Towards a Re-interpretation of Industrial Networks: Culture and Discourse

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Abstract

This conceptual paper provides a critique of modelling of industrial networks in terms of the question of culture. We argue that networks are a promising metaphor to explore marketing practice, especially in international trading contexts. Building on the work of Capra, this promise is due to the consonance of networks as 'pattern' (involving the qualitative configuration of relationships of ideas) with conceptions of culture that emphasise process rather than structure. Our proposition, however, is that until now the context-specific, ideational elements of culture have been comprehensively overlooked in industrial network analysis. Noting that this neglect varies from apparent purposeful avoidance to reluctant avoidance of cultural processes with recognition of their potential importance, we exemplify our arguments chiefly with reference to one school of network theory: the IMP Group. Despite the considerable contribution of IMP scholars to the network literature, we show that a degree of analytical reductionism has resulted from the dominant modernist, rationalist, logocentric view of networks found in the management science and social networks literatures. As such, we propose that integrating networks with 'culture as process' (rather than merely as a structural variable) has considerable potential. The paper concludes by outlining the research implications of our interpretivist research agenda, which contains a plea for greater linguistic sensitivity and a 'plurivocal' conceptualisation of culture in the study of industrial networks.

INTRODUCTION

Research into culture is an important area when considering global business networks. Yet, for all of the research conducted to date, our understanding of culture and its consequences on business practice are still inadequate. In this paper we are proposing that culture needs to be re-conceptualized resulting in new research directions to be undertaken if the concept of culture is to be seriously considered. Culture needs to be considered the lens through which networks of ideas are researched. Thus, requiring us

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to adopt a network epistemology and ontology through which an individual’s *networks of ideas/symbols* can be researched.

Our conception of culture is that of an emergent property of human systems (Capra 1996). Culture is continuously changing, every time we interact, allowing society to evolve/grow. We identify ourselves by the use of symbols, knowledge, information and communication or ‘discourse’, all of which are embedded and interpreted within our cultural ideas. Culture, therefore, is suitably conceived of as a network of ideas and symbols formed through language. Similar cultures may develop similar ideas and symbols allowing interpretation to be close to the original meanings, but an individual’s consciousness and thinking patterns change interpretation. Understanding ideas and symbols requires emphasis upon the pattern (or form) of their organisation, which involves the qualitative configuration on the relationships of ideas. Ideas exist within multiple networks and multiple layers making the interpretation of the patterns bounded in our own “cultural” biases. Research considering such existing patterns is still sparse with emic researchers grappling with the different networks/layers on which to conduct their research highlighting the complexity that cultural research entails (Fang and Kriz 2000). Relational patterns are non-material and non-physical processes, and therefore, not appropriate for structural analysis (Lowe et al. 2004) but more suited to interpretive research techniques that allow for individual perceptions to be analysed. The behavioural outcomes of the processes can be observed, with methods such as participant observation generating a deeper understanding on the patterns as they occur (Anderson and Jack 2002).

This paper elaborates on how marketing research and in particular that conducted within the IMP Group can begin to extend their existing network research to take cultural research seriously. For such a discussion to proceed we will elaborate on how knowledge generation affects our approach to research, its implications within the IMP Group and how this can be used within an ongoing research agenda on culture.

**KNOWLEDGE/THEORY GENERATION**

Within Western thought, knowledge precedes doing and requires actors to gain understanding through written/verbal communication (Chia 2003). Implications for theory generation are such that researchers develop causal hypotheses prior to conducting their research. Knowledge and theory are generated from existing ‘knowledge’ found within the literature and results from previous researchers. Thus, certainty and confirmation are important components of the research agenda. Everything within this ‘epistemological culture’ is affected (or infected) by the pursuit of certainty resulting in frantic avoidance of indeterminacy or complexity. Simplicity is the rule of the day, bringing knowledge down to a number of tested hypotheses. The only things worth knowing are those articulated and explained within theories, measurable using ‘tried and tested’ or ‘rigorous’ methodologies and suitably certain to warrant the ultimate legitimacy of results being ‘significant’ and universally ‘generalizable’. Research is expected to be ‘objective’ with the researcher standing back from the research stage and developing their picture of reality. God-like knowing from above (the outside) generates certainty while the parochialism of the actor (on the
inside) is too subjective, local and insufficiently rationally intelligent to warrant credible explanation. Such an approach to knowledge generation has seen research techniques such as action research previously being 'criticised as non-rigorous and unscientific' (Little and Motion 2004: 2). Yet, action research allows for knowledge generation to occur through the investigation of problems by 'doing', in other words an interactive process where knowledge is generated through the reflective discussion on the outcomes of each action and feeding back into new actions.

Knowledge generation, within Eastern cultures, is acquired principally through practice or doing (Chia 2003). With research more suited to complex problems where indeterminacy is common. Such a mind-set can be seen with Chinese business practices often being described as complex and irrational with logical approaches not achieving consistent understanding (Fang and Kriz 2000). Consequently, there is little emphasis given to previous problem investigations as their particular situation is in a different context and requires different variables to be included in the problem solving kit. So the same problem, but placed in different contexts, may be approached with completely different solutions with the knowledge generated not related.

Different approaches have resulted in a debate over 'etic' or 'emic' approaches to research. In the study of culture the problem (within scientism) of needing to know how to explain and compare 'rationally' from the outside using 'etic' models frustrates a more vital 'emic' and local understanding from the inside. In industrial networks, tacit understanding and social capital are the currencies that ensure that knowing is about being and doing the 'right' things rather than being able to theorise about what the right thing might be. Knowledge generation is developed through acting within the network and the culture in which it is embedded. In our globalized economy, business networks may in fact contain a number of different cultural patterns and understanding can only really be developed by participating in the network. The only actors that understand how the network operates are those who are actively participating in it. Actors looking in from the outside will not understand the implications of certain behavioural patterns and can easily misinterpret the consequences of actions.

Therefore, developing knowledge is best achieved through participating in the network and taking the participants view of how network patterns emerge. The current push towards theorizing and explaining causalities through an etic language does not fully reflect how the actors imagine the network creating misunderstandings and in a worse case scenario missing important concepts entirely. Such a requirement on knowledge generation through doing is particularly important when it comes to understanding the nuances of culture and subsequent cultural research. When dealing with concepts made up of ideas and imagination it is necessary to take the participants viewpoint and consider why they behave in such a manner. Therefore, knowledge generation from the actors' world is necessary.

CULTURAL CRITIQUE OF NETWORK THEORY

Culture and networks are coalescent constructs. They both concern non-physical organisation making them not suitable for measurement purposes as their foundations
are based on the perception of the individual rather than a generalised structure. Network thinking, or *vernetztes Denken*, recognises that reality and our descriptions of it exist as a network of relationships. Objective understanding is, therefore, a fallacy because we cannot abstractly separate from this reality and our description of it because we are a part of it and it is a part of us. Subjective understanding based on individual cultural interpretation is therefore an important aspect of network theory. We argue that researching culture requires a network approach and visa versa, researching networks requires the researcher to include the network of ideas and symbols which is the foundation of culture.

Interpretation of network cultures can only really be done on the individual level by the actors who are actively participating in the network. Yet researchers still follow a positivist path when analysing networks and culture. Such a path does not recognise the importance of an individual's perspective but rather prefers to develop simplified generalised law-like models as a way of explanation. Thus, avoiding the complexity of network thinking and the issues involved in developing knowledge on abstract and non-rational ideas.

An example of this is social network analysis which principally focuses on the structure of the network, ignoring the processes that determine such structures. Network position is often 'measured' by how many connections an actor has within the network relative to other actors (Wasserman and Faust 1994), thus reducing complex connections, interpreted differently by individual actors, to a number. Although, more topographical measures of centrality have been developed they have tended to simplify complex relations rather than grasp the complexity of the processes involved in their interactions. Thus, social network analysis has tended to ignore the complexity outlined by the process aspects as required by Capra (1996). Simplifying network analysis in an attempt to see if structure explains network theory has resulted in inadequate understanding of the cultural ideas and symbols that determine the network.

The managerial approach to cultural research has taken a different perspective in that values are considered the core of all research but simplifies social order through objective analysis of the values. Consequently, values become measurable variables that are brought into the research agenda as required. A typical example of this is Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions that are measured from an objective view and incorporated into marketing models as a mediating or moderating variable rather then considering the network of ideas and symbols that individual actors bring to the situation/s being researched.

For instance, a managerialist slant is commonly taken on issues of cultural differences that can have a negative impact on the atmosphere (Hakansson 1982) of international marketing relationships. In order to analyse these issues, the most commonly used measures of difference between national cultures are psychic and cultural distance (Bridgewater and Igan 2002). Both these constructs are problematic, however. The most important feature of the concept of psychic distance is that it is a perception, yet it is measured using macro-economic and other published data, which uses the country as the unit of analysis. The assumption that individuals perceive similar levels of psychic distance is an oversimplification (Langhoff 1997). Measures of cultural distance,
typically based on Hofstede’s classification of cultures (1980) may be similarly criticised. Hofstede assumes that national cultures remain stable over long periods of time, but historic data may no longer be able to give us any contemporary insights (Cray and Mallory 1998). Again, the data is at the national level, yet concepts of one cohesive national culture are misleading (Fletcher and Fang 2004). Hofstede (1980) conceptualises national culture as core, systematically causal and territorially unique. His independent dimensions of culture fail to accommodate the ambivalence and co-existence of the polar dimensions. Ultimately, as Langhoff argues.

"The significance of culture on human life cannot be explained and understood by reducing cultural studies to [Hofstede's] variables. Common to all cultures, however, is the assignment of meaning... Human beings use and need culture to organise a coherent meaning of the world around themselves and they do so by developing and applying symbols” (1997: 146, emphasis added).

Once again, therefore, we see the importance in the study of inter-organisational relationships and networks of an epistemology that seeks to interpret locally occurring discourses rather than produce law like models that ignore the complexity of the business environment and the context in which decisions are made.

Although the IMP Group have attempted to gather information from the individual actor’s perspective, they have yet to incorporate culture as the basis of network research. Culture has tended to be sidelined or added on as another variable within their models rather than the meaning of why and how networks develop. Yet, the Group recognises the subjective nature of business relationships and the tacit nature of knowledge within and about networks (Axelsson 1993). What appears to be lacking is a significant agenda to do anything about exploring culture. Despite the significance of linguistic constructions being acknowledged in the B2B literature (e.g. Easton and Araujo 1993; Turnbull, Ford and Cunningham 1996), the exploration of culture as a social construction has rarely been acted upon in IMP research (exceptions include Faria and Wensley 2002; Hopkinson 2003). In general, meaning has been down-played by IMP scholars (Hellgren et al. 1993; Welch and Wilkinson 2002) and there appears to be a reticence to adopt network thinking required to take culture seriously. Instead, what we find in the industrial network literature are approaches where culture is ignored/marginalised, mistaken or inappropriately accommodated/conflated. Discussion on each of these approaches is now given in more detail.

**Ignoring/ Marginalising Culture**

Within the IMP literature, culture tends to be ignored even when research into relationships considers aspects where culture is a key component. Relationships are cultural. Interacting with people is embedded in the cultural assumptions concerning human nature. Our interpretation of human behaviour is seen through the lens of our cultural upbringing.

Yet, Hakansson and Snehota (1995) explored developing relationships within networks without any direct reference to culture. Even when the cultural nature of the interaction involved idea generation, learning, trust and the social construction of individual
identities (Håkansson and Snehota 1995: 202) culture was ignored. The marginalization of culture by these leading scholars is strange, given their earlier assertion that the pattern of activities in an interactive, relational context is guided by values and norms of behavior, rather than by logical and rational planning (Håkansson and Snehota 1995: 536). Such values and norms are subjected to cultural interpretation and meaning.

**Mistaking Culture as a Variable**

Mistaking culture usually involves applying scientific rationalist reductionism to the complex phenomenon of culture, often illustrated by Hofstede’s dimensions of national culture (e.g. Battaglia et al. 2004). Given that relationships are embedded within the cultural network in which we operate concepts such as trust are interpreted through our cultural values. Within marketing research, trust is often taken as a component of the transaction rather than as the emotional and rational thought processes which individuals’ process. Often trust is conceptualized as a single variable (see Morgan and Hunt 1994), yet trust is a complex idea involving the perceptions of the individual and includes many different aspects including the context in which the individual find themselves.

**Culture as a Paradox**

The central problem facing a conceptualization of culture as one domain of ideas co-evolving with a parallel domain of interests is ‘Nadel’s Paradox’. This concerns the problem of accommodating the dual domains of ‘interests’ and ‘ideas’ within analysis of relationships. ‘Interests’ appears compatible with quantitative, logically empirical analysis of the structure of relationships but ‘ideas’ appears more compatible with qualitative analysis that is sensitive to the subjective interpretations of cultural actors. The paradox is that progress towards better explanation and understanding relies upon the simultaneous application of two apparently incommensurable approaches (DiMaggio 1992). But how might this be achieved?

Welch and Wilkinson (2002) fall into this paradox with their conceptualisation of ideational logics within the AAR model. In seeking to explain how systems of ideas shape and are shaped by human interaction, they take a step towards incorporating the cultural tenets of learning symbolically, development of ideas, truth and ideologies through language and communication. The focus of Welch and Wilkinson (2002) on ideas and meanings within knowledge systems may succeed in description but fails to develop and understand culture within network theory. Because these ideational phenomena are forced into the same instrumental domain as interests, ideas are treated as ‘real’ cultural artefacts or elements, rather than as nominal processes of human imagination. In treating culture within the same domain as interests of activity links, resource ties and actor bonds, this approach exacerbates the confounding of ideational with other, separate dimensions concerning interests. As a result, the approach of Welch and Wilkinson contributes considerably to helping to identify cultural patterns by the outside observer but cannot focus upon the experience of the cultural participant. Such an ‘emic’ understanding requires separate treatment of ideas from interests and the adoption of interpretivist ontology’s and methods. It demands a parallel but separate journey into the *Geisteswissenschaften* or ‘cultural sciences’. 
We suggest that for IMP researchers and marketing researchers that a new approach to cultural research be adopted. Instead of the unit of analysis being the ‘relationship’ as outlined by Anderson, Håkansson and Johanson (1994), we propose the unit of analysis to be ‘relational processes’. The ‘relationship’ has been the unit of analysis for much research into the IMP domain and has focused researchers into developing approaches which have exasperated the three issues highlighted above. By focusing on trying to explain business relationships researchers have developed models that measure variables that are not conducive to quantitative measurement. Examples of such constructs include (but not limited to): trust, commitment, face, guanxi and Hofstede’s cultural dimensions. Such variables are not independent and appropriate for measurement. Researchers have attempted to use them in inappropriate situations in an attempt to simplify the relationship for quantitative modeling purposes.

If the unit of analysis is changed to the relational process through which interactions develop and culture is embedded then the focus is now on how our network ideas interact between each other. By investigating the processes through which relationships develop then researchers need to incorporate how relational processes interact with our network of ideas and interpretation of symbols. Relational processes also incorporate the context and learning environment through which human interaction occurs. Individual perceptions that visualize their network of ideas are an important foundation for understanding how relational processes are interpreted and emerge. Such visualizations are the outcome of conversations that construct the individual’s identity, meaning and knowledge (Deetz 1992). The communication process itself is an important aspect in developing an understanding of our ideational networks. Culture and communication are not separable (Vickers 1984); the form of language and symbols which we use to communicate are developed in the cultural environment from which we live.

The interaction process itself from which we draw the participants’ knowledge is conducted within the cultural boundaries from which both participants (manager and researcher) are drawn. Therefore, knowledge development on the relational process is affected by our own communication style/ cultures that we as researchers bring to the table. Our ideas and interpretation influence the way knowledge is developed. It is thus crucial to acknowledge how our own cultural network processes are related to the analysis of the business networks studied. This means remaining ‘epistemically reflexive’ (Johnson and Duberley 2000:178) in order that research outcomes are related to the “knowledge-restraining and -constituting impact of the researcher’s own beliefs which derive from their own socio-historical location”.

For instance, the authors of this paper have cultural backgrounds that differ, enabling us to bring a variety of conceptual ‘lenses’ to our view of networks; in broad terms, the three of us represent a small network comprising a UK-based ‘Western’ academic, an Antipodean ‘Western’ academic and a further UK-based academic with close family connections to ‘Eastern’ cultures. Despite our mutual sensitization as scholars to the IMP oeuvre (e.g. the AAR model), we are likely therefore to have somewhat differing perspectives on what might constitute a ‘successful’ network relationship, both amongst...
ourselves and in relation to some of our intended international participants. This behoves us to examine our own cultural categories, oppositions and metaphors as we offer our interpretations of network processes. In coding linguistic data for example, we will need to reflect upon how our theoretical understanding of industrial networks may affect (or even ‘infect’) what we present as the emic responses of managers. It will be important to identify ‘metaphors-in-use’ (Oswick and Grant 1996) in managerial communication, before etically imposing our own. Moreover, the inter-textual nature of discourse is likely to be reflected in the fact that managerial participants will be all too aware of our academic credentials. They may thus present accounts which are subject to the ‘judgemental gaze’ of the marketing discipline, drawing upon theoretical/managerialist concepts in their talk in order to legitimize ‘how things are’ (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000). A methodological approach which claims to take culture seriously must remain sensitive to such issues.

Researching relational processes requires the concept of culture to be seen as the foundation upon which individuals interpret relational processes. This foundation is the networks of ideas and meanings which influence an individuals’ decision making process, thus determining their interests and consequential economic actions. An ideational cultural perspective also facilitates the exploration of how networks of ideas are connected across many individuals; and of how relational processes are connected. Within social reality such ‘hidden’ connections are cultural and thus require the integration of meaning and, particularly the role of language and communication in its construction. Within cultural processes, meaning is constructed within the values and beliefs that reflect different interests and as such is a political process that involves power and control. Capra (2002) posits that the ‘hermeneutic’ dimension is the fourth critical dimension of understanding social reality that allows us to reflect upon these processes. As a result culture becomes an essential criteria required to understand social reality since “culture is created and sustained by a network (form) of communications (process), in which meaning is generated. The culture’s embodiments (matter) include artefacts and written texts, through which meaning is passed on from generation to generation” (p.64).

An integrative understanding of socially networked reality that excludes hermeneutics is accordingly incoherent. Integrative theories that incorporate cultural analysis are both missing and crucial. Culture must therefore be taken more seriously than in the past and liberated from myopic, linear, structuralist analysis. It is necessary to regard it as non-linear, complex and

“created by a social network involving multiple feedback loops through which values, beliefs and rules of conduct are continually communicated, modified and sustained. It emerges from a network of communications among individuals; and as it emerges, it produces constraints on their actions. In other words, the social structures, or rules of behaviour, that constrain the actions of individuals are produced and continually reinforced by their own network of communication” (Capra, 2000:75).

Within network analysis, taking culture as a networked hermeneutic and as ‘hidden phenomena cannot be accommodated by its prevailing treatment as structural,
measurable and capable of being analysed by variance modelling, regression analysis, factor analysis or law-like theorising. Such approaches should be complemented by an analysis of the role of language in the creation of shared beliefs across networks.

Our next discussion will outline a research agenda on how researchers can visualize these ideational networks.

**IMAGINING NETWORKS**

We advocate the adoption of more interpretivist approaches to the study of industrial networks. In doing so, we align ourselves with the seminal definition of culture offered by Geertz:

“Believing with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (1973, p5, emphases added).

In other words, individuals’ webs need to be investigated through interpretive approaches to understand the meanings behind the webs. Within the industrial networks approach we are advocating that researchers need to consider relational processes and how the interaction of individual webs develop into the meanings behind the relational processes.

Social reality within the interpretivist paradigm is regarded as a network of assumptions and intersubjectively shared meanings (Burrell and Morgan 1979). This stimulates a research agenda exploring organization “as subjective experience and to investigate the patterns that make organized action possible” (Smircich 1983: 348). If we go back to Capra (1996) we see the pattern, process and structure formulations that emerge. Patterns are the webs of ideas and symbols that individuals bring to the relational process to develop structure. Within the interpretivist paradigm, culture is the root metaphor on which the interaction process develops meaning. Therefore, culture can no longer be considered just a variable, but as a foundation upon which relational processes are researched. In other words, we see networks, culture and organisation as concomitants of human imagination and not as concrete realities. Put another way, culture is more like cinematography than photography. It is about making pictures, not taking pictures. Making pictures in our mind/ imagination in an attempt to interpret others actions and behave in an appropriate manner.

Several metaphorical approaches have adopted conceptions of networks and/or culture within this social science paradigm. These include the organisational culture metaphor, the ‘self-organised’ neural network, the political systems metaphor, and the complexity and dialectic metaphors within contemporary systems theory (Morgan 1997). All of these metaphorical approaches perceive a network as an organised entity where everything is connected to everything else through process. Network forms are not an intrinsic element of any of the parts in isolation and cannot be understood through mechanistic analysis of the parts i.e relationship or actor. Therefore, investigating the relationship through quantitative modelling is not going to present an image of how the
network form evolved or is perceived by the individual. Modelling is not necessarily
going to indicate how our imagination of the network developed or is evolving but will
give a photograph of a network component in that particular time frame. Developing an
understanding of network processes requires a process epistemology that assumes our
knowledge is also a patterned system of concepts (individual webs) and models without
foundation. Therefore, all knowledge generation is approximate and based on our
cultural interpretation. This has been called an ‘epistemic consciousness’ (Capra 1996).
It requires realising that picture-making is more important than picture-taking in
knowledge development. Take, for example, living systems metaphors. Such cognitive
or ‘conscious’ systems theories have culture as an emergent property where culture is
organisation and organisation is cognition or ‘mind’. The focus is upon networks as the
principal organisational metaphor, which is consistent with the networked nature of the
Chinese business sphere (Lowe 1998). Yet how can we make a movie of networks and
their evolution that come from within our imagination?

The IMP Group have begun down this path with their approach of looking at network
pictures (Ford 2003, Henneberg et al 2004). Using a non-traditional methodology they
have attempted to study an individual managers’ picture of their network. A network
picture is the different perceptions that individual managers have of their network
(Henneberg et al 2004). Such perceptions relate only to the individual and are likely to
be unique, as each actor’s perspective will be different. Considering and accepting such
diversity is a small step toward investigating the mental maps of different actors. Taking
this research a step further we suggest that rather then developing a literal picture of the
network, the research should attempt to develop a mental map of their network of ideas.
In other words how do the actors make their network pictures?

POSSIBLE RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

In selecting methodology, the researcher is faced with an array of choices, all premised
by underlying assumptions. Some choices are not obvious as they have not been widely
used within the research community, but need to be considered based on their suitability
for the research requirements. For example, ideas and interests, as per Nadel’s Paradox,
require different ontological assumptions and thus different approaches. Research into
culture requires researchers to use different methodologies based on the different
epistemological and methodological assumptions. Therefore cultural research will
require a paradigm crossing (Schultz and Hatch 1996). Paradigm crossing involves
recognising and engaging multiple paradigms requiring the cognitive flexibility to
accept the coexistence of multiple truths and the expectation of benefits of mutual
arising from the synthesis of apparent opposites. Paradigm crossing techniques include
‘sequential’ crossing approaches (Schultz and Hatch 1996: 533). Sequential crossing
involves exploring the complementarities between paradigms by revealing sequential
levels of understanding through one method informing on, or providing inputs, for
another from a different paradigm. In other words, it requires a kind of ‘double-think’
enabling the application of apparently incommensurate paradigms in order to resolve
Nadel’s Paradox. An advantage of paradigm crossing is to release choices and to expose
the assumptions underlying them. In doing so, researchers are freed to develop their
interests and recognise their limitations and motives (Lowe et al. 2004).
Within the IMP Group the paradigm crossing reconciles structural (quantitative, relational structure) with action (qualitative, cultural aspects) to explain relational processes. Both approaches need to be equally important and used equally within the research community. To further explore culture within an IMP agenda we are proposing to even up the odds and suggest that more emphasis needs to be placed on researching relational processes from an action perspective. One approach which is suitable for this research is discourse analysis. We will now outline why discourse analysis is a suitable approach to cultural research.

**Discourse Analysis**

Discourse analysis recognises that all human knowledge is subjective and a product of human imagination. All discourse involves the contest of establishing which truth, from the many truths available, is established as most legitimate, valid and credible. Discourse analysis, therefore, focuses on how ideas or truths are socially constructed or 'made' rather than 'found' by human beings. Within the "hermeneutical tradition" (Gómez Arias and Acebron 2001 15) of discourse analysis, the 'archaeology of knowledge' emphasises liberating local truths, meanings and voices denigrated by dominant, globalising, modernist 'metanarratives'. The important aspect is that discourse analysis recognises that human knowledge is a product of human imagination. Human imagination is where our cultural development nurtures our web of ideas and symbols that influences our interpretation of other communication thus affecting how we develop our relationships. As we are highlighting that relational processes become the unit of analyses then developing further knowledge on communication processes is vital.

Language within discourse analysis is generally accepted to be the principal medium through which human subjective understanding of the world is mediated. Phillips and Hardy (1997) delineate three interrelated and "mutually implicated" (Oswick et al. 2000: 1118) discursive entities that facilitate this mediation: discursive concepts, discursive objects and discursive subjects. Concepts are theories, ideologies and notions created through language that frame our understanding of identity and relationships. Concepts occupy the realm of ideas and closely resemble the notion of schemas. A "network" is itself a discursive concept in that it is an alternative organisational notion to the concepts of 'market' or 'hierarchy'. Objects occupy the practical realm and exist in the material world as well as the ideational domain. Within networks are 'actors', who are tangible beings who are discursive objects also carrying images of identity. Finally, discursive subjects are practices, structures, social responses and policies generated through discourse. Within networks, 'trust' and relational processes would be examples of discursive subjects.

The advantage of this approach is to be able identify many of the phenomena examined by network analysis as discursive and, therefore, consequences of forms of information, knowledge and communication. Networks, relationships, trust and, to a large degree, actors are all products of human imagination. This understanding can be employed in two ways in advancing network theory. First it can be used to establish 'networks' as a discursive concept and, therefore, as a "contested space" within the schools (Araujo and Easton 1996) of network theory. This approach ensures that research investigates the
human imagination, allowing culture to become a vital component from which relational processes can be investigated.

Second, it can be employed in field research to liberate understanding the non-rational, expressive and subjective ways in which networks are imagined by their participants. Emphasis is placed on local narratives, the particularistic and pluralistic, socially constructed worlds of the network participant. This, in turn, requires the realisation that "it is not possible for the researcher to place himself outside of reality and look at it like an external God" (Gómez Arias and Acebron 2001: 14). The researcher shares the imagined reality with the researched. This requires researchers, in becoming conscious of their own imagination, prior to conducting fieldwork. Exposing different (local) voices, highlighting the diversity of thought assist a richer understanding on how relational processes are perceived through individuals. Rather than aim for generalised models to explain relational processes, the researcher needs to be comfortable delving into the complexity and diversity of human imagination.

CONSEQUENCES OF ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

The IMP Group is better placed than most other schools of network theory to explore networks using an approach that does not denigrate the importance of culture as the "social mind" or cognitive process. This potential promises to address concerns that the tools of network analysis gain a purchase on social structure but "fail ultimately to make sense of the mechanisms through which these relationships are reproduced or reconfigured over time" (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994: 1447). From Capra’s (1996) viewpoint, the key to success is to understand that relational structures are a reification of a nominal pattern invented through a cultural or cognitive process. To understand such complexity requires acceptance that there is no one best way and no single approach capable of discovery of an unequivocal and eternal truth. Therefore, researchers need to embrace the diversity of approaches and interpretations that emerge, at the same time as following the path of their own research agenda.

Epistemological and ontological consequences

Capra (1996) advocates that knowledge and knowledge generation is affected by our own images, thus reality is our perception of it and there is no scientific certainty in the pursuit of knowledge. Such an understanding of knowledge generation requires researchers to understand and accept their own images and that our thinking in developing knowledge is contextual to our own ideas and is not necessarily certain.

This is not to say that business actors and their networks are figments of our imagination, but rather our identification of them is subjectively developed based on our own thought processes. For instance, the concept of network position puts an organisation in relation to other actors in a network context, according to the perceptions of participants. It is also thought to form a framework for actions (Johansson and Mattsson 1992). This idea is concordant with the highly contextual notion of ‘network pictures’ (Ford et al. 2003), which effectively function as the ‘actor’s network theory’ (Mattsson 2002: 6, emphasis in original cited in Henneberg et
al. 2004). These images contribute to the process of organisations’ identity construction and shape actors future agency. An individual actor’s network theory is unique, but will have similarities with other individual actors’ network theory who experience the same situations and therefore generate similar knowledge.

**Methodological consequences**

Different approaches are likely to bring different ideas and descriptions of network theory. Therefore, a universally true understanding of business networks is not likely to occur, but rather a mixed conglomeration of different actor’s perceptions of networks. Each individual has their own idiosyncratic interpretation when understanding business networks.

In that case, what reassurance are we able to offer the struggling network researcher? Research without a ‘safety net’ boils down to four basic strategies; namely curiosity, courage, reflection and dialogue (Gummesson 2001). It involves ‘post-modern’ approaches to market and marketing research that, for example, employ hermeneutical techniques emphasising four key concepts: namely socialisation, text, chorality and interpretation (Gómez Arias and Acebrón 2001). It requires each of us to embark, like Gummesson, on a never-ending “journey through Methodologyland” (Gummesson 2001: 27) and a relentless questioning of mainstream choices of research approaches. As Kilduff and Tsai state:

“...the complexity of organisational systems inheres not in rationally-planned structures but in fluid participations and understandings between actors... (who) connect around tasks and within contexts that are rich with meaning. Research that captures the often-fleeting networks of meaning creation is likely to draw upon a variety of intellectual traditions” (2003: p131, emphasis added).

The research agenda incorporating relationships as a culture of collaboration involves a divergence from current approaches, without disregarding current approaches. Researchers are to take into account many different approaches to incorporate differences rather than simplified law like models. In conceiving culture as a network of ideas, it requires a means of understanding how network participants prescribe their environment, their ‘self’ and others through imagination and symbolism. It requires recognition that reality and actors’ descriptions of it are themselves a network of relationships. It requires the study of culture to adopt the agenda of the IMP Group; namely to put ‘relational processes’ as the central construct, but it also requires a shift towards understanding the nominal nature of ideational relationships and to accommodate the ‘process’ element of networks.

In order to analyse the multiple realities of social life we must reject a unitary concept of ‘culture’, and instead embrace notions of cultural repertoires (Long 2001). A useful way of exploring these repertoires and how they interact situationally is discourse analysis. A key theme of discourse analysis is its focus on language as a constitutive feature of social interaction, and the reproduction of relations of power through everyday talk and social practice. For Watson (1995: 814), discourses or repertoires
"function as menus of discursive resources which various social actors draw on in different ways at different times to achieve their particular purpose – whether these be specific interest-based purposes or broader ones like that of making sense of what is happening in the organisation or of what it is to ‘be a manager’.

Actors achieve social positioning (arguably both for themselves and for the organisations they represent) and identity formulation predominantly through language use. Networks become key elements in actors’ contestations and negotiations over meanings since they facilitate information gathering, opinion formation, legitimization of one’s standpoint, resource mobilisation and their bridging of social space (Long 2001). For the network researcher, any method of data gathering is useful that can generate descriptive text that then lends itself to discourse analysis which attempts to reveal repertoires that account for and justify particular actions. In this way the discursive production of agency/activities plays a role in structuring the world of networks and establishes some of the network ‘facts’ into which managers act (e.g. Ellis and Hopkinson 2004).

CONCLUSION

This paper argues that network analysis, including the IMP Group, has been dominated by a functionalist paradigm in trying to develop law like, simplified models of relationships (a component of the network). Consequently, culture has tended to be ignored, reduced to a single variable or researched within the wrong context. To overcome this lack of a cultural research agenda we are proposing that a sequential paradigm crossing be considered. Rather than concentrate on a dominating ontology and a small number of methods, researchers should pursue multiple approaches to developing knowledge. To overcome the dominance of the positivist paradigm we are suggesting that other interpretative approaches such as discourse analysis are considered. Thus, when managers use language to legitimate network others as, for instance, ‘untrustworthy partners’ with ‘adversarial cultures’, and themselves as (typically) ‘market orientated’ firms that adopt ‘relationship marketing strategies and ‘ethical supply chain practices’ in a competitive global environment’, discourse analysis allows us to deconstruct the discursive entities (concepts, objects and subjects) inherent in such processual claims. As such, discourse analysis holds great promise for re-interpreting industrial networks.

The proposition is that network analysis generally, and the IMP Group particularly, should begin to take culture more seriously. A ‘paradigm crossing’ approach is recommended proposing that analysis of relational processes within a network are a suitable starting point for a subsequent and complementary analysis of the social construction of relationships and networks using discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is forwarded as one suitable complementarity to modelling because of its potential to provide a lens that focuses upon the imaginative, non-physical and locally understood nature of networks. The suggestion is that this simultaneous exploration of networks from different paradigmatic viewpoints provides a more balanced, ‘epistemic’ agenda that enables culture and meaning to be explored with more subtlety. Within the field of international marketing, this can enable us to move away from “the conceptual lacuna that is the essentialist notion of national culture” (McSweeney, 2002: 113).
As Bourdieu states:

“Once a culture becomes reified as natural, it constitutes a scarce commodity which confers distinction, hence status, upon those who possess it... Hence culture becomes capital which confers power in the same manner as economic capital” (1984: 68).

To facilitate such exploration, we propose that network researchers “approach the social phenomenon of ‘organisation’ as a (discursive) process – organising” (Keenoy and Oswick 2003: 141).

References


Kilduff, M. and Tsai, W (2003), Social Networks and Organizations, Sage, London.


