

Ethics and industrial networks: a Levinasian approach towards the study of justice in the supply chain

Matthew Higgins & Nick Ellis*

School of Management, University of Leicester, UK

*contact author: n.ellis@le.ac.uk

Abstract

This theoretical paper seeks to make a contribution to studies of ethics in a 'business-to-business' context. We argue that the normative focus of much research in marketing ethics has rendered scholars unable to imagine issues of morality beyond a rather narrowly defined set of tools. Instead, after a quarter of a century of academic development in the field of purchasing and marketing, we invite the IMP Group to embrace some more challenging conceptualisations of justice. Fittingly for a conference to be held in France, this re-conceptualisation will be approached through the work of the post-structuralist philosopher Emmanuel Levinas.

We posit that Levinasian approaches to ethics offer a particular insight into supply chain relationships, re-appraising the identities of the parties that comprise industrial networks. Thus, after outlining some notions of justice within marketing systems, our paper will suggest how we might relate Levinas's complex theoretical arguments about ethics and justice to the discourse of supply chain managers and their codes of practice. Based on these arguments, we will explain how a discursive analysis of social constructions of managerial identities and 'the other' within the language of supply chains may facilitate moves towards strategies of fairer trade.

Key words: ethics, industrial networks, supply chains, justice, discourse analysis

Introduction

This theoretical paper seeks to make a contribution to studies of ethics in a 'B2B' context, a field in which Lindfelt and Tornroos (2006: 328) have noted that research is "almost nonexistent". Having said this, marketing ethics in general has proven to be a keenly researched field over the last 20 years. Indeed, the marketing discipline is replete with frameworks, codes and guidelines that seek to advise practitioners on their behaviour and to guide further research within the field. We argue, however, that the normative focus of much of this research has created a claustrophobic atmosphere, rendering scholars unable to imagine issues of morality beyond a rather narrowly defined set of tools. Instead, after a quarter of a century of academic development in the field of purchasing and marketing, we invite the IMP Group to embrace some more challenging conceptualisations of justice.

Our paper seeks to unsettle conventional marketing perspectives on supply chain ethics. It sets out to achieve this by proposing an approach to supply chains that looks beyond a detached and abstract linear 'flow' model to examine the contextual nature of supply chain relationships. Moving away from an emphasis on the end user, our *oeuvre* casts managers as participants in the construction of the chain. We suggest that this requires a re-conceptualisation in method as we examine the issues of ethics and morality that reverberate within this process of construction. Fittingly for a conference to be held in France, this re-conceptualisation will be approached through the work of the post-structuralist philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who from 1930 was granted French citizenship.

Levinas has been largely ignored by writers on supply chain management and marketing ethics, as Jones et al. (2005: 167) note "It is telling that, despite the existence of a large and controversial work...and being one of the major influences on discussions of ethics in philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century, Levinas has been almost totally avoided by the discipline of business ethics." This omission is perhaps to be expected; whilst Jones et al. (2005) note the existence of a "large and controversial work", they should perhaps also note the seemingly wilful complexity of the writings of Levinas that the reader is forced to confront. Nevertheless, in writing this paper we wish to suggest that Levinasian approaches to ethics offer a particular insight into supply chain relationships and ethics, re-appraising the identities of the parties that comprise industrial networks. In addition, Levinas and his absence from the canon of works within business ethics offers an opportunity to reflect on the particular nature of business ethics and justice as approached by marketers.

Thus, after outlining some notions of justice within marketing systems, and discussing some of the contributions that philosophy has made to the study of supply chain ethics, our paper suggests how we might relate Levinas's complex theoretical arguments about ethics and justice to the discourse of supply chain managers and their codes of practice. Based on these arguments, we posit that a discursive analysis of social constructions of managerial identities and 'the other' within the language of supply chain ethics may facilitate moves towards strategies of fairer trade or "strategy as justice" (Gilbert, 1992 - cited in Carlton and Kurland, 1996: 176). In this way, Levinas has opened out a 'problematic', creating a space in which problems become identified, if not resolved. The discursive approach to management texts we put forward paper does not promise easily digestible solutions, but does continue the search for justice.

Notions of justice: monitoring the marketing system

Perhaps the most pertinent notion of justice to the context of supply chain relationships is that of distributive justice (DJ). Laczniaik and Murphy (2008: 5) explain that DJ "applied to marketing deals with how the marketing system... fairly apportions rewards and penalties among the various parties affected by the market exchange process". They provide some examples of topical issues in DJ including how firms treat impoverished suppliers and consumers when marketers establish footholds in developing countries; and "the proportionate awards going to migrant farm workers who

are employed in the agribusiness supply chain". Laczniak and Murphy argue that as the "globalisation of the economic inevitably expands further... the concerns of DJ will only become more critical." Indeed, they note how the American Marketing Association lists fairness as one of its ethical values for marketers.

Fairness in industrial networks can be linked to a stakeholder perspective on global supply chain strategy and corporate culture. After Freeman (1984) and Donaldson and Preston (1995), Ferrell and Ferrell (2008: 25) argue, "the stakeholder framework recognises the intrinsic value of all stakeholders from an ethical perspective and acknowledges the utilitarian need for firms to serve interests of different stakeholders to secure their support". If marketing is viewed as operating at the centre of business functions, then "from a strategic perspective there may be moral fiduciary responsibilities (e.g. to shareholders), but it is wrong to ignore stakeholders who are third parties...". They propose that a stakeholder culture can be developed through three integrated components (shared values, behavioural norms, and artefacts) that can foster a sense of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), explaining that, "Artefacts include codes of ethics (and) policy manuals...(that) preserve the history of the organisation and help new organisational members learn and maintain the corporate culture" (p23). Moreover, it would appear that, in the case of supply chain relations, the hope is that such learning extends beyond the notional boundaries of the focal firm, and is transferred 'upstream' to suppliers.

It is worth considering the notion of procedural justice (PJ) in comparison to DJ in this context. PJ is concerned with the fairness with which decisions are made and implemented. It differs from DJ in that it focuses on the means by which outcomes arise from interactions, whereas DJ looks at the outcomes of the exchange. A greater perception of fairness tends to arise in situations where individuals have greater control and a 'voice' (Boyd et al., 2007). A supplier pursues its own interests in an exchange relationship to gain financial reward, but PJ also helps to ensure that the supplier's concerns are represented in the buyer's decision-making process. Suppliers will often give up short term gains if the buyer indicates an interest in a longer-term relationship, where past interaction influences future behaviours. PJ is present if buyers communicate to suppliers that they are valued as an exchange partner and member of the supply chain for more than just maintaining low cost, but also for CSR compliance.

This can be compared to the use of codes of conduct as formal mechanisms for supplier monitoring. Codes can enable a firm to signal to stakeholders that it is committed to CSR, and allow it to attempt to ensure supplier compliance to CSR guidelines. However, the inconsistent ways in which firms carry out this monitoring has been criticised, making cross-chain comparisons impossible and leading suppliers to question the commitment of buyers towards fairness in trading. Despite a common-sense assumption that higher levels of monitoring will increase the likelihood of compliance by reducing information asymmetry between buyers and suppliers, the literature suggests that this can instead signal distrust (Murry and Heide, 1998), sometimes even leading to opportunistic acts (John 1984). High levels of monitoring can thus have negative impacts on relationships, leading to conflict and poor performance. We may thereby see how an approach characterized by PJ can be more likely to increase supplier compliance.

However, as Boyd et al. (2007: 349) point out, just how a buying firm can embed PJ into its relational practices is far from clear. They argue that one step to achieving a procedurally just implementation of CSR within the supply chain is for a firm to "articulate precisely" in a code of practice what its intentions are and what it expects from its suppliers and their suppliers in turn. They believe that there should be "no ambiguity" as to the goals and penalties pertaining to the code. Moreover, they state that buying firms should take a less paternalistic view of working with low-cost country suppliers, and give them a voice such that they are encouraged to participate in supply chain CSR issues. While we welcome the second of these recommendations in terms of affording 'voice' to suppliers, we are rather less convinced that precise articulation of CSR responsibilities and unambiguous statements within codes of practice are the best way forward.

As Boyd et al. (2007) themselves note, trust, communication and commitment are key elements of PJ in a collaborative supply chain. They cite a number of studies in support of this view. For

instance, a shared vision of the future, with open and frequent exchange of information, and with less rigid control mechanism can result in better performance and stronger competitive position (Hipkin and Naude, 2006). Furthermore, collaborative advantage allows buyers and sellers to reach a common understanding of the level of CSR to which a supplier should conform. It necessitates a shared framework that guides the implementation of a code of conduct. Tensions will naturally exist between parties, but such a complex problem makes it nothing less than a moral obligation for buyers and suppliers to collaborate (Huxham and Vangen, 2005). Furthermore, the application of PJ in supply chain management is such a complex issue that the term 'managing' may not be the correct way to describe inter-firm relationships: "Instead, PJ is built on mutual respect, shared goals and trust" and "Suppliers will no longer be evaluated on hard metrics and quantitative measure alone; instead buyers will have to understand better suppliers' motivations... Such data are not found on a fact sheet or in a prospectus..." (Boyd et al., 2007: 352).

It strikes us that several of the key elements of justice highlighted in the preceding discussion (i.e. those of corporate culture, open communication and shared frameworks) revolve around issues of meaning. This suggests an attendant need for more subtle understanding between parties. We thus believe that codes of practice actually have limited utility in addressing justice with industrial networks, whether the perspective taken is that of distributive or procedural justice. If the supplier is truly to be given voice, a different, less structured approach may be required.

Perhaps the notion of interactional justice (IJ) offers a way forward? Luo (2006: 1022) explains, that IJ "complements PJ by providing social elements that foster the enactment of structural elements, while complementing DJ by incorporating socially embedded reward elements into an economically structured gain-sharing system". IJ can be related to the experiences of boundary-spanning managers as they translate the interpersonal fairness they receive into their parent organizations' actions. The perceptions of these individuals may affect their own commitment to decisions regarding relationship-building, but also influence interactions at the firm level as they are voiced to corporate decision-makers. Promisingly, Luo (2006: 1021) defines IJ terms of fairness regarding "honesty, respect, understanding and courtesy in the course of interpersonal treatment", and transparency and timeliness in two-way communication. Frustratingly, at least in terms of our observations regarding a need for more interpretive approaches to the study of justice, he then goes on to test whether IJ affects inter-organizational attachment via a survey-based questionnaire incorporating a number of reductionist measures which do not, in our opinion, pay sufficient regard to the nuances of such constructs.

We are thus left with a series of conceptualisations of justice (i.e. distributive, procedural and interactional) that seem to offer much insight into scholarly attempts to understand and perhaps bolster fairness within supply chain relations. Nevertheless, despite the worthy discussion that can be found within management and marketing literature of the idea of justice in relationships, this vital moral issue may benefit from being explored in a manner that better captures the complexity of the phenomenon.

So how can we try to ensure global stakeholders are adequately accommodated in contemporary marketing practice? In particular, can marketing codes of ethics make much difference? Despite our reservations, it is still possible that a firm's claimed ethical initiatives may have some positive effects on the global supply chain. For instance, Grein and Gould (2007) discuss voluntary codes of ethical conduct in terms of globally integrated marketing communications. They do so in a way that addresses both upstream and downstream ethical issues. Grein and Gould (2007: 300) comment that the values and principles expressed in relation to marketing in CSR statements from firms like Nike and Mattel are positive, but they are rather vague with regard to specificity and taking a proactive approach. They conclude that both firms have "explicitly tried to enforce codes of conduct on independent contractors, suggesting the benefit of getting compliance from the extra-corporate network. However codes need to be broadened to include the entire extra-corporate network, i.e. agents, distributors, retailers, ad agencies etc".

This view is fine as far as it goes, but we could (and arguably should) expand it to the entire stakeholder realm, embracing parties ever-more distant, both spatially and socially, from the focal

firm in today's global marketplace. Where, for instance, are the primary producers or raw material processors in the supply chain in some of the fore-going discussions of justice and codes? How can we begin to understand issues of fairness within such complex networks? As we shall see, this is an important question to which many scholars have turned their attention.

The business ethics suite

Research on both upstream and downstream issues within the supply chain and marketing ethics is well established; reviews of the literature by Tsalikis and Fritzsche (1989) and Gaski (1999) identify a broad range of both normative and descriptive approaches to ethics. Areas of focus within marketing ethics include issues that arise within the research process (Lund 2001), ethical attitudes (Bellizzi and Hite 1989) or with the validity of tools to explore ethical decision making within supply chains (Hunt and Vitell, 1986, 1993; Hunt, Wood and Chonko 1989). Discussion of ethical issues pertinent to the marketing mix and the international dimensions of marketing are also well rehearsed (see for example Schlegelmilch, 1997).

The orientation of much of this research is of interest, displaying as it does a strong emphasis on deontological and in particular teleological schools of ethical thought (e.g. Ferrell and Skinner, 1988; Hunt and Vasquez-Parraga, 1993). This perhaps should not be surprising. Nantel and Weeks (1996) remind us, that if we are to assume a managerial definition of marketing as satisfying human needs through an exchange process, the orientation is already framed within a utilitarian calculation. Pragmatic considerations such as the audience for marketing texts and the need to provide tools for managerial decision-making are also pertinent. Normative approaches are often susceptible to being condensed and transformed into a memorable framework (or artefact – cf. Ferrell and Ferrell, 2008) that can be applied by managers across a broad range of contexts. Ethical theory in marketing is often judged by its practicality for the problem at the manager's hand (Primeaux and Shebor, 1995). This leaning towards providing 'off the peg' solutions to ethical business problems should not be surprising, as Pearson (1995: 109) reminds us "neither God nor Kant has had to run a modern business".

A dispute between Smith (2001) and Gaski (1999; 2001) in the *Journal of Business Ethics* perhaps exemplifies the limitations of contemporary marketing ethics. Gaski's (1999) provocative paper attempted to survey the state of marketing ethics. From a review of the literature, Gaski was unable to identify a contribution for the ethical frameworks developed within marketing. His conclusion was blunt. He proposed that within marketing, ethics was irrelevant, offering nothing more than statements of law or self interest. Gaski wrote of the "total redundancy and superfluity of marketing ethics" (1999: 330). Smith sought to respond to Gaski's criticism on behalf of those who advocate or labour within the area of marketing ethics. Smith worked through Gaski's article on a point by point basis, carefully highlighting the substantive and technical deficiencies within Gaski's original article. Gaski's reliance upon free-market ideas, heavily influenced by Milton Friedman (1962), and Smith's belief in the need for corporate social responsibility produce what Lyotard (1984) refers to as *agon*, a contest or battle of narratives. Gaski's and Smith's positions were incommensurable; there was no meeting point for the narratives to engage. The ease with which arguments for fair trade can envelop free market ideology and ethical frameworks without fear of apparent contradiction may encourage us to review the extent to which dominant approaches to ethics can offer comment on marketing and free trade. The alignment between marketing ethics and the foundations of contemporary marketing thought may be too close.

Following Bartels (1976), Arndt (1985) and Brown (1995) we are familiar with the historical development of marketing as a body of knowledge and the dominance of the managerial school. Marketing is a *modern* enterprise, it shares with modernity many of the desires for control, prediction and measurement:

"Marketing has been dominated by the logical empiricist paradigm stressing rationality, objectivity, and measurement. While leading to many breakthroughs, this domination has contributed to a neglect of important aspects of marketing and a lack of attention to alternative research approaches." Arndt (1985: 11).

This has implications for the manner in which parties to marketing are constituted. The managerial approach has subsumed the consumer within a commercial exchange framework. The result, as Alvesson (1994) points out, is the denial of individuals as autonomous agents. Instead they are regarded as purely instrumental beings to be examined from the perspective (and for the benefit) of those who wish to manage or manipulate the individual's behaviour. We suggest that this perspective has influenced marketers in the manner in which they have engaged with issues of ethics and marketing. Ethics and morality are construed as rules, codes and guidelines and, in the process, externalised from the individual. These rules are also required to be compatible with the desire to maintain "the system's performance-efficiency" (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv). Marketing ethics is thus constrained by the knowledge base of its subject and the dominant research orientation within the discipline. Legitimation for marketing ethics knowledge claims must therefore be congruent with both that of its subject and the market system it maintains. We suggest that this is a heavy burden for marketing ethics to carry.

In the hope of making some progress, a key contribution to the possibility of supply chain members enacting 'strategy as justice' is thought to be made by so-called 'fair trade' initiatives which seek to create positive social change by altering what occurs at each end of the supply chain while shortening the social distance between producers and consumers (Shreck, 2002). So for further insight let us consider how theories of ethics have been employed within the context of evaluating the management of fair trade. Two best-selling advocates of fair trade, Nicholls and Opal (2005: 60), examine the relationship between CSR and what they term the "philosophy of ethics". They see that a unifying theme of concerns over the actions and impacts of global businesses has been the nature of the modern supply chain and its functioning within the free market system. These concerns often revolve around the treatment of constituents within the supply chain and the provenance of the product. They devise a framework of ethics, based around deontological and consequentialist approaches to ethics, which are further divided into either institutional or individual contexts. This results in four categories comprising 'a framework of ethics' through which trade can be subject to evaluation. The conclusions drawn by Nicholls and Opal (2005) expose us to one of the problems of trying to operationalise such a framework for ethics. Nicholls and Opal conclude, rather complacently in our view, that fair trade is congruent with a variety of interpretations of morality, "such that it effectively defies criticism from an ethical/philosophical perspective" (p.69): in short, ethics as formulated here has little to say. We therefore need to move beyond modernist conceptualisations of marketing ethics.

Levinasian notions of justice

In comparison to other social sciences, marketing experienced the methodological convulsions of postmodernism rather late (Brown, 1995). Areas of the subject where boundaries with other disciplines are more permeable (e.g. consumer research and macromarketing), have perhaps seen a greater willingness to engage with the epistemological and ontological issues embroiled with the question of the postmodern. Within the field of marketing ethics however, debate on what postmodernism could possibly mean for the study of ethics has been rather limited. This we feel is unfortunate because, following Zygmunt Bauman's (1989) work, postmodernism may offer a form of liberation in moral thought and a lifting of the burden for marketing ethics. Bauman views approaches to morality and ethics as contextual, situated within time and place. In the process Bauman chronicles how modernity transformed sin into guilt and the rules of religion were confronted with the universalising metanarratives of science and progress. Postmodernism for Bauman is the collapse of the stabilising structures of modernity and with this the disintegration in the hopes associated with universalising ethics. Within this new landscape, the individual's relationship to ethics and morality is transmogrified. Rather than subservient to reason and religion, the self is recast as autonomous, the origin and controller of moral responsibility. The freedom from modernity is countered by a climate of ambivalence and a refocus on the self and relation to others. We propose that it is within this less structured situation that we can begin looking for an approach to ethics. Bauman acknowledges that his work on mapping out a postmodern ethics owes a significant debt to the work of Emmanuel Levinas: it is to Levinas that we will now turn.

The development of Levinas' writings on ethics is usually associated with two texts, 'Totality and Infinity' (1969) and 'Otherwise than Being Or Beyond Essence' (1974). Together these texts outline and develop the idea of the responsibility inherent in the moral relation with 'the other' and the significance for subjectivity of the epiphany of the other's face. It is in the response to the other, through engagement with other's face, that Levinas situates the site of morality and the construction of subjectivity. Without the other, Levinas presents a human being as unfulfilled and lost in an unbearable indifference. For Levinas, ethics and morality have been misplaced by western philosophy. Reason, calculation and identity have promoted a thinking of the 'same' at the expense of the relation with that which is not 'I', in other words, the other. In a challenging position, Levinas argues that the relation with the other places an unbearable and ceaseless responsibility, a necessary responsibility, not contracted or agreed, but a primordial aspect of being. Levinas offers an ethics that builds from the alterity for the other without an expectation of reciprocity. It is an ethics that asserts a question for a contemporary society, a society that currently neglects the other and promotes the supremacy of the I.

Levinas is thus proposing an approach to ethics that is clearly very different to the study of ethics to those which marketing ethicists are usually accustomed. It offers little in terms of answers that would normally be demanded of business ethics. There is no consideration of intent or calculation of consequence. This (re)location of ethics can be seen as an emotional response (Ten Bos and Willmott, 2001) to the sterile, functionalist world of supply chain management. The exercise of power and the nature of the exchanges between supply chain (or marketing channel) members has long been a strategic issue within business thought (e.g. Stern, 1969). Increasingly, however, channel management has sought to incorporate a moral dimension into the decision making process (Takala and Uusitalo, 1996; Smith and Higgins, 2000). The relationships between supply chain partners also appear to be of interest to a broader audience. This is partially due to the intensified media interest in business practices. Broadcast and print media provide a bricolage of business related material, incorporating consumer advice, rogue traders and globalisation (e.g. Klein, 2000; Monbiot, 2000).

Let us now explain what insights a Levinasian perspective can offer us in the search for justice. In terms of supply chain relations, the notion of 'proximity' (Levinas (1974/2004) between actors includes a relation to third parties, effectively positioned 'up' and 'down' the chain. If we extend the chain metaphor to an industrial networks perspective (Easton and Araujo, 1993), we might even describe this as a "lace of obligation" (Derrida, 1991: 30). The introduction of a third party to the relation with the other requires the subject to treat them as equally entitled to devotion. As such, they demand that 'justice' be done to everyone, justice for Levinas being broadly characterised by structures of administration and comparison, the search for some sort of order. Levinas argues that the relationship with a third party involves a weighing, an "incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity in which the face is looked at" (1974/2004: 158). He believes that the subject's relationship with the (proximate) other gives meaning to relations with all others, meaning that justice is not a legality regulating humans en masse: rather, "justice remains justice only, in a society where there is no distinction between those close and those far off, but in which there also remains the impossibility of passing by the closest" (p.159). Justice exercised through laws and politics are necessary to maintain togetherness and the original ethical condition, however they are never equal to this original ethical condition.

The views of Levinas can be related to Marx's notions of the commodity. Should fair trade become normalised in supply chain practice, it would have a significant impact on several key stakeholders, who contribute to global supply chains, chains that typically trade in what have become known as 'commodities'. If we take a banana, for example, it is difficult to know anything about the conditions under which it was grown and brought to market. In this way, even though commodities are the product of a specific set of real human relationships, when the commodity arrives on the market, all we see is an object. "If ... commodities turn relations between people into relations between things, then this says something about the relations to the Other which are part and parcel of consuming a commodity" (Jones et al 2005: 104). As these authors so presciently put it, when we consider the lengthy supply chains that make up much of global trading, this forces us to rethink "the very taste of the food in our mouths when we realise that we are not simply eating a banana, but are consuming

a set of relations with others – those others that planted, grew, tended, picked, packed, shipped, unpacked and stacked those bananas on the supermarket shelf” (p.105). We thus become complicit in the conditions under which the banana was produced. Such thinking takes us beyond more conventional models of business ethics into a far more ‘demanding’ sphere of ethics, a huge space of potential agency that can have ethical consequences. It makes us recognise all the social relations that are embodied in exchange (Jones et al., 2005).

Jones (2003) explains that the ethical relation for Levinas is non-reciprocal, non-calculating, expecting nothing in return: “the moment one is generous in hopes of reciprocity, that relation no longer involves generosity but the commercial relation, the exchange of good behaviour” (Levinas 1999: 101). In concordance with Levinas’ views, Derrida suggests an ‘unconditional hospitality’, based on an infinite openness to the Other. Such hospitality comprises a great risk and is far from reassuring (Jones 2003). While the law (as enshrined in a code of practice, say) can attempt to protect certain relations with Others, we must remember that the application of rules is not equal to ethics or justice. In this way, such codes can at least serve to outline a set of expectations regarding the stakeholder relations of the focal firm in a supply chain. Ultimately, however, for Levinas, this ethical relation is not something that may be formalised as a law or an instruction.

Levinas states that a legislation founded in justice is a “legislation always unfinished... It attests to an ethical excellence and its origins in goodness, from which, however, it is distanced – always a bit less perhaps – by the necessary calculations imposed by a multiple sociality, calculations constantly starting over again” (Levinas, in Robbins, 2001: 206). Thus, in turning to the ‘other other’ or (the third), we might consider whether the subject diminishes the original demand of the first other? This is, in effect, a ‘violation’ caused by putting the third ‘second’ when the immediate other is put first, such that “no solution can ever be just enough” (Aasland, 2005; 44). Thus, as Rhodes and Byers (2005: 119) put it, “the order of justice, as the rational resolution of an innumerable absolute freedoms, is necessarily a limitation and hence, a kind of violence”. They argue that this means the ‘ethical integrity’ of an organisation cannot be established and secured in codes of practice. Recognising the unavoidable ‘violence’ that accompanies the application of principles for all others, they demand the continual review and re-articulation of principles, where: “no principle is set in stone; none provide a stable, reliable ground; and no single group is privileged in the discussion” (p122).

With this in mind, let us return to Smith and Gaski’s debate on the value of ethics within marketing. Whilst we have indicated that the debate exemplifies one of the limitations of normative approaches to ethics, this is not our sole reason for concentrating on this debate. During the course of setting out his defence of the domain of marketing ethics, Smith promoted a view of ethics within marketing that was pluralist in conceptualisation and methodology. Thompson’s influential article on ‘A Contextualist Proposal for the Conceptualisation and Study of Marketing Ethics’ (1995) is one of the texts Smith refers to in support of this pluralism. Thompson seeks to analyse ethical reasoning through an appreciation of the multiplicity of cultural meanings from a stakeholder perspective. Many writers have seized upon this contextual approach to moral reasoning, with the moral agent constituted within a culturally situated position (e.g. Cui and Choudhury, 2003; Young and Franke, 2000; Shultz and Holbrook, 1999). Thompson highlights that “a mutually implicative relationship exists between normative models of ethical reasoning and the general theoretical orientation from which the empirical study of moral reasoning ensues.” (1995: 179). By implication, research into ethics within marketing needs to consider not merely the theoretical orientation of the ethical reasoning but also the inseparable relationship of the orientation to the paradigm within which the research is undertaken and the method employed.

We contend that the marketing channels and industrial network literatures, despite offering some examination of ethical concerns, still suffer from a rather restricted outlook. This is exemplified in a recent piece by Lindfelt and Tornroos (2006: 328) who note that research on ethical issues in a ‘B2B’ context is “almost non-existent”. They then attempt to develop a framework for the study of value creation derived from an ethical perspective. However, although they note the differing conceptualisations of ‘values’ that exist (and indeed, which can co-exist) between the fields of ethics and economics, their world view remains steadfastly managerialist, as they conclude “ethical value is one factor that can have a role to play in providing a positive *image* for key customers, the overall

markets as well as in the eyes of institutional actors, investors and the general public. Value creation therefore in essence also deals with forming an ethical *image* and reputation suitable for the market in which a company operates” (2006: 345, emphases added).

Such market-based notions of ‘image’ are given short shrift by Levinas. This is acknowledged by Roberts (2001) who points out the difference between Levinas’ view of ethics (as outlined in *Otherwise Than Being*) and other, more mainstream, business ethics theorising: ethics for Levinas is “only to be discovered as an approach to the other which denudes us of the illusions of...a sense of self identity” (2001: 111). It is “an ethics thrown upon me in spite of myself, and of any images I would wish to have of myself” (Aasland, 2004: 6). In conclusion, Aasland states that whilst a market orientation may represent an orientation towards the other, “the market cannot replace ethics, that is, hospitality, and decency. The invitation of the market system to pursue one’s self interest must be submitted under a preceding attitude of setting the other before the self” (p8). Justice for Levinas is thus underpinned by an appreciation of the self and the other. So how might we make sense of the positioning of social actors within contemporary marketing systems?

A discursive approach to codes of ethics

One of the popular mechanisms used to prescribe marketplace behaviour are, of course, codes of practice. In our search for ‘hospitality’ and ‘decency’ we propose the examination of the linguistic construction of codes of practice and the perspectives of individuals who develop and work with these codes. To paraphrase Watson (1995: 15), the reality of supply chain ethics is part of the rhetoric of supply chain ethics, and the rhetoric of supply chain ethics is part of its reality. Such a perspective enables us to configure codes of practice as text which can be interpreted and analysed. In order to achieve this (re)interpretation, we advocate some rethinking in the way that IMP research has tended to treat language. Although IMP studies are already based on considerably more ideographic approaches than is found in other fields of B2B marketing, we argue that a discursive approach can lead to an even more reflexive and intimate engagement with practice (cf. Lowe, Ellis and Purchase, 2008). Discourse analysis can expose the non-rational and subjective ways in which industrial networks are imagined by their participants (Ellis, Lowe and Purchase, 2006).

If we examine corporate texts closely we can begin to see how the parties within the supply chain use language to construct their realities and in the process their ‘other’ and their proximity to that other. A critical approach to discourse analysis recognises that linguistic elements can be combined to construct social categories such as ‘us and them’, thereby polarising particular groups and positions, and sustaining existing differences or creating new relations (van Dijk, 1993). If a manager’s (or organisation’s) identity/position, and the positions of ‘others’, can be constructed, at least in part, by the wording of corporate texts (Cooren, 2000), then the interpersonal function of language may be a useful perspective for considering codes of practice.

For instance, Ellis and Higgins (2006) show how, through the recurrent use of linguistic features, code writers (typically senior management or governing boards) may marginalize employees. The discourse of codes effectively aligns the right to impose values with management and the right to obey with employees. The restrictions placed on individuals by the discursive demands of such codes make it difficult for buying managers to recognise the identity of the decision makers as themselves. This is especially so when set against the two ideologies constructed by the text: “the social expectations of the enterprise and the rigid hierarchy of interpersonal relationships within the organisation” (Farrell and Farrell, 1989: 599). The language of codes of ethics typically positions the individual into a role and establishes regimes of accountability and their relations with others. Farrell and Farrell (1998) support this view of perceiving Codes of Practice as essentially prescriptive, and generally with little concern for the subject’s ideological position. However, perceiving Codes of Practice as a means of suppressing individual moral urges misses the point. The focal point of research into ethics within industrial networks should be the inter-relational dimension between the individuals concerned and the manner in which positions are constructed and engaged with.

We propose examining how supply chain parties and their market-based relationships are constructed through discourse with a view to examining moral intent. As Beech and Huxham (2003: 29) explain: "The way that parties...identify themselves and each other seems likely to be significant in their ability to develop productive mutual relationships". Moreover, the crossing of social boundaries that is involved in attempting to develop supply chain relationships is likely to emphasize (and be re-emphasized by) the distinction between 'oneself' and 'others'. Thus we suggest that scholars of ethics focus on how members of organisations use language in finding and describing the more or less orderly character of those inter-organisational settings in which they act. Studies should attempt to deal with terms such as 'relationship', 'supplier' and 'customer' as they are actually understood by the people who conceptualise, speak and write of them (Buckley and Chapman, 1997). Within these conceptualisations, it seems likely that any stereotypical views of 'others' will inhibit the creation of community (Gray, 1985), making it difficult to develop any common goals in supply chain interactions. Our objective is to bring a greater linguistic sensitivity to the analysis of issues of morality and ethics within supply chain interactions. In analytical terms, this involves asking if linguistic devices are being used to establish supply chain 'facts' and to appeal to norms of network legitimacy (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992).

Discourse analysis can allow us to examine the way in which the identity of individual and collective actors is enabled, or denied, and through which engagement is negotiated or prevented. The embrace of difference and diversity within organisational studies has rejuvenated an interest in the political and ethical dimensions of otherness (Fournier, 2002). Difference and otherness are inseparable aspects of organising, a critical part in this labour of division (Hetherington and Munro, 1997). Otherness is not an end result; it is part of a constant process, where similarities and difference are articulated and visions of the world are contested. The move within marketing thought towards relational aspects is an implicit acknowledgement of differentiation and identity within the supply chain and the broader market. This process is however rarely identified within the marketing literature. We suggest that the generation of division within codes of practice operate to reify and veil identities and relationships within the supply chain. It is within these inter-subjective relations that Levinas and Bauman situate concerns with morality. For Bauman, morality exists not in rules, such as codes of practice, but in relations with others. It is the manner of this engagement with the 'other' which is the primal moral scene (Bauman, 1995). Following Levinas and Bauman, we argue that the significance of alterity and this process of negotiation require interrogation for moral intent.

As our preceding discussion of Levinas suggests, we advocate a view of otherness as an active role. To appreciate the socially constructed nature of supply chain relationships, we believe that discourse analysis has the potential to identify how these positions are constructed. This is congruent with Thompson's (1995: 184) contextualist position: "Therefore, every moral deliberation presupposes an implicit interpretive choice about whether a particular issue or stakeholder interest should be included, emphasized, excluded, or de-emphasized."

Implications for the study of justice in networks

It is useful at this point to remind ourselves of the positions we are taking regarding marketing ethics and justice. At the core of the argument we are promoting the view that writers on marketing ethics need to be explicit in the congruence between theoretical orientation to ethics and the research methodology being employed. This necessitates researchers grappling with assumptions they carry into the research process and identifying the paradigms within which they are working.

The manner in which organizational members discursively engage with the other is the site of moral potential. What we wish to suggest, however, is that it is often the absences from discourse which should also be of interest. To this end, Fournier (2002) makes a useful distinction between 'otherness' and 'difference', highlighting that whilst difference depends upon connection, comparison and assessment, otherness is the act of disconnection, or "not" (Fournier, 2002: 81). Within the supply chain, this encourages us to reflect upon not only those who are party to the supply chain, but also those who remain hidden, invisible or silent. This may be for example, the exclusion of parties, such as those Gap and Nike employees identified by Klein (2000) who are

unable to read codes of practice. However, it can also include a much broader sphere, to encompass both human and non-human actors, who support or enable the supply chain.

Levinasian ethics precedes conventional approaches to business ethics and in doing so asks discomfiting questions of what we presently assume to be justice. This is not such a bad thing. We wish to propose that business schools and the teaching of business ethics needs to construct the world with sight that is not narrowly structured by considerations of reason, calculation or process.

To echo Hopfl (2005: 70), we “would like to teach in a business school which puts compassion high on its agenda both for its own style of management and for something it seeks to nurture in its students. [We] would like to teach students who care about something other than themselves.” So how can we employ and apply a Levinasian approach to ethics within the supply chain? This may require us to rethink the possibility for a business ethics. Following Corvellec and Bevan (2005: 3), we may be faced with the “stark impossibility of any programme of business or corporate ethics”: instead we may need to locate ethics within inter-personal and managerial relations; and to try to interpret the meanings that both produce, and are reproduced by, these network interactions.

This paper does not provide a clear prescription of what constitutes ethical behaviour; this would be contrary to our intention. Our desire is to suggest a different approach to studying moral issues within marketing. For students of marketing management this discovery of other points of view may be crucial to that task of critical education that is, as Spivak puts it, “to unlearn your privilege” (1990: 30). A reading of relationships within industrial networks with a view to otherness can open us to the experiences of others and the ways in which our actions affect those of others.

Whilst discourse analysis may assist us in identifying the processes through which the other is produced, marketers need to consider how to represent the other. This is not a simple undertaking for, as Peperzak (1991: 65) puts it, “as long as responsibility remains reflexive, it cannot evade philosophy”. Researchers in marketing ethics must now identify how we can clear the space to allow these others to speak (Spivak, in de Kock, 1992) and reflect upon how we construct, represent and talk with the ‘subaltern’. Levinas presents us with ethics as a condition of humanity. Scholars of marketing ethics within the IMP Group are thus warmly invited to join us as we flounder in the uncertainties and instabilities of ‘being’ human, and what this may mean for the search for justice.

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