



Understanding cultural sensemaking of business interaction: A research model



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ABSTRACT

This methodological paper proposes a research model for understanding individual-level cultural sensemaking as regards business interaction in international business-to-business relationships. Culture is treated as knowledge inherited and learned by individuals through their lived experiences and learning in various cultural contexts. The developed research model integrates three complementary methods a sensemaking perspective, narrative research, and a metaphor analysis. Making sense of interpersonal business-to-business interactions rests on talk and meaning making, which represents itself as a process through narrative stories with plots. This narrative form is a basic sensemaking device, in which metaphor analysis is helpful in uncovering underlying cultural meanings. The paper concludes with a critical evaluation of the introduced ‘cultural sense-translation’ model, including avenues for further research and implications for practice.

1. Introduction

In business-to-business marketing between firms, interaction forms a key to understanding how business relationships start and develop over time, and why firms engage in these relationships for mutual value creation (Ford, 2004; Håkansson & Snehota, 1995; Håkansson, 1982). In order to understand interaction in business marketing settings, “subjective interpretation” or individual sensemaking (Weick, 1995) is stated as being useful and needing further research (Ford & Håkansson, 2006). Each individual engaged in dyadic business relationships has his/her own personal interpretation of the interactive situation within a business relationship. Therefore, the cultural background of the individual manager (national, organizational, professional, etc.) plays a significant role in his/her sensemaking (Fellows & Liu, 2016; Harris, 1994; Ivanova & Torkkeli, 2013). Thus, uncovering the cultural meanings behind managerial sensemaking about interaction with other business counterparts is an important issue (Fellows & Liu, 2016; Ivanova & Torkkeli, 2013).

Intercultural research has been conducted within business marketing field, but not to any notable degree (Nes, Solberg, & Silkoset, 2007; Pornpitakpan, 1999; Törnroos & Möller, 1993). The cultural environment is generally approached in international marketing and business-to-business studies by applying experimental variable-based and systemic models, as for example, that of Hofstede (1980, 1991) or Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010) (see Fletcher & Fang, 2006; Leung, Bhagat, Buchan, Erez, & Gibson, 2005; Lowe, Carr,

Thomas, & Watkins-Mathys, 2005; Yaprak, 2008). The usage of this naïve realist underlying ontology together with quantitative research methods notably disregards the actual specificity, complexity and dynamics of culture in interactive business processes across cultures. For instance, by complexity of culture we imply that this realist view of culture does not account for the enmeshed nature of various forms of culture (e.g. national, professional and organizational), which may be embedded within an individual manager/actor engaged in interactive and international business processes. Neither does this perspective consider the possibility of potential changes in an individual’s cultural repertoire through adaptive behavior and learning from business interactions with their partners. The perspective taken here is thus constructivist, processual, and interpretive in order to deal with the complexity concerning culture in international business interaction in B2B marketing encounters. From a social constructivist perspective culture is treated as a flexible network of situation-specific knowledge (DiMaggio, 1997; Hong & Mallorie, 2004; Swidler, 1986). The cultural background of interacting individual managers, thus, consists of cultural schemas, which contain knowledge (e.g. gained knowledge on ways of behavior and beliefs) regarding various cultural contexts (e.g. national, organizational, professional). These schemas provide individuals with reference points for making sense of key interaction events (Garro, 2000; Jameson, 2007), and detecting cues that serve as guides for action (Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005)

Individuals’ social construction of reality through sensemaking (see Weick et al., 2005) and meaning development ultimately results in

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‘talk’, stories, and a linguistic form (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). This view is consistent with what has been coined as the ‘linguistic turn’ in management research (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). This turn gained prominence during the past decade in emphasizing the need to consider more closely the texts emanating from individuals when scrutinizing intercultural interaction in business research and organization theory. Texts form the most common outcome of data collection for business marketing scholars studying business interaction, due to the wide usage of case studies and personal interviews (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Halinen, Medlin, & Törnroos, 2012). However, the voices of individuals are frequently lost, as the resulting story is often told from an organizational perspective, through construction of a macro-narrative by the researcher (see further Section 2.3). Until now the linguistic turn has had little impact on business-to-business marketing scholars. We are inclined to believe that adopting linguistic approaches can generate new and relevant insights for the field (see also Lowe, Ellis, & Purchase, 2008). We note further that methodological contributions have not become a high-priority area of business-to-business marketing (cf. Lowe & Hwang, 2012), especially regarding cultural contexts and considering an individual perspective on business interaction.

Based on these noted gaps, we focus on developing a qualitative interpretive tool allowing a view of the world from the perspectives of the studied subjects (i.e. individual managers); in particular, by investigating what cultural meanings the subjects impose on their experiences of intercultural interaction in dyadic business relationships. We explicitly tackle how business people express their thoughts, ideas, and their sensemaking of business interaction in its practical and linguistic context. The idea here is to reveal techniques and means for researchers to make interview data and its analysis more ‘thick’ and culturally enriched. We particularly restrict the article to the three key points that focus on the matters at issue.

- Individuals are treated as the key actors of the firms and cultures they represent and through them we can understand the interaction processes in dyadic business settings;
- These human actors possess the embedded aspects of inherited and learned sociolinguistic behaviors as a part of their cultural baggage in interacting across cultures;
- Inter-individual interaction creates interplay between; (i) the specific context surrounding interaction (the cultural realms of knowledge: i.e. national, professional and organizational), (ii) the enacted process of interactive exchange in business relationships and, (iii) the narrative text and/or symbolic expression and outcome of the interaction process.

Based on the foregoing discussion, methodological and conceptual approaches were selected and motivated by the chosen perspective, focus, and conceptual framework:

First, the *sensemaking approach* (Weick et al., 2005; Weick, 1995) gives a relevant framework for understanding the basic mechanism of how managers, through narratives, ascribe meaning to interactions within business relationships. An interview setting in itself can be viewed as a planned minor event, which triggers sensemaking by the informant (see further Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). This conceptual perspective also forms the “lens” through which the researcher approaches and interprets the collected qualitative data. The sensemaking approach corresponds well with the individual and cultural perspectives adopted (Section 2.2. presents sensemaking in more detail).

Second, the process of sensemaking by a key informant results in an *individual narrative*, i.e. a story with plots, which represents the informant’s construction of an interaction event (cf. Vaara, Sonenshein, & Boje, 2016). Here we adhere to the interpretive, narrative construction approach and focus on the individual form of narratives, i.e. “individual accounts or stories”, rather than composite narratives, i.e. narratives, which “capture the collective meanings of a group of organizational members” (Vaara et al., 2016, p. 504). Most

business marketing research has either focused on composite narratives or applied a realist approach towards narratives (see Makkonen, Aarikka-Stenroos, & Olkkonen, 2012), by viewing narratives “as representations of other phenomena” (Vaara et al., 2016; p. 499). Thus, we extend current business marketing literature by developing a research model using an interpretive analysis of narratives. The strength of an interpretive approach toward narrative analysis resides in enhancing the present understanding of an individual’s reasoning behind storied events; such reason being obtained from the managerial informant’s sensemaking. The few existing business marketing studies that apply narrative construction approaches focus on managerial perceptions of network-embedded phenomena, such as, for example, communication or value co-creation (e.g. Ellis & Hopkinson, 2010; Ellis & Ybema, 2010; Rod, Lindsay & Ellis, 2014). However, most of these studies lack a cultural perspective and predominantly focus on discourses rather than applying a narrative approach, which may lead to disregarding the processual nature of business relationships. This paper is complementary to the above-mentioned previous studies in providing a definite methodological model; a model which allows an understanding of the role of culture in managerial perceptions and sensemaking of interactive business processes (see further concerning narratives in Section 2.3). Other promising methods such as e.g. conversation analysis were also considered. However, conversation analysis focuses on studying the order of talk or the turn-taking system (Psathas, 1995; Ten Have, 2007) and was therefore found unsuitable for the purposes of this paper.

Third, the metaphors found in the narrative data (i.e. metaphors-in-use) allow a better and deeper understanding of the cultural schemas that are symbolically expressed in specific ways by the informants (cf. Ellis & Hopkinson, 2010) (see further Section 2.4). The metaphors, in this case, are complementary to the narratives (Musacchio Adorisio, 2011; Riad, 2011). Analysis of metaphors-in-use has been used to some extent within the organization science (Cornelissen, Oswick, Christensen, & Cornelissen, 2008), but is lacking in interactive and international business marketing, at least thus far (Lowe, Rod, & Hwang, 2016). *Metaphor analysis*, as applied here, is a way of investigating thought and attitudes from the metaphors that appear in the narratives (cf. Denshire, 2002). It involves (i) metaphor identification in the sensemaking narrative through comparison of its basic and contextual meaning and (ii) additional interpretation of metaphors in relation to the cultural context of the narrative (Cornelissen et al., 2008; Praggeljaz Group, 2007). By revealing “something of the speakers’ emotions, attitudes and values” (Cameron, 2010), this method also deepens and enriches the interpretation of the informants’ sensemaking about interactions with a cultural meaning and is thus feasible for the purposes of this paper.

Combining the aforementioned and complementary methods into a research model (for further details see Section 3) enables a researcher to extend and deepen the analysis of the qualitative narrative data (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). This offers a plausible but demanding platform for the study of business interaction from an individual angle while also unfolding its intercultural content. The suggested methods and techniques consider the specific focus and perspective adopted in this study. This, however, does not deny the applicability of other methods to studying the individual perspective on intercultural interaction in business relationships. The model presented gives one possible path towards a richer, ‘thicker’ and deeper understanding of this issue.

The proposed methodological approach and model further targets a clear gap in current literature by exploring the role of culture in international business relationships using an interactive approach (Håkansson, 1982; Håkansson, Ford, Gadde, Snehota, & Waluszewski 2009). We particularly contribute to the growing amount of business marketing and inter-organizational literature on sensemaking and a narrative approach (Gertsen & Søderberg, 2011; Henneberg et al., 2010; Jørgensen, Jordan, & Mitterhofer, 2012; Lowe & Hwang, 2012;

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