

Dynamics of interaction, business relationships and business network

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There has been in the IMP tradition a mixture of research perspectives although the distinctions are not always declared (e.g. Ojansivu, Hermes, & Laari-Salmela, 2020). Within the IMP tradition one finds research that accepts interaction, business relationships and networks as: (i) objectively defined entities modeled by dimensions in a Cartesian space (e.g. levels, mechanisms), (ii) social constructions where there are shared, co-created understandings, and (iii) emerging ephemeral entities created socially in processes. For example, while Håkansson and Johanson (1988) describe interactions as streams (processes) they also proclaim interaction is:

“Both objective and subjective. It is objective in the sense that the industrial activities and the interfirm relations have an observable effect on the interaction and vice versa. It is subjective in the sense that the actors make subjective interpretations of its meaning and base their action on this meaning.” Håkansson and Johanson (1988, 373)

When applied according to a constructivist approach the IMP tradition emphasizes change and the dynamics inherent in interaction, business relationships and networks. For example, one starting point for understanding interaction is the subjective aspect on an individual actor (Ford & Håkansson, 2006). While a subjective interpretation fits to a constructivist perspective, it also implies and relies upon a distinction to an objective interpretation (see, Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burrell & Morgan, 1979). This ‘dualism’ is quintessential in a Cartesian entity interpretation of the world (Adam, 1995; Lefebvre, 1991; Rorty, 1991; Uttal, 2004), which is “rationally blind to the dynamic world of interwoven, reciprocally responsive, ceaseless living activities within which we all have our being” (Shotter & Lannamann, 2002, 578).

There is a further issue inside that of adopting a research perspective, for each is changing as new understandings are adopted, some are aspects are changed and others are forgotten (Ojansivu, Medlin, Andersen, & Kim, In press). What is at issue here is not so much a static perspective reminiscent of the paradigm wars (Shepherd & Challenger, 2013), rather there is a path of academic development that has primarily adopted a Cartesian ‘entity path’, in which concepts are individual, ‘a historic’, ‘a contextual’ and neglectful (Shotter, 1995b). Cartesian thinking models the business world as atomistic actors (Gergen, 2018), in static theoretical representations that can only imply processes, studied separate from their contexts and without consideration of the growing and changing character of individuals in their social settings (Adam, 1995; Ingold, 1986; Lefebvre, 1991, 2008; Lock & Strong, 2010; Shotter, 2006, 2010b; Shotter & Lannamann, 2002). The ephemerality of business relationships and networks is also studied according to mechanistic processes (Shotter, 1990). But to do so is to take more an entity path following the Cartesian method. Evidently studies always combine aspects of the entity, the constructivist and process perspectives.

In this call for papers, we seek studies that develop an alternative path, provisionally named a temporal process path. We look for research that accepts the joint (Ford & Håkansson, 2006) and co-created ways of acting and sensemaking (Weick, 1979; Weick & Roberts, 1993; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2008) that are found in business relationships. Here we are taking Descartes “I think therefore I am” and re-imagining the ‘therefore’ as temporal processes that involve interaction, business relationships and networks from the collective perspective of “We are thinking therefore we are becoming”. The idea being to research interaction, business relationships and networks as relational concepts that are connected to participant respondents and to the IMP academic community (see Andersen, Medlin, & Törnroos, 2020; Gergen, 2009; Shotter, 2015), but to focus to relational becoming (Corcoran & Cromby, 2016; Gergen, 1994; Gergen, 2011; Shotter, 1995a) according to a turbulent relational ontology (Shotter, 2012).

There are of course many issues in pursuing the temporal process path. Researchers are constantly faced with and drawn towards an entity path for explanation and representation, as it is easier to communicate and fits neatly into established research perspectives (Adam, 1995; Ingold, 2016). By

contrast the proposed temporal process path recognizes: (i) each event is specific and particular with its own historic and contextual setting (Gergen, 1994, 1997; Shotter, 2010a, 2011), (ii) constructions of time and temporalities requires care to study (Adam, 1995), (iii) contexts are social constructions (Shotter, 1985; 1993, 2011), and (iv) processes are joint social constructions with a longitudinal life in which, rather than logically within systems, the interdependencies are temporal.

The IMP tradition has for some time been pursuing the temporal process path. For example studies in the IMP tradition have been cognizant of processes, time and the temporalities of actors in the empirical domain (see the special issue Halinen, Medlin, & Törnroos, 2012), and their acting together in a joint fashion is noted (Ford & Håkansson, 2006) although hardly studied. Business relationships are developed in time through interaction between actors (Håkansson, 1982), as are networks (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995), but the way temporal processes are involved as contexts and situations for relating and networking deserve further research.

Following a temporal process path of academic development seems difficult and against the grain, but this may only be our academic training and the inertia of our academic communities (Ojansivu et al., In press). However, when one considers the advances made in following an entity path of academic development, there appears a great opportunity in developing an understanding of the alternative path, for all research perspectives.

We look for studies that consider:

- Any problematizing of central IMP concepts, such as atmosphere, embeddedness, enactment, joint action, interdependence, dyads, triads, interconnectedness, and representation from a process (withness) perspective.
- Contextual matters: Explore processes of networking and relating as constructed contexts within which interactions, business relationships and specific focal networks are changing.
- New and interesting methods and means for analyzing temporal processes.
- Addressing how change and ephemeral stabilities unfold at different viscosities in networks and how this impacts dynamics.
- Business interaction from different perspectives concurrently.
- Linking interactivity to commitments and to wider understandings within networks.
- Theoretically framing the nature and networking consequences of business actor strategizing efforts, on-going interventions and resistances, as they unfold over time.
- Give birth to new research methods that enable the empirical pursuit of the temporal process path.
- Conceptualizing interaction, business relationships and networks without resorting to dualisms.
- Address how shared understandings ‘temporarily stabilize and disrupt’ business network practices/logics (and how they multiply, diverge or fade).

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