Constructivism and critical realism as alternative approaches to the study of business networks: Convergences and divergences in theory and in research practice ☆

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine the implications for understanding the practices of researching business networks that result from 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. Based on three common building blocks in understanding social systems (individuals, social practices and processes, and social structures), we examine the implications of adopting two different research traditions, namely: critical realism and constructivism. Drawing on data from an in-depth investigation of a construction project undertaken in the UK, we apply these research traditions to a managerial phenomenon, specifically the practice of novation in temporary organisational networks. In so doing we examine what we may realistically learn from each approach and ask what are the implications for the practice of research.

1. Introduction: The Emperor's new clothes and researching business networks; is it just fashion or is the tailor to blame?

As children, we were told the story of the Emperors' new clothes as a morality tale in the power of perception, how choice can drive action, and integrity. Two tailors agree to make a special suit for the Emperor to wear made from fabric invisible to anyone who is unfit for his position (or hopelessly stupid). Afraid to admit he cannot see the clothes himself, the Emperor parades naked through the streets. Driven by the same fear, his courtiers and subjects applaud his new clothes. They justify their behaviour as that of discerning and open-minded followers of fashion, until the folly of their actions is questioned by a child who has nothing to lose by speaking the truth. Regardless of the moral of the tale, it is mindful to remember that the tale started with the actions of the tailors who, in providing the Emperor with his new clothes, set the tale in motion and fostered future action and outcomes. In fairy tales, as in business network research, our understanding of reality and managerial practices are inseparable. In this paper, we examine the implications for understanding the practices of researching business networks that result from 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 — in other words, our very own tale of the Emperors' new clothes.

The issue of understanding how to undertake research in practice is confounded by the ontology one chooses to adopt to scrutinise the actions of specific agents. Particularly as ontology is essentially the specification of some form of conceptualization (Gruber, 1993) and hence has to contend with multiple realities (or multiple understandings of reality). Despite clear academic and commercial importance, the academic quest to achieve ontological consensus in researching business networks (and management in general) has not been successful (Tranfield & Starkey, 1998). Instead, the field has become increasingly fragmented by different research orientations, some of which stem from different basic assumptions regarding the nature of business networks.

Based on three common building blocks in understanding social systems (individuals, social practices and processes, and social structures), we examine the implications of adopting two different research traditions, namely: critical realism (Archer, 2000; Bhaskar, 2002, 2008; Bhaskar in Harré & Bhaskar, 2001) and constructivism (Harré in Harré & Bhaskar, 2001; Latour & Woolgar, 1986). We have chosen these two research traditions (defined as research approaches that have advanced to the point of containing complete ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies: Hunt, 2010) as they are commonly found approaches in business network research (Schurr, 2007). Drawing on data from an

in-depth investigation of a construction project undertaken in the UK, we apply these traditions to a managerial phenomenon, specifically the practice of novation in temporary organisational networks. In so doing we examine what we may realistically learn from each approach and ask what are the implications for the practice of research.

2. Living with the real: Why ontology and epistemology matter

In an exploration of the nature of management research, Tranfield and Starkey (1998:345) observed that … "Probably the most striking feature on which there is consensus within the discipline is that management research operates no single agreed ontological or epistemological paradigm". Using Becher's (1989) taxonomy of academic disciplines, they claim that management research may be characterised by four key properties. First, that it is soft in the extent to which a body of theory is subscribed to by all members of the field, and therefore does not share a unifying paradigm. Second, that it is applied in nature. Third, that it is divergent in terms of shared ideologies and values. Finally, that it is rural in that there is a very low ratio of people to problems studied and thus research focus and activity is fragmented. As a result, they claim that knowledge production in the management discipline emerges incrementally, developing theoretical structures that may not follow any given disciplinary map and which may trigger several different but associated trajectories for further work. The consequences of this are, they propose, a need for debate into the identification of the ontological status of management research and a recognition of what might be considered core and established in terms of disciplinary knowledge, what might be considered indicative and requiring further testing, and that which might be emergent. They suggest that management research is quintessentially non-reductionist and that management researchers should take a "catholic yet carefully defined approach to the making of quality judgements" (Tranfield & Starkey, 1998:353).

Such catholicism is also evidenced in an exploration of ontology in medical practice by Annemarie Mol (2002:6), who outlines her philosophical tale thus: "…ontology is not given in the order of things, but that, instead, ontologies are brought into being, sustained, or allowed to wither away in common, day-to-day, sociomaterial practices". Thus, she proposes that reality is multiple, and that if reality is (perceived) to be multiple, it is also political. But if ontologies are both multiple and political, and if our epistemological efforts are not so much attempts to observe reality but are in fact interferences with it, then the question becomes "… what is a good way of doing research, of going about the assembling and the handling of material?" (Mol, 2002:157). She goes on to stress that: "Good knowledge then, does not draw its worth from *living up to* reality. What we should seek, instead, are worthwhile ways of *living with* the real" (Mol, 2002:158, emphasis in the original).

However, just how do we approach living with the real? The paradigm debate in management research is perhaps best characterised according to differing fundamental assumptions about the nature of organisational phenomena (ontology), the nature of knowledge about those phenomena (epistemology), and the nature of ways of studying those phenomena (methodology: Gioia & Pitre, 1990). Gioia and Pitre propose that "… developing multi-paradigm approaches offers the possibility of creating fresh insights because they start from different ontological and epistemological assumptions and, therefore, can tap different facets of organisational phenomena and can produce markedly different and uniquely informative theoretical views of events under study" (1990:591). Their notion of blurred boundaries between ontologically differing paradigms, allowing for a limited but conceptually critical multi-paradigm approach, has been a popular driver of theory building for over twenty years. So why do we still find that theory building is a practice fraught with fragmentation, disagreement and differentiation?

Stemming from the seminal work of Burrell and Morgan (1979), researchers have grappled with the notion of commensurability and ontology in research practice. The political dominance of some ontological perspectives (as well as dominance in epistemological and methodological choices) has been recognised in marketing research; Tadajewski (2008) maintains that Burrell and Morgan proposed the mutual exclusivity of paradigms in order to protect the less theoretically developed from over-dominance by those more adopted paradigms. Yet paradigms are crafted on shifting sands, as emphasised by some scholars who suggest that researchers explore the blurred transition zones between paradigms (Gioia & Pitre, 1990; Lewis & Grimes, 1999). The notion of such transition zones, however, presents challenges for research practice. This is because attempts to mix and match different ontological perspectives may lead to situations where the fundamental basis of these paradigms could be undermined (Easton, 2002). This does not mean that incommensurability is a state of nature (see Hunt, 2010), but that ontological perspectives have integrities that may be undermined if not understood and respected.

Perhaps the major issue faced in attempts to overcome incommensurability is that the whole set of assumptions that underpin one paradigm against another at a theoretical level are not examined (Tadajewski, 2008). This highlights the risk we run in attempting to achieve commensurability by considering ontologies as a continuum of viewpoints (which is the stance posited by Gioia & Pitre, 1990) along one narrowly defined aspect, rather than alternative ontologies with significant differences between what might be many different (or a few central) aspects. Incommensurability is not simply a problem faced at the level of the research methods we choose to use. Indeed, Hunt (2010) argues that there has never been an interpretation of incommensurability in the philosophy of science that poses a problem for the practice of science. However, attempting to overcome incommensurability by forming teams of researchers from differing paradigms who try together to construct one explanation of the data is inherently problematic, as inevitably one or more researchers will be forced to abandoned their ontological position.

What Tadajewski (2008:283) poses is the need (according to Kuhn, 1970), for "… marketing theorists who are lexically bilingual and understand the historical development of the debates they comment upon and can help others to comprehend alternative modes of thought." This, however, is not an easy task to achieve, as Tadajewski (2008:283): "I, like many others, sometimes wish we were all multilingual, that we could move across orientations with grace and ease, but this type of Teflon-coated multiperspectival cosmopolitan envisioned by Morgan (1986) or Hassard (1991) is often both illusionary and weak (see Parker & McHugh, 1991). Good scholars have deep commitments. Multiperspectivalism often leads to shallow readings and uses of alternative orientations, since unexamined basic assumptions have unexpected hidden qualities (Deetz, 1996)".

The rationale behind the use of multiple (rather than mono) paradigm analysis in developing marketing theory is that it is believed to facilitate conversations across research paradigms. In so doing, it provides a more comprehensive view of the foci phenomena than would ordinarily be available. However, "… marketing theorists have yet to acknowledge the … potential political issues that derive from negotiating incommensurability…" (Tadajewski, 2008: 275). One of the challenges of living with the real is that ontologies are neither mutually exclusive, nor wholly encompassing. As Mol (2002) points out, they are created and maintained in everyday practice. Thus, while in this paper we do not seek to integrate (or bridge) paradigms, this does not preclude the possibility of our comparing and contrasting differing ontological approaches in order to have an informed awareness of their respective contributions to knowledge (Gioia & Pitre, 1990).

Therefore, it is our intention to explore two different ways in which researchers of business networks go about living with the real, two different ways of interfering with it. Firstly, we will explore the main ontological and epistemological tenants of Constructivism, and compare them with those of Critical Realism. Two key proponents of these ontological perspectives (Rom Harré and Roy Bhaskar) have discussed for years the relative merits of each perspective in terms of understanding social structures (Harré & Bhaskar, 2001). In