

## COMBINING IN THEORY BUILDING

**Uolevi Lehtinen**

Professor

Aalto University and University of Tampere

HELSINKI, FINLAND

E-mail: uolevi.lehtinen@uta.fi

### ABSTRACT

*The objectives of this article strive to describe the idea and rationale of combining i.e. why, when and how to develop theoretically new combined approaches. Then business administration, especially marketing is used as a theoretical and empirical illustrative area. Methodology is inductive and deductive logic and in the empirical examples surveys, case analysis and utilization of secondary data. This article introduce a new promising way, in the long run, to develop new comprehensive approaches and even paradigms for different disciplines, sub-disciplines and branches of sub-disciplines. Therefore, the ultimate message of the article is to challenge 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 rather multiple disciplinary concerning for example economics, social sciences and political sciences in addition to business administration.*

**Keywords:** combining, theory building, paradigms, practice.

### BACKGROUND

Many scholars have seriously debated the status of the theory or theories of their research area as a discipline and in practice. Have scholars excessively specialized in narrow perspectives and thus failed to look at the bigger picture in theory and in practice? Can theory describe the real world?

The researchers have also debated about paradigms. For example, in organization studies this debate 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).

This article tries to stimulate a general motivational start for theoretical development, which, in the longer run, will hopefully result in more systematic combinations and combined use of present approaches, for instance such as frameworks, models and theories. The objectives of this article aim at contributing 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, it utilizes the former business administration studies which describe the idea and rationale for combining, build some new approaches by combining present major approaches and examine them empirically. Especially marketing studies are used because combining has been studied in that area (see Lehtinen 2011) and we can utilize the results of these studies here. But we refer also to some studies in other areas of business administration.

Third, it 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 and often multidisciplinary paradigms for many parts of different disciplines.

Combining is the most central concept in these objectives. Here combining means putting some original parts together. In this article those parts are scientific approaches. Combining can be more or less identified e.g. with uniting, linking, connecting and integrating.

Discipline is another central concept in the objectives of this article. Here discipline refers to a particular body of knowledge, wisdom or learning. Normally this body of knowledge is associated with one academic field of study or profession.

So I use here the term discipline when discussing some main area of science e.g. business administration. I use sub-discipline when referring to an area of a discipline e.g. marketing and I use branch of sub-discipline when speaking about a theory of a sub-discipline e.g. marketing mix or relationship marketing.

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

As some kind of byproduct combining can also challenge some areas of present thinking in those parts of disciplines that are present in the combining process.

### **IDEA AND RATIONALE FOR COMBINING**

The natural and promising idea of combining in theory building has attracted very little direct attention in research. However, there are many general reasons to explore the combining possibilities of two or more present approaches:

- if 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.
- if there is a need or purpose to build some kind of general approach, which can cover some present approaches.
- if present approaches are not mutually exclusive.
- if present approaches have their own distinct strengths thus complementing one another.
- if present approaches have their own distinct weaknesses and the weaknesses of one approach can be at least partly offset with the strengths of the other (and possibly vice versa).
- if combining present approaches is a useful way to fill gaps between different theories, within specific theories and between theory and practice.
- if the generally accepted approaches can be so pertinently combined that the result should be an acceptable approach.
- if present approaches are well-known, which makes adoption easier.

These reasons are quite often valid. For the same reasons, the new approach (theory), which consciously, systematically and equally combines the essential and compatible elements of present 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 of 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 scientific levels. The utilization of advanced combining will be most common and natural at the level of branches of sub-disciplines because these branches are often scientifically or for their purpose quite near each others. In the marketing illustrations later, marketing mix and relationship marketing approaches are combined. Their scientific backgrounds are not very similar but their purpose is to a great extent the same. At the higher levels of combining i.e. when combining disciplines and sub-disciplines the results 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.

In another direction, 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 through the conscious but unsystematic combining to the conscious and systematic combining. 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 can also depend on the characteristics of the case in question. Thus combining can be performed e.g. with different thoroughness. This thoroughness depends on how easy it is to find and combine different compatible elements of the approaches.

Combining may be performed within one discipline or 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 as multidisciplinary areas of inquiry. Oswick, Fleming and Hanlon (2011) listed fourteen remarkable contributions of organization and management theory and only one of the proponents of these contributions was a primarily the researcher of business administration. On the other hand, many social-psychological, mathematically formulated models have been utilized in consumer behavior research which is quite independent research area inside marketing research. These kinds of borrowings have often been very fruitful and they can sometimes be rather useful when trying to find proper combinations.

Actually, in rather many 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. 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.

It is a good reason to underline that we should have no implicit assumption that combining as such is a virtue. Even if we can find some remarkable major approaches with the help of combining we must appreciate also minor theories that are fruitful in a limited area.

Sometimes 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, approaches can be even so contradictory and incompatible that any combining is unwise or even impossible.

Some researchers have dealt with some concepts that are the relatives of combining. For example, borrowing and blending are the relatives of combining that can be utilized also in the connection of 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).

Many combined approaches are to some extent multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary because they have fairly different origins. But it is a good reason to understand that all combined approaches are not very multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary.

## MARKETING STUDIES COMBINING MIX AND RELATIONSHIP APPROACHES

The marketing studies are now discussed as illustrations 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, Pels, Coviello, and Brodie 2000).

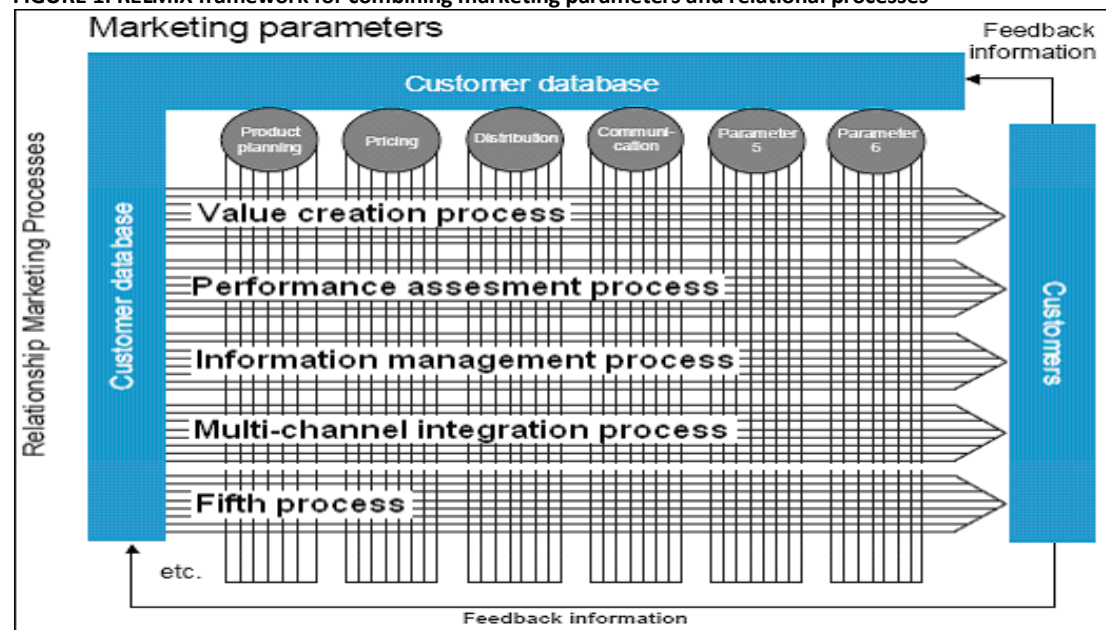
The main objective of the marketing studies was to outline theoretically new conceptual approaches by combining the marketing mix and relationship marketing approaches and to study them empirically (Lehtinen 2009 and 2010). The marketing mix and relationship marketing approaches are at the center of theoretical and practical marketing (see Grönroos 2007, Gummesson 2008 and Kotler 2011).

Both mix marketing approach and relationship marketing approach actually are the families 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 often have the different scientific origins and in this sense the examination is interdisciplinary (see also Choi and Pak 2006).

Some new combined approaches were developed according to the objectives of the marketing studies (Lehtinen 2011). 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 used separately or parallel.

A fairly advanced combination framework developed in the marketing studies (Lehtinen 2007 and 2009) 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 of mix marketing on the horizontal level and the essential elements of relationship marketing on the vertical level. 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. 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 graph 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.

The RELMIX framework like all advanced combined approaches can be considered interdisciplinary. In principal, the most advanced approaches can be even transdisciplinary at least if the combined approaches are scientifically quite far from each others. On the other hand, the parallel use of different approaches can be considered multidisciplinary but not interdisciplinary. Actually, the degree of multiple disciplinary depends on the scientific difference of the combined theories.

The quality of the empirical parts of the studies was maintained throughout the research work (see Lehtinen 2011). Because the main results were almost identical in all the three surveys and 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 the four own studies and three secondary studies seemed to prove that there are evident gaps between marketing practice manifested by empirical results and current theories manifested by separate approaches of mix marketing and relationship marketing. At the same time, the results of these studies also confirm the view of the marketing studies that there are a lot of parallel use of both approaches, a significant use of approaches combined to some extent and a strong need to explore how to combine approaches. So many companies have already utilized combining approaches at least in a modest form and most companies really wanted to find a proper way to combine.

The findings of the marketing studies can be used in marketing management practice at least in a modified form. Applications naturally require the 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, though 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 2011).

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.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

There is a good reason to return to the questions presented at the beginning of this paper. The most fundamental question is: Have scholars specialized their studies excessively and narrowed their perspectives resulting in a failure to look at the bigger picture in theory and practice. The results of the marketing studies suggest an affirmative answer to this question. But this article does not try to persuade to narrow perspectives, but, on the contrary, to broaden them.

This article introduces a promising new way, in the long run, to develop new, comprehensive and also 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.

As we stated we should have no implicit assumption that combining as such is a virtue. It is important to scrutinize different arguments that can be presented for or against the idea of combining approaches (and perhaps creating one single paradigm at the same time). On the other hand, we should not have any implicit assumption that multiple disciplinarity is a virtue. We must also understand that all forms and results of combining are not clearly multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary. But very many combinations are, because they have at least somewhat different scientific origins.

The results of the marketing studies strongly encouraged to continue the scientific and practical work on combining approaches in marketing. But I have no reason to suspect that the basic idea and rationale behind combining are invalid in other branches of business administration. For example, in accounting, in finance as well as in management and organization there are both rationalistic research and behavioral research. Some combinations of approaches in these research areas should be possible and reasonable. They result in fairly comprehensive approaches and possibly even new comprehensive paradigms which are more or less multiple disciplinary.

I think that the basic idea and rationale of combining could and should be utilized in very many disciplines in addition to business administration. Probably the scientists in many research fields should experience combining as one fundamental and stimulating challenge when developing theory and practice. Therefore, the ultimate message of this article is to stimulate the researchers 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 and comprehensive approaches if possible in the field in question. Naturally, the nature of this message is rather multiple disciplinary concerning for example economics, social sciences and political sciences in addition to business administration.

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