own experience. My subjective experience is an expression and result of social relating (an inter-subjective worldview). This is why a personal story always has something recognisable about it and why my personal experience with customer orientation is valid as research knowledge for others. We tend to experience similar things in similar environments, even though these environments are not directly connected to each other.

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