



Managing meaning in complex business networks[☆]



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ABSTRACT

In examining Van de Ven and Poole's (2005) typology of different approaches for studying organizational change, this article focuses on underlying methodological premises and concludes that an ontological, and consequently also an epistemological, perspective seems to be lacking, if the aim is to fully understand change and a firm's networking ability. Arguing for increased sensemaking, an extended version of Van de Ven and Poole's (2005) typology is proposed, which aims to guide and improve future research in understanding the interplay between cognition, action and outcomes in business networks. First, the developed methodological matrix adds an alternative view of change as a theoretical foundation. Second, the proposed model represents a useful structure for analyzing different ways to further marketing theory. Third, the results also indicate that if the aim is to find a general theory of marketing, capable of integrating seemingly contrasting stances, the outlook on change has to be altered.

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1. Introduction

The academic discussion on the interplay between cognition, action and outcomes within business-to-business (B2B) marketing seems to stand on shaky ground due to methodological ambiguities that lead to counterproductive disagreements concerning how and why firm behavior should be studied. "It is unfortunate that academic researchers tend to cluster into 'camps' of like-minded people with little discussion with those in other 'camps'. This separation reduces research that cuts across alternative views of the B2B marketing world" (LaPlaca, 2013, p. 273). The risk of locking perspectives into individual camps is sidelining the essential issue: that is, genuinely increasing understanding of real-life phenomena, which is important for business marketing as an applied science, and for the managerial relevance of research (Jaworski, 2011; Reibstein, Day, & Wind, 2009). Too much is at stake for B2B marketing research to neglect underlying methodological assumptions and their influence. First, the whole spectrum offered by sensemaking risks not being used. Second, methodological clarity is threatened by the tendency to set perspectives in stone; the discussion between silo "camps" do little to support an increased shared understanding of the benefits of using multiple vantage points on B2B marketing phenomena – in fact it seems to discourage it.

In order to support research on the interplay between cognition, action and outcomes, as well as a multidisciplinary approach, the aim of this article is to *clarify and widen* the outlook on the methodological field. Notably, space is added to the methodological menu provided by

Van de Ven and Poole's (2005) typology of different approaches for studying organizational change. By adding a row and a column, a more *comprehensive* view of both managers' and researchers' sensemaking is permitted, as well as a more *refined* view of the different ontological and epistemological vantage points. Notably, Weick's stance of disciplined imagination (1989) will be integrated. Perspectives in use when studying business networks depend on:

... the ontological paradigm choices that researchers make. This is not an esoteric theoretical problem; without understanding these choices and their implications for research practice, much of our knowledge of many business-to-business marketing problems may suffer from superficiality and rely on overly descriptive accounts and narratives.

[(Peters, Pressey, Vanharanta, & Johnston, 2013b, p. 336)]

Indeed, from the management strand, a call echoes for more interesting and influential management research which is distanced from neo-positivist works that "aim for an 'intimate interaction with actual evidence' that 'produces theory which closely mirrors reality'" (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 547, cited in Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013, p. 146). In an interrogation into why calls for increased conceptualization within marketing remain unheeded, MacLnnis (2011) proposed that: "Maybe we lack of a framework for thinking about conceptualization" (p. 151). This article posits that marketing lacks a framework for increased clarity regarding *what* is studied (ontology) and *why* (epistemology).

The ambition is to contribute to the discussion on theoretical perspectives in industrial marketing (Peters, Pressey, Vanharanta, & Johnston, 2013a; Peters et al., 2013b) – a debate that is shrewdly reiterated by the theme of this special issue (Corsaro, Ramos, & Mattson,

[☆] Extending Van de Ven and Poole's (2005) typology of approaches for studying organizational change.

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2012). “Given the importance of ontology in framing research contributions, it is surprising that greater attention is not paid to exploring different ontological and epistemological approaches in industrial marketing research” (Easton, 1998, cited in Peters et al., 2013a, p. 275). The intention behind the extended methodological model is to reconcile different stances in line with Matthyssens, Vandembemt, and Van Bockhaven’s (2013) acknowledgment of both agency and structure, which means admitting change as both emergent and governed intentionally. Pluralistic insights from different approaches provide “a richer understanding of organizational change than any one approach provides by itself” (Van de Ven & Poole, 2005, p. 1377).

B2B marketing, in both research and practice, needs to alternate the vantage points from which phenomena are studied. Within this, “no ontological approach can claim pre-eminence..., it is of benefit to the field of business network research to comprehend what we can learn through the application of alternative research traditions to business network enquiries” (Peters et al., 2013b, p. 345). In particular, the increased sensemaking perspective this article is redeeming is not *conceived* within B2B marketing’s normative process approach – rather, it is dependent on a methodological shift, and a capability and will to achieve this. Notably, when discussing *managing in complex business networks* and the concept of *networking ability* (Ritter et al., 2004), the aspect of managers’ filters (Weick, 1995a) has, despite several advantages, not been satisfactorily taken into account. A plausible, underlying cause for this omission is precisely the overly restricted outlook on the methodological field, which this article wants to highlight and caution against.

1.1. The sensemaking issue in B2B marketing

Network pictures, the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) Group’s concept focusing on managerial cognition and firm behavior, is highly debated between different research “camps” within business network research. The concept is open for more than one interpretation, and discussions are not always productive due to methodological opacity – indeed, “as with the definition of network pictures there is also ambiguity in their stated purpose and therefore their value” (Leek & Mason, 2010, p. 402). The concept also figures in various ontological controversies. Instead of forwarding a shared understanding of managerial cognition and firm behavior, the concept of network pictures seems to stir things up.

A salient characteristic of network pictures is that it forms an advantageous ingredient within the network approach, since – in complement to a system approach for understanding generative mechanisms of firm behavior and network outcomes (e.g., Wilkinson & Young, 2013) – it *takes one step back* (in a figurative sense) and redirects attention to the decision-maker; that is, the manager. Still, the concept of network pictures is simultaneously *anchored* in the same emergent, system approach – a result of staying true to foundational IMP tenets – a process view of reality, and the descriptive mode as a way of understanding change and firm behavior.

For an increased understanding of managerial cognition in relation to firm behavior, this article adds the option of (figuratively) taking *two steps back*. The *first step back* corresponds to the redirection of focus (in line with network pictures) from the interaction and system view to the manager, and the choices made by a human actor. The network may very well have its own impetus, and even be described as a living organism (Easton, 1998), however it does not dispose of human motivation and intention to act. The *second step back* serves to return to the “antecedents of network pictures” (Henneberg, Mouzas, & Naudé, 2004, pp. 2–3); that is, to belief systems or attitude formations *not* included in the network picture construct, and that have “directional behavioral repercussions” (p. 3).

It is noteworthy in this context that IMP research, in line with dissatisfaction with the theoretical underpinnings of economics and methodological individualism (Arrow, 1994), is based on a rejection of approaches focusing on individual actors (Ford, 2011). However, the

methodological vantage point of increased sensemaking visualized by this article is in sharp contrast to that of methodological individualism, as a decision-making that only takes rationalities into account is not targeted. Instead, the reclaim of an increased sensemaking perspective concerns attitudinal filters; that is, *imagination* and its intuitive, associative capacity to form meaning. Omitting the perspective of imagination, a capability perspective and useful understanding of managers’ networking ability is lost, as *the filters* used for opportunity identification and problem definition are not incorporated into the analysis. Typically, when studying *efficient managerial functioning*, business network studies tend to ignore the potential benefits of incorporating intuition (Vanharanta & Easton, 2010).

B2B studies rely heavily on the conviction that “a processual world should be studied only through processual methods” (Van de Ven & Poole, 2005, p. 1390). References to Weick and his work on sensemaking (e.g., Weick, 1995a) tend to concern a process view of sensemaking (e.g., Colville & Pye, 2010). Van de Ven and Poole (2005) stated that “Weick (1979) provides a good starting point for developing a process understanding of organizing, sense-making, and related processes” (pp. 1390–1391). A result of a vocation to consider sensemaking from a process view is that sensemaking is used nearly interchangeably with *cognition* (e.g., Henneberg, Mouzas, & Naudé, 2010), with a biased definition of sensemaking toward cognitive aspects, which leaves out *imagination*. For the same reason (using a process view), sensemaking becomes highly linked to *interpretation*. Weick (1995a) stated that *sensemaking* and *interpretation* are often confused. This coupling of sensemaking to cognition and interpretation, respectively, is misguiding for the wider implications of the notion of sensemaking, which this article will redeem.

1.2. Method and delimitations

Due to the eclectic character of the marketing field (Möller, 2013), and as there are so many different “camps” within B2B marketing research that address managerial and firm behavior, for increased clarity there is a need to *go back to basics*, to the fundamental premises for developing theory. Outlooks on change provide such a divide, and Van de Ven and Poole’s (2005) typology delivers a structure of underlying assumptions regarding how to study behavior and change. First, it clearly *separates* ontology from epistemology, and the resulting matrix then *combines* ontologies with epistemologies in a four-field matrix, which is clear-cut and intelligible. The framework manages to accommodate the vast majority of common stances within business management and organizational studies, equivalent to different research traditions, “camps”, or “isms.”

The highly condensed, typological structure for “isms” (or different research stances, “camps,” etc.), defined by Van de Ven and Poole (2005), is notably the reason for choosing precisely their model as the basis of analysis, over other available overviews of “isms.” The center of interest is the structure in itself, the *order beyond* (Bohm & Peat, 2000) “isms” – not at this point *the order between* (Bohm & Peat, 2000) “isms”. (For an approach that focuses more on “isms” (meta-theories), in order to *classify*, describe, and compare them, see, for example, Löbler (2011)).

Van de Ven and Poole’s (2005) typology is built on scholars’ commonly held outlooks on change and behavior; their model forms a practical indicator *in itself* of academia’s normative outlook on the methodological field. The extended model proposed in this article is a parsimonious methodological matrix with far-reaching implications – though, due to space limitations, not all of these will be discussed in this article.

1.3. Outline of the article

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Section 2 justifies the addition of an increased sensemaking perspective to the

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