

Advancing relationship marketing theory: exploring customer relationships through a process-centric framework

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Received: 19 January 2016 / Accepted: 6 April 2017 / Published online: 8 May 2017
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Abstract Relationship marketing is commonly defined as a process. Its essential process dimension, however, remains surprisingly under-theorized. In this conceptual paper, we address this theoretical void and begin to develop a process-centric framework to explore company-customer relationships. This framework distinguishes four ideal-typical models of the relationship marketing process: (1) life-cycle, (2) evolutionary, (3) teleological and (4) dialectical process models. Our review of the relationship marketing literature reveals the prevalence of life-cycle conceptions of the relationship marketing process, followed by teleological and evolutionary conceptions. It is against this backdrop that we illustrate the value of dialectical process models as a first promising opportunity to advance relationship marketing theory. The second opportunity we showcase consists in combining two (or more) of

these process models. We end with guidelines on how to identify suitable combinations of commensurable process models to systematize the multifaceted opportunities for advancing theory in relationship marketing and beyond.

Keywords Relationship marketing process · Customer relationships · Process theories · Dialectics · Dual-motor theory · Theory combination

Introduction

Despite consolidating efforts reflected in a number of recent literature reviews and meta-analyses, the field of relationship marketing remains in need of more elaborate theoretical foundations (Agariya and Singh 2011; Verma et al. 2015). Indeed, there is still considerable variety in conceptualizations of relationship marketing, with each accentuating different aspects. One feature shared by most definitions of relationship marketing is its conceptualization as a process. Somewhat counter-intuitively, the process dimension is so prevalent in current relationship marketing discourse that it appears to be taken for granted and largely immune to explicit theorization. It is against this backdrop that we argue that the process of relationship marketing has emerged as an important conceptual blind spot that impedes further progress in the field. In particular, the lack of theorization of the relationship marketing process is likely to obstruct the much-needed scholarly effort to explicate the dynamics of relationship initiation and development over time (Palmatier et al. 2013).

This conceptual paper seeks to address this theoretical void and draws on the process theory archetypes identified by Van de Ven and Poole (1995) to distinguish four perspectives on relationship marketing as a (1) life-cycle, (2) teleological, (3) evolutionary, or (4) dialectical process. This paper reveals that

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three of these process theories are strongly represented in relationship marketing literature, while one particularly promising perspective, the dialectical view, remains largely underexplored. Based on this classification, we illustrate two particularly promising opportunities for advancing relationship marketing theory, exploring a dialectical process model and building so-called dual-(or-more-) motor theories that combine two (or more) process theory archetypes. In our opinion, this process-centric framework constitutes a meaningful conceptual contribution in that it helps to systematize the relationship marketing literature and, even more importantly, identifies a rich and comprehensive set of opportunities for “recombinatory” theory building in relationship marketing. As such, it can serve as a meaningful conceptual toolbox for those interested in advancing theory in relationship marketing.

Our paper answers the recurring calls for developing more elaborate and realistic frameworks for relationship marketing (Möller and Halinen 2000). Specifically, our focus on relationship marketing processes answers the call of Eiriz and Wilson (2006), who state that moving toward a better understanding of relationship processes is one of three priorities for future research in the field – along with uncovering the rationale for relationships and the structures for the management of these relationships. Not unlike the field of marketing as a whole (Yadav 2010), relationship marketing has much to benefit from a renewed focus on its intellectual and theoretical foundations. This paper is meant to contribute toward this broader agenda by advancing relationship marketing theory and enriching the conceptual landscape that informs the research of relationship marketing processes.

In the remainder of this paper, we provide a brief overview of extant relationship marketing literature with a specific focus on its underlying process dimension. Second, the four generic process theories by Van de Ven and Poole (1995) are described, and selected contributions from the vast body of relationship marketing literature are classified accordingly. Given the absence of any elaborate dialectical perspective on relationship marketing, we outline two opportunities for advancing relationship marketing theory: (1) exploring a dialectical perspective on the relationship marketing process and (2) building so-called dual-(or-more-) motor theories that recombine distinct process theory archetypes. We use the example of the financial services industry to describe one possible recombination of two process theories, that is life-cycle and dialectics. Finally, we discuss the implications of dialectical and recombinatory theorizing in relationship marketing and show how carefully specified process models can deepen our understanding of the multifaceted nature of the relationship marketing process. This has meaningful implications for relationship marketing practitioners and opens up fascinating opportunities for advancing relationship marketing theory.

The process of relationship marketing

Although market relationships can be traced back to ancient trade relationships, relationship marketing only evolved into a separate field of marketing research during the 1990s (Möller and Halinen 2000). As part of this development, relationship marketing also emerged as a key research topic within the service marketing literature (Kunz and Hogreve 2011) and is among the most frequently cited topics (Roberts et al. 2014). At the same time, attempts to define relationship marketing have multiplied. The objective of achieving conceptual consensus remains elusive though (Agariya and Singh 2011). That said, some characteristics of relationship marketing are found to be recurring in most definitions, including “acquisition, retention, profitability enhancement, a long-term orientation, and a win-win situation for all stakeholders of the organization” (Agariya and Singh 2011, p. 228).

Additionally, a key feature of many definitions of relationship marketing is its process dimension. As part of their conceptualization of relationship marketing, Parvatiyar and Sheth (2000) notice that the process of a company engaging in relationships with its customers comprises four sub-processes, namely a formation process, a management and governance process, a performance evaluation process, and a relationship evolution or enhancement process. This and other process models of relationship marketing (e.g., Dwyer et al. 1987; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Wilson 1995) document the imperative of viewing relationship marketing above all as a dynamic process. Advancing and complementing this position, Grönroos (2004, p. 101) states that according to most definitions, “relationship marketing is first and foremost a process”. In summary, by reviewing definitions of relationship marketing advanced between 1983 and 2010, Agariya and Singh (2011) conclude that the process dimension is a critical component of the most frequently cited definitions of relationship marketing. Thus, no study of relationship marketing is complete without its highly dynamic process element (Grönroos 1994).

Based on this central proposition that the relationship marketing process is always dynamic, Table 1 displays selected definitions of relationship marketing that explicitly adopt this dynamic process view of relationship marketing. Based on these definitions, the dynamic and multifaceted nature as well as the lack of a consensus definition for the relationship marketing process become clear. An analysis of these definitions reveals at least five particularly salient process characteristics (with dynamic as the sixth): polyadic, outcome-oriented, activity-centric, value-laden, and structured. In Table 1, each definition is mapped onto these six process characteristics. In the following, we will describe in brief each of these characteristics to provide a holistic picture of what is established about the nature of the dynamic relationship marketing process.

Table 1 Exemplar definitions emphasizing relationship marketing as a process

Author(s)	Definition of Relationship Marketing	Relationship Marketing Process Characteristics						
		Dynamic	Polyadic	Outcome-oriented	Activity-centric	Value-laden	Structured	
Berry (1983, p. 28)	“Relationship marketing concerns attracting, maintaining and - in multi-service firms - building customer relationships”	x			x			
Dwyer et al. (1987, p. 15)	“The Relationship Development Process: Relationships evolve through five general phases identified as (1) awareness, (2) exploration, (3) expansion, (4) commitment, and (5) dissolution. Each phase represents a major transition in how parties regard one another.”	x	x				x	
Sheth et al. (1988, p. 195)	“...we need to expand our understanding of marketing to incorporate the basic tenets of marketing, that is, market behavior, market transactions as the unit of analysis, marketing as a dynamic process of relationships between buyers and sellers, and the exogenous variables that influence market behavior.”	x						
Webster (1992, p. 11)	“Thus, marketing may be involved in relationships with vendors at least as much as, if not more than, relationships with customers as part of the process of delivering superior value to customers.”	x	x	x	x	x		
Porter (1993, p. 14)	“RM is “the process whereby the buyer and the provider establish an effective, efficient, enjoyable, enthusiastic and ethical relationship – one [...] that is rewarding to both parties.”	x		x				
Evans and Laskin (1994, p. 440)	“Relationship marketing is the process whereby a firm builds long-term alliances with both prospective and current customers so that both seller and buyer work toward a common set of specified goals. These goals are met by: (1) understanding customer needs, (2) treating customers as service partners, (3) ensuring that employees satisfy customer needs; this might require employees to exercise initiative beyond company norms, and (4) providing customers with the best possible quality, relative to individual needs. [...] shows a model of effective relationship marketing. The process consists of inputs, outcomes, and ongoing assessment.”	x	x	x	x		x	
Grönroos (1994, pp. 13–14)	“Relationship marketing [...] is a process including several parties or actors, the objectives of which have to be met. This is done by a mutual exchange and fulfillment of promises, a fact that makes trust an important aspect of marketing. [...] Relationship marketing is also dynamic, because of its process nature.”	x	x	x	x	x		
Grönroos (1997a, p. 407)	“... the process of identifying and establishing, maintaining, enhancing, and when necessary terminating relationships with customers and other stakeholders, at a profit, so that the objectives of all parties are met, where this is done by a mutual giving and fulfillment of promises	x	x	x	x			
Parvatiyar and Sheth (2000, p. 15)	“Building on that work and anchored to our definition of relationship marketing as a process of engaging in cooperative or collaborative relationship with customers, we develop a four-stage relationship marketing process model. The broad model suggests that relationship formation process; management and governance process; performance evaluation process; and relationship evolution or enhancement process.”	x					x	

The first process characteristic concerns the parties involved in relationship marketing, its *polyadic* nature. As derived from Table 1, the definitions of the relationship marketing process differ in whether they underline the role of a company's relationships with its customers (see Table 1, definitions by Berry 1983; Evans and Laskin 1994; Parvatiyar and Sheth 2000; Porter 1993; Sheth et al. 1988) or whether they emphasize the central role of multiple actors, that is all of a company's stakeholders (see Table 1, definitions by Dwyer et al. 1987; Grönroos 1994; Grönroos 1997a; Webster 1992). Although company-customer relationships surface as being particularly salient, some definitions explicitly point to the plethora of possible relationships between a company and its multiple stakeholders. Especially in the polyadic conception of relationship marketing, it is essential for managers to “prioritize and establish the appropriate mix of relationships needed for the company's success” (Payne et al. 2005, p. 862).

Many of the definitions we analyzed also highlight the *outcome-oriented* nature of the relationship marketing process, which can pertain to a wide range of actors' non-financial and financial goals. Porter (1993) (see Table 1), for instance, argues that companies engage in relationship marketing activities to gain a competitive advantage, which in turn increases their economic profitability. Relationships hence need to be rewarding for both parties – in a financial and a relational way (Kotler et al. 2005). Customers expect benefits that exceed their costs from this relationship engagement and both parties aim at achieving commonly specified goals (see Table 1, definition by Evans and Laskin 1994). Similarly, Grönroos (1994, 1997a) emphasizes the role of goal achievement among actors as a defining element of the relationship marketing process.

Conceptualizations of the relationship marketing process also tend to be *activity-centric*, in that they attempt to decompose the process into constitutive activities, routines or sub-processes. These activities go beyond traditional marketing activities such as advertising, pricing, and selling (4 Ps framework, McCarthy 1960), and seek to advance a company-wide orientation toward customers (Grönroos 1990). Relationship marketing activities foster the active rather than passive integration of customers and aim at delivering superior value for customers (see Table 1, definition by Webster 1992) or the best possible quality (see Table 1, definition by Evans and Laskin 1994), and fulfilling promises (see Table 1, definitions by Grönroos 1994, 1997a). Among the multitude of relationship marketing activities, a company chooses those that fit the type of behavior the company is aiming at, that is retention, participation, or coproduction as influenced directly or indirectly by different types of commitment (Gruen et al. 2000).

Another characteristic is that relationship marketing is sometimes conceptualized as *value-laden*. This is reflected in the fact that customers look for partners whom they can trust and who share the same values (e.g., Hunt et al. 2006;

Morgan and Hunt 1994; see Table 1, definitions by Webster 1992 and Grönroos 1994). Relationship marketing processes will hence be shaped by emotions such as warmth, care, and empathy – both from customers and company representatives.

Other authors emphasize the *structured* nature of the relationship marketing process. To them, the process can be broken down into clearly defined and delineated stages (see Table 1, definitions by Dwyer et al. 1987; Parvatiyar and Sheth 2000; Evans and Laskin 1994). The idea here is to identify a clear structure that provides relationship marketers with the perception of being able to predict and steer the development of relationships across the relationship life-cycle (e.g., Parvatiyar and Sheth 2000).

Overall, Table 1 also reveals that the process characteristics we distinguished differ substantially with regards to their salience and the research attention they have attracted. At one end of the spectrum, process characteristics such as the dynamic, outcome-oriented and activity-centric nature of the relationship marketing process are acknowledged in most definitions we reviewed. At the other end of the spectrum, however, only few definitions directly refer to the polyadic and value-laden nature of the relationship marketing process.

In this study, we adopt a definition of relationship marketing that highlights first and foremost its dynamic nature of change and development and integrates all key process attributes depicted in Table 1. We hence conceptualize relationship marketing as the dynamic process by which a company acquires, develops, enhances, and, if necessary, terminates customer relationships that create value for all partners by performing activities that aim to build mutual trust and achieve a set of specified goals. These relationships are supported by a company's relationships with its other stakeholders.

It has long been established that relationship marketing is a process. This calls for a dynamic conceptualization of the relationship marketing process as unfolding over time in manner that is not entirely predetermined. It is only then that the changing nature and importance of relationships over time can be appreciated, tracked over time, and explained (Palmatier et al. 2013; Ravald and Grönroos 1996). Likewise, it is essential to understand the underlying dynamics, since they may lead to stronger relationship marketing theory and can “lay [...] the groundwork for better prediction of customer behavior and organizational outcomes” (Hollmann et al. 2015, p. 273).

It is against this backdrop that we begin to develop a process-centric framework to explore company-customer relationships and advance relationship marketing theory.

Unpacking process theories in relationship marketing

To enhance the understanding of the underlying process of relationship marketing and classify the existing body of

literature accordingly, we refer to the four generic process theories advanced by Van de Ven and Poole (1995). The four process theory archetypes, (1) life-cycle, (2) teleology, (3) evolution, and (4) dialectics, are applied to describe processes of development and change in organizations, and each of these theories is described by a specific sequence of events and a generative mechanism (Van de Ven and Poole 1995).

Notwithstanding the fact that Van de Ven and Poole (1995) originally intended these archetypes to be applied as process theories of change in organizations, we consider the application of these four theories to relationship marketing valid for several reasons. First, the value of applying the framework to strategic alliances has already been established (de Rond and Bouchikhi 2004). Given the conceptual linkages between strategic alliances and company-customer relationships, we see the work of de Rond and Bouchikhi (2004) as an important precedent we can build on. Second, there is initial evidence for the applicability of the four process archetypes even within the field of relationship marketing in part with reference to Van de Ven and Poole (1995). As a case in point, Halinen (2012) observes the prevalence of both life-cycle and evolutionary approaches in the relationship marketing literature. At the same time, he highlights the rareness of evolutionary and process research in relationship marketing, and calls for research into the process patterns of relationship marketing. Third, Van de Ven & Poole (1995, p. 521) themselves describe their theories as “four ideal-type process theories” with a broad scope of applicability because primarily, these four basic types of process theories “explain how and why change unfolds in social or biological entities” (Van de Ven and Poole 1995, p. 511). Applied to organizational entities, a “(a) process is viewed as a different cycle of change events, (b) which is governed by a different ‘motor’ or generating mechanism that (c) operates on a different unit of analysis and (d) represents a different mode of change” (Van de Ven and Poole 1995, p. 519). This focus on how change occurs in organizational entities could well be transferred to the process of relationship marketing since the inherent dynamics of relationships point to the ongoing change and development in these relationships. This change process can, for example, be conceptualized as unfolding in different developmental stages by the different activities that cause the relationship to develop further as described above. The specific form of change that occurs, in turn, is dependent on the mode and unit of change as the two core elements (Van de Ven and Poole 1995). The mode of change explains whether change is determined a priori and follows a prespecified way or whether change emerges and develops unpredictably. The unit of change describes which organizational level is concerned by the change, that is whether only a single entity or whether the interaction of multiple entities is affected by the change. Furthermore, a development view of relationship marketing is also explicitly mentioned in the literature (e.g., Gruen et al. 2000).

We hence adopted the four process theory archetypes proposed by Van de Ven and Poole (1995) as a lens through which we conducted a selective review of the relationship marketing literature. Among the four process theories, life-cycle models appeared to be most prevalent in the relationship marketing literature. Some research can also be classified as evolutionary or teleological research, while – to the best of the authors’ knowledge – a dialectical process theory has yet to be developed for relationship marketing. For this reason, we see considerable potential for a dialectical view to yield additional insights of direct relevance for relationship marketing scholarship and practice. Indeed, dialectical inquiry has proved highly valuable not least in the field of strategic alliances (de Rond and Bouchikhi 2004) and ecosystems (Velu 2015). Below, we briefly summarize the state of relationship marketing theory with regard to each of the four process theory archetypes. Table 2 summarizes these archetypes by describing their key metaphor, their logic, and their event progression. Furthermore, Table 2 lists exemplars from the relationship marketing literature, summarizes their key findings, and identifies application scenarios within the field of relationship marketing.

Life-cycle process models According to life-cycle theory, processes of development and change are typically characterized by four generic stages: start-up, growth, harvest, and termination. These must be passed one by one, since each stage is a necessary antecedent of the subsequent stages. The generative mechanism in life-cycle models is thus an immanent program or regulation and the change process follows a fixed sequence of interconnected stages, where characteristics from the former stages are retained to the next (Van de Ven and Poole 1995). Originally developed for human development and later transferred to organizations, development according to life-cycle theory describes specified stages that every organization has to go through when developing from a small start-up to a large corporation.

The transition from transactional marketing to relationship marketing is based on the idea that instead of selling only once to each customer, it is more profitable, and thus desirable, to establish a sustained relationship with customers (Reichheld and Sasser 1990). Thus, the fundamental idea of relationship marketing describes the development of a company-customer relationship following a life-cycle, that is following prescribed stages including acquisition, development, enhancement and, if necessary, termination. These stages are similar to the four life-cycle stages as described by Van de Ven and Poole (1995) and are also sequentially dependent. This implies that the next stage will typically not be reached without going through the previous one. However, this is not to exclude the possibility that relationship development might unfold in a less predictable way, for instance, by moving from acquisition straight to termination (Batonda and Perry 2003).

Table 2 Theory archetypes of relationship marketing processes

Family	Life-cycle	Teleology	Evolution	Dialectic
Key Metaphor Logic	Organic growth Prefigured sequence	Purposeful cooperation Envisioned end state	Competitive survival Natural selection among competitors in a population	Opposition, conflict Contradictory forces
Event Progression	Linear, irreversible and predictable	Recurrent, discontinuous sequence of goal setting, implementation, and adaptation to reach desired end state	Recurrent, cumulative, and probabilistic sequence of variation, selection and retention events	Recurrent, discontinuous sequence of confrontation and conflict between contrary forces
Research Exemplars in Relationship Marketing	Bejou (1997); Dwyer et al. (1987); Grönroos (1997); Jap (2001); Mattsson (1997); Palmatier et al. (2013); Palmer and Bejou (1994)	Bagozzi (1995); DeConinck and Lewis (1997); Parvatiyar and Sheth (2000)	Batonda and Perry (2003); Beverland and Lindgreen (2004); Palmer (2002)	Andersson-Cederholm and Gyimóthy (2010); Bantham et al. (2003)
Key Findings	Life-cycle with different labels of phases & stages; Necessity to manage life-cycle	Continuous monitoring/controlling of development; evaluation of goals, outcomes, and resources; situations and actors as constraints	Market dynamics as mechanism for relationship development; the role of scarce resources in company's environment	Conflict between relationship partners; first evidence on potential value of dialectical lens, but missing comprehensive examination
General Application Scenarios in Relationship Marketing	Understanding and managing a relationship life-cycle as a preconfigured and linear sequence	Means to achieve the envisioned end state of lasting relationships with profitable customers	Means to survive the selection process driven by competition for profitable long-term customers	Understanding and managing a relationship as a recurrent but discontinuous process of conflicting interests and powers between companies and customers

Adapted from Van de Ven & Poole (1995, p. 514) and de Rond & Bouchikhi (2004, p. 60)

The recognition of a relationship life-cycle is widespread in extant relationship marketing research. Dwyer et al. (1987), for instance, describe the development of buyer-seller relationships using a life-cycle approach comprised of five stages: awareness, exploration, expansion, commitment, and dissolution. They state that these five stages are sequential, with each stage resulting in a change in the characteristics of the relationship (Dwyer et al. 1987). This implies that relationships evolve by moving through a prescribed sequence of process stages. Similarly, Jap (2001) describes the relationship life-cycle as the dynamic development process of relationships. However, in contrast to Dwyer et al. (1987), she states that these relationships do not have to follow an orderly sequence. Therefore, she refers to “phases” instead of “stages” where not all phases have to be completed and the relationship could be terminated at any point of time (Jap 2001, p. 95). An additional exemplar of the life-cycle theory in relationship marketing is the “customer relationship life-cycle model” by Grönroos (1997b, p. 326). In this model, the management of the life-cycle of the development and evolution of the relationship between a company and its customers is conceptualized as the central task relationship marketing has to fulfill (Grönroos 1997b).

Teleological process models Instead of a linear and sequential process as in life-cycle theory, teleological process models propose a cycle of formulating, implementing, evaluating, and modifying goals based on the actual experiences of an organization. Thus, the organization has to be adaptive, willing to learn and is guided by its intentions. There is no one effective way to reach the envisioned end state. Rather, the development is characterized by the organization's movement toward its goals. Thus, the focus within this theory is not the goal itself, but rather the movement toward the goal and the conditions necessary to attain the envisioned end-state. The generative mechanism in this theory is the “purposeful enactment or social construction of the envisioned end state” (Van de Ven 2007, p. 203). Perhaps most importantly, neither the envisioned end state nor the patterns of change are assumed to be externally prescribed. Instead, they are negotiated and enacted by individuals responsible for the entity undergoing change. Reaching the envisioned end state also does not imply that the organization permanently stays there, since influences from the external environment can push it toward further development (Van de Ven and Poole 1995).

Teleological process models include two characteristics that are of direct relevance for relationship marketing. First, as the process is socially constructed, situations can occur during the process that have not been expected or planned. Then, it is management's task to enable learning and adaptation within the organization to develop toward its goals and deal with the new situations properly (de Rond and Bouchikhi 2004). Second, teleological theory understands the

environment as a constraint on the change process. Environmental constraints may include institutional as well as actors' restrictions (Van de Ven and Poole 1995).

Applied to a general organizational level, setting goals and working to implement them within a strategic planning process is an example of the application of a teleological theory. Another example on an individual, personal level is the planning of one's career as an iterative process of goal setting and implementation (Swanson and Holton 2001).

In the relationship marketing literature, little research exists that adopts a truly teleological perspective. However, the idea of a steady cycle on the way to achieving one's goals is followed by Parvatiyar and Sheth (2000). Within their relationship marketing process framework, they recognize the need for continuous monitoring of relationship development to reduce the probability of failures and conflicts. It is precisely the evaluation of goals, outcomes, and resources as part of the monitoring processes that allows relationships to evolve toward the intended aim (Parvatiyar and Sheth 2000). Other relationship marketing research mainly focuses on one aspect of teleological theory, namely the organizational environment and its constitutive actors as a constraint on the way to the envisioned end state. The primary target group of relationship marketing in this regard pertains to those customers willing to establish a relationship. However, they could also be expanded to include all stakeholders of a company (e.g., Homburg et al. 2012). Since similar patterns are likely, employees might also be an attractive target group. Beyond that, suppliers, the government, NGOs etc. can all be recipients of a company's relational communications, which then have to be individually adapted for each group of stakeholders.

Apart from a company's target groups, situational aspects can also represent a restriction on reaching envisioned goals (e.g., Kalwani and Narayandas 1995). It has been found that a company's communication efforts as part of its overall relationship marketing strategy are most effective in situations where relationships are critical (Palmatier et al. 2006). The criticality of relationships is, for example, influenced by the nature of the purchased good or the received service, or by the dynamic and uncertain environment that increases customers' need for a relationship (Neu et al. 2011; Palmatier 2008).

Another aspect of teleological theory mentioned in relationship marketing literature is the need for controlling processes. A possible approach to controlling relationship marketing is examining customers' satisfaction with and loyalty to the company (which represent commonly used measures in marketing literature (e.g., Anderson and Sullivan 1993)), for example by investigating trust, commitment, and related constructs (Morgan and Hunt 1994).

Evolutionary process models According to evolutionary process models, changes in the organizational environment constitute the primary mechanism of change. Specifically, this

means that organizations are in steady competition to survive in an environment of scarce resources. The continuous cycle of change includes variation, selection, and retention of organizational entities implying that some organizations succeed and others fail to survive in their competitive environment. The complete process is seen as recurrent, cumulative, and probabilistic (Van de Ven and Poole 1995). Evolutionary process models thus put an organization's market environment and the organization's ability to survive and thrive within this environment in the foreground (Swanson and Holton 2001).

Within the relationship marketing literature, market dynamics as the mechanism for the development of relationships are widely acknowledged. Palmer (2002), for instance, states that the evolution of relationship marketing itself became increasingly important because of the changes in the business environment of organizations during the 1990s. These changes include technological, social, economic, and political/legal issues in the marketing environment. Reimann et al. (2010) extend this line of thought by pointing to the commoditization of industries as a critical factor in evolving markets contributing to growing salience of relationship marketing.

A further aspect of evolutionary theory that is present in the relationship marketing literature is its focus on scarce resources in the environment of the company. In competition to retain loyal customers, these customers can be viewed as a scarce resource for companies that aim to build long-term relationships (Hunt et al. 2006; Parvatiyar and Sheth 2000). Thus, one reason for the existence of market dynamics is the competition for relationships in an environment with a limited number of customers (Möller and Halinen 2000). Beverland and Lindgreen (2004) give a comprehensive overview of the influence of environmental changes on the adoption of relationship marketing. First, they find support for the general linkage between the dynamic market environment and the changing nature of relationships, which is in line with prior research in this field (Achrol and Etzel 2003; Joshi and Campbell 2003). Second, their results support the view that companies steadily "form, build upon, and exit out of relationships in response to a changing environment and changing strategic needs" (Beverland and Lindgreen 2004, p. 852). In this vein, the competitiveness of the market and changing growth rates of the market are the main factors in the environment assumed to trigger evolutionary changes in relationships (Beverland and Lindgreen 2004).

Dialectical process models The fourth process archetype is the dialectical model. It assumes that organizational entities exist in a pluralistic world characterized by competition for domination and control. It is against this backdrop that change is conceptualized as occurring through the conflict between thesis and antithesis. The desired goal is a synthesis, at best representing a win-win solution for both entities. However, unequal power distributions prevent dialectical tensions from

consistently generating creative syntheses. The resulting synthesis might become a thesis itself in the next cycle of a dialectical process, implying that continuous movement is taking place. Thus, the generative mechanism of dialectical theory is pluralism, confrontation, and conflict (Van de Ven and Poole 1995). Pluralism can exist in ideas, among people or within organizations. It serves as a driver of change (Eisenhardt 2000). Furthermore, the nature of dialectical processes includes the confrontation between two or more entities that embody internal or external oppositions confronting each other. Tensions in this vein are defined as “two co-existing contradictory forces with conflicting goals” (Fang et al. 2011, p. 774). Dialectical tensions describe the dynamic interaction between opposing forces that drive change and development in any social system (Baxter and Montgomery 1996). Applied to the organizational level, changes that reflect ethnic diversity for instance often occur due to dialectical tensions (Swanson and Holton 2001).

The notion of conflict between relationship partners is recognized in the relationship marketing literature and plays an increasingly central role in academic discourse (Hui et al. 2004; Lindgreen 2001; Palmatier et al. 2006). The ever more salient role of partnering between salespeople and customers includes managing conflicts arising between partners, building and maintaining relationships with customers, and focusing on sales teams instead of individual sellers (Weitz and Bradford 1999). Managing conflict in relationships aims at achieving mutual benefits and strengthening relationships (Weitz and Bradford 1999). The literature emphasizes the negative effects of conflicts on relationships (Anderson and Weitz 1992) as well as its positive effects when conflicts are managed successfully (Anderson and Narus 1990; Dwyer et al. 1987).

Despite existing research on the role of conflict in relationships as a central feature of dialectical theory, relationship marketing still lacks specific examinations of dialectical tensions. A notable exception is the study by Andersson-Cederholm and Gyimóthy (2010). It examines triadic constellations that are characterized by a third person in the traditional service dyad, who links or separates the other two actors in service encounters. As a result, the service triad involves the dialectical tensions of loyalty and disloyalty, trust and distrust, empowerment and disempowerment, proximity and distance, and lastly, the tension between organizational decisions and an individual’s activity sphere. A detailed examination of these tensions and their consequences, however, is missing. Similarly, the traditional dyadic service encounter that is prevalent in business practice can also benefit from a closer analysis of dialectical tensions. As a case in point, Bantham et al. (2003) adopt a dialectical lens and find tensions to exist during all phases of relationship building. The main focus of their study is on tensions that concern the configuration objective of the relationship, such as growth and risk, top

management and process-employee perspectives, and strong and weak control. Tensions between the partners themselves are not examined. Furthermore, an in-depth examination of antecedents and consequences, and a detailed description of the configuration of the tensions, are once again missing from this study.

Both papers provide initial evidence for the potential value of a dialectical perspective on relationship marketing for academia and practice. By adopting a dialectical view, a more holistic picture of the relationship marketing process can be drawn, given the complementary insights of the dialectical perspective relative to extant life-cycle, teleological, or evolutionary views of relationship marketing. In particular, the understanding of the dynamic process dimension of relationship marketing could be enhanced using a dialectical process model in isolation or in combination with one or more of the other three theories. We will outline and illustrate both opportunities for advancing theory in relationship marketing below.

Opportunity 1: Advancing a dialectical process perspective

To begin to develop a dialectical process perspective on relationship marketing, we draw on the literature on interpersonal relationships and examine the applicability of dialectical tensions identified therein for company-customer relationships. The substantial conceptual similarities between company-customer and interpersonal relationships are well documented in the literature (for an overview see e.g., Butcher et al. 2002; Guenzi and Pelloni 2004). In the following, we attempt to exploit this analogy to explore a dialectical perspective on the relationship marketing process. Please note that we do not attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of relevant research from social psychology. Instead, we draw on social psychology as a source of inspiration to enrich our understanding of the underlying dynamics as represented in dialectical tensions in the relationship marketing process.

Since Levitt’s (1983) use of the marriage analogy for relationships between a company and its customers, efforts to draw on social psychology to fuel conceptual development in relationship marketing have proliferated. Even if the marriage analogy does not include the variety of parties involved, the costs and benefits, the willingness, or the ideal timescale of commercial relationships (Tynan 1997), some parallels exist. Iacobucci and Ostrom (1996) examined the suitability of a categorization of interpersonal relations from social psychology to commercial relationships, that is individual-to-individual, individual-to-firm, and firm-to-firm relationships. In particular, the dimensions of closeness, valence, asymmetry, and formality were found to be useful when applied to commercial relationships, with each commercial relationship possessing a unique combination of the four dimensions (Iacobucci and

Ostrom 1996). Furthermore, the analogy of interpersonal relationships in marketing has not only been applied to relationships between customers and companies, but also to those between customers and brands (Aggarwal 2004; Fournier and Yao 1997; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001).

Perspectives on dialectical approaches to studying interpersonal relationships include characteristics that are based on dialectical theory by Hegel (Baxter and Montgomery 1996), particularly its focus on process and contradiction (Altman et al. 1981; Baxter 1988; Cornforth 1968). As a consequence of constant interaction, the contradictory dialectical tensions lead to development and continuous change in relationships (Baxter 1990; Montgomery 1993), which in turn function as the driver of change (Ben-Ari 2012). Based on the premise that tensions are always present, and can thus only be managed or adapted, interaction between the “unified oppositions” (Baxter and Montgomery 1996, p. 8) leads to evolution and change in relationships (Masheter and Harris 1986). Taken together, change and development as the result of reactions to – and the managing of – opposing tensions are central to both conceptualizations of dialectical theory.

Most importantly, tensions as cognitions are not seen as negative per se (Baxter 1990). Instead, they are understood as oppositional forces that work together in a more or less coordinated and concurrent fashion (Altman et al. 1981), with each having the chance to be evaluated both positively and negatively (Montgomery 1993). Furthermore, relationship partners do not need to be aware of the dialectical tensions (Montgomery 1993). Moreover, both poles of each tension constantly exist, though they are not recognized or their importance in specific situations is likely to vary (Montgomery 1993). Lastly, dialectical tensions are context-specific and should thus be exclusively investigated in context (Montgomery 1993). This emphasis on context is another similarity, compared to the dialectical process theory of Van de Ven and Poole (1995).

Description of five exemplar dialectical tensions in company-customer relationships

Research on interpersonal relationships identified a number of specific dialectical tensions. As part of our interdisciplinary literature review, five tensions surfaced that are most compatible with our purpose of a transfer to company-customer relationships. Even if other tensions have been identified, for example in the field of B2B-marketing relationships, such as cooperation and competition, and flexibility and rigidity (Fang et al. 2011), we perceive these five tensions to be most relevant for company-customer relationships due to the analogy to interpersonal relationships. In general, this analogy is applicable to all types of commercial relationships i.e., individual-to-individual, individual-to-firm, and firm-to-firm relationships (Iacobucci and Ostrom 1996). In the interest of

parsimony, we develop our arguments with regards to company-customer relationships in business-to-consumer settings, which are particularly prevalent in relationship marketing research (Agariya and Singh 2011). That said, we expect most of our theoretical arguments to be valid beyond B2C contexts.

Figure 1 depicts the five selected tensions of autonomy-connection, openness-closedness, predictability-novelty, realization-idealization, and affection-instrumentality, which we assume to jointly shape company-customer relationships over time. In the following sections, we describe each tension from a social psychological viewpoint before examining them for their applicability to company-customer relationships.

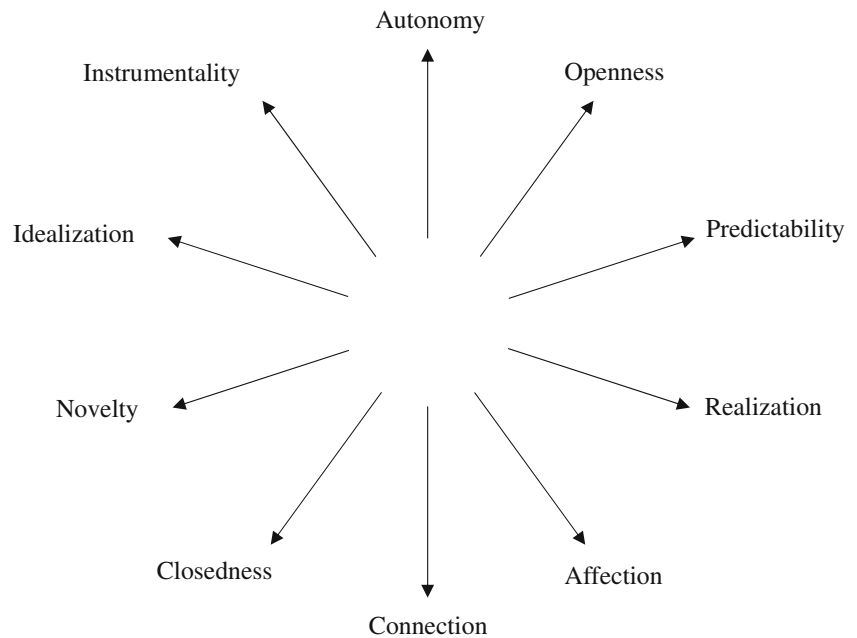
Autonomy and connection In a relationship, the two extremes of autonomy and connection simultaneously contribute to its continuity. While individuals have the desire to connect to other people and rely on them, individuals also need a certain degree of autonomy, demonstrating that their identities are independent of others (Baxter 1990). Andersson-Cederholm and Gyimóthy (2010) mention the related tension of proximity and distance, which exhibits considerable similarities with the tension of autonomy and connection.

In company-customer relationships, a company might strive for the closest possible connection to its customers in order to improve customer outcomes and increase control over interactions and handlings with their customers. Furthermore, the company wants to keep a certain degree of connection to their customers to ensure the best possible customization of products and services, regardless of changes in customers’ situations. This is especially important in a service context, where the specific service encounter takes center stage in the evaluation process (e.g., Bitner 1990). In the same manner, customers prefer a certain degree of connection to the company, depicted in the concept of “relationship closeness” brought forward by Berscheid et al. (1989). Relationship closeness is defined as “a customer’s systematic preference for frequent, diverse, and mutually influential relationship marketing-related interactions with a firm” (Mende et al. 2013). In contrast, some customers strive to ensure their autonomy in order to prevent being dependent and secure the option of changing the provider in the case of dissatisfaction (Mende et al. 2013).

All in all, the dialectical tension between autonomy and connection is prevalent in interpersonal relationships as well as in company-customer relationships and has to be managed and adapted to, depending on customers’ preferences.

Openness and Closedness The second dialectical tension that has been identified as particularly salient is openness and closedness. This dialectical tension describes the way information is shared between individuals. On the one hand, openness is necessary for sharing information, especially at the

Fig. 1 Selected dialectical tensions in company-customer relationships



beginning of a relationship in order to get acquainted. On the other hand, both sides become vulnerable the more information they share and, thus, some degree of information closedness is also necessary (Baxter 1988).

This aspect is well transferable to company-customer relationships. From a company's point of view, establishing customers' trust in the company requires that, for example, salespeople find the appropriate balance between providing as much information as necessary to satisfy their customers, yet as little information as possible to minimize the vulnerability of the company. For customers, a similar pattern can be expected. Customers need to weigh up how much information they share with a company. Being too open makes the customer vulnerable and might lead to opportunistic behavior from the company's side. At the same time, being too secretive and holding back too much information makes it impossible for a company to advise and work with its customers to their satisfaction. Furthermore, communication between a company and its customers can go beyond the sole exchange of information as depicted in the concept of "relational communication" (Soldow and Thomas 1984). Relational communication therefore focuses less on the actual content of a message than on its form as shaping – and being shaped by – the social fabric among communication partners.

The dialectical tension of openness and closedness is similar to the tension between expressiveness and protectiveness brought forward by Rawlins (1992). This tension describes openness as being expressive and closedness as being rather protective in the communication between friends. Overall, the dialectical tension between openness and closedness appears

to be salient not only in interpersonal relationships, but also in company-customer relationships.

Predictability and novelty The third tension prevalent in existing dialectical research is that between predictability and novelty. In interpersonal relationships, this tension refers to the conflict introduced by the simultaneous need for continuity and novelty. Literature in the area of interpersonal relationships yields various results concerning whether one or the other end point is more desirable. On the one hand, novelty introduces excitement, which makes a relationship more interesting and unpredictable (Braithwaite and Baxter 1995). On the other hand, predictable routine activities, such as everyday talk, lead to more certainty and thus contribute to relationship consolidation (Duck 1994; Gerstel and Gross 1984).

In addition to this trade-off in the realm of interpersonal relationships, companies are likely to face a similar tension between predictability and novelty in terms of company-customer relationships. In particular, companies must identify customers' wishes and needs concerning the degree of novelty in the relationship. This aspect can be explained as the degree of standardization or differentiation of the company-customer relationship. The more a customer prefers a novel development, the more the company has to differentiate this specific relationship to accommodate the customers' preferences as opposed to delivering a standardized service that the customer might know from the experiences of other customers. Therefore, the tension of predictability and novelty appears to be highly relevant in company-customer relationships.

Realization and idealization Rawlins (1992) describes the dialectical tension between realization and idealization as

stemming from the potential discrepancy between the expected and the realized nature of an interpersonal relationship. Idealization can have a particular influence on the level of satisfaction in relationships. It explains a positive bias toward the partner or the whole relationship (Schulman 1974). Idealization can frame satisfaction positively in separation phases, but becomes problematic in joint relationship periods, since idealization no longer takes place and realization is stronger (Stafford and Merolla 2007; Stafford and Reske 1990). Independently of the aforementioned, a certain level of idealization is necessary (Murray et al. 1996).

Transferred to company-customer relationships, idealization can play a key role in at least three ways. First, customers may idealize a company they have interacted with, in which case the succeeding company has to take measures to reduce the idealization of the preceding company. Second, also from a customer's perspective, customers may idealize the current company, which enables the company to strengthen its relationships with them. In the same manner, customers transfer expectations of the former company to a future relationship with another company. Third, from a company's perspective, the company aims to convey an ideal image that equals their real image as perceived by their customers at its best. Idealization, therefore, is an omnipresent characteristic of company-customer relationships from the customers' as well as from the company's side. It is very important to balance the tension between realization and idealization to prevent dissatisfaction-triggering gaps caused by expectations that have not been met (Oliver 1980).

Affection and instrumentality The difference between understanding a relationship as an end in itself, and understanding it as a means to an end, is the basis for the tension between affection and instrumentality. It focuses on the differentiation between emotions (e.g., warm feelings toward a friend) and the objective and goal-directed cognitions (e.g., financial benefits) of the relationship (Rawlins 1992). A central issue with this tension is that the understanding and interpretation of actions in relationships is highly dependent on the relationship partner. In this way, the same action can be understood as an unselfish and caring action, the same way as it might be understood as an instrumental aid in order to gain a functional reward (Rawlins 1992). It should be noted that this issue is extensively discussed within social psychology research, related to the phenomenon of altruism (e.g., Batson 1997).

Transferred to company-customer relationships, the service itself determines the peculiarity of this tension. Services with a high hedonic value are more relevant for the affective side of the tension while services with a high functional value are sensitive to instrumental outcomes (Babin et al. 1994; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). Additionally, researchers can assume that customers are only partially aware of their preferences for affect and goal-direction following recent

insights from social psychology that deal with conscious and unconscious processes (and related issues, see e.g., De Houwer et al. 2009). Constraints (e.g., time, need for cognition) that limit the evaluation of affective and cognitive states can lead to the dominance of unconscious tensions. For example, a customer spontaneously misinterprets the actions of a service employee in a checkout area as “false”, feels offended, and quits the relationship instantly despite being determined and goal-directed in lasting situations.

This is only an initial illustration of the potential new insights that can be gained from adopting a dialectical perspective on the relationship marketing process. The preceding discussion examined the tensions as occurring independently of each other. This is clearly helpful for analytical purposes. However, tensions are likely to coexist and coevolve; several tensions might be an integral part of the same relationship at the same point or consecutive points in time (see Fig. 1). Therefore, it is necessary to shed light on possible interdependencies among the tensions identified above. Figure 1 also points to the fact that each relationship is continuously shaped by multiple, possibly contradictory forces.

These tensions not only coevolve over time, but are also expected to shape salient relationship outcomes such as loyalty and word-of-mouth as well as relational mediators such as perceived trust and relationship satisfaction in non-trivial ways (e.g., Palmatier et al. 2006). Importantly, they are neither necessarily functional nor dysfunctional. As a motor for relationship development, dialectical tensions are hence not always detrimental to relationship performance (de Rond and Bouchikhi 2004). As tensions are omnipresent in any kind of relationship, tension management rather than tension prevention moves into the foreground. Explicit management attention is especially required, when one pole of a tension (e.g., autonomy and connection) appears to marginalize the other. Indeed, in case of stark imbalances, effective tension management can be vital for maintaining trust and relationship satisfaction as salient factors mediating the link between relationship marketing and relational outcomes. Greater emphasis on tensions and tension management might therefore even help explain inconsistent empirical findings on the effectiveness of relationship marketing (Palmatier et al. 2006). We encourage scholars in relationship marketing to extend our exploratory efforts and fully exploit this first major opportunity for exploring company-customer relationships.

Opportunity 2: Recombining distinct process theories

A second promising opportunity for advancing relationship marketing theory is based on the idea of recombining distinct process theories instead of simply using them in isolation. Van de Ven and Poole (1995) advance arguments in support of

such endeavors. Each entity is influenced by its inner and outer context that develops over space and time. Therefore, different “motors” are likely to influence differently the various parts of an entity. The resulting complexity can be explained only incompletely with single motor theories. Moreover, each motor is necessarily incomplete by itself. Indeed, each motor has aspects that are determined up-front but still, each motor includes aspects that remain unspecified. As a case in point, in dialectical theory, the origin of the antithesis is not clearly specified. Here, events from other motors, for example from teleological theory, can help to account for the missing aspects (Van de Ven and Poole 1995). Consequently, it is necessary to understand the conditions under which different motors are useful and when it is suitable to combine them.

Table 3 summarizes the conditions that need to be met by each of the four process theory archetypes for it to possess the greatest explanatory power and their respective motors to operate. To identify promising theory combinations, Van de Ven and Poole (1995) suggest a two-step process called template matching. As part of the first step, researchers need to assess whether the conditions from Table 3 are present to determine which of the four motors is operating. In case more than one motor is operating, researchers need to examine how these two or more motors are related. It is through template matching that researchers can assess whether “a given type of motor explains development in a particular situation” (Van de Ven and Poole 1995, p. 524). For example, for a life-cycle motor to operate, a discrete entity needs to experience change, yet maintain a stable identity. Furthermore, subsequent stages need to differ in form or function and the development trajectory needs to follow some immanent order. As a condition necessary for a dialectical motor to operate, at least two entities need to be in contradiction or opposition in turn. The resulting struggle or conflict needs to unfold in a physical or social venue and lead to either a new entity, the elimination of one of the contradicting entities, or a stalemate (Van de Ven and Poole 1995).

Table 3 also guides relationship marketing researchers on how to select the process theory(ies) that are most compatible with the specific research focus at hand. As a case in point, we indicate that a dialectical process lens might be most appropriate for researchers seeking to shed light on relationship tensions, conflict and crisis or subsequent recovery efforts. Although these research foci are meant to be exemplar rather than comprehensive, we believe that they can act as a valuable guide for relationship marketing researchers. Indeed, for each research focus listed in Table 3, multiple granular research questions can be explored. For relationship tensions, for instance, researchers could ask, how tensions emerge, which tensions are most salient, how tensions can be managed and how tensions can lead to open conflict in relationship management.

More complex research questions with multiple research foci might call for multi-motor theorizing. Building so called “dual-[(or-more-)]motor theories” (Van de Ven and Poole 1995, p. 527) accounts for the fact that two (or more) motors might operate simultaneously. Consider an entity, such as a company-customer relationship, whose development over time is assumed to be jointly shaped by some immanent order as well as by conflict and synthesis (e.g., how do specific tensions unfold across different stages of the relationship life-cycle). Any one-process theory archetype will then possess lower explanatory power than a dual-motor theory that integrates using life-cycle and dialectical mechanisms. Both motors might be complementary here in that the “life-cycle explains the ‘form’ of the unitary stages, while the dialectics explain the underlying dynamics of movement” (Greiner 1972, cited in Van de Ven and Poole 1995, p. 530). Another candidate for exploration is integrating dialectical and evolutionary or teleological motors to better explain sources of variation in evolutionary models or unexpected deviations from the path toward some envisioned end state in teleological process models. As such, we hope that the ideas contained in Table 3 will serve as a source of inspiration for relationship marketing scholars.

To illustrate and showcase the appeal of such dual-(or-more-)motor theories within relationship marketing, we provide an illustrative example from the financial services industry. In particular, we show that the underlying dynamics characterizing each stage can be explained by the application of a dialectical perspective, while the life-cycle describes forms of and transitions between stages. Importantly, this approach is in line with previous calls to complement life-cycle models with a more dynamic perspective (Palmatier et al. 2013).

An illustrative example of a dual-motor theory to explain the dynamic process of relationship marketing

Financial services are ubiquitous and relevant for almost everybody at one point in time. Company-customer relationships typically unfold in stages of acquiring, developing, enhancing, and, if necessary, terminating the relationship. Deregulation and digitization have increased switching options, raised customer power, and diluted willingness to pay for services. As a result, effective relationship marketing has moved center stage, emphasizing frontline employees and service encounters (e.g., Bitner et al. 1990). Below, we explore potential links between dialectical tensions across life-cycle stages in particular.

Acquisition stage: Need for transaction services

This initial stage includes customers’ first contact with the provider. They might simply wish to open their first savings account to satisfy basic needs in terms of financial services,

Table 3 Matching Process Motors and Research Foci in Relationship Marketing

	Assumptions about Phenomenon	Selected Research Foci in RM
Life-Cycle Motor	Singular entity undergoes changes while maintaining its identity Change process follows distinguishable stages Program determines stages of development and its progression	Relationship initiation Relationship development Relationship termination
Teleological Motor	Singular entity engages in reflexively monitored action that aims at a common goal Envisioned end state of development is not fixed but the process steps of reaching it need to be identifiable Activities by the entity need to contribute to a fixed set of requirements and constraints to attain the goal	Relationship objectives Relationship goal orientation Relationship monitoring Relationship adaptation Relationship constraints
Evolutionary Motor	Entities exist in a relationship in an environment with limited resources necessary to survive Mechanisms indicate (1) variation, (2) selection, and (3) retention of entities Macro-population characteristics influence the three steps at the micro-level	Relationship models Relationship change Relationship persistence Relationship fitness
Dialectical Motor	Two or more entities oppose or contradict one another These entities engage in some confrontation or conflict Possible results of the confrontation comprise a stalemate, among the entities, the defeat of one entity by another, or the emergence of a new entity	Relationship tensions Relationship conflict Relationship crisis Relationship recovery

Adapted and extended from Van de Ven & Poole (1995, p. 525)

particularly balancing consumption and transferring money (Howcroft et al. 2003). The need for personal face-to-face interaction with the provider is limited as the account could also be opened online.

At this stage, the relationship, if present, tends to be characterized by a high level of autonomy, closedness, predictability, realization, and instrumentality. A new bank customer who opens an account online may not feel the need to have a particular connection with the bank. A high degree of autonomy also appears desirable from a customer point of view to be able to switch provider in case of dissatisfaction (Mende et al. 2013). Additional information is only needed in relation to account opening requirements (e.g., identification documents). In contrast, relationship-oriented information is scant, since a relationship has not yet developed. Therefore, the tension between openness and closedness tends to be pushed in the direction of closedness. At the same time, the relationship in that initial stage is likely characterized more by predictability than novelty. That said, small gifts for customers, for example on their birthday, can instill some novelty, since special treatments like this are associated with friendship (Price and Arnould 1999), which in turn fosters relationship development. The balance of realization and idealization might be in favor of realization, since the decision to open a savings account is inherently focused on its basic features (Howcroft et al. 2003). Therefore, development of an idealized image is unlikely at this early stage. By the same token, the relationship is still primarily instrumental as opposed to affective in nature.

Overall, recognizing and managing the dialectical tensions toward the intended pole of each pair to provide mutual benefits is vital for the company in this stage. Once the bank account is established, life-cycle view indicates that this stage has been completed with the relationship moving to the subsequent stage.

Development stage: Need for insurance services

In the second stage, the probability increases that customers need additional financial services, as basic needs are supplemented by “high level” needs such as insurance services (Howcroft et al. 2003, p. 1005). These require an increased level of competence and skill on the provider’s side and, in turn, an increase in personal interactions to receive specialist advice (Howcroft et al. 2003). This leads to opportunities for developing lasting relationships and increasing the cross-selling potential and profits, provided that these dynamics can be managed adequately.

At this stage, the dialectical tension between autonomy and connection could trend toward a higher level of connection, thereby increasing customer loyalty, while customers profit from related benefits (e.g., Gwinner et al. 1998). Aiming at a higher level of relationship closeness (Berscheid et al. 1989), customers increasingly value more frequent interaction, with a demand for more open relationships that involve the disclosure of relevant personal information, for example, to customize the service. However, at this stage, customers might

withhold some information to minimize their vulnerability. The dialectical tension between predictability and novelty also tends to shift toward a higher level of novelty, since the financial service is no longer standardized. Instead providers can develop existing relationships by tailoring services to customer preferences thereby instilling a certain degree of novelty into the relationship. With the interaction frequency increasing and separation times decreasing, higher degrees of idealization require the provider to convey a real image in order to prevent misperceptions that could lead to dissatisfaction (e.g., rose-tinted glasses that skew negative experiences which are then remembered again in interactions). Likewise, an advanced relationship replaces instrumental motives (e.g., financial benefits) with affective motives (e.g., a good feeling toward the financial services provider). Therefore, a certain degree of affection as compared to only goal-directed cognitions gains importance.

Enhancement stage: Need for specialist services

In the relationship enhancement stage, additional high level needs concerning financial services might surface. These could pertain, for instance, to specialist services such as pension plans or stock investments. This moves expert advice center stage, as legal and/or tax matters need to be considered (Gupta and Torkzadeh 1988; Howcroft et al. 2003).

At this stage, each dialectical tension pair is likely to move toward the opposite pole from that during the acquisition stage. Discussing long-term topics such as investments in stocks, and personal aspects of life, such as pension plans, requires a high level of connection between provider and customer. Once a provider is selected, customers tend to lose interest in options to switch providers, and customers' desire for autonomy tends to decline. For the financial services provider, this high level of connection is beneficial in that it offers additional opportunities for value capture. As for openness and closedness, high levels of personality frame social interaction. Consequently, the importance of relational communication peaks (Soldow and Thomas 1984). Another important aspect at this stage is the provider's need to manage customer preferences for predictability and novelty. While the previous focus was on interaction frequency, communication content becomes more important for relationships at this stage. Correspondingly, as the time between interactions increases, the customer is more likely to idealize the provider and ignore any imperfect experiences in single interactions. However, as soon as the provider and the customer meet again, negative experiences can arise. Therefore, it is essential to manage these rare but important interactions effectively. Lastly, growing personal interaction increases the affection end of this dialectical tension, conveying honest intentions to provide assistance and support for customers, as well as avoiding misinterpretations of actions during the relationship.

Overall, this brief example was meant to illustrate that integrating life-cycle and dialectical motors has the potential to deepen our understanding of the relationship marketing process. In particular, each life-cycle stage can be characterized by a unique tension profile, with meaningful implications for relationship marketing practice. As a result, coping strategies to manage crucial encounters will likely be different for the acquisition, enhancement, and termination stages. Given its complementary nature, we argue that an integrative approach helps build more profound and granular knowledge of relational tensions as well as their salience and dynamics across the relationship life-cycle. This novel perspective can also explain why some relationships do not progress as predicted by life-cycle models alone: tensions spinning out of control and leading customers to disengage (Hollmann et al. 2015). Clearly, opportunities for combining process theory archetypes are manifold with the dialectical life-cycle model we started to develop being just one illustrative example.

Discussion

Reviewing the conceptual landscape of relationship marketing research through the lens of four process theory archetypes, namely life-cycle, teleology, evolution, and dialectic, yielded novel insights into the process of relationship marketing based on what is already known about the process's nature, that is its six process characteristics. It allowed us to identify and systematize two promising sets of opportunities that we believe can stimulate and guide efforts to advance relationship marketing theory.

Implications for dialectical theorizing in relationship marketing

The first opportunity we identified and started to explore is the development of a dialectical process perspective on relationship marketing as a multifaceted, tension-laden process. A dialectical change motor fueled by conflict and tensions between distinct entities has remained largely absent from current theorizing in relationship marketing. This is all the more surprising as a dialectical approach has demonstrated explanatory power in the context of strategic alliances (de Rond and Bouchikhi 2004). It is uniquely equipped to explain the dynamic "messiness" that shapes customer relationships over time and cannot readily be accounted for in life-cycle models based on some immanent order.

Clearly, much remains to be done on the way toward a fully specified dialectical theory of relationship marketing. We therefore perceive our work not as an endpoint, but as a starting point for dialectical inquiry in relationship marketing and beyond. Opportunities for further development are manifold. Below, we sketch a brief research agenda, which we

hope will serve as a source of inspiration. On a broad level, we call for future research to embed the dialectical approach we have started to develop in this paper more firmly into relationship marketing theory and practice. Further research is now needed to advance dialectical inquiry from a contextual, conceptual and methodological standpoint.

First, we encourage scholars to shed light on the *contextual* embeddedness of tensions and corresponding coping strategies. Most notably, further research needs to unpack the extent to which specific relationship constellations including company-customer, company-supplier and customer-customer relationships (Gummeson and Polese 2009) exhibit a distinct dialectical profile, that is are exposed to a unique set of tensions. When applied to the research stream on internal marketing (Berry et al. 1976), such a dialectical lens could also inform research on company-employee relationships as prevalent in the fields of organizational behavior and human resource management (e.g., Giannakis and Harker 2014). Similarly, tensions might differ in their salience as a function of the respective exchange object, be it a specific type of good or service (e.g., Bowen 1990). At a broader level, the salience of individual tensions and coping strategies might be contingent on geographical and cultural characteristics that shape the relationship at hand. In particular, we assume tensions to become more prevalent the greater the geographical and cultural distance between the actors involved (e.g., Conway and Swift 2000). One contributing factor might be so called country-of-origin effects (e.g., Maheswaran 1994) and cultural stereotypes more generally.

In this paper, we focused on five pairs of dialectical tensions in order to demonstrate their fit with relationship marketing theory. However, additional tensions can influence the dynamics of company-customer relationships. We hence call for research to broaden the set of tensions examined. One opportunity to do so is by broadening research to B2B-marketing. Here, for example, research on tensions in B2B-marketing relationships might wish to include the tension between cooperative and competitive orientation, between the use of knowledge for common or private benefit, and the one between power and dependence (Tidström 2014). Similarly, tensions in B2B-marketing relationships might comprise the ones between flexibility and rigidity as well as between long-term and short-term orientation (Fang et al. 2011).

Second, research on the dialectics of relationship marketing could extend our research *conceptually* and explore the diverse antecedents and consequences of dialectical tensions in company-customer relationships. This could comprise empirical efforts to identify the most salient triggering events for conflict and opposition in such relationships. Likewise, scholars might want to better understand the specific boundary conditions that shape the link between selected tensions and key relationship outcomes such as customer satisfaction and loyalty. Importantly, research might wish to explore both the

dysfunctional and functional effects of tensions and associated reconciliation attempts in company-customer relationships. It also appears worthwhile to further unpack the nature of dialectical tensions. A useful starting point in this regard could be the distinction between primary tensions that exist across relationship types, and secondary tensions that are particular to a specific relationship type (Montgomery 1993). Furthermore, tensions can be internal in that they occur between the respective relationship partners (here, company and customer) or external in that they involve a relationship partner and some third entity such as customer advocacy groups, privacy protection agencies, regulatory bodies and so forth. As the present research focused exclusively on internal tensions, further research into the salience of external tensions appears needed.

Third, dialectical inquiry in the field of relationship marketing can add to – and, in turn, be enriched by – a broad *methodological* repertoire. Our research presents a framework that is meant to provide the conceptual foundations not only for future theoretical developments, but also for empirical investigations into the dialectical tensions and its combinations with other motors of company-customer relationships. Inductive qualitative research including longitudinal ethnographic and observational studies is particularly well positioned to unpack and describe the nature and evolution of dialectical tensions as they unfold across the relationship life-cycle. This research might contribute to theory building and help paint a more granular picture of the manifold tensions and coping strategies that characterize company-customer relationships. Quantitative and experimental research is then needed to detect dialectical patterns in larger samples of company-customer relationships, identify salient antecedents and consequences of tensions, isolate connections to additional relationship marketing theories, and test the effectiveness of selected reconciliation strategies. For instance, based on the financial services example, a qualitative study could observe interactions to enrich the presented combination of life cycle and dialectical theory. Further, this research could reveal whether additional theories are applicable in this setting. Building on these insights, quantitative research could then examine the relevance of tensions for relationship marketing outcomes. Since relationship partners are not necessarily aware of existent tensions (Montgomery 1993), all empirical research encompasses the challenge of revealing tensions at all; additionally, researchers need to take care that tensions that have not yet been recognized by the relationship partners are not unveiled too obviously, since tensions might be perceived as negative – on both sides. Overall, independent of the type of empirical research, this research encompasses and addresses the vital aspect of tensions, that is their contextual embeddedness.

Implications for dual-or-more motor theorizing in relationship marketing

The second and perhaps even more far-reaching opportunity to advance relationship marketing theory we identified goes beyond any one individual process theory. Instead, the focus is on combining two (or more) ideal-typical process models. As we showcased for the combination of a dialectical and a life-cycle perspective, dual-motor theories promise to deepen our understanding of the multifaceted nature of the relationship marketing process. Among others, robust empirical evidence on the interplay between dialectical and life-cycle motors is now needed to complement our illustrative example of dialectical tensions unfolding across relationship stages in financial services. It appears conceivable that this will help to extend recent insights on the need to tailor relationship marketing practices to each specific stage of the relationship life-cycle (Zhang et al. 2016). Clearly, opportunities for the development of other dual-or-more-motor theories abound as shown previously in the manuscript. We encourage relationship marketing scholars to explore these and other fascinating opportunities for dual-or-more-motor theorizing. Our guidelines on how to identify suitable combinations of process models might serve as a helpful starting point. The particular value of the combination of two or more motors to explain relationship marketing processes lies in the opportunity to build a holistic picture of the process. Most notably, our insights summarized in Table 3 guide scholars on how to account for the multifaceted nature of the underlying theoretical explanations of many relationship marketing phenomena. Furthermore, these combinations might lead to clearer insights on how to achieve favorable relational outcomes and might help explain the mixed results in prior empirical research. It is only when this multifaceted nature of the phenomena under study is recognized that relationship marketing can advance toward a more theorized field in marketing.

Combining motors also has implications for overarching discussions in relationship marketing research. As a case in point, the four process theories in combination could shed new light on the satisfaction-profit chain (Anderson and Mittal 2000). That is, these theories can explain why or why not the chain unfolds its full potential. Hence they can help in explaining why customer satisfaction programs do not always lead to the desirable results. Since the links between the four chain elements do not follow one another in a symmetric and linear progression (Anderson and Mittal 2000), that is they do not always follow a prescribed life-cycle, aspects from the other three motors can explain these deviances.

Overall, we believe that pursuing any of these avenues will yield additional insights into the dynamic process of relationship marketing that can advance theory in our field and prove valuable for relationship marketing scholars and practitioners alike.

Implications for relationship marketing practice

Perhaps most fundamentally, dialectical theory portrays tensions in relationships as neither necessarily dysfunctional nor inherently functional. Embracing this basic dialectical premise will have consequences for practitioners and their approach to managing tensions in company-customer relationships. Marketers might begin to appreciate tensions and conflict as being natural elements and motors for change in any relationship (Anderson and Narus 1990). This implies that companies are well advised to not avoid or reconcile tensions at all costs.

Instead, a more subtle and reflective approach toward the management of relational tensions is needed. Social psychological research on interpersonal relationships might be informative in this regard, as it suggests situational strategies to cope with tensions. A widely used classification of strategies to cope with the three key tensions in an interpersonal relationship (i.e., autonomy and connection, openness and closedness, predictability and novelty) is brought forward by Baxter (1988), that is selection, separation, neutralization, and reframing. Selection results in partners' decisions to emphasize one extreme tension over the other, while separation only affects one pole for specific topics that arise in a relationship. In contrast, neutralization aims at achieving an average position by balancing both poles. Finally, reframing includes a redefinition of tensions in a way that opposing poles no longer exist (Baxter 1988). Practical and empirical insights into whether these patterns are also present and effective in company-customer relationships are much needed. As dialectical tensions will vary across the relationship life-cycle, practitioners are well advised to consider an approach to tension management that is carefully tailored to the stage-specific tension profile.

Conclusions

Relationship marketing is commonly defined as a process. Its essential process dimension, however, remains surprisingly under-theorized. In this conceptual paper, we started to address this theoretical void and developed a process-centric framework to explore company-customer relationships. This framework distinguishes four ideal-typical models of the relationship marketing process: (1) life-cycle, (2) evolutionary, (3) teleological and (4) dialectical process models. Our review of the relationship marketing literature revealed the prevalence of life-cycle conceptions of the relationship marketing process, followed by teleological and evolutionary conceptions. It is against this backdrop that we illustrated the value of dialectical process models as a first promising opportunity to advance relationship marketing theory. In particular, we found a dialectical lens to have the potential to redirect scholarly and managerial attention in an effort to paint an even more realistic picture of the relationship marketing process and its social

complexities. We developed five tensions in our paper, including the ones between idealization and realization and between novelty and predictability, which jointly shape relationship marketing processes. They vary across the relationship life-cycle, are unlikely to evolve in any prescribed order, and can be reconciled imperfectly at best. The second opportunity for advancing theory we showcased consisted in combining two (or more) process archetypes to do better justice to the multifaceted nature of the relationship marketing process. We hope that these insights and our process-centric framework for exploring company-customer relationships will inspire future research and help to systematize the manifold opportunities for advancing theory in relationship marketing and beyond.

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