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Be(com)ing normal – not excellent:

Service management, the gap-model

and disciplinary power

Per Skålen

per.skalen@kau.se

Karlstad University

The Service Research Center

SE-65188

Karlstad, Sweden

Martin Fougère

martin.fougere@hanken.fi

The Swedish School of Economics and Business Administration

P.O. Box 478, FIN-00101

Helsinki, Finland

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Structured abstract

Research paper

Purpose

Marketing ‘from the intra-organizational perspective’ has been comparatively untouched by the critical turn in organization studies. The objective of the present paper is to contribute to a critical examination of marketing as a change discourse by focusing on service management scholarship. In particular we focus upon the gap-model.

Design/methodology/approach

Foucault’s disciplinary power concept is used to analyze how the gap-model tends to objectify, subjectify and normalize.

Findings

Focusing on service management contributes to the scarce critical examination of marketing in general and the almost non-existent critical examination of service management in particular. Further, the paper contributes to the investigation of the production of subjectivity and normalization as an effect of marketing technologies.

Research implications

We suggest empirical exploration of subjective responses to marketing discourse and associated technologies.

Originality/value

Critical examinations of marketing discourse in general, and service management in particular, are very scarce. Specifically the paper contributes to the understanding of how service management intends to fixate the subject.

Key words: Disciplinary power, Normalization, Subjectivity, Critical Management Studies, Marketing, Service Management, the Gap-model.

Introduction

'Critical Management Studies' has been established as a field in its own right within organization studies. The field's main focus has been on the repression, discipline and control as well as resistance to and emancipation from managerial discourse (Alvesson and Willmott, 2003). A critical perspective has also been applied to sub-disciplines of management, such as accounting and strategic management (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996). However, Morgan (2003) demonstrates that marketing has been comparatively untouched by the critical turn in organization studies. This is surprising since Alvesson and Willmott (1996), in their review of critical management studies, argue that marketing is the management discipline where critical theoretical approaches could contribute most.

Marketing's 'ideas and rhetoric have been widely used to legitimize change in [and around] organizations in the public and private sector' (Brownlie et al., 1999:6). Marketing has stimulated organizations to 'customer orientate' their operations and their personnel (Harris and Ogbonna, 2002) and has contributed, with its particular view of society and markets, to the treatment of consumers as objects. This intra- and extra-organizational objectification of human beings have contributed to re-define the subjectivity of organizational members and consumers (Brownlie et al., 1999). In the present paper, our objective is to contribute to a critical examination of marketing discourse as a change discourse. We do so by focusing on service management (Grönroos, 2000), which has been one of the most significant contributions to marketing during the last decades (Kotler, 2003). In fact, Vargo and Lusch (2004) believe that service management has laid foundation for a new dominant logic in the marketing discourse. Service management scholarship, as other disciplines of marketing, stands well within a modernist, positivist and functionalist tradition. The managerial dimension is explicit. A prescriptive and normative focus on management is present in

virtually all research. Its final aim – an aim that service management shares with other branches of managerial discourse (du Gay, 1996) – is to make organizations and their personnel become *excellent* by adopting service management prerogatives (Berry, 1999; Schneider and Bowen, 1995).

The distinctive argument made in this paper is that, rather than bringing about excellence as it claims to, service management tends to produce *normal* organizations and individuals. Our argument is based on a Foucauldian analysis of the ‘gap-model’ (Parasuraman et al., 1985; 1988). The gap-model is the most important technology in the field of customer perceived service quality. Service quality has been at the centre of the service management research agenda since the middle of the 1980s (Brady and Cronin, 2001; Brown et al., 1994; Parasuraman et al., 1985) and encapsulates the service management ‘spirit’. The gap-model conceptualizes service quality as a comparison between customer’s expectations and perceptions – the ‘disconfirmation paradigm’ for measurement, which is the predominant model in the quality and customer satisfaction literature (Oliver, 1997). The gap-model is thus not a marginal customer survey technology. Rather, it is representative for gaining insights into customer’s demands and desires.

But service quality has not only had an impact on service management research. It has also had a deep impact on the operations of service organizations and on wider societal customer orientation discourse and thus merits critical analysis. Today, almost every service organization, private service firms and public authorities included, measure service quality and/or customer satisfaction. The design of these measurement instruments is nearly always reminiscent of the gap-model. Schneider and White (2004) argue that the gap-model has provided the original structure for the measurement of service quality, even though local

adaptations of it have been made to suit particular needs in different service industries. Accordingly, empirical research in organization studies and marketing have shown that service quality initiatives have made the personnel of service organizations adapt their behavior to customer demands (Harrington and Akerhurst, 2000; Kantsperger and Kunz, 2005; Korczynski et al., 2000; Peccei and Rosenthal, 2000). It also seems likely that service quality has affected wider customer discourse in contemporary society (du Gay, 1996; du Gay and Salaman, 1992) and that the gap-model and its local elaborations have been important in diffusing theoretical research into wider societal discourse.

In the paper, service management in general – and the gap-model in particular – is conceptualized as a form of ‘disciplinary power’ (Foucault, 1977; 1981; 1986). When service management was starting to be formulated as a distinctive field in the middle of the 1970s (Berry and Parasuraman, 1993; Shostack, 1977), general marketing was articulated around the assumption that the level of interaction between employees and customers should be limited and indirect (Kotler, 1976). Service management theory, on the other hand, was founded on the reverse assumption. Therefore, since the early days of service management scholarship, a central suggestion has been that everyone has to behave as a marketer for the organization to survive and prosper (Grönroos, 1982; Parasuraman et al, 1985). In service organizations, the personnel *is* the service. Service management has thus contributed to embed the marketing concept deeper into organizations and to secure the employers’ normative control over the employed (Sturdy, 1998).

Influenced by Townley’s analysis of Human Resource Management (Townley, 1993; 1998), we conceptualize the gap-model as an examination – which according to Foucault (1977) is the common way in which disciplinary power works – and analyze how the gap-model

stimulates individual confession – which, Foucault (1981) argues, makes people tied to a distinct subjectivity. We thus seek to describe the way in which the gap-model tends to produce the subjection of those who are perceived as objects and the objectification of those subjected. In order to demonstrate how the gap-model normalizes, we use Foucault's five propositions of normalization outlined in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1977). However, our focus in this paper is not on the effects that service management has on organizations. Rather, we focus on service management theory and its *capacity* to objectify, subjectify and normalize. Whether this happens or not is an empirical question.

The paper is divided into six sections. It opens with a section on previous critical marketing and management research. The second section presents an overview of the particular Foucauldian approach used in this paper, focusing on the concept of disciplinary power. We proceed with a description of central propositions in service management, with a focus on the gap-model. In the fourth section, our analysis of the gap-model is presented. In the fifth section, we discuss what kind of normality the gap-model produces and how it produces it. In our conclusion, the contribution of the paper is established and avenues for future research are proposed.

Critical marketing and critical management

While it can be argued that marketing stands at the centre of the main social processes characterizing contemporary society, mainstream marketing has consistently failed to critically articulate and reflexively analyze why it has become so significant (Hackley, 2003; Morgan, 2003). In service management, there has traditionally been even less of a critical discussion. Burton (2001) mainly blames this inability on the traditional relative lack of

interest in the development of theory within marketing, as well as on the reluctance to take up the theoretical challenge represented by the emergence of postmodernism.

However, in the past few years, there has been a growing interest in critical perspectives on marketing promoted by several journals – *Journal of Macromarketing*, *Marketing Theory* and *Consumption, Markets and Culture* (Burton, 2001). In addition, textbooks have been written with a critical perspective (Desmond, 2003). However, in contrast to accounting and organization studies, papers with an explicit critical stance never appear in the more influential journals and the major marketing textbooks do not touch upon the area of critical marketing (e.g. Kotler, 2003). Critical marketing is thus not established at the centre of the marketing research agenda. In addition, marketing has not been conceptualized as a managerial discourse in previous critical marketing studies, and we believe it should be – service management in particular. In critical marketing, the phenomena of consumption and the consumer have been focused on (Firat and Dholakia, 1998; Hackley, 2001). This might be one reason as to why the emerging field of critical marketing has predominantly been informed by cultural studies and postmodernism rather than the more overtly critical approaches of critical theory – especially from the Frankfurt school – and Foucauldian inspired analysis, which have laid foundation for critical management studies (see e.g. Alvesson and Willmott, 1996). Drawing on these overtly critical perspectives, critical management students have explored how marketing knowledge transforms individuals into particular kinds of consumer subjects (Hodgson, 2002; Knights and Sturdy, 1997). However, even in these studies, marketing has not been conceptualized as managerial discourse and the control, subjectification and normalization of employees has accordingly not been in focus. From our perspective, the most promising contributions to the emergent field of critical marketing are, on the one hand, an edited volume (Brownlie et al., 1999) with papers written

by influential critical management scholars, and, on the other hand, occasional critical reflections on marketing in management journals (Alvesson, 1994; Hackley, 2003). Here, the management or managerial perspective is in focus and so are the discipline, control and repression of the personnel as well as the desirable emancipation from disciplinary discourse. However, there does not seem to exist a single analysis that uses the disciplinary power concept to examine the normalization – and associated practices, in particular the subjectification of employees – of marketing discourse in general, and service management in particular, conceptualized as managerial discourse.

Disciplinary power, subjectivity and normalization

In Clegg's (1989) review of the power literature, it is evident that those conceptualizations of power that have prevailed prior to Foucault's view draw on the Hobbesian sovereign power concept. A central idea in theories of sovereign power is that power holders have power over those that lack power and, consequently, that power is in the hands of certain people or institutions. An empirical analysis following such a conceptualization of power focuses on the what of power; for example what people in the name of power do against their will or the shift of power from one power holder to another (Lukes, 1974). Foucault (1977; 1981; 1986) rejects treating power as a commodity. Rather, he argues that, from the enlightenment onwards, i.e. during modernity, power has taken disciplinary shape – power is invested in discourse and technologies of control that make people behave and think in a distinctive manner. In addition, Foucault breaks distinctively with positivistic epistemology, which is explicit or implicit in all modern social sciences. Foucault argues that such knowledge (e.g. psychology) is the example par excellence of discourses and technologies of control invested with power. Foucault (1977; 1981) thus stipulates a close coupling between power and knowledge/truth.

Foucault's conceptualization of disciplinary power treats power as constituting human beings as objects of knowledge while at the same time making them subjects – and subjected – to knowledge (Foucault, 2000a). In the present paper, we analyze *how* service management may objectify and subjectify. We analyze the gap-model's potential to objectify by conceptualizing it as an 'examination', which Foucault (1977) identifies as the principal technology of the self associated with the objectification of the individual (Townley, 1998). Associated with the examination is an important distinctive feature of disciplinary power, i.e. that disciplinary power itself is always invisible but that it imposes a compulsory and constant visibility on those disciplined (Foucault, 1977). The principal technology of the self associated with the creation of subjectivity is the confession (Foucault, 1981; 2000b). Both examinations and confessions facilitate the management of individuals (Townley, 1993; 1996; 1998). By confessing, the individual becomes tied to an individual identity. We argue that the gap-model stimulates people to confess.

Knights and Willmott (1989:554) have clarified and defined Foucault's concept of subjectivity: 'Rejecting the essentialist view of human nature, subjectivity is understood as a product of disciplinary mechanisms, technologies of surveillance and power/knowledge strategies'. Fleming and Spicer (2003: 158), accordingly, argue that 'the subjectivity of workers and managers is inextricably entwined with relations of power and knowledge'. In critical management studies, 'the humanist notion of a meaning-creating and autonomous human subject is rejected in favor of subjectivity as being discursively produced' (Sturdy, 1998:28). What subjectivity managerial discourse creates and how it creates it have been a vital theme in critical management studies. For example, du Gay and Salaman (1992:626), in their study of programs of customer orientation, argue that 'governing the business

organization in an enterprising manner involves cultivating enterprising subjects – autonomous, self-regulating, productive, responsible individuals’. In a similar fashion, Townley (1993:537) claims that ‘HRM practices function to constitute the individual in a particular manner through tying him or her to a changed sense of self or identity’.

The subjectivity created by disciplinary discourse defines what is normal and what is deviant and is consequently inclined to produce normal subjects.

...the art of punishing, in the régime of disciplinary power, is aimed neither at expiation, nor even precisely at repression. It brings five quite distinct operations into play: [it] compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it *normalizes* (Foucault, 1977:182-183).

The discussion in the present paper is based on these five normalization properties. We argue that the gap-model contributes to creating normal human beings and normal organizations rather than the excellent people and organizations that the service management discourse promises to develop. This is consistent with critical management analyses of HRM (Townley, 1993; 1996; 1998), cost accounting and budgeting (Miller and O’Leary, 1987), TQM (Knights and McCabe, 1999), customer orientation (du Gay and Salaman, 1992) and corporate culture (Sturdy, 1998). Even though the concept of ‘normalization’ is not used frequently in this research, a fundamental argument is that managerial discourse has normalized organizations and their members. Du Gay and Salaman (1992:621), for example, argue that ‘customer survey technologies’, such as the gap-model focused on in the present paper, ‘are made to exert control over employees’. Particularly, they show that ‘in the case of service industries with significant employee/customer interaction, customers are made to function in the role of management’ by defining appropriate employee behavior, thoughts and emotions. In a similar vein, Sturdy (1998:30) argues that ‘in particular, the emergence and application of marketing ideas’ have secured the managers’ normative control over

employees. ‘This is illustrated by the development of the North American idea of “internal marketing”’, a concept invented by service management scholars, which Sturdy (1998) recognizes by quoting two influential service management theorists – Grönroos (1981) and Berry (1981) – in support of his claim.

Service management and customer perceived quality

In 1977, Shostack’s article ‘Breaking Free From Product Marketing’ appeared in the *Journal of Marketing*. It is commonly referred to as the starting point of service management scholarship (Brown et al., 1994). In the article, Shostack argues that service industries have not integrated marketing into their management because mainstream marketing offers no guidance, terminology or practical rules that are clearly relevant to services. The main reason for this is, according to Shostack, that services differ from products. Services are *intangible* and *heterogeneous*, service production and consumption are *inseparable* and services do *perish* after having been consumed. These features, furthermore, provided the grounds for the claim that service management is a field distinct from goods marketing (Berry and Parasuraman, 1993). Grönroos (1994) identifies in the service management perspective five key factors which set it aside from general marketing: its overall management perspective (not only management principles for a separate function), the emphasis on long-term customer relationships (not short-term transactions), the intraorganizational cross functional collaboration it implies (not specialization), quality being considered as a management issue (not a separate issue), and the centrality of internal development of the personnel and the creation of a service culture (not only the development of administrative tasks). A topic of central importance to service management research, in that it manifests the service management ‘spirit’, is ‘customer perceived service quality’ (Brown et al., 1994). The most

important model in this research stream is the gap-model, which is studied in the present paper.

The gap-model

The gap-model was introduced by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry in a *Journal of Marketing* article that appeared 1985. Knowledge on goods quality, they argue, is insufficient to understand service quality since ‘the characteristics of services [...] have to be acknowledged for a full understanding of service quality’ (Parasuraman et al., 1985:42). In order to gain such knowledge on service quality and to create their model, they used an exploratory research design. Four service categories were chosen for their investigation: retail banking, credit card, securities brokerage and product repair and maintenance. A single firm represented each service category. In-depth open-ended personal interviews were conducted with fourteen executives (three or four from each firm) and twelve focus group interviews were carried out with customers to the firms. The main conclusion of the executive interviews was that ‘a set of key discrepancies or gaps exists regarding executive perceptions of service quality and the tasks associated with service delivery to consumers. These gaps can be major hurdles in attempting to deliver a service which consumers would perceive as being of high quality’ (Parasuraman et al., 1985:44, emphasis in original removed). The gaps that Parasuraman et al. (1985) point out are:

1. The gap between what customers expect from a service and managers perception of customer expectation.
2. The gap between management perception of customer expectation and service quality specifications.
3. The gap between service quality specifications and the actual service delivery.
4. The gap between service delivery and external communications.

The analysis of the focus group interviews provided strong support to the conceptualization of service quality in the scarce previous research (Grönroos, 1982; Lewis and Booms, 1983) as a comparison between customer expectations and customer perceptions of performance, commonly referred to as the ‘disconfirmation paradigm’ (Brady and Cronin, 2001). The disconfirmation paradigm – imported from the customer satisfaction and the product quality literature – stipulates service quality as satisfactory if perceptions equal expectations, as unsatisfactory if expectations are below perceptions, and as excellent if perceptions exceed expectations.¹ In later versions of the gap-model, the ‘zone of tolerance’ was introduced. The zone of tolerance stipulates that customer expectations do not exactly have to equal customer perceptions in order for service quality to be satisfactory, it rather allows for some variation: satisfactory service quality ranges from adequate to desired service delivery, excellent service quality exceeds the zone of tolerance and unsatisfactory service quality fails to reach it (Strandvik, 1994). According to Parasuraman (et al., 1985), a customer’s perception of a service is dependent on the size and direction of gap one to four and customer expectations on past experience with the service, word of mouth communication regarding the service and personal needs. The perception-expectation construct (gap number five) thus has a heuristic position in the gap-model, since it brings together the customer side and the organization side of the model (see Figure 1).

Insert figure 1 here, please.

Interpreting the focus group interviews, Parasuraman (et al., 1985:46) also found that ‘regardless of the type of service, consumers used basically similar criteria in evaluating service quality. These criteria seem to fall into 10 key categories which are labelled “service

quality determinants””. Using factor analysis, these service quality determinants, in later versions of the model, were reduced to five and eventually three. The gap-model is often, however, presented with five determinants (Brady and Cronin, 2001; Parasurman et al., 1988:23):

Reliability: Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.

Responsiveness: Willingness to help the customers and provide prompt service.

Empathy: Caring, individualized attention the firm provides to its customers.

Assurance: Knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence.

Tangibles: Physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel.

The service quality determinants gave increasing precision to the perceived service quality construct and provided foundation to create a standardized scale for measurement of service quality. The 22-item instrument or questionnaire that Parasuraman (et al., 1988) developed is labelled ‘SERVQUAL’ and operationalizes the five quality determinants. Following the disconfirmation paradigm, the same 22 questions are used to examine customer’s expectations and perceptions regarding a service delivery. The invention of SERVQUAL made it possible to measure service quality on a large scale for the first time.

The presentation of SERVQUAL gave rise to a debate on service quality in prestigious marketing journals.ⁱⁱ What matters to us in this paper is the instructions given on how to manage with the gap-model (Zeithaml et al., 1990), rather than the explosion of the somewhat technical research into customer perceived quality that the gap-model gave rise to. The fundamental argument is that when the quality evaluation scores below the zone of tolerance, i.e. when customer perceived quality is ranked as unsatisfactory, actions have to be taken.

More precisely, this means that one or several of the gaps one to four have to be ‘closed’ and several technologies designed to do that are presented (Zeithaml et al., 1990). It is equally interesting to note that no directions are given on how to improve satisfactory quality to excellent quality or how to maintain excellent service quality. The gap-model as a management tool helps to improve unsatisfactory quality so as to make it satisfactory, but, once it is satisfactory, it does not contribute to make the quality excellent.

Creating the service management object and subject

According to Foucault (1977, 1981), disciplinary power operates through technologies of the self, most importantly the ‘examination’ and the ‘confession’, which are closely connected to each other. The examination ‘constitutes the individual as an object of knowledge, and the confession [...] ties the individual to self-knowledge and establishes concepts of subjectivity’ (Townley, 1993:533). Since the gap-model is aimed at ‘diagnosing’ how well the organization functions in service management terms as well as designed to give instructions on how to enhance the level of customer perceived service quality, it is fruitful to conceptualize it as an examination. This will make clear how we believe the gap-model contributes to constituting people as objects of knowledge. But since a central proposition of Foucault’s power/knowledge concept is that knowledge never only represents reality but also creates reality – it is performative –, the gap-model also stimulates production of subjectivity through confessions. Conceptualizing discourse as an examination should, according to Foucault (1977: 184-192), focus on how disciplinary power (1) renders people visible while remaining invisible itself, (2) enables individual documentation and (3) makes each individual a case. We show how each of these steps is tied to confession and thus to the production, manifestation and elaboration of subjectivity.

1. The visibility effect of the invisible disciplinary power of the gap-model: The invisibility of disciplinary power puts it in sharp contrast to sovereign conceptualizations of power, which is dependent on its visibility in order to have effect and be reproduced. While sovereign power allows those over whom it is exercised to remain in the shades, since it only becomes visible when deployed, disciplinary power imposes a principle of compulsory visibility to those who are objectified by it and subjected to it.

It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection. And the examination is the technique by which power...instead of imposing its mark on its subjects, holds them in a mechanism of objectification. (Foucault, 1977:187)

The gap-model certainly can be considered to function as an examination in this respect. The SERVQUAL questionnaire, answered by the customer, makes the personnel's actions and thoughts visible and thus known and objectified. But in order to stimulate people to constitute themselves as particular customer-orientated subjects, the SERVQUAL raw data have to be analyzed through the use of the gap-model. This analysis will focus on comparing customer perceptions of service delivery with customer expectations. If the result is found to be that the customers' perceptions of service delivery equal their expectations, the personnel will receive positive feedback. This will probably make the personnel reproduce their behavior through confessing their value to themselves and others. On the other hand, if the result of the analysis points to an unsatisfactory quality (i.e. expectations exceeds perceptions), an analysis into which of the internal gaps (1-4) that is/are causing the expectation-perception gap will have to be made by management. Once that analysis have been made, actions will be taken to close the problematic internal gap(s).

In Zeithaml et al. (1990), 17 reasons are given to explain the occurrence of internal gaps, followed by suggestions on how problems can be solved. An unsatisfactory gap 3 – the gap

between service quality specifications and the actual service delivery –, for example, may occur because of seven possible reasons. One of them is ‘role conflict’ defined as the ‘extent to which employees perceive that they cannot satisfy all the demands of all the individuals (internal and external customers) they must serve’ (Zeithaml et al., 1990: 92). Directions are given as to how role conflict is being diagnosed, i.e. how role conflict is separated from the other six reasons to gap six. Guidelines are, furthermore, given that suggest how problems referring to role conflict should be solved: ‘If the company defines service roles and standards in terms of customers’ expectations, role conflict is minimized’ (Zeithaml et al., 1990:98).

Role conflicts serve as a standard example of how the gap-model works; the diagnosing of difficulties is followed by suggestions for action. If the SERVQUAL data are tied to specific organizational departments and their managers and if the gap-model is used over and over again, it will function as a technology of correction that produces constant visibility of the subjugated, holding them in a mechanism of objectification. It will inspire people to confess that they have acted badly and will stimulate improvement. People will strive to act in accordance with the guidelines given by the gap-model. The gap-model itself, however, will never be seen by the subjugated as it travels in envelopes between the customer and the organization, and as management commands are not framed in its explicit language (e.g. ‘we have to close gap three’) but rather in a more general language of customer orientation (e.g. ‘always try to satisfy the customer’).

2. *The gap-model enables individual documentation.* The gap-model should not be used as a one-off event. On the contrary, it should be used over and over again in order to produce the customer orientation that it promises. It has to be an important part of the organization’s strategy. One could in fact argue that the power of the gap-model becomes obvious in its full

bloom only when several measurements are compared to each other. If the gap-model is used in this way, it will leave behind, as other types of examinations do, an archive of information, in this particular case customer perceived quality information. This information will be individualized to a great extent, since the gap-model's examination is linked to departments in the organization. The gap model will, due to the 'customer perceived quality archive' that it produces over time, create homogenization of individual features and fix norms (Foucault, 1977).

The gap-model is general and specific at the same time. It offers a general model for the measurement of customer perceived service quality as well as general service quality determinants that frame what criteria customers use in evaluating service quality, regardless of service. But the construction of the gap-model enables different mixes of the service quality determinants for specific organizations and services – even though customers evaluate service delivery using the same general criteria, they might want to perceive different mixes of those criteria depending on the context. One customer might want to perceive a high level of empathy when using hospital services but, when buying hamburgers at a fast food restaurant, responsiveness might be more important. In a specific setting, the gap-model thus specifies over time what distribution of the quality determinants the average customer would like to perceive and consequently creates a homogenization of people's behavior and a stabilization of organizational norms which will stimulate people to engage in similar self-confessions and accordingly homogenize the creation of subjectivity. However, the personnel are not, of course, explicitly commanded to show more empathy or to be more responsive. The gap-model rather breaks down the quality standards into the 17 reasons to internal gaps and associated suggestions for closing them presented by Zeithaml (et al., 1990). The gap-model works tacitly, hidden away in the organizational shadows.

3. *The gap-model makes each individual a case.* Foucault (1977:192) argues that, in modernity, the patient, as a result of the use of examinations, has become an individual case, i.e. ‘the object of individual descriptions and biographical accounts’. This governmental logic can be related to the gap-model. If the gap-model is used for some time, indexes will be created that will serve as a device for comparisons and for tracking people who deviate from the quality standards. This will probably stimulate people to regulate themselves towards the norm by confessing to themselves and others that they deviate. Especially, middle managers and supervisors will be an object of and subjected to these indexes, since they have a direct responsibility for the results of the departments that make up the organization. In addition, if people do not correct their behaviors or if it seems impossible to correct them, the index can be used as a rationale for dismissing them or maybe as a reason for closing a whole department.

The gap-model’s capability to document people’s performances through quantifying them in indexes takes its disciplinary power to the edge. It makes it possible to compare human beings with the norms that have been created based upon the gap-model and to target and design suitable methods of correction at the individual level by stimulating people to engage in certain confessions. In such a situation, it has an extensive effect on the subjugation of people and thus on the production of subjectivity while at the same time reproducing human beings as objects of service management knowledge. The gap-model is meant to make people manageable.

Becoming and being normal

‘The chief function of disciplinary power is to train [hence] disciplinary punishment has the function of reducing *gaps*. It must therefore be essentially *corrective*’ (Foucault 1977:170 and 179; first emphasis added). The ‘punishments’ of the gap-model also obviously serve to reduce gaps by training people to behave, think and feel in accordance with service management discourse. If this is done adequately, the underlying argument is that organizations will become excellent (Berry, 1999; Schneider and Bowen, 1995). Foucault (1977), however, argues that disciplinary power and the punishments connected with it produce normality rather than excellence. Normalization has been an underlying argument in our analysis, which we intend to make explicit in this section through using Foucault’s five normalization properties of disciplinary power. A picture that contrasts with the one normally painted within service management will thus be displayed.

1. The gap-model compares. The first step in the process of normalization is the comparison of individuals within a field with a particular knowledge. The gap-model comparison is based on the five quality determinants that are imbedded in the SERVQUAL questionnaire that the customer answers. The actual field of knowledge that individuals are compared with is not, however, the five quality determinants themselves, but rather their product, embodied in employee behavior, in the way that the average customer of a particular organization perceives it. The expectation-perception gap thus not only produces a field of knowledge that individuals are compared with, but also functions as the principal instrument for doing the actual comparison.

2. The gap-model differentiates. The second step in the process of normalization is the differentiation of individuals from one another. The gap-model differentiates departments and

individuals by determining those who produce a satisfactory level of quality (i.e. those departments/individuals for which/whom customer evaluations are found inside the zone of tolerance), those who produce unsatisfactory service quality (below the zone of tolerance), and those who produce excellent service quality (above the zone of tolerance). The gap-model, furthermore, determines the 'rule [that functions] as a minimal threshold, as an average to be respected or as an optimum towards which one must move' (Foucault 1977:183). The minimal threshold that the gap-model defines is obviously positioned at the bottom of the zone of tolerance. Inside the zone of tolerance, no further corrections are stipulated by the gap-model. At first glance, the optimum towards which one must move might be perceived as the behavior that corresponds with excellent customer perceived service quality. However, as will be shown below, this is not the case.

3. The gap-model hierarchizes. A third important aspect of the process of normalization is that individuals and departments are ordered in a hierarchy on the basis of their 'true' value. The advantage of the gap-model, compared with many other conceptualizations of service quality (Brady and Cronin, 2001), is that it quantifies. It transfers the level of customer perceived service quality for different departments into numbers and makes it possible to put them on a scale. Since the procedure of measurement is made continuously, indexes will be a preferred scale. Indexes enable comparisons between departments and individuals as well as the change of behavior for an individual or a whole department (Townley, 2002).

4. The gap-model homogenizes. The most important part of the process of normalization is the production of homogenization which results in a conformity that must be achieved. This process is dependent on the differentiation and the hierarchization since the latter puts departments and individuals on a scale and the former fosters a movement towards

satisfactory – and merely satisfactory – quality. Indeed, a more thorough investigation has to conclude that the optimum that the gap-model points to is rather positioned somewhere within the zone of tolerance. The reason for this is that the management instructions connected to the gap-model only provide guidance for how to improve unsatisfactory quality to satisfactory quality but no suggestion is given on how to improve satisfactory quality to excellent quality since no gaps will appear in such situations. The gap-model thus fosters a movement towards satisfactory quality (Zeithaml et al., 1990). The differentiation and hierarchization introduced by the gap-model will produce a normal distribution where the peak is positioned inside the zone of tolerance.

The homogenization adds important aspects to the process of normalization. Indeed, employees will not be encouraged to maximize their service behavior, i.e. not try to produce as much empathy or responsiveness as they are able to. Neither are they encouraged to behave unsatisfactorily. Rather, in order to conform to the normal behavior, they should try to behave in such a way that the customer evaluations of the service(s) fall inside the zone of tolerance. The process of homogenization thus encourages a movement towards the middle of the normal distribution; it encourages people to move towards conformity. More and more people will end up inside the zone of tolerance resulting in a very steep shape of the normal distribution.

5. The gap-model excludes. To a large extent, the gap-model, by normalizing individuals, marginalizes those who are deviant. But it would be wrong to draw the conclusion that the gap-model excludes extreme ‘outliers’ from the analysis and even more wrong to believe that the outliers are unimportant to the process of normalization that the gap-model produces. The gap-model evaluation does cover all individuals in the organization no matter how extreme

their customer perceived service quality value is. These ‘extremists’ are, furthermore, of true importance to the process of normalization since they define abnormality. They do consequently serve as warning lessons but also as a prerequisite for producing normality since they introduce the very dialectics of normal-abnormal.

Excellence is a relative term. In service management research excellence is defined with reference to the customer – excellence means that organizations should try to adapt themselves to the needs of the customer. According to the Collins dictionary (Collins, 1987) ‘excellence’ is supposed to entail something that is ‘very good indeed’. In the light of our analysis we believe it is more correct to talk about the effects of the gap-model in terms of normality rather than excellence. As we have shown the gap-model will ideally make all organizations and their personnel adapt to the needs of the average customer – no one will be outstanding, everyone and everything will tend to be(come) similar. Read through the lens of disciplinary power, the gap-model is just another technology for the production of normality.

Conclusions and further research

In the introduction of the paper, we argued that marketing has been relatively – comparatively to other management sub-disciplines – untouched by the critical turn in organization studies, and we expressed our surprise, since marketing can be considered to be the management discipline where critical theoretical approaches could provide the most significant contributions (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996). Our objective with the present paper was to contribute to the critical examination of marketing. We believe that we have done so by focusing on: (1) service management, and the gap-model in particular, (2) the form of subjectivity it creates and (3) the normalization it favors – instead of the excellence it promises.

Our analysis provides foundations for the creation of research questions with a critical stance in service management and marketing broadly defined. Previous research within these fields has focused on how to improve service organizations but research on how service organizations work and how they should not work is comparatively scarce. Consequently, we would like to see more descriptive and critical research into management of service organizations rather than more prescriptive research. Furthermore, we anticipate that our study will stimulate more critical empirical examinations of general marketing and/or service management.

Finally, we would like to stress that the dynamics presented in this paper are not unique to the case of the gap-model. As argued in the introduction, the gap-model is an archetypal customer survey technology, since it finds its foundation in the ‘disconfirmation paradigm’. Thus, we believe that our analysis of the gap-model is representative of customer survey technologies in general. Further research within the area should reinforce our argument.

ⁱ The expectancy construct has been much debated within customer perceived quality research. Here we present it according to Parasuraman et al. (1985; 1988), which we believe captures the essence of the concept as applied in the gap-model. If we had based our presentation on other sources (e.g. Cronin and Taylor, 1994, Parasuraman et al., 1994) a slightly different interpretation would have been made.

ⁱⁱ For an overview of this discussion and the critique levelled at the gap-model, see Buttle (1996).

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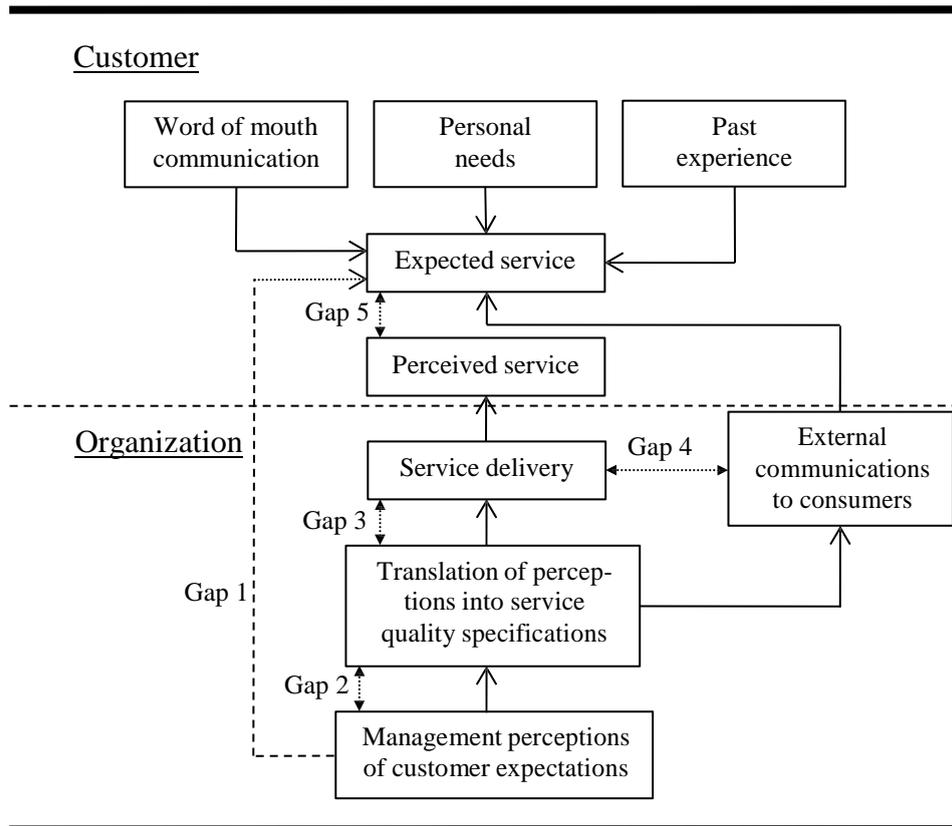
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Figure 1. The gap-model



Source Adapted from Parasuraman et al. (1985:44)