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Practice theory and the study of interaction in business relationships

Some methodological implications

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Research Highlights

1. Zooming in and out of multiple sites of interaction enables us to better understand interaction in business relationships
2. Practice-based approaches provide us with methodological insights useful for studying business interactions
3. Treating actors as emergent entities helps to orient the research on business interaction
4. Activities aiming at reproducing interaction practices deserve more attention
5. Major attention should be paid to the role of materiality that permit relationships to be temporarily stabilized

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Abstract

Research on customer-supplier relationships in business markets has evidenced the centrality of interaction processes. However, while several studies examine interaction processes and their consequences in relation to the resource and activity layers of business relationships, the actor layer has not attracted the same attention. This raises the question: how adequate are our methodological approaches for investigating interaction processes in business networks? In this paper, we examine how practice-based approaches, with their preference for ethnography and techniques such as multi-site observations and analytical interviewing and treating actors as emergent entities, can help orient the research on business interaction. We argue that some of the themes emerging in practice-based approaches, applied to studies of interaction in business networks, could yield a better understanding of the dynamics of organizing across organizational boundaries. We conclude that research on interaction in business relationships would benefit from (1) zooming in and zooming out of multiple sites of interaction to better understand interaction processes and the role of controversies and interdependences among the different interacting roles; (2) including fluid multiple roles in business relationships that treat actors as emergent entities and transcend the 'fixed' conceptualization of two actor levels – individual and organizational; and (3) paying major attention to the reproduction of interaction practices and the role of materiality that permit relationships to be temporarily stabilized.

Keywords: Interaction, practice-based studies, business relationships, actors, methodology

1. Introduction

The traditional perspective on marketing rests on the assumption that companies' market performance revolves around discrete exchange transactions and effective marketing practices (Bagozzi, 1975). However, in recent decades, a considerable body of research on business markets has pointed to the existence of continuous high-involvement business relationships between companies. Various studies have highlighted the importance of such relationships for the economic performance and development of individual businesses as well as the dynamics of business markets (Cannon & Perreault, 1999; Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987; Håkansson, 1982; Håkansson & Snehota, 1995; Håkansson, Ford, Gadde, Snehota, & Waluszewski, 2009; Narayandas & Rangan, 2004). In particular, research has focused on the interaction processes in business relationships to understand how these relationships develop and what their outcomes are for the companies involved (Hallén, Johanson, & Sayed-Mohamed, 1991; Håkansson et al., 2009; Johanson & Mattson, 1987). Interaction has been conceptualized as “an economic process through which all of the aspects of business, including physical, financial, and human resources, take their form and are changed or transformed” (Håkansson et al., 2009, p. 33). The importance of interaction across companies' boundaries lies in their role concerning how mutual adaptations are initiated and carried out, and has led to the conclusion that interaction is a core business process at the heart of business development (Håkansson et al., 2009).

While interaction has come to the fore in research on customer-supplier relationships in business markets, few studies explore interaction processes in inter-organizational business relationships at a micro level and investigate the role of actors in the development of solutions. In fact, most of the research appears to ‘black-box’ the individual interaction behaviors (Guercini, La Rocca, Runfola, & Snehota, 2014). The relative scarcity of studies on how actors interact in business relationships can be a sign of the methodological complexities in studying business interaction empirically (La Rocca, 2013). Indeed, interaction as the interlocking of behaviors and mutual conditioning is notoriously difficult to investigate empirically. Hence, it is relevant to ask what research lenses and tools should be adopted to study interaction processes in business relationships.

Against this background, this paper will focus on practice-based approaches within organization studies (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Miettinen, Samra-Fredericks, & Yanow, 2009; Nicolini, Gherardi, & Yanow, 2003; Orlikowski, 2002; Reckwitz, 2002a,b; Schatzki, Knorr

Cetina, & von Savigny, 2001; Shove, Pantzer, & Watson, 2012) and within market studies (Araujo, 2007; Araujo, Kjellberg, & Spencer, 2008; Araujo & Kjellberg, 2009; Azimont & Araujo, 2007; Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2006, 2007; Mason & Spring, 2011; Rinallo & Golfetto, 2006). These practice-based approaches appear complementary to the approaches used in the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) research tradition to study interaction processes in business relationships. Opening up the black-boxed interaction processes (Guercini et al., 2014) and going “below the surface of the supplier and customer as two organizations” (Hjelmgren & Dubois, 2013, p. 101) inevitably poses methodological challenges. The rationale for drawing upon practice theory is that, like the IMP perspective, it focuses on processes, sociomateriality, actual practices, and how the practices are related in time and space. However, while in the IMP few attempts have been made to study how actors actually interact (Guercini et al., 2014; Hjelmgren & Dubois, 2013), practice theory has a long tradition in tracing *what actors do*.

In this paper, we examine the methodological approaches of practice-based research with the aim of identifying approaches that permit us to capture more effectively the dynamics of interaction processes in business relationships. From an ontological point of view, we share the assumption that social reality has an emergent and enacted character (Law & Urry, 2004). This study draws on a ‘practical constructivism approach’ (Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2006) that focuses on ontological issues and is concerned with “social practices enacting realities” rather than with “knowledge claims based on different perspectives on a single reality” (Andersson, Aspenbeg, & Kjellberg, 2008, p. 69). Our study examines selected studies within the IMP and practice-based streams of research, outlines their ontological positions, and focuses on their methodological approaches.

The paper contributes by suggesting three methodological paths that could potentially enrich and expand our understanding of interactions in business relationships: (1) zooming in and zooming out of multiple sites of interaction, (2) including fluid multiple roles in business relationships, and (3) paying major attention to the reproduction of interaction practices in business relationships.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we review the literature on business relationships and interaction in the IMP research, focusing on the methodological approaches that have been typically employed in this tradition. In the section that follows, we outline key topics that have emerged in contributions from practice theory. In Section 4 we discuss how studies of

business relationships can benefit from practice-based approaches; and in the last section we draw some conclusions.

2. Studying interactions in business relationships

In this section, we outline some of the basic assumptions of IMP research, both conceptually and methodologically, in order to identify (in Section 4) methodological contiguities with practice-based approaches (discussed in Section 3).

2.1 The IMP roots

If we look at the roots of IMP, one of the first features is the emphasis on joint behaviors and interdependencies between organizations (Håkansson, 1982). The focus on what happens between organizations – and among individuals who represent them – has led to the conclusion that the idea of autonomous rational actors who act purposefully, form intent, and interpret the context to achieve desired goals, is of limited use in explaining the dynamics of business markets (Håkansson, 1982; Håkansson & Snehota, 1995). Rather, it appears that relational processes, interaction in particular, are central in marketing and thus are essential constructs in explaining the emergence and consequences of business relationships among organizations (Håkansson, 1982; Håkansson & Snehota, 1995; Ford, Håkansson, Gadde, Snehota, & Waluszewski, 2010). Olsen (2013) argues that “the fundamental ontological position defining the IMP as an area of theory is the assumption that resources are heterogeneous and only partially knowable, and as a consequence, that relations and interactions are fundamental constituents of the economy” (p. 162).

The foundations of the concept of business relationship and its functions is empirical. Empirical research has shown that what happens between the buyer and seller company in a business relationship has consequences in three dimensions: 1. For the relationship itself (e.g., how it will develop); 2. For the organizations and actors involved (e.g., economic outcomes for the businesses taking part); and 3. For other, indirectly connected parties and relationships (e.g., for the customers of the customer, suppliers of the supplier) (Anderson, Håkansson, & Johanson, 1994; Håkansson & Snehota, 1995). The interdependence and connectedness of business relationships (Håkansson, 1982), in the sense that what happens in one business relationship affects what happens in another (directly connected through one of the parties or indirectly connected

through more than one party), has led to the formulation of the concept of a business network as a set of interdependent business relationships (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995).

Analysis of inter-organizational business relationships requires the development of concepts suitable for capturing the complexity and permitting the differentiation and classification of the variety of these relationships in terms of their content and function. Some scholars have proposed using the Activity-Resource-Actor (ARA) model to analyze business relationships and their consequences (Håkansson & Johanson, 1992; Håkansson & Snehota, 1995). The idea/argument is that in order to understand the development of a particular company (or one of its businesses) we have to look at how it is connected to other companies (or companies' business) in the following three dimensions or layers: activities, resources, and actors. Interaction in business relationships can be analyzed by examining the overall pattern of interaction between the two businesses in these layers (Håkansson et al., 2009), and also at a more micro level, by investigating various processes that pertain to the single layers: e.g., how specific resources, products, organizational units, activities, and individuals interact.

Research on inter-organizational business relationships in the IMP tradition has led to acknowledging explicitly two levels of the 'actor' concept, distinguishing between companies as actors and individuals that serve as agents for the companies involved in inter-organizational relationships (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995). An attempt to connect the two levels has been conducted in an empirical study of actors' identities in business relationship that highlights the interactive nature of actors, showing the interplay between the two levels and the role interactions have in shaping mutually perceived identities (La Rocca, 2011). Outside the IMP, the notion of organizations as actors in inter-organizational relationships has rarely been discussed, with the exception of a growing body of market studies (e.g., Araujo, 2007; Araujo et al., 2008; Araujo & Kjellberg, 2009; Azimont & Araujo, 2007; Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2006, 2007; Mason & Spring, 2011; Rinallo & Golfetto, 2006). Some of these studies, inspired by the inroads of a 'practice turn' (Schatzki, et al., 2001) in marketing, have also been related to IMP. It has been observed that from a market perspective "actors should be conceived as composites comprised of multiple acting entities" (Anderson, Aspenberg, & Kjellberg, 2008, p. 68). We will return to this latter point when we examine how these and other related market studies have addressed inter-organizational processes from a practice perspective.

Given the focus on inter-organizational relationships between businesses, which involve the interfacing of resource constellations and activity patterns, it is not surprising the IMP research has been emphasizing the ‘materiality’ of inter-organizational business relationships, referring to the ‘heaviness of business relationships’ (Håkansson & Waluszewski, 2002; Håkansson & Ford, 2002). The importance of the ‘material aspects’ in customer supplier relationships is what inspired the ARA framework. The argument that the material dimensions (resource and activity) of relationships between two organizations represent heavy constraints on the behaviors of companies, and therefore is important in interpreting opportunities and constraints, has been conspicuously present in the IMP research. The resource and activity context has been shown to influence the innovation activities of a business (Baraldi, Ingemansson, & Launberg, 2014; Waluszewski, Ingemansson, & Håkansson, 2014), purchasing (Dubois & Gadde, 2000), and new venture development (Ciabuschi, Perna, & Snehota, 2012). Consequently, in the IMP perspective, the actor dimension of relationships does not appear to be the dominant one but rather one among three explanatory dimensions in business relationships (La Rocca, Snehota, & Trabattoni, 2015). However, while many studies examine interaction processes and their consequences in relation to the resource and activity layers of business relationships (e.g., Bankvall, 2014; Bankvall, Bygballe, Dubois, & Jahre, 2010; Baraldi & Strömsten, 2006; Gadde, Hjelmgren, & Skarp, 2011), the actor layer, particularly in relation to individual behaviors (of companies’ representatives) in interaction (Guercini et al., 2014), has not gained the same attention among IMP scholars (La Rocca, 2013; Prenekert, 2013).

The question of how actors find a way to collaborate more or less effectively and the extent to which actual behaviors in interaction affect relationship development remains mostly an open question (Guercini, La Rocca, Runfola, & Snehota, 2015). In an attempt to unpack the interaction process, Hjelmgren and Dubois (2013) frame their analysis along three lines, focusing on: 1. The actors interacting both at intra- and inter-organizational firm level, 2. The object and focus of interaction, and 3. How the interaction is organized. To go below the ‘surface’ of interactions in business relationships inevitably poses several methodological challenges. One of the major challenges is not taking for granted who/what the actor is (La Rocca, 2013). Prior studies have tended to start either from an organizational unit or from an individual as actors that are taken for granted. A second challenge lies in delimiting the unit of analysis when approaching interaction and the choice of which interactions to look at and how to follow them. For instance, while it has

been observed that there is no clear-cut separation between inter- and intra-organizational interaction (Hjelmgren & Dubois, 2013), the interplay between intra- and inter-organizational interactions has been almost neglected in prior research on inter-firm interaction (Badir, Buchel, & Tucci, 2008). A third challenge is the time frame to adopt for the study of interactions in business relationships. Since business relationships consist of countless interaction episodes that unfold over time, the bracketing of these episodes inevitably affects the insights we can gain about the dynamics of business relationships and their outcomes.

In the following sections we examine what methodological approach(es) IMP researchers commonly employ (discussed in Section 2.2), and what alternative and/or complementary insights we can potentially get from practice-based studies (discussed in Sections 3 and 4).

2.2 Methodological approaches within the IMP tradition

Methodologically, IMP studies started out with a rather large survey, collecting data on more than 1,000 customer-supplier relationships through face-to-face interviews in both buyer and seller companies, interviewing multiple respondents in the companies involved (Håkansson & Snehota, 2002). Between 1984 and 2012, a number of studies followed the initial survey, addressing a multitude of aspects but focusing mainly on one of the IMP's key concepts: "relationship" (Wuehrer & Smejkal, 2013). The bulk of these studies were case studies investigating the consequences of continuous business relationships for the organizations involved. Case studies have thus emerged as the dominant methodological approach in industrial marketing studies (Easton, 2000). According to Easton (2010), one reason lies in the nature of the phenomena investigated: organizations and relationships are in fact difficult to access, and their structure is complex compared to consumer markets. Case research became the 'primary tool' (Dubois & Araujo, 2004) among industrial network researchers because, given its specificities (Easton, 1995; Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1989) and challenges (Piekkari, Plakoyiannaki, & Welch, 2010), it was found to be the most suitable approach to study business networks (Halinen & Törnroos, 2005). In the IMP tradition the choice of case research follows from theoretical notions (Dubois & Gibbert, 2010), and case studies are seen as providing opportunities to confront theory with empirical materials with the aim of capturing relevant features of a case through a particular framework (Dubois & Araujo, 2007). Several studies in the IMP stream of research have been inspired by the so-called 'systematic combining' – an 'abductive approach' to case research described as a

nonlinear, path-dependent process of combining efforts to match theory and reality (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; 2014).

The 'interaction approach' characterizing the IMP perspective (Håkansson, 1982) entails certain principles relating to how to approach actors; it tends to emphasize observing actual interaction behaviors rather than investigating the declared intents of the interacting parties. Consequently, actors are identified as those perceived as actors by their interacting counterparts (La Rocca, 2013). The heterogeneity assumption and emphasis on uniqueness have been central in IMP studies but is easily set aside because of the difficulties in finding useful instruments to analyze and report on heterogeneity. Indeed, it is much more common to find tools that help to evidence pattern similarities (homogeneity) than to find suitable tools that capture uniqueness and are suitable for revealing and measuring dissimilarities (heterogeneity). Lowe et al. (2008) have pointed out that it is necessary to focus on the *processes* of interaction, rather than frameworks of interaction, giving a more central role to constructs such as identity, culture, language, and communication if we want to gain a more subtle understanding of interaction. In terms of temporal orientation, studies on business networks rely mostly on comparisons between different states (observed at different points in time) and on historical ex-post reconstructions, making little use of real-time and interaction-related data (Halinen & Mainela, 2013). Also Halinen et al. (2012) found that time and process have not been comprehensively discussed or developed within the IMP research tradition. This is probably linked to the fact that the most common method for collecting data in industrial marketing studies has been through interviews, while venues for interactions, such as workshops and meetings, or documents of business deals and interaction (e.g., contracts and correspondence) are rarely reported as sources of data (Halinen & Mainela, 2013).

There is a call among IMP scholars for real-time and interaction-related data as sources of evidence and the need, when studying networks, to rely on multipoint data collection (Håkansson & Ford, 2006; Halinen & Mainela, 2013; La Rocca, 2011; 2013; Guercini et al., 2014; 2015) that has led us to turn to practice-based studies as a possible methodological approach for conducting empirical research on the complex phenomenon of business interaction.

3. Practice-based approaches

3.1 *The roots of practice-based approaches*

In recent years there has been increasing interest in using practice theories to study issues such as marketing, consumption, institutions, accounting, strategy, learning, routines, innovation, and so forth (Nicolini, 2012, p. 12). The publication of “The practice turn in contemporary theory” (Schatzki et al., 2001) has been highly significant for the development of practice-based studies.

However, theories of practice have long and strong traditions in both sociology and philosophy, and their roots can be traced to Wittgenstein and Heidegger, with points of connection between some of their ideas and earlier contributions from pragmatists such as James and Dewey (Shove et al., 2012). We are aware that the roots of practice-based approaches can be described in different ways, and the concept of ‘practice’ has different accents for different researchers. We do not aim here to develop a comprehensive categorization or a unified definition; rather, we would like to offer an overview based on the work of some researchers who have tackled these ideas (e.g., Nicolini et al., 2003; Nicolini, 2012; Schatzki, 2001; 2012; Reckwitz, 2002a,b; Shove et al., 2012). Nicolini et al. (2003) identified three central traditions in practice-based approaches. The first is the Marxist tradition, which eschews focusing exclusively on cognitive aspects and the tendency to make knowledge a dominant entity. Rather, it emphasizes how knowing is related to doing. The second research tradition that has inspired current practice-based approaches is phenomenology. Symbolic interactionism adds a strong social and interactional dimension. For symbolic interactionists every kind of knowledge represents and embodies (interactional) work and can be accessed only through interaction. The third tradition is represented by influential sociologists such as Bourdieu, Garfinkel, and Giddens (Schatzki, 2001; 2012). The central concern for Bourdieu was that of theorizing *habitus*, which reflects the question of how human action is regulated. Practices are seen as functional for approaching *habitus* – the embodiment of practical dispositions (as opposed to abstract logic) that other theorists, however, would consider a part of practices themselves (Shove et al., 2012). Giddens (1982) locates practices in the middle, between actors and social structures, suggesting that because individuals appropriate and interpret structures according to their own agendas, they play a key role in the reproduction of structures and actions outcomes. In terms of definitions, Nicolini et al. (2003) define practice “as what persons say, imagine, conceive, and produce, and think while attempting to carry out [these] activities” (p. 7). Schatzki (2012, p. 2) defines a practice as “an open-ended, spatially-temporally dispersed nexus of doings and sayings” and suggests social reality to be understood as a “bundle

of practices and material arrangements” (ibid, p. 4). In an attempt to push the studies of practice further, Reckwitz (2002a) suggested distinguishing between ‘Praxis’ and ‘Praktik’:

“‘Practice’ (Praxis) in the singular represents merely an emphatic term to describe the whole of human action (in contrast to ‘theory’ and mere thinking). ‘Practices’ in the sense of the theory of social practices, however, is something else. A ‘practice’ (Praktik) is a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge. A practice ... necessarily depends on the existence and specific interconnectedness of these elements, and which cannot be reduced to any one of these single elements” (249-250).

This distinction between practice (praxis) and practices (praktik) has important implications for the framing of research questions and for defining units of analysis in empirical studies. With the former in mind, research is about understanding some phenomenon *as it happens in practice*, aiming for ‘thick descriptions’ and showing the complexity of social practices and processes. With the latter approach, research will additionally seek to identify and understand the *routinized practices making up social, socio-economic, and socio-technical orders*. In Reckwitz’s (2002a) analysis, individuals are *carriers* or hosts of practices. This means that, contrary to conventional approaches, understanding, know-how, meaning, and purpose are not personal qualities, but “elements and qualities of a practice in which the single individual participates” (p. 250).

We now turn our attention to two streams of research within practice research, which, for different reasons, we believe are fruitful contiguities with the IMP research tradition. The first stream belongs to organization studies, while the second belongs to market studies. The rationale for focusing on these two streams is that the first has a long tradition in studying complex organizational phenomena. The second stream shares with the IMP research tradition the interest in inter-organizational processes that shape markets and pertain to market dynamics.

3.2 Practice-based approaches in organization studies

There are at least four important research streams that co-exist in the practice-based studies stream (Gherardi, 2006). The first stream is the *cultural and aesthetic approach*, in which culture is studied to increase our understanding of how practices are produced and reproduced because practices are highly context-dependent collective endeavors (Gherardi, 2006; Nicolini, 2012). The second stream is *activity theory*, which underscores how practices are situated and mediated through artefacts. The relationship between practice and objects, and how activity systems carry with them long histories, has therefore been central in this stream of research (Blackler, Crump, & McDonald, 2000; Nicolini, Mengis, & Swan, 2012; Prektert, 2006). The third research stream is *situated learning theory*, which emerged as a critique of approaches in which knowledge is seen as a context-free entity in the heads of individuals rather than situated in practices (Brown & Duguid, 1991; 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Newell, Robertson, & Scarbrough, 2009). This stream emphasizes how organizational learning is fundamentally social, and located within everyday work practices. Central to this stream of research is the notion of ‘communities of practice’ defined as “a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98). The fourth research stream is that of Actor Network Theory (ANT) or sociology of translation (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1987; 1988; Law, 1994). This research tradition, with roots in science and technology studies, emphasizes how practices are associations or assemblages of different elements, human and non-human, that shape each other (Reckwitz, 2002b). The same tradition also points out that practices embody social relations, intentions, and competencies and that considerable effort is required to make such heterogeneous networks hold together and stabilize them.

Despite the diversity, a few traits are common to these streams. They take a process-oriented stance, moving from a ‘sociology of nouns’ to a ‘sociology of verbs’ (Law, 1994). Hence, words such as “learning, organizing, belonging, understanding, and knowing” are often used (Nicolini et al., 2003, p. 21). Practice-based studies focus on how practices are social accomplishments and emphasize that practices are socially, culturally, and historically situated (ibid). In analyzing practices, the non-human artefacts and historical conditions are given prominence. Generally, practice-based studies highlight the relevance of concepts such as paradoxes, tensions, inconsistencies, and incoherencies (ibid). Since the unit of analysis is practice, the object of study is not confined to individuals, single organizations, fields, or populations; a practice should be viewed as a connection in action (Gherardi, 2012). However, although practices supporting and

competing with each other are always connected to other practices in different ways and across time and space (Shove et al., 2012), research in the organizational field has often tended to limit the attention to flows of practices within organizational boundaries. Inter-organizational relations have been rarely examined, with few exceptions (e.g., Brown & Duguid, 2001; Geiger & Finch, 2009; Mørk, Hoholm, Maaninen-Olsson, & Aanestad, 2012). Mørk et al. (2012) found that ‘boundary organising practices’ could be a useful analytical approach to describe how medical innovation processes unfold on the boundaries between different disciplines and between different organizations. Moreover, Geiger and Finch’s (2009) study shows that sales people are market shapers who “develop and act on and within a complex pattern of relationships with other companies as well as with their colleagues in their own organization, making exchanges and forming identities within and across these companies as well as within and across markets” (p. 616). They thus offer a view that bridges organizing with market making.

We now examine the inroads of practice-based studies in the subject area of market studies.

3.3 The practice-based approach in market studies

With its strong emphasis on the material, as well as on the challenge of combining and stabilizing heterogeneous elements, the ‘practice turn’ has been important for market studies (e.g., Araujo, 2007; Araujo et al., 2008; Araujo & Kjellberg, 2009; Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2006, 2007). Inspired by the idea of Callon (1998) on the sociology of translation, authors in this stream suggest that markets are constituted by ‘market practices’ (Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2006), also defined as the “bundles of practices including material arrangements that contribute to perform markets” (Araujo et al., 2008, p. 8). The conceptualization of market actor and the idea that market practice is characterized by ‘multiplicity’ (Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2006) are particularly interesting for the purpose of this study. Kjellberg & Helgesson (2006) outline three reasons for this multiplicity: 1. Individual market actors do not necessarily act according to one market perspective but engage in diverging market practices; 2. market practice brings together actors whose actions draw on diverse definitions of the context in which they are involved; 3. market actors engage in more or less overt market-making activities that all affect the market to some extent (p. 849). Exploring agency in three empirical scenes, one of which is a buyer-seller interaction, Andersson et al. (2008) discuss how actors are configured in practice, through processes of ‘interdefinition,’ ‘inscription,’ and ‘ascription.’ Kjellberg and Andersson (2003) address a fundamental issue in relation to

researching business interaction when they formulate the question: “What are the consequences of the narrator’s point of view of who the actor is for the study of business action?” The authors found that in the marketing literature actors: (1) are often clumped together into functional aggregates, e.g., “the customers,” (2) are often described in terms of their function vis-a-vis focal actors, and (3) are recognized only at a specific level, either individual or company (Kjellberg & Andersson, 2003, p. 41).

Practice-based market studies instead conceptualize ‘actor’ in line with the relational thinking of actor-network theory. Markets and marketing activities are viewed as performative, in that representations, tools, and practices are part of constituting and shaping markets (Araujo, 2007; Araujo & Kjellberg, 2009). The principle of including artefacts in the analysis leads to an explanation of actors as socio-material aggregates, and any acting capacity is seen as a relational effect (Hagberg & Kjellberg, 2010). Finally, actors are seen fundamentally as socio-material arrangements of humans, artefacts, and their ‘programs of action’ (Latour, 1994; Hagberg, & Kjellberg, 2010). Such a perspective implies an actor’s capacity to act as an outcome of an aggregated set of relationships between humans and resources (Hagberg & Kjellberg, 2010), which is key to the idea of “variability of roles” among business actors that we discuss further in Section Four.

Building on the previous discussion, in the next section we focus on the ongoing debate around the preferred empirical methods of practice-based approaches within organization studies as well as in market studies taking the practice perspective.

3.4 Methodological concerns in practice theory

Methodological concerns raised in practice theory are related to the underlying ontological assumptions. Here we will focus on five themes we find potentially fruitful for our aim of refining methodological approaches to study interaction in business relationships.

The *first* theme is related to the distinction between the “weak” and “strong” program in practice-based organization studies (Nicolini, 2012). This distinction has been used to discuss preferable methodological approaches to studying social phenomena through a practice perspective. The idea behind such a distinction is to spur researchers to go beyond rich descriptions of everyday work (that represents the weak program) to explain what goes on in practices (the strong program), shedding light “on the meaning of the work that goes into it, what makes it

possible, why it is the way it is, and how it contributes to, or interferes with, the production of organizational life” (Nicolini, 2012, p. 13), hence, partially overlapping with Reckwitz’s (2002a,b) call for more studies of ‘Praktik.’ Such an idea points to the importance of, and need to investigate, routinized and sociomaterially configured practices.

A *second* inspiring theme within practice theory is the idea that ethnography is required to understand practices and that there is no alternative to doing ethnography (Schatzki, 2012). However, Czarniawska (2004) warned that “traditional ethnography” as “bounded as it is to one place, misses the mobility inherent in contemporary organizing” (p. 774). She proposed using the concept ‘action net,’ which holds that “actions – connected by translation – might produce actors, networks, and macro actors, i.e., actor-networks” (p. 782). To achieve the aim of rapidly moving from one place to another, Czarniawska (2007) suggested using “shadowing” in fieldwork. An advantage of shadowing is that it can provide insights into otherwise invisible aspects of people’s work and organizing; being able to ask questions or gain insights in the moment is significant (Czarniawska, 2007). Shadowing is particularly useful because it provides a way of answering “research questions where the unit of analysis is not the individual but the social relation; positions are explored within a complex of interrelated processes” (Quinlan, 2008, p. 1482). Rinallo and Golfetto (2006) made an explicit point about the suitability of using ethnographic methods in business-to-business marketing research, particularly for the study of market forms and market practices. To describe how a multiplicity of normative and representational practices is aligned and temporarily stabilized around a trade fair by a network of actors operating in the fashion industry, the authors carried out participant observation of the many ‘backstage events’ (meetings and workshops to explain new trends to exhibitors) and of the trade fair itself (in different editions). They took field notes, photographs, and videos to document interactions between and among visitors and exhibitors and conducted 95 interviews (Rinallo & Golfetto, 2006).

Ethnographic research is akin to what Law (2004) calls ‘non-coherent realities,’ which brings attention to our *third* theme, related to the ANT tenet of ‘following controversies’ (Latour, 2005). Indeed, a central commonality between ANT and ethnography is that both eschew neat analytic categories in favor of a sensitivity to messiness (Law, 2004). So much so, that controversies in ANT are taken to display the social in its making. Indeed Latour (2005) suggests inquiring into the assemblage of the social (as an empirical question) by following controversies, rather than using the social (as a theoretical abstraction) to explain away phenomena. Hoholm’s

(2009) and Azimont's (2010) dissertations are examples of studies inspired by the idea that by "letting actors deploy controversies and tracing connections between them and the aggregated assembled you can let actors define the order rather than impose it forehand" (Latour, 2005, p. 23). In his study on innovation in the food industry, Hoholm (2009) was tracing the controversies as they emerged while the innovation unfolded in practice (Hoholm & Araujo, 2011; Hoholm & Olsen, 2012). While Hoholm's fieldwork was relatively project- and focal company-centric, albeit including ethnographic visits to suppliers and trade fairs, Azimont's (2010) study on category management broke down the longitudinal case in "five embedded sub-cases" that emerged while following the controversies around various market constituents (p. 91). Similarly, Onyas and Ryan (2015), drawing from empirical material obtained using ethnographic methods (including field notes, participant observation, interviews, and visual methods) over a five-week period, conducted their fieldwork in four research settings to examine the highly specific and concrete actions of agencies involved in reconfiguring the Good African Coffee market in innovative ways.

The *fourth* theme relates to the question whether interviewing is a suitable technique when conducting practice-based studies. Hitchings (2012) found that interviewing was tricky but possible and worthwhile doing. From his own research experience, he observed that informants were able to reflect on and talk about their practices (explicating ways of acting differently) without feeling themselves to be "impotent carriers of practices" (Hitchings, 2012, p. 65). To help interviewees better articulate certain aspects of their practices, Nicolini (2009a) suggests a technique called 'interview to the double.' The idea is to ask the informant to provide instructions that would be thorough enough to enable a double to replace the interviewed person in her daily activities. Kreiner and Mourtizen (2005) argue for the use of 'analytical interviewing' to investigate management practices, in which the interviewee is considered a co-creator of knowledge. They warn against taking interviewee statements as final truth because of the common problems of ignorance, tacitness, boundedness, institutionalization, and opportunism in the interview situation. Instead, they suggest using interviews as a platform from which to explore practice dilemmas, and an environment in which relationships and explanations may be constructed and tested in collaboration between researcher and interviewee. This creates a very different interview situation, in which an active dialogue between a reflective practitioner and an experienced and informed researcher may lead to the exploration of novel explanations (i.e., theorizing) of what is normally taken for granted (i.e., practice). After all, they argue, "empirical

inquiry is not just about what practice is factually observable” (Kreiner & Mouritsen, 2005, p. 172), and therefore reflective dialogue, mobilizing counterfactual, theoretical, and experiential elements, may be productive for researching (i.e., interviewing and theorizing simultaneously) practice. At the same time, however, there have been some ANT-inspired studies conducted with no or minimal interaction with informants. For instance, in their dissertations on the shaping of markets, Helgesson (1999) and Kjellberg (2001) used mainly archival and other printed sources for their practice studies.

Finally, the *fifth* theme of practice-based research debated in organization studies, but relevant to ‘inter-organizational’ (market) studies as well, that we want to raise concerns the impossibility of distinguishing *a priori* between micro and macro actors (Callon & Latour, 1981) and the metaphorical movements of ‘zooming in’ and ‘zooming out’ (Nicolini, 2009b). The argument is that studying practices requires zooming in on details of the practical accomplishments of a practice, as it is often historically, locally, and culturally situated within the boundaries of a formal organization. By zooming in on a practice, researchers can better understand what people are saying and doing, what they are trying to do, how these practices flow in time, and with what effect. At the same time, the scope of observations needs to “zoom out” in order to “trail the connections between practices and their products” (Nicolini, 2012, p. 219). Zooming out is required to be able to account for how the here and now practices are connected to other practices, and “how configurations, assemblages, bundles, and confederations of practices are kept together,” and how “the practice under consideration contributes to the wider picture” (ibid, p. 230). These arguments recall the discussion in ANT around relations between micro and macro actors (Callon & Latour, 1981) and the traditional research focus on either micro (individuals, groups, families) or macro actors (institutions, organizations, social classes, parties, states) as separate entities. Following Callon and Latour (1981), researchers should not distinguish *a priori* between micro and macro actors. Instead, they should consider actors holistically as all those (actors) that work together to create a macrostructure. The macrostructure becomes a unified structure known as a black box, which persists until a need emerges that forces it to open; and then the actors, through their black box interactions, stimulate and possibly create changes (Callon & Latour, 1981).

Having examined methodological approaches that characterize practice-based studies of organizational as well as market practices, in the following section we outline the implications for studies of inter-organizational business relationships and related interaction processes.

4. Potential contributions of practice-based approaches in researching business interactions

Drawing on our analysis of selected practice-based studies, we believe empirical studies and theorizing on interaction processes in business relationships can benefit from the experience of the practice-based approaches in both organizational and market studies. There is a certain analogy among the two research streams as both aim at conceptualizing and theorizing the phenomena of “organizing” or the emergence of organized activity systems. The stance of IMP research is rather similar to the practice-based approach to market studies, particularly studies inspired by ANT, which emphasizes the importance of the material dimension of interaction.

Given the contiguity of the two research streams, we have focused on three themes in practice-based approaches that we find potentially relevant and fruitful for advancing our understanding of interaction processes in business relationships at the center of interest in the IMP research. The first concerns the *multiplicity of the site(s)* of interaction; the second, the *emergent property of roles in business interaction*; the third relates to the *reproducing and stabilizing interaction practices* in business relationships. The three themes are interesting because of their methodological implications for research on interaction in business relationships as they have a bearing on what to look for when investigating interaction processes in business relationships and how to carry out the research.

4.1 Zooming in and zooming out of multiple sites of interaction

Practice-based approaches have implications for how to set the boundaries of the phenomenon under research and to delimit the unit of analysis. The need to balance zooming in and zooming out found in investigating practices (Nicolini, 2009b) has implications for defining the unit of analysis. Applied to interaction in business relationships, zooming in means exploring the micro interactions in business relationships in greater depth, which is likely to involve exploring further the role of the material dimensions (resources and activities). But it also implies, perhaps primarily, that social, cultural, and behavioral factors need to be included in studies on interaction in business relationships. This is likely to attract attention to the role of controversies and conflicting epistemologies as argued by Gherardi and Nicolini (2002), who found multiple professional groups at a construction site coordinating and collaborating in order to produce a safe work environment in spite of (or due to) partly conflicting epistemologies. Zooming out in studies on interaction in

business relationships means further accentuating the tracing and following up both spatial and temporal interdependences of single-interaction episodes, not only within organizations, but also across the boundaries of formal organizations. To zoom in and simultaneously to zoom out reflects the need to take into account the interplay between intra- and inter-organizational practices, and to further elucidate the roles and practices at the boundaries of organizations (Hjelmgren & Dubois, 2013).

Attaining a better understanding of business interaction implies carrying out ethnographic studies *at various sites of interaction* both synchronously and asynchronously. Business interaction may be studied (observed) at different sites, such as at negotiation meetings (Azimont & Araujo, 2007), on supermarket shelves (Hoholm, 2011), or in purchasing interactions (Anderson et al., 2008). Following up interdependences and controversies means including sites of interaction that often tend to be neglected; but it also means avoiding relying mainly on ex-post rationalization by informants. Participant observations at ‘backstage events’ of the trade fair of Rinallo & Golfetto (2006), as well as Jarzabkowski and colleagues’ (2015) recent efforts to do multi-site ethnography across multiple companies and geographical locations are examples of ethnographic studies of multiple sites of interaction.

We would argue that studies of business interaction can benefit from a multi-site ethnographic approach. Connecting multiple in-depth observations across business actors and sites is likely to showcase both the respective “backstage” activities of the interactions and the “front stage” direct interactions, as well as connect intra-organizational interactions with inter-organizational interactions. It holds the promise of contributing to a better understanding of the dynamics of interdependent organizing across organizational boundaries and how controversies and interdependences among different interacting roles affect the development and outcomes of business relationships.

4.2 Fluid multiple roles in business relationships

There is a tendency in IMP-related studies to consider a pre-defined set of more or less fixed organizational roles or ‘functional aggregates’ (Kjellberg & Andersson, 2003) consisting mainly of ‘suppliers’ and ‘customers.’ Taking the practice perspective, a range of different roles, related to a varied set of activities, responsibilities, and competencies, heterogeneously constituted of humans and artefacts, is likely to emerge from empirical studies. In a study of marketing practitioners, Hagberg and Kjellberg (2010) found variable and different configurations of actors

and thus suggested the importance of empirical and analytical approaches that “do not restrict agential variation in advance” (p. 1036). There are reasons to expect that in business relationships too there will be a variable configuration of actors reflecting the numerous different touch points between business organizations; engineers and technicians, accountants, call centers, managers, as well as IT systems, facility interfaces, and documents of various kinds. Andersson et al. (2008) and Hageberg & Kjellberg (2010) offer examples of ‘work-sensitive’ accounts of marketing practices, but more needs to be done in this area, given the variety of roles typically involved in business relationships. Organization studies provide examples of how inter-group interaction happens in practice. An example is Mørk et al.’s (2010) study of the contested process of developing novel medical procedures when different professionals from different hospitals have to innovate collaboratively. Another example is the account of Xerox repair workers’ interactive storytelling with customers and colleagues while attempting to solve technical problems (Brown & Duguid, 1991).

Studies following the IMP perspective tend to distinguish between the individual and the organizational level. Both levels of actors are somehow conceived *a priori*, and empirical research on the topic is limited. Both levels are problematic as individuals act as agents for organized entities, and businesses are seldom one formal organizational entity tending to consist of several different business and organizational units. IMP research could benefit from practice-based studies that generally approach organizations as ‘informal organizing,’ such as communities and networks of practice, and identify various constellations/groups of relevance in the phenomenon under research (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Avoiding the fixed conceptualization of two actor levels, treating actors in interaction as emergent entities (Latour, 1988; 2005), and approaching the analysis of actors as socio-material constellations enabling action/agency (e.g., Nicolini et al., 2003; Hageberg & Kjellberg, 2010) are three ways of expanding IMP research on business relationships. Attention to the variety of roles in interaction in business relationships is bound to highlight the fluidity in how actors are seen in inter-organizational business relationships and the consequences for the dynamics of business relationships.

4.3 Reproduction of interaction practices

Practice-based research appears to suggest that interaction in business relationships could be approached as a ‘bundle of practices’ (Schatzki, 2012) that emerge when connecting two or more business organizations. Business relationships research following the IMP tradition has shown particular interest in the processes of development and change, but numerous IMP studies suggest that business relationships often appear to be rather stable and continuous. That raises the question: How is the noticeable stability and continuity in business relationships achieved? We would argue that the apparent stability and continuity of business relationships deserve more attention and implies investigating the role of materiality in stabilizing social orders (Latour, 1991) inherent in business relationships processes. This would also suggest investigating interaction routines, interaction patterns, and other ‘mundane’ socio-material ways of ‘keeping things together,’ as proposed by ANT. Prior IMP research has evidenced that the temporary stability observed in business relationships is important for the economic outcomes of such relationships, but is achieved through intense and costly alignment efforts related to a heterogeneous combination of elements, power games of enforcing or compromising actors’ interests, and routinizing certain activity patterns of which we have rather limited knowledge (Wilkinson, 1996; Olsen, Prekert, Hoholm, & Harrison, 2014). A practice-based approach to this issue would likely lead to studies of a wider set of activities (practices) and social aspects of interaction in business relationships, providing description and analysis of the constellations of (micro) practices that can be found in close and complex business relationships. Analyzing interactions as ‘everyday’ practices holds the promise of a better understanding of the *‘doing’ of interaction* and of how it relates to the socio-material embedding, stabilization, and reproduction of interaction.

Investigating business interaction as everyday practice is likely to shed further light on the resource embeddedness argument of IMP (Håkansson & Waluszewski, 2002) through micro investigations of how facilities, tools, and texts are mutually adapted and aligned. Investigating interaction in business relationships as a recursive practice of connecting organizations might also reveal the precariousness of resource interfaces and activity links in business relationships that may, and often do, break down, and shed some more light on the efforts and practices required to continuously stabilize and re-stabilize interaction patterns. Practice-based studies have shown that stabilizing practices involves assembling and aligning heterogeneous elements, black-boxing and thus concealing the controversies to be settled, and reproducing interaction patterns. IMP research has evidenced the importance of interaction at the boundaries of business organizations for both

economic efficiency and development. Identifying practices related to reproducing and stabilizing the actual interaction patterns in business relationships and examining how these relate to interaction outcomes is bound to offer interesting insights regarding the implications for the practice of management.

5. Conclusions

We are convinced that research on customer-supplier relationships in business markets has reached the point where to gain a better grasp of the dynamics of business relationships it is necessary to open up the black-boxed interaction processes, notwithstanding the difficulties such research may encounter. In turn, that implies the need to further refine methodological approaches for how to research interaction processes in business networks. Based on revisiting of practice-based approaches in organization and market studies, we have identified three paths to enrich the understanding of interaction in business relationships: investigating multiple sites of interaction by zooming in and zooming out, recognizing fluid multiple roles in business relationships, and focusing on reproduction practices underlying the continuity of business relationships. We are aware that the implications of applying practice-based approaches to research on business interaction are not trivial. An obvious challenge is that studies following the practice-based approach, particularly the preference for ethnography and multi-site observations (e.g., Jarzabkowski, Burke, & Spee, 2015; Onyas & Ryan, 2015; Rinallo & Golfetto, 2006), shadowing (Czarniawska, 2007), as well as analytical interviewing (Kreiner & Mouritsen, 2005), typically make such studies very time consuming, even more so when practices are distributed across business relationships and networks (Hoholm & Araujo, 2011). A further challenge, as the experience of ethnographers shows, is that action always tends to be where the observer is not (Law, 1994; Hoholm & Araujo, 2011). However, we are convinced that the three paths will offer a richer understanding of interaction processes on which the development of business relationships depend and can be fruitful for both research and consequently for management practice.

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