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Target and position article

## Business network becoming: Figurations of time, change and process

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### ABSTRACT

Concepts such as ‘time’ and ‘change’ are always presaged by metaphor, narratives and other ‘tropes’ and are therefore, representations invented by association, analogy, indirect inferences and figuration. If these representations change, then their meaning also changes. In this paper, we argue that dominant figurations of time have been predominantly mechanistic and a consequence of ‘substance’ metaphysics. The mechanistic metaphor of time constructs comprehensions of time that are linear, homogenous and clock-like. As with any analogical representations, this type of figuration favors some aspects of time and diminishes others. Our proposition is that if we apply an alternative ‘process metaphysics’ to time, then this is associated with different figurative representations. In this paper, we make specific reference to the IMP research tradition where we explore ‘holographic or rhizomic time’ as a different temporal metaphor. We illustrate what linear clock time reveals and hides in a ‘centered’ epistemology and explore what an adoption of ‘holographic’ time would allow us to see, and discuss some of the benefits and limitations of this different figuration of time, which promotes a ‘de-centered’ epistemology.

### 1. Introduction

Concepts, theories as well as paradigms are always, consciously or not and partially or fully, a product of analogical reasoning (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Morgan, 1986). Concepts such as time are, therefore, always presaged by metaphor, narratives and other ‘tropes’. Time, therefore, is a representation that is invented by association, analogy, indirect inferences and figuration. From this perspective, time is never directly apprehended by humans and is always mediated by our descriptions and representations. If these representations change, then the meaning of time changes also.

In this paper, we follow the view of American pragmatists who sees beliefs, justifications for actions and activities as part of a life-world often captured by a particular metaphor or analogical style and argue that dominant figurations of time have been predominantly mechanistic and a consequence of ‘substance’ metaphysics. The mechanistic metaphor of time constructs apprehensions of time that are linear, homogenous clock-like and clockwork. As with any analogical representations, this type of figuration foregrounds some aspects of time and diminishes others. Our proposition is that if we apply an alternative ‘process metaphysics’ to time, then this comes attached with different figurative representations. A process view does not sustain a mechanistic metaphor because linear, ‘clockwork’ universality is inconsistent

with process understanding. In process metaphysics, time is analogically relativist and non-linear. Process time, which may be better represented for example by the image of a ‘holograph’ (Morgan, 1986) or rhizome (Deleuze, 1994) is contextual, indeterminate, heterogeneous and a more ‘quantum’ representation. As with looking at a hologram, time conceptions depend upon where you are and at what speed and direction you are going. Time as process is, consequently, relative to context. Time is different, for example, when experienced from inside or viewed from outside of the hologram. In this paper, we explore ‘holographic or rhizomic time’ as an alternate temporal metaphor. We emphasize what linear clock time reveals and hides in a ‘centered’ epistemology and explore what an adoption of ‘holographic’ time would allow us to see, and discuss some of the benefits and limitations of this different figuration of time, which promotes a ‘de-centered’ epistemology.

### 2. Substance and process contrasts

Conceptions of business networks can be divided into two opposing metaphysical traditions supported by contrasting temporal metaphors. One suggests that time and change are what happens to organizations, dyadic relations, managers, things and other substantive identities and it regards change as something that the network *has*. The other, far less

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prevalent perspective regards change as something the network *is*, where time and change are constitutive and identities are temporary instantiations or waves of stability in an evolving, complex sea of change. We view *process* metaphysics as an alternate orientation to the study of networks and time. In this paper, we argue that the adoption of the metaphysics of *process* would mean that business network research in terms of ontology, epistemology and methodology, particularly with reference to the IMP research tradition, would focus on ‘network becoming’.

With substance metaphysics, time and change are absolute; with a linear progression of objective, synchronic events and past moments, via the present and towards the future whereas with process metaphysics, time is constituted in relative experience of duration via diachronic/polychronic and non-linear enfolding of the past and future into the present (Lowe & Hwang, 2010). In other words, change and process within process metaphysics is subjective and substances such as actor’s identities, when understood as fixed entities, are illusions caused by their habitual naming. Substance metaphysics has dominated conceptions of business networks for some time, therefore we expand on Lowe and Hwang’s (2010) initial efforts and investigate what adoption of the metaphysics of process would mean to business network research in terms of ontology, epistemology and methodology, particularly with reference to the IMP research tradition; which has recently been described as exemplifying “normal science,” benefitting “from a resistant conceptual framework which seems to have weathered the test of time” (Cova, Pardo, Salle, & Spencer, 2015, p. 80), yet which continues to treat business/network *interaction* as a blackbox (Guercini, La Rocca, Runfola, & Snehota, 2014). Essentially, what we illustrate in this paper is that ‘centered’ modernists adhere to a substance perspective by attempting to externally objectively understand the world in mechanistic terms and strive (but often fail) to be able to deduce exactly how all the cogs fit together. However, any representations that do not explain, in mechanistic terms, how the clock works are disregarded as not making sense. We suggest that the alternate process approach accepts that we don’t know and can’t know anything completely objectively because we are a ‘de-centered’ part of whatever we are trying to understand. We can get better at prediction but we cannot ever be certain within measurable tolerance limits of error and therefore, a process orientation embraces phronesis, habitus, bricolage and situated practical effectiveness.

Another way to understand the different logics of substance as opposed to process is through the distinction offered by Rorty (1999). A movement from substantive metaphysics to process metaphysics is usually accompanied by a gradual relaxation of prioritizing identifications of cause and effect. An accompanying increasing engagement with complexity, emergence and indeterminacy is evident as researchers appear to transform from substantive metaphysics to a more ‘ironic’ metaphysics of process (Rorty, 1999). Process metaphysics is more ironic because it is skeptical of the need or desirability of a ‘final vocabulary’ or absolute and universal Truth in theory-building, and more tolerant of understanding theories as ephemeral, narratives and pragmatic “poetic achievements” (Rorty, 1999, p.100) that can last only as long as they are practically useful and coherent within the logic of the time. The difference between the two metaphysical traditions is, consequently, notable and should appeal to practicing managers because it acknowledges contextuality and highlights the transferability of insights across contexts rather than searching for absolute, generalizable theory that transcends context. Differences are comprehensive in terms of the metaphors employed to carry their meaning, the intellectual sources attributable to the different metaphysical conceptions, the ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying them and conceptions of time and change inherent in them. To shed more light on what benefits a process orientation promises, we now turn to examine the figurative differences between process and substance in some detail before exploring their methodological implications.

### 3. IMP time research

Notwithstanding the rich tradition of varied/alternative philosophical orientations in IMP related research, most business marketing research approaches tend to assume modernist perspectives (Tomás Gómez Arias & Bello Acebrón, 2001) with their associated substance metaphysics objectivist assumptions. This modernist discourse highlights human advancement possibilities by adopting rationality, reason and progress. ‘Systems’ modernism is its dominant form, in its institutionalization of reason via developing the functional demands of universal systems. Modernism adheres to a notion of information/knowledge as being referential or representational, as a means of communicating and describing something real and foundational independent of itself. Its foundational assumptions derive from a realist ontology and lend themselves to logical positivist and universally generalizable, hypothetico-deductive, nomothetic ‘model building/testing’ methodologies. It assumes a ‘structural’ stance necessitating complexity being reduced to atomized, quantifiable, foundational certainties in adopting perfunctory metaphors and linear, rational, causal descriptions to depict a world, which it advocates as being manageable by human actors as the principal means of reason.

We regard the present IMP view as predominantly centered, substance-based, and somewhat linear. It is enveloped in particular beliefs and assumptions, distinctive language and rhetorical styles and approved research activities. What we present is an alternative perspective. This is characterized by process and de-centered approach, which has a set of differing beliefs, alternative concepts and discourse, and proposals for research activities that depart from the current orthodoxy.

Di Maggio (1992), Emirbayer and Goodwin (1994), and Tomás Gómez Arias and Bello Acebrón (2001) lament the limits of contemporary network analysis. IMP research, assumes modernist, logocentric perspectives grounded in structural-functionalist assumptions of a realist ontology and nomothetic methodology. Failing to acknowledge the symbolic world leads to biases in perceptions about the important stakeholder relationships most tied to organizational outcomes, such as those with customers. In failing to acknowledge tradespeople’s symbolic world, Ringberg and Forquer (2003) illustrate how tools manufacturer’s over-reliance on ‘utilitarian,’ brand-trust models created tremendous misunderstandings between them and potential users resulting in missed opportunities. Employing interpretivist techniques to explore this symbolic world of tradespeople would likely have revealed values in contrast to their perceived stereotypes of machismo and materialism. A process metaphysics perspective suggests that misinterpretations arising from diverse views of time are potentially the major reason for symbolic dissonance, especially when there are cultural differences between buyer and seller.

Calls for a more prominent role for time to enrich [business] case methodological approaches (Quintens & Matthysens, 2010) have been heeded; as exemplified by special issues in this journal (Halinen, Medlin, & Törnroos, 2012). However, the dominant modernist foundations of a substance metaphysics and its ontological stance of ‘being’ seem to persevere with respect to current approaches to time research within the IMP Group; whether in relation to time, concepts such as ‘episodes’ (Håkansson, Ford, Gadde, Snehota, & Waluszewski, 2009), or ‘moments’ (Medlin, 2003), or ‘events’ (Hedaa & Törnroos, 2002), or even ‘critical events’ in time and space (Tidström & Hagberg-Andresson, 2012). Refer to fig. 1 in that these views seem to fall between an Objectivist stance and Mead’s ‘middle path’ separating idealist and positivist approaches. Major additions to IMP time research is credited to Halinen and Törnroos (1995), Halinen, (1998), Hedaa and Törnroos

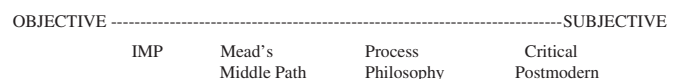


Fig. 1. A paradigm continuum.

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