

## **Substantive Paradigms and Business Anthropology**

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*Neoclassical theories deemphasize the unique cultural context of behavior and its emotional mainsprings. Substantive economic anthropology, in contrast, nests economic behavior within a social framework which takes the feelings of people into account. By merging substantive economic analysis with other non-neoclassical models, business anthropologists can provide a unique and much needed framework of analysis.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Business leaders who embrace neoclassical theories envision economic choices as rational and universal (not emotional and culturally specific) in nature. Substantive views of economic anthropology, in contrast, are more socially oriented and less focused upon rational theories regarding human response. Although the substantive position is valuable because of its cultural sensitivity, mainstream decision makers who embrace a neoclassical perspective may have trouble relating to perspectives that run contrary to their worldview.

Because business anthropologists have a foot both in the strategic and the social sciences, they have an important role in presenting views that transcend the neoclassical model in ways to which mainstream decision makers can respond. Research in the INJBA that follows this basic agenda could include Gnag (2011) and Qirkoi (2012). This essay provides suggestions on how to do so, largely using the field of marketing as an illustrative example.

After juxtaposing neoclassical theory and substantive economic anthropology, modern marketing management will be analyzed as a neoclassical paradigm that concentrates upon how organizations and customers receive mutual benefits by collaborating with each other in rational ways. The resulting paradigm, although useful under many circumstances, draws attention away from the uniqueness of the culture and other non-rational triggers of behavior. By merging substantive economic anthropological perceptions with paradigms of marketing that exist independently of the neoclassical marketing management approach, a richer and more robust mode of analysis results. Business anthropologists are uniquely positioned to provide these much needed perspectives.

### **NEOCLASSICAL ECONOMICS: RATIONAL AND ACULTURAL**

The term “neoclassical” has come to refer to what is generally envisioned as the mainstream economic paradigm that dominates in the Western and the developed spheres. Certainly, there are differences of opinion among the many members of this loosely intertwined school of thought. Thus, among United States universities, the so-called “freshwater school” (so named because of a proximity to

the Great Lakes) advocates less governmental intervention, while their “saltwater” rivals (closer to the ocean) are more comfortable with governmental involvement in the economy. Although strong differences of opinion exist regarding the appropriateness of entangling public policy within the realm of private business, most mainstream economists stand as one when it comes to the basic premises, paradigms, and conceptual strategies of the neoclassical model.

Neoclassicists view economics as the science of exploring how desirable and scarce resources are allocated. They use rational and universal models to do so. To be specific, neoclassical economists hypothesize that:

1. Economic decisions are essentially rational in nature.
2. Individuals will make the decisions that they believe will result in the most “utility” (use) or provide the same utility at a lower cost.
3. People have access to perfect information.
4. People tend to act independently of each other.
5. Individuals/consumers seek utility, organizations seek profits.

Such sentiments are mirrored by anthropologist Raymond Firth, a leader of “formalist economic anthropology” that applies neoclassical economic models to the study of economic responses among traditional people. (see Firth’s work on the Maori in this regard 1929, 1939, 1967.) Harold K. Schneider has also embraced formalist perspectives to good advantage.

Criticisms of the formalist model of economic anthropology include a questioning of the assumptions the model accepts about human life and action as well as the suggestion that formalism does not reflect human universals. Prattis, for example, argues that the underlying concept of utility maximization is tautological, complaining that “This post hoc reasoning back to a priori assumptions has minimal scientific value as it is not readily subject to falsification.” (1989:212). And as we will see when discussing substantivist economic theory, the case can be made that economic activities are embedded within the cultural landscape and cannot be appropriately analyzed outside of that context.

To be fair to the neoclassical economists and the formalist economic anthropologists, it should be added that all students of economics (except the most naïve undergraduates) acknowledge that people and their decisions are far more complicated than that. Few, for example, would deny the fact that emotion affects decisions (although the degree to which it does so is a matter of debate.) Certainly, not everybody has access to perfect information. Nonetheless, the neoclassicists affirm that these assumptions allow them to model economic behavior in a useful and articulate manner. To give a taste of the method, a thumbnail sketch of these assumptions is provided below.

**Economic Man Model:** Neoclassical thinkers embrace some version of the “economic man” model which assumes that people act in rational ways to achieve perceived goals that are motivated by the twin desires to maximize benefits and/or minimize costs. Thus, people are viewed as (1) seeking specific and predetermined goals (2) while hoping to gain these benefits at the lowest possible cost (however costs and benefits might be defined). These assumptions, of course, do not imply that people’s choices are inevitably wise, intelligent, or truly in their self-interest, but merely that economic actors are using some sort of calculated rational thought (overtly or covertly) in an attempt to maximize benefits and/or minimize costs.

**Perfect Information Model:** Neoclassical economists often assume that state of perfect information and perfect competition exists. In other words, all participants in an economic sphere are treated as if they possess perfect information regarding costs, product quality, etc. Perfect information essentially means that all economic participants know everything that is relevant to an economic decision and that they are in a position to use these unerring facts to make optimum decisions. While common sense tells us this is seldom completely true, the model has proved useful in many contexts.

**Profit Motive Model:** While individuals seek to maximize utility, firms seek to maximize profits. Therefore, organizations seek to develop an edge or an advantage over competitors in order to gain the patronage of customers and clients in order to maximize profit.

In summary, neoclassical economics and formalist economic theory simplifies the analysis of economic behavior by making certain assumptions that are obviously not totally accurate. Although

neoclassical economists realize their assumptions are not 100% valid, they view them as representing the norms of human responses. As a result, neoclassicists accept these assumptions because the model is viewed to be accurate enough to be statistically significant and of value in the decision-making and analytic processes. As we shall see below, mainstream business theories (represented in this paper by the marketing management approach) embrace the basic tenets of neoclassicism and need to be evaluated accordingly.

Business anthropologists dealing with a particular group of people may object to these tactics of analysis because they seriously distort reality and do not accurately reflect how specific people think and react. In this paper, substantive economic anthropology is merged with vintage theories of business that exist independently of the neoclassical model in order to facilitate a more robust and appropriate analysis. In doing so, an example is provided regarding how business anthropology can combine with established business fields in robust and synergistic ways that have theoretical and practitioner significance.

## **MARKETING MANAGEMENT AND NEOCLASSICAL THOUGHT**

Contemporary marketing theory is an example of neoclassical thinking. Its pivotal premise is the “marketing concept” that argues that the only reason organizations exist is to serve their customers/clients at a profit. The typical process by which this is accomplished involves understanding what a specific target market demands and serving it better than any other competitor does.

Today, this approach to marketing is generally known as “*4 Ps*” *marketing management* since each of the controllable variables the organization can manipulate to please a target market (**P**roduct, **P**rice, **P**lace, and **P**romotion) starts with “P”. The approach, stemming from E. Jerome McCarthy’s seminal text (1960) has become almost universal. Although many marketing texts are available today, they all tend to be organized according to the McCarthy schema. Graphically, this arrangement is portrayed by Table 1 below.

Focusing (1) upon the needs of specific groups of customers and (2) adjusting the organization’s controllable variables in order to satisfy the desires and demands of that target market, this approach fits in well with and reflects the neoclassical model (and its rational and universal perspectives.)

Neoclassical economics asserts that its methods and models can be applied universally and cross-culturally and are appropriate both within the modern industrial world and among small scale societies (such as tribes, rural villages, and ethnic enclaves.) This position is maintained even though various societies seek and value a wide range of scarce resources (that may run the gambit from wealth, to security, to spare time, to respect, to attractive members of the opposite sex, and so on.) Once these scarce and desirable items (whatever they are) are identified, neoclassical methods (centered on rationality and universality) can be used to model behavior.

In such a manner, 4 Ps Marketing Management seeks to identify the products and utilities that people want. After doing so, the firm’s controllable variables are manipulated in order to help them to achieve their goals. When working within a neoclassical framework, business anthropologists have a very real, but narrow role to play (helping decision makers to better understand what particular people want and proposing ways to help them achieve their goals.

## **A SUBSTANTIVE ALTERNATIVE**

Thus, business disciplines, like marketing, and formalist economic anthropology believe that neoclassical economic models can usefully model universal tendencies of production and consumption. While this might be true to a degree, an alternative position suggests that in many circumstances more culturally sensitive models need to be employed (see Plattner 1989 & Wilk, R. 1996 .) The case is made that economic actions and decisions are nested within a cultural context that needs to be taken into account when economic behavior is examined and analyzed. Those who embrace this perspective are likely to conclude that in many circumstances business anthropologists are better able to analyze economic behavior than those who embrace a neoclassical perspective.

**TABLE 1**  
**MARKETING MANAGEMENT: AN OVERVIEW**

<b>FACTOR</b>	<b>PHENOMENA</b>	<b>IMPACTS</b>	<b>IMPLICATIONS</b>
<b>Product</b>	The actual good or service being sold to the target market	People are buying the tangible and intangible characteristics of the product. To be successful, the product must respond to a need perceived by the market.	The product or service can take advantage of consumer demands and/or respond to consumer feelings such as curiosity.
<b>Price</b>	The price which the organization charges for its goods and services	The price can influence the size of the market and determine when people will buy the product.	Price can be quickly adjusted as a short-term tactic or changed as part of an evolving long term strategy.
<b>Place</b>	The distribution network and where the product will be made available	Where the product is and who sells it may influence the level of sales and who buys the product.	Getting the product to where it can be reached and purchased by an appropriate target market.
<b>Promotion</b>	The communication between the organization and its intermediaries, customers, and other relevant publics that facilitate the marketing effort and/or the general health of the organization.	In order to most effectively sell a product, the organization must communicate effectively and to the proper audiences.	To effectively market a product, various publics must be addressed in ways that influence them. This communication should both reinforce the other marketing variables and speak to specific publics on their own terms.
<b>Marketing Management</b>	Coordinating all of the controllable variables so that the benefits of synergism make the organization and its products more marketable	By consciously interlacing the various controllable variables, the organization is able to more efficiently and effectively market the product.	By overtly combining each of the controllable variables into a coherent and synergistic campaign, the organization will be more effective in marketing its products.
<b>Discussion</b>	Mainstream 4 Ps marketing reflects neoclassical perspectives. Customers/clients are assumed to (1) basically understand what they want and (2) that they search the marketplace for the item that best suits their conscious needs. Organizations seek to understand customers/clients and having done so they devise ways to give them precisely what they want. Thus, customers seek maximum utility and organizations pursue maximum profits (or whatever yardstick of evaluation is used to measure success.)		

The classic statement of the substantive position, of course, is found in Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* (1944) which argues that a great divide in humanity is marked by the transition from small scale societies (in which people interact in intimate ways involving face to face contact) to the environment spawned by the industrial revolution (that is typified by wage labor, increasingly impersonal relationships, and an economy based on money.) Polanyi, in effect, embraces the notion that the transformations triggered by industrialization created patterns of life and human interaction that are profoundly different from what had been experienced in earlier times and still existed in small scale societies (Polanyi 1968.)

Polanyi and those who embrace his perspectives (known as substantive economic anthropologists) believe that the modern industrial world is a specific realm where rational action and strategic decision (largely reflective of the neoclassical model) dominate. People in such a system are assumed to be striving to advance their individual situation in overt, rational, and calculated ways. These substantivists insist that these rational and universal patterns of response are not universal and that the neoclassical framework is an artifact of the industrial age, not a reflection of general economic response.

In specific, the substantivists argue that within many small scale societies, economic activity is not a separate and distinct realm of strategic behavior; instead, it is subtly intertwined within the entire culture (including kinship patterns, mores, religion/ceremony, etc.) When social, cultural, and economic pressures and responses become enmeshed in such a manner, one-dimensional neoclassical analysis is not robust enough to portray economic behavior in all its complexity. By conceptualizing economics in such a manner, the formal, rational, and universal aspects of the model are deemphasized and are no longer viewed as an essential and inevitable part of the economic process.

Polanyi made significant use of two terms, "redistribution" and "reciprocity." Reciprocity involves a long-term pattern of mutually exchanging of goods and/or services, typically among those who are perceived to be equals. Interacting in this way emerges as part of the fabric of life and not as payment, charity, or a calculated "quid pro quo." Redistribution, in contrast, takes place when a strong leader, political force, and so forth gathers resources that are then doled out in accordance with some culturally established formula. Scarce and desirable goods are dispersed even though the rational and formal marketplace (that is modeled by neoclassical theory) is not the mechanism that does so.

Polanyi and the substantivists use the term "embedded" to indicate how this process actually works. Instead of economic activity being a distinct and discrete part of life and culture, distribution and allocation is nested within the entire cultural and social framework. Thus, economic life is not totally dictated by rational and universal responses that take place in relative isolation. (For a fuller discussion see (Granovetter 1985.)

Many examples of such non-neoclassical behavior have been documented. I, personally, have participated in the redistribution that takes place among the Inupiaq of the North Slope of Alaska when a whale is caught. The majority of the meat is shared with the community, given away in a traditional fashion. The home of the successful whaling boat captain is opened to the public for a feast and everybody goes home with a sack of whale blubber and meat. At various other times in the year (such as Thanksgiving) additional redistributions take place. This culturally regulated dispersal remains a significant part of life on the North Slope even if it is but a pale reflection of the subsistence economy that long dominated there.

Certainly, neoclassical economists can portray the acts of these donors as merely capturing respect (a scarce and desired commodity) through the redistribution of commodities (in manner reminiscent of philanthropists in the developed world who seek prestige and notoriety through charity. Nonetheless, the whole process is much more complex and it is intimately connected to the cultural heritage of the people. The behaviors are structured in accord with long standing tradition. Adherence to these cultural dictates is not viewed as optional; this pattern of sharing is part of the Inupiaq's established patterns of behavior. Under such circumstances, economic activities and other aspects of life are seamlessly intertwined with one another in ways that make conformity to them a natural and intuitive response. Thus, substantivist economic anthropologists view the various institutions of the culture (family, social structure, religion, mores, and so forth) as creating the frame within which specific economic responses take place. This

kind of analysis provides a much richer and robust understanding than merely using neoclassical analysis in isolation.

In traditional and small scale societies, a subsistence way of life often continues to prevail even if a market/cash economy exists side by side with it. These substantivist responses tend to benefit the entire community, not specific segments that are working to achieve their own partisan goals in ways that are reflected by neoclassical theory.

When specific Native, indigenous, and rural people are considering their options, business anthropologists can help them do so in ways that do not presuppose the neoclassical model. Business anthropologists can also help intrusive outsiders to understand how neoclassical models might not be suitable when evaluating such communities. In short, neoclassical thinking can be envisioned as an artifact of the industrial world and the modern global economy; substantivism, in contrast, emerges as a way to understand cultural distinctiveness in ways that downplay rational thought and economic universals.

As any other paradigm, the substantive model is not immune to criticisms. Thus, Prattis (1982) reminds us that the distinction between primitive and modern economies is largely arbitrary even though Polanyi seemingly argued in black and white terms. My rebuttal of this critique is that Polanyi was merely using the dialectical form of argumentation that is based upon the tactic of presenting the point of view being championed in stark to the position being critiqued. I'm sure Polanyi recognized the obvious: many different variants exist in economic life (as well as in all other phases of human life and culture.)

A further attack of the substantivist model comes from members of a splinter group often called the culturalists, such as Steven Gudeman (1986.) Even more culturally focused than the substantivists, the culturalists prefer analyzing economic activities with reference to the way the people being studied perceive them. Rejecting universal perspectives deriving from the experiences of the developed world, the culturalists insist that local, culturally derived perspectives should dominate the way that economic activity is envisioned, modeled, and studied. Gudeman, for example, uses the phrase "people's own economic construction" (1986:1) when doing so.

Although the culturalists make some good points, I consider their work to be a useful and clarifying refinement of the substantivist approach, not a new school functioning in contrast to it.

## **SUBSTANTIVIST MODELS AND ALLIED CONCEPTS OF MARKETING**

As discussed above, modern marketing management is neoclassical because it is geared towards rational and universal responses triggered by overt self-interest. Business anthropologists have a role in offering substantive alternatives that deal with people and their economic behavior in a more robust manner that transcends rationality and universality in order to deal with the lives, thoughts, and actions of actual people.

When presenting findings, however, business anthropologists need to use examples that make sense to those whose worldview is built upon business theory and practice. This can best be accomplished by discussing substantive issues using metaphors that stem from business theory and practice.

Before the marketing management paradigm came to dominate, alternative visions and models of marketing existed that did not presuppose the neoclassical principles that currently dominate the field. Connecting the substantive way of thinking with these models provides a way to present this chain of thought in a way that resonates from business practices and experiences.

Three classic models of marketing (the "functional", "commodity", and "institutional" approaches) have useful contributions to make in this regard. Each will be discussed below.

### **Functional Approach**

The basic goal of the functional method in marketing is to focus upon what kinds of activities need to take place in order for economic activity to occur. This form of analysis, however, does not presuppose any kind of neoclassical response. Functionalism in general, of course, arose in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the dominant paradigm in disciplines such as sociology and anthropology as well as business.

In the current era, functional methods have often been dismissed as an apology for the status quo. Poststructuralists, furthermore, often suggest that the so-called structures of life and society are actually illusions that draw attention away from the dilemmas and challenges facing individuals. Such critiques notwithstanding, functionalism provides a powerful toolkit. As functionalism developed within marketing, it examined tasks that must be performed if goods and services are to be distributed. In a classic statement from the marketing literature, Edmond McGarry made this distinction (1950 268):

The function of the heart is not simply to beat, which is its activity, but rather, to supply the body with a continuous supply of blood. [Thus, functionalism in marketing] should be used only in connection with activities that must be performed in order to accomplish the general purpose.

Even though analogies are sometimes abused, this point is well taken. The functional method within marketing focuses upon various sub-tasks that are necessary for the exchange and consumption of goods and services. It does so without accepting neoclassical premises (such as the presumption that actors are engaged in some sort of rational campaign dictated by self interest.) Paul Converse, for example, breaks functionalism in marketing down into an array of tasks involving (1) ownership, (2) creating possessive utility, (3) the movement of goods, and (4) marketing management.

Consider, for example, the example of the distribution of whale meat and blubber that was described above. Transportation of the commodity must take place. Ownership must pass from the captains to the members of the community. Conditions must be created so the meat can be utilized by the people (prepared for serving and/or dividing and packaging for people to take home, etc.) These functions take place within a social context and can be analyzed accordingly, not merely with reference to rational and universal principles. Converse's typology underscores how functionalism can usefully augment the neoclassical marketing concept.

The functional method merely assumes that a variety of activities that must take place to facilitate distribution and consumption. By viewing economic behavior in this even handed way, the functional approach can provide a common ground for those who embrace both the neoclassical and the substantive economic models.

### **Commodity Approach**

The commodity approach to marketing emphasizes that certain types of products, by their very nature, need to be treated in specific ways. Thus, steel girders might be valuable but they can be left unguarded because they are so heavy they cannot be easily stolen. In addition, they are useless to most people (have no utility.) Smaller objects, such as TV sets, although of relatively little comparative value, can easily be removed. In addition, TV sets have a utility that can benefit many people. As a result, they require protection.

Some products, furthermore, require special treatment to maintain their utility and viability. Items, such as fresh food, must get to consumers before it spoils; marketing methods must be adjusted accordingly. In these cases, the nature of the commodity, dictates how products are marketed. Perishability, for example, determines how produce is marketed, not the neoclassical marketing concept.

### **Institutional**

Marketing takes place within the context of institutions. These institutions, furthermore, have requirements and characteristics that need to be taken into account when economic activities are being modeled and when strategies are being developed. Some institutions that are discussed by modern marketing include various types of retail and wholesale establishments. Marketers consider needs and characteristics and develop campaigns accordingly. Note that this analysis is centered around social institutions and their needs and habits, not merely with reference to projected neoclassical responses.

The case can be made that cultural traditions, societies, and social structures are examples of institutions that profoundly impact the marketing process. Indeed, many consultants earn their living by providing insights regarding how the social conventions of specific countries or peoples impact the way business is conducted. These variables, of course, transcend neoclassical responses and merge with the substantive model.

On many occasions, the institutions that facilitate business are not adequately analyzed using neoclassical economic models. Although scarce and desirable resources are being allocated, the process by which this happens is not entirely rational or satisfactorily explained using universal models. These limitations of the neoclassical model exist because substantive relationships are often intertwined with the allocation and distribution of goods and services.

Most broadly, then, the institutional approach looks at the characteristics of organizations that function within the sphere of marketing. These institutions operate according to priorities and traditions all their own. Substantive economic anthropology, coupled with the institutional approach of marketing is able to systematically deal with this reality.

In summary and conclusion: the functional, commodity, and institutional approaches do not presuppose and do not depend upon neoclassical perspectives. These tools and their characteristics are outlined below in tabular fashion:

**TABLE 2**  
**ALTERNATIVES TO NEOCLASSICAL BUSINESS MODELS**

	<b>PERSPECTIVE</b>	<b>IMPLICATIONS</b>
<b>FUNCTIONAL</b>	The functional approach makes no assumptions regarding why people act in the way they do. The method merely analyzes things that must happen if distribution and consumption are to take place.	In the functional approach, neoclassical response is viewed as discrete and not inevitable. As a result, the functional method can explore the functions of marketing without presupposing a neoclassical context.
<b>COMMODITY</b>	Certain commodities have characteristics that impact how distribution and consumption take place.	Commodities with different traits may need to be dealt with in specific ways that can impact social relationship in substantive ways.
<b>INSTITUTIONAL</b>	Distribution and consumption takes place with the context of institutions. Cultural traditions and social structures are examples of institutions that can impact economic behavior.	Institutions, not merely neoclassical economic principles, exert profound impact upon the way in which scarce and desired good are distributed.
<b>DISCUSSION</b>	While marketing management tends to embrace neoclassical assumptions regarding economic behavior, the functional, commodity, and institutional models do not. This allows for a more even handed and objective analysis because the dice are not loaded towards a particular point of view. They also fit nicely with substantive analysis.	

Thus, non-neoclassical views of marketing dovetail with the perspectives of substantive economic anthropology. Combined in a synergistic fashion, they offer useful alternatives to neoclassical applications such as the contemporary market management approach that is rational and universal in nature. The substantive model looks at economic behavior from a specific cultural perspective, acknowledging that peoples' feelings often impact (1) the process by which individuals acquire and consume items as well as (2) how production and redistribution takes place. By nesting this thinking

within established business thought, business anthropologists can develop a more compelling mode of analysis. By using this tact of reasoning, business anthropologists who embrace the substantive position can more effectively present their opinions to those who harbor neoclassical beliefs. This paper has presented advice on how to do so.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Business anthropologists are in a position to perform an invaluable task by transcending the tenets of neoclassical economics (and business theories based upon it.) The theory and methods of substantive economic anthropology offer a way of doing so. Drawing linkages between substantivism and established business theories that are not neoclassical in nature is an ideal opening gambit for those who seek to argue in this manner.

Business anthropologists have a window of opportunity in this regard. A rationale regarding how to proceed has been presented here. My approach and discussions have been very general because (1) I wanted to present a broad chain of thought (2) while avoiding the controversy that might occur if specific partisan ideas were advocated while others were ignored or criticized. Substantive economic anthropology (and allied chains of thought related to it) are complex, and disagreements within the field exist even though they are not discussed here.

Culling my discussion down to its essence, I have observed that neoclassical economic theories, that presuppose rationality and universality, dominate the academic and practitioner realms of business. Unfortunately, this paradigm, useful though it is, possesses profound blind spots that need to be addressed. Substantive economic anthropology provides a way to get beyond these limitations. By combining substantive thought with established neoclassical models (such as marketing, management), business anthropologists have the best chance of making a positive impact in this regard.

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