

**Business relationships in the industrial network literature:
three approaches and their underlying assumptions**

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Abstract

The industrial network literature contains underlying assumptions about the nature of business relationships. We use change as a vehicle to unearth these assumptions and conduct a systematic review of change in business relationships in the industrial network literature. We identify three approaches to business relationships: agency, structure and practice. Our research contributes to the industrial network literature by explicating how change in business relationships is derived implicitly from what people do, the surrounding structures, or the logic underlying their action. This research helps provide construct clarity by elaborating the key assumptions and key constructs of the three approaches as well their implications for business relationships research.

***Keywords:* industrial network literature, business relationships, business networks, change, underlying assumptions**

INTRODUCTION

Business relationships are a central concept in the industrial network literature (hereafter INL). The INL represents a central research stream within the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group [IMP Group] that centers on the contacts and relationships firms have with other organizations in their focal network (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995). Since the inauguration of the INL and the formulation of seminal conceptualizations of business relationships (e.g., Campbell, 1985a; Ford, 1980; Håkansson, 1982; Wilson, 1995), the field has broadened to cover different theoretical perspectives. However, boundary setting in defining a relationship, interaction and actors within it as well the development of the concept itself has been omitted in the literature (Andersen, Medlin & Törnroos, 2019; Hadjikhani & LaPlaca, 2013; La Rocca, 2013).

In the extant INL, business relationships are broadly conceived as the continuous interaction and exchange between at least two actors or organizations involving economic and social elements (e.g., Hadjikhani & LaPlaca, 2013; Holmlund & Törnroos, 1997; Mandják, Szalkai, Neumann-Bódi, Magyar & Simon, 2015). As almost four decades of accumulating research has passed, we are now witnessing a critical re-evaluation of many of the taken-for-granted aspects of business relationships. Researchers have revised ‘continuity’ (e.g., Havila & Wilkinson, 2002; Ojansivu, Alajoutsijärvi & Salo, 2013), ‘exchange’ (e.g., Dalsace & Jap, 2017), ‘actors’ (e.g., Guercini et al., 2014; La Rocca, Snehota & Trabattoni, 2015; La Rocca, 2013; Medlin, 2012), ‘economic and social’ (e.g., Cova & Salle, 2000; Hadjikhani, 1996) and even the concept of a ‘relationship’ (Hadjikhani & LaPlaca, 2013).

With hindsight, one can conclude that business relationship research lacks ‘construct clarity’ (Suddaby, 2010; Shepherd & Suddaby, 2017). Even though different theoretical viewpoints, such as voluntarist and determinist turns, have been introduced (e.g., Håkansson & Ford, 2002; Nicholson, Brennan & Midgley, 2014), the underlying assumptions have not been explicated (e.g., Mandják & Szántó, 2010; Raskovic, 2015; Schurr, 2007). For example, Raskovic (2015) points out that many INL scholars use sociological concepts as ‘metaphors’ without elaborating on their intended meaning. Similarly, Mandják and Szántó (2010, p. 205) request attention to assumptions of theory as “Unwarranted direct application of theory may be ineffective or even dangerous”. Construct clarity, or a lack thereof, indicates the “degree to which ideas overlap or differ” (Suddaby, 2010, p. 352), enabling or hindering the accumulation of knowledge and distinction of what we already know and how new perspectives could broaden our understanding. Without construct clarity, it is challenging for INL to develop in a coherent manner. In this paper, we aim to increase the construct clarity of business relationships within the INL through systematically reviewing and analyzing the current corpus of INL-based business relationship research.

Inquiring into the nature of business relationships requires something, e.g., a device, vehicle or lens, to tease out the underlying assumptions. We use change as such a vehicle to unearth these assumptions, including the capacity to act within them. Our central argument is that variations in how we conceptualize change are underpinned by different implicit assumptions about the nature of business relationships. When talking about underlying, implicit assumptions, we mean “the debate over the primacy of structure or agency [which] relates to an issue at the heart of both classical and contemporary sociological theory: the question of social ontology” (Fadul & Estoque, 2011, p. 53). Thus, we ask ‘How have business relationships been approached within the industrial network literature and what are their underlying assumptions?’

We identify three implicit approaches with differing underlying assumptions from which business relationships have been approached: agency, structure and practice. These approaches can be seen as trending during different periods of time within the INL (see, e.g., Hadjikhani & LaPlaca, 2013; Möller, 2013). We discuss the implications of theorizing change in business relationships from the prevalent agency and structure approaches, as well the emerging practice approach, which considers agency and structure as mutually constitutive and change immanent in individuals' actions (Chia & MacKay, 2007; Tsoukas, 2010).

We argue that agency, structure and practice approaches act as 'explanatory programs' (Cornelissen, 2017) or 'epistemes' (Foucault, 1980) in which scholars become trained and socialized unconsciously to prefigure particular ways of thinking. As Blumer (1954, p. 5) points out: "...everything depends on how fruitfully and faithfully thinking intertwines with the empirical world of study, and since concepts are the gateway to that world, the effective functioning of concepts is a matter of decisive importance." Indeed, each of the three identified approaches leads to a unique conceptual gateway and understanding of business relationships. Our findings point to the danger of becoming blind to assumptions made in the literature; the way research on business relationships has been conducted in the INL has led to certain forms of theorizing at the expense of others. Hence, it is crucial to periodically open this self-propelling cycle and the underlying assumptions of the concept of a business relationship.

ONTOLOGICAL CHALLENGES IN THE INL

Throughout the emergence of the INL, ontological thinking and perceptions of what change means in business relationships have shifted. More precisely, there have been several distinct

but somewhat overlapping theoretical influences. As Möller (2013, p. 330) points out, the INL is the result of ‘disciplinary amalgamation’ of resource dependency theory, social exchange theory, transaction cost economics, institutional studies, evolutionary economics and organizational theory. It is therefore not surprising that several debates have emerged in INL with diverse ontological undertones.

These debates include for example definitions of actors either as individuals or firms (e.g., Anderson, Håkansson & Johanson, 1994; Guercini et al., 2014; Johnston & Hausman, 2006; La Rocca, Snehota & Trabattoni, 2015; La Rocca, 2013; Medlin, 2012; Ford & Mouzas, 2010), criticism toward determinism embedded in relationship development frameworks (e.g., Aaboen & Aarikka-Stenroos, 2017; Batonda & Perry, 2003; Corsaro & Snehota, 2012; Hedaa, 1993; Huang & Wilkinson, 2013; Polonsky et al., 2010; La Rocca et al., 2017), business relationships and networks as emergent versus managed structures (e.g., Cheng & Holmen, 2015; Schurr, 2007; Johnston, Peters & Gassenheimer, 2006; Järvensivu & Möller, 2009), the prevalence of critical realist versus constructivist methods (e.g., Easton, 2002; Ehret, 2013; Peters et al., 2013), and observable economic activities versus the mental dimension, meaning or intent of actors as the dominant unit of analysis (e.g., Guercini et al., 2014; Henneberg, Naudé & Mouzas, 2010; Mandják & Szántó, 2010; Olsen, 2013).

What appears to be the main reason for these debates is the implicitness of ontological thinking as pinpointed by La Rocca (2013, p. 171): “discussion about what and who is an actor is practically absent; it is somehow considered to be obvious.” In a similar vein, Håkansson and Waluszewski (2016, p. 449) demand transparency: “There is a need to be clear and conscious about one’s own underlying assumptions.” The tendency of scholars to scrutinize their methodological choices (how do we go about studying business relationships?) rather than their

ontological foundations (what is the nature of business relationships?) is an evident characteristic of the INL. Apparently, there is need for deeper ontological consciousness. In the following, we will conduct a systematic review of change in business relationships in the INL to illustrate the need for ontological consciousness.

METHODOLOGY

Literature search strategy

To comprehensively account for research on change in business relationships in the INL, we conducted a systematic review following Tranfield, Denyer and Smart's (2003) three stage procedure: planning, execution and reporting (see also Crossan & Apaydin, 2010). First, in the planning stage, we determined the objectives and key data sources of the research. Our objective was to unearth the underlying assumptions about the nature of business relationships within the INL and thus increase the construct clarity of business relationships. We chose to limit our sources to peer-reviewed articles from marketing and management journals written in English and published between 1976 (marking the inauguration of the IMP group) and 2018 as these provide validated and relevant sources of knowledge with high impact (Reid & Plank, 2000). We chose Business Source Complete (EBSCO) and Scopus as our databases of record because they represent a comprehensive account of marketing and management peer-reviewed journals.

Second, in the execution stage of our review, we identified the search terms, and decided on the inclusion criteria and quality assessment as well synthesized the data. We began with a keyword search (titles, abstracts and the main body of articles) in the Business Source Complete (EBSCO) and Scopus databases. The search terms were 'business relationship', 'buyer-seller' and 'business-to-business relationship' combined with 'interaction', 'change' or 'develop' and

their derivatives (i.e., develop* = developing, development, developmental etc.). The exact search string was ‘business relationship*’ OR ‘buyer-seller’ OR ‘business-to-business relationship*’ AND interaction* AND chang* OR develop*. This resulted in 217 papers in EBSCO and 224 in Scopus. After crosschecking we were left with a raw set of 301 articles. We then narrowed down the raw set of articles on the basis of reviewing the article title, abstract and keywords using the following two inclusion criteria. The first was an explicit identification with the INL through terms such as ‘IMP’ or ‘Industrial Network approach’ or ‘Interaction approach’; or implicitly through INL-related business relationship concepts such as ‘interaction’, ‘exchange’, ‘networks’, ‘atmosphere’ or ‘interaction orientation’. The second criterion was business relationship (i.e., buyer-seller relationship) change or development being recognized as the central phenomenon of the study. We acknowledge that change could be captured through several other terms (such as adaptation, initiation, recovery, repair, ending, dissolution, exit and termination of the business relationship). It would be, however, challenging to include all possible terms and, thus, impossible to provide a fully exhaustive view on all forms of business relationship dynamism. We decided to focus on ‘change’ as a somewhat overarching term capturing different forms of dynamism in a business relationship. We argue that, when researchers write about change in business relationships, they also describe (often implicitly) how the change comes about, which allows us to unearth the underlying assumptions.

Quality assessment involved the literature review’s internal validity and transparency in resolving disagreements about the inclusion of articles (Tranfield et al., 2003). When we had doubt about the relevance of an article, the article was inspected more profoundly by multiple members of the research team. When consensus about the selection was not reached (18 articles of 301, 6 percent), we resolved the disagreement through discussion, leading to 11 (61 percent)

articles being included and 7 (39 percent) articles excluded. A particular issue that needed attention was unraveling business relationships from networks because one of the central INL models, Actors–Resources–Activities (ARA), has become affiliated mainly with networks despite its original aims (e.g., Håkansson & Snehota, 1995). As Anderson, Håkansson and Johanson (1994, p. 1) explain “...consideration of the individual relationships and what occurs within them often is scant, with the relationships themselves rapidly diminished to links within a network that is of focal interest.” Thus, we included papers focusing on business relationships in a network context, but disregarded papers that considered business relationships peripheral to the inquiry of the focal network. As an outcome of this process, we ended up with 42 articles. We then added 22 articles (indicated by # in Table 1) that were not identified by EBSCO or Scopus, but which we had come across during the review or which we knew based on our own reading of the literature, leading to a final set of 64 articles. We then commenced data synthesis by systematically coding each of these articles to identify different approaches to change in business relationships. For the content analysis and coding, we turned to Gioia, Corley and Hamilton (2012), to visually structure how first-order themes relate to second-order and more abstract overarching themes (Figure 1).

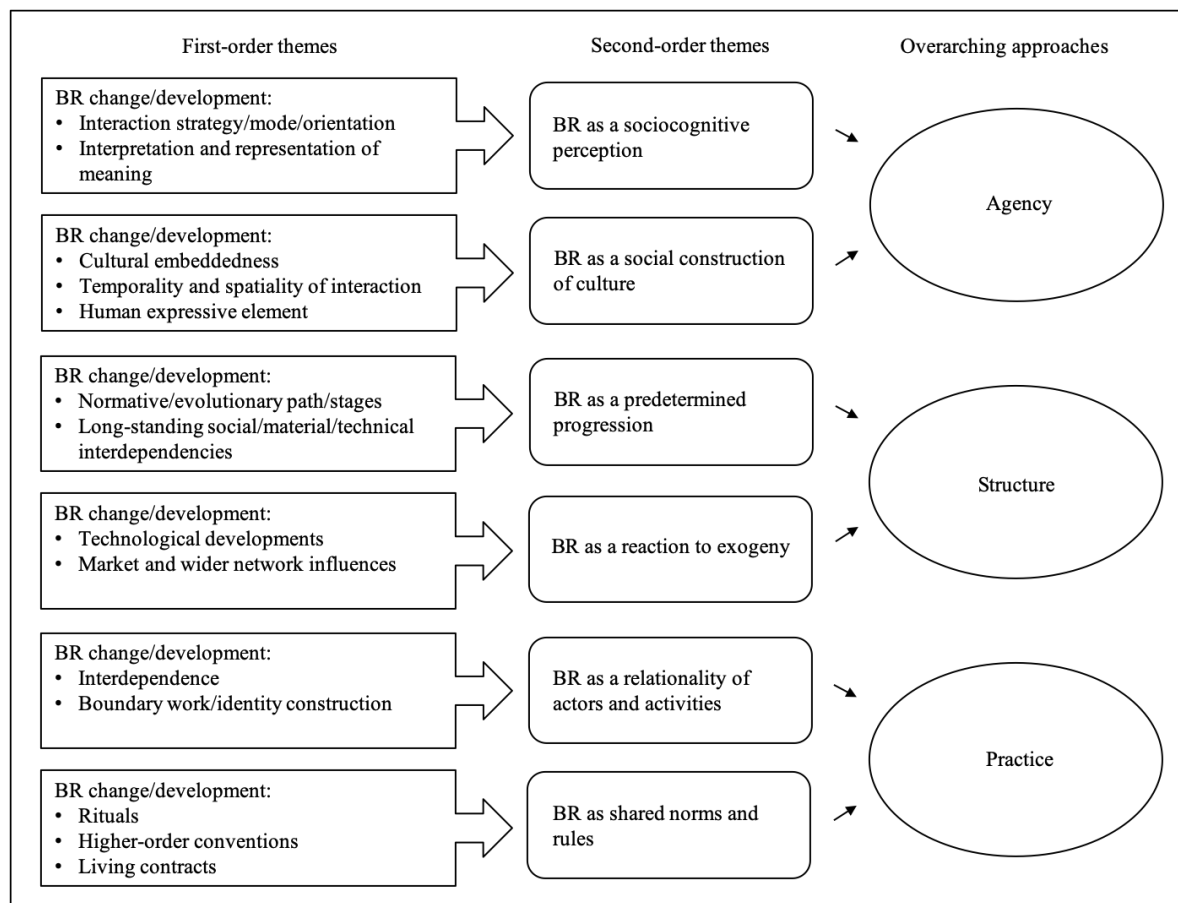


Figure 1. Data coding

We undertook content analysis of the full text of the 64 articles following an inductive, grounded theory-based approach (Gioia et al., 2012). The content analysis and coding were an iterative process in which each of the authors asked the same question: how does change come about in business relationships? All three authors proceeded with the coding in parallel and then compared their results; when the coding differed because of, for example, multiple equally strong approaches present in the paper, the authors confronted their arguments to jointly decide on the article's predominant approach. Fourteen different themes emerged from the first-order coding process (Figure 1). In the second-order coding, we searched for relationships between these themes and ordered them around six second-order themes, which were more abstract theoretical concepts. At this point, we already sought for theoretical integration of the data-driven concepts with existing bodies of literature (Dubois & Gadde, 2014). As we read (and

reread) these articles, three implicit approaches with differing underlying assumptions in the business relationship-related INL emerged following *ex post* theoretical integration (Figure 1).

One of these is the view that considers business relationships a social construction. Referred to as agency, it views change in business relationships via interaction processes, scrutinizing the temporally and spatially bound human perceptions and their representations. This approach ‘humanizes’ the business relationship by prioritizing interaction and individual choice. A second approach treats change as a reaction to exogeny or as a predetermined progression. Labeled as structure, this approach ‘dehumanizes’ the relationship by prioritizing structure over individual choice. A third approach, referred to as practice, is the view ‘behind’ the action of the actor. The focus of the practice approach is the interplay of confining and molding forces, centering on the dualism of agency and structure, giving ontological priority to practice or implying the indication to do so.

When cycling between emerging themes and key concepts in the literature, we refrained from coding articles purely based on their chosen INL frameworks or concepts (e.g., ARA, lifecycles, interaction model). Rather, we looked for the underlying assumptions behind the use of certain frameworks and concepts, not the concepts per se. We aimed for a holistic reading of the papers, evaluating their methods, frameworks, framings and analysis. Each of the three overarching approaches corresponds to different implicit underlying assumptions and unit of analysis in the business relationship literature. Even though some articles had isolated instances reflecting more than one approach, it was still relatively easy to identify the common thread and the predominant approach of each article. We focused on the most common and consistent thread running throughout the paper and ignored momentary insignificant aberrations. We emphasized how change came about on a fundamental level.

The aim of the last stage of the literature review, reporting, is to identify emerging themes, aggregate links between themes and to summarize the literature from which the review was derived (Tranfield et al., 2003). The results of the literature review, with lists of the relevant articles, their key assumptions and primary approach, are presented in Table 1. Of the 64 initially identified articles, 38 (59 percent) predominantly use the agency approach, 21 (33 percent) the structure approach, and five articles (8 percent) adopted the practice approach. In the following, we will elaborate on the three identified approaches to business relationships in the INL by discussing their key assumptions, constructs and implications for research.

Table 1. Three approaches of change in business relationships in the industrial network literature, 1976–2018

Author(s)	Date	Publication outlet*	First-order themes	Second-order themes	Overarching approach	Key assumption
Abrahamsen, Henneberg & Naudé #	2012	IMM	Interpretation and representation of meaning	BR as a social cognitive perception	Agency	BR changes as in actors uniquely
Alajoutsijärvi, Eriksson & Tikkanen #	2001	IBR	Interpretation and representation of meaning	BR as a social cognitive perception		BR change through meanings individual
Alajoutsijärvi et al. #	2012	MD	Interaction strategy/mode/orientation	BR as a social cognitive perception		BR change occur
Alajoutsijärvi, Möller & Rosenbröjler	1999	JBBM	Interaction strategy/mode/orientation	BR as a social cognitive perception		BR change occur
Andersen & Kumar	2006	IMM	Human expressive element	BR as a social construction of culture		BR change occur influenced by inf
Biggemann #	2012	JBIM	Interpretation and representation of meaning	BR as a social cognitive perception		BR change occur relationship in th
Biggemann & Buttle	2009	JBIM	Interpretation and representation of meaning	BR as a social cognitive perception		BR change through the reaction of on
Campbell	1985a	JBR	Interaction strategy/mode/orientation	BR as a social cognitive perception		BR change as a
Campbell	1985b	EJM	Human expressive element	BR as a social construction of culture		BR change through a central role
Corsaro & Snehota	2012	IMM	Interpretation and representation of meaning	BR as a social cognitive perception		BR change through
Edvardsson, Holmlund & Strandvik #	2008	IMM	Human expressive element	BR as a social construction of culture		BR change as ke unrecognized to
Elo, Benjowsky & Nummela	2015	IMM	Cultural embeddedness	BR as a social construction of culture		BR change through
Espelid et al.	2013	IMP	Interpretation and representation of meaning	BR as a social cognitive perception		BR change through collective views
Ford & Håkansson	2006a	IMP	Interpretation and representation of meaning	BR as a social cognitive perception		BR change through individual's ideas
Ford & Mouzas	2010	IMM	Temporality and spatiality of interaction	BR as a social construction of culture		BR change through of companies and
Guercini et al.	2014	IMM	Interpretation and representation of meaning	BR as a social cognitive perception		BR change through informal, context
Guercini et al.	2015	IMM	Interpretation and representation of meaning	BR as a social cognitive perception		BR change through informal, context
Halinen, Medlin & Törnroos	2012	IMM	Temporality and spatiality of interaction	BR as a social construction of culture		BR change is em
Havila & Wilkinson #	2002	IMM	Temporality and spatiality of interaction	BR as a social construction of culture		BR change through the relationships
Hingley, Leek & Lindgreen	2008	BFJ	Human expressive element	BR as a social construction of culture		BR change through interpersonal rel
Ivanova & Torkkeli	2013	EMJ	Cultural embeddedness	BR as a social construction of culture		BR change through interactions
Ivanova-Gongne	2015	JBIM	Cultural embeddedness	BR as a social construction of culture		BR change through
Ivanova-Gongne & Törnroos	2017	SJM	Cultural embeddedness	BR as a social construction of culture		BR change through
Johnston & Hausman	2006	JBIM	Human expressive element	BR as a social construction of culture		BR change through
Leek & Mason #	2009	IMM	Interpretation and representation of meaning	BR as a social cognitive perception		BR change through pictures
Leminen	2001	MD	Interpretation and representation of meaning	BR as a social cognitive perception		BR change is inf experiences in bu
Mainela	2007	IMM	Human expressive element	BR as a social construction of culture		BR change through evolve over time
Mandják & Szántó	2010	JBIM	Human expressive element	BR as a social construction of culture		BR change through relationships
Mattsson, Corsaro & Ramos #	2015	IMM	Interpretation and representation of meaning	BR as a social cognitive perception		BR change through
Medlin #	2003	JBBM	Interaction strategy/mode/orientation	BR as a social cognitive perception		BR change occur interaction space

Medlin	2004	IMM	Temporality and spatiality of interaction	BR as a social construction of culture		BR change through
Medlin #	2012	JBIM	Human expressive element	BR as a social construction of culture		BR change through
Ojansivu, Alajoutsijärvi & Salo	2013	IMM	Interaction strategy/mode/orientation	BR as a social cognitive perception		BR change through
Ojansivu & Medlin	2018	IMM	Cultural embeddedness	BR as a social construction of culture		BR change through
Ritter	2007	JBIM	Interaction strategy/mode/orientation	BR as a social cognitive perception		BR change occur
Törnroos, Halinen & Medlin #	2017	IMM	Temporality and spatiality of interaction	BR as a social construction of culture		BR change through space
Welch & Wilkinson #	2002	JBBM	Interpretation and representation of meaning	BR as a social cognitive perception		BR change as id
Wilkinson & Young #	1994	AMJ	Interpretation and representation of meaning	BR as a social cognitive perception		BR change through meanings individ
Cova & Salle	2000	IBR	Rituals	BR as shared norms and rules	Practice	BR change accor
La Rocca, Hoholm & Mørk #	2017	IMM	Interdependence	BR as a relationality of actors and activities		BR change with practices
Mouzas & Ford #	2009	IMM	Higher-order conventions	BR as shared norms and rules		BR change through them, ne
Möhring & Finch	2015	JBIM	Living contracts	BR as shared norms and rules		BR change as the evolves over time
Simões & Mason	2012	EJM	Boundary work/identity construction	BR as a relationality of actors and activities		BR change as a
Baptista	2013	IMM	Market and wider network influences	BR as reaction to exogeny		BR change as the
Baraldi & Nadin	2006	TECH	Social/material/technical interdependencies	BR as predetermined progression		BR change as the interdependencies
Batonda & Perry #	2003	EJM	Normative/evolutionary path/stages	BR as predetermined progression		BR change as ma
Chou & Zolkiewski	2012	JBR	Normative/evolutionary path/stages	BR as predetermined progression	Structure	BR change as a n
Claycomb & Frankwick	2010	IMM	Normative/evolutionary path/stages	BR as predetermined progression		BR change as a p
Ford #	1980	EJM	Normative/evolutionary path/stages	BR as predetermined progression		BR change as a p
Forkmann et al.	2012	IMM	Market and wider network influences	BR as reaction to exogeny		BR change as a c
Gadde et al.	2012	JBR	Technological developments	BR as reaction to exogeny		BR change as the
Hadjikhani & Thilenius	2005	JBIM	Market and wider network influences	BR as reaction to exogeny		BR change as the
Holm et al.	1999	SMJ	Technological developments	BR as reaction to exogeny		BR change as a n development
Håkansson & Ingemansson #	2013	CME	Social/material/technical interdependencies	BR as predetermined progression		BR change as the interdependencies
Kalafatis	2002	IMM	Market and wider network influences	BR as reaction to exogeny		BR change as the
Lenney & Easton #	2009	IMM	Social/material/technical interdependencies	BR as predetermined progression		BR change as the interdependencies
Polonsky et al. #	2010	JSM	Normative/evolutionary path/stages	BR as predetermined progression		BR change as a p
Prenkert & Følgesvold	2014	AMJ	Market and wider network influences	BR as reaction to exogeny		BR change as the
Quinton & Wilson	2016	IMM	Technological developments	BR as reaction to exogeny		BR change as the
Salo & Wendelin	2013	JBBM	Technological developments	BR as reaction to exogeny		BR change as the
Schurr et al.	2008	JBR	Normative/evolutionary path/stages	BR as predetermined progression		BR change as the
Wilson #	1995	JAMS	Normative/evolutionary path/stages	BR as predetermined progression		BR change as a n outcomes in evol
Wren & Simpson #	1996	JBIM	Market and wider network influences	BR as reaction to exogeny		BR change as a n environment imp
Zerbini & Castaldo	2007	IMM	Normative/evolutionary path/stages	BR as predetermined progression		BR change as a t
TOTALS	64	14	6	3		

Notes: # = added after search engine generated results; *JBIM = Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing; JBBM = Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing; IMM = Industrial Marketing and Strategic Management Journal; IBR = International Business Review; MD = Management Decision; AMJ = Australasian Marketing Journal; EMJ = European Management Journal; EJM = European Journal of Strategic Marketing; SJM = Scandinavian Journal of Management; BFJ = British Food Journal; TECH = Technovation; JAMS = Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science; CN

AGENCY APPROACH ON BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS

Related research streams in the INL

In our literature review, we identified 38 papers that exemplify an agency approach to business relationships. A consistent theme running through these papers is that change is initiated by humans as portrayed by Campbell (1985a, p. 42): “A relationship must ultimately depend on the interaction of the individuals who participate”. Another consistent theme is that business relationships are considered social constructs, and their change is derived from the interpretation and representation of meaning, cultural embeddedness as well as the temporality and spatiality of interaction. Biggeman and Buttle (2009, p. 549) capture this fittingly: “Business relationships are social constructions that are dynamically created, confirmed, modified and terminated by people in interaction”.

Agency-driven business relationship research evolved rapidly during the 1980s as the interaction model (Håkansson, 1982) and classifications of business relationships (Campbell, 1985a) became legitimized foundations for research. The interaction model (Håkansson, 1982; Campbell, 1985b) placed continuous interaction processes at the center of attention. Change in business relationships was framed through a process of products/services, information, and financial and social exchange as well a relationship atmosphere (Håkansson, 1982). Significantly, the human expressive element emerged in the spotlight:

“At least two individuals, one from each organization, are involved in a relationship. These are usually a buyer and a salesman. More commonly, several individuals from different functional areas at different levels in the hierarchy and fulfilling different roles become involved in inter-company personal interactions.

They exchange information, develop relationships and build up strong social bonds which influence the decisions of each company in the business relationship.” (Håkansson, 1982, p. 27)

Change processes were viewed as something that occurred in the interactions between purposeful and adaptive individuals (Andersen & Kumar, 2006; Hingley, Leek & Lindgreen, 2008; Johnston & Hausman, 2006; Mainela, 2007; Mandják & Szántó, 2010). In the late 1990s, the idea of analyzing business relationships longitudinally through interaction strategy, mode or orientation (Alajoutsijärvi, Mainela, Ulkuniemi & Montel, 2012; Alajoutsijärvi, Möller & Rosenbröijer, 1999;; Campbell, 1985a; Medlin, 2003; Ojansivu, Alajoutsijärvi & Salo, 2013; Ritter, 2007), and understanding their meaning through metaphors (Alajoutsijärvi, Eriksson & Tikkanen, 2001; Wilkinson & Young, 1994) as well as their temporality and spatiality (Havila & Wilkinson, 2002; Halinen, Medlin & Törnroos, 2012; Ford & Mouzas, 2010; Medlin, 2004; Törnroos, Halinen & Medlin, 2017), highlighted the emergent and dynamic nature of business relationships. In the early 2000s, the concept of ‘idea logics’ (Welch & Wilkinson, 2002), ‘gaps’ (Leminen, 2001), ‘substantive’ interaction (Ford & Håkansson, 2006a) and network pictures (Leek & Mason, 2009) broadened the scope of interaction to actors’ abstract ideas and heuristics (Guercini et al., 2014, 2015). This insight elucidated the importance of the interpretation and representation of meaning – a research theme that has recently gained traction in the INL (Abrahamsen, Henneberg & Naudé, 2012; Biggemann, 2012; Biggemann & Buttle, 2009; Espelid et al., 2013; Mattsson, Corsaro & Ramos, 2015). More recently, the agency approach has broadened into cultural embeddedness and the consideration of business relationships as a social construction of culture (e.g., Elo, Benjowsky & Nummela, 2015; Ivanova-Gongne, 2015; Ivanova-Gongne & Törnroos, 2017; Ivanova & Torkkeli, 2013; Ojansivu & Medlin, 2018).

Figure 2 depicts the prevalence of the first-order themes over time for articles explicitly using the agency approach on business relationships in the INL literature.

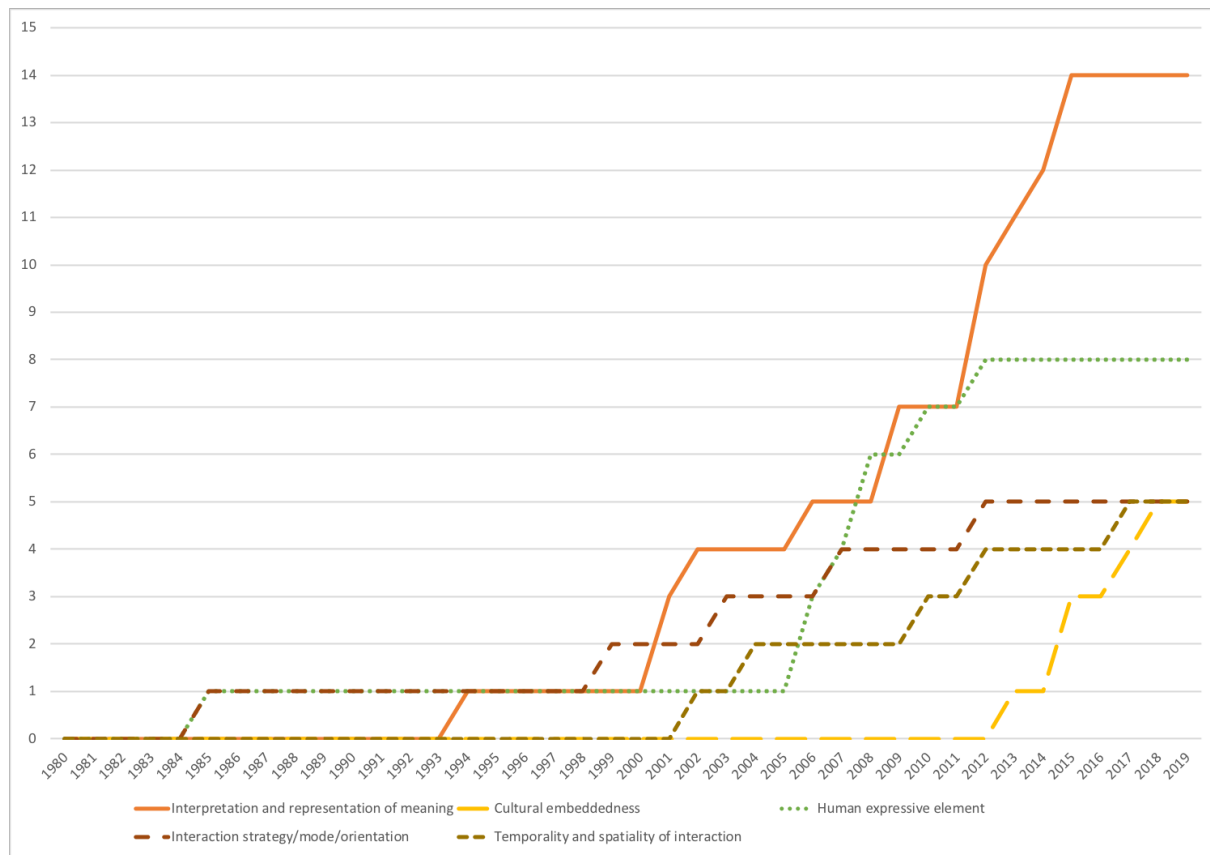


Figure 2. Cumulative article count, 1976–2018.

Key assumptions

The agency approach on business relationships stresses the active role of humans in organizations. Stemming from nominalism and constructivism, reality is considered endogenous to human minds (Kukla, 2013; Latour & Woolgar, 1986). Agency approach assumes individuals as active participants in change processes (Fligstein, 2001) and thus the centerpiece of business relationships. Individuals are considered capable of acting independently and making their own free choices (Arrow, 1994), while not only fulfilling their self-interest but also servicing other actors in the business relationship (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Meyer & Jepperson, 2000).

Key constructs

Based on Weber's (1978) idea of individuals and their causal efficacy on social phenomena in the 1920s, the agency approach views individuals as self-contained, self-motivating human agents who act on and influence their external environment. Business relationships are perceived as methodologically individualistic means (Arrow, 1994) for individuals to interact and achieve a desired end in an autonomous, empowered and heroic manner (Dewey & Bentley, 1949; Emirbayer, 1997). For example, in social constructivist- and interpretivist-informed research, individuals are assumed to be initiators of activities and processes in their environment and to rely on teleological and purposeful action (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The agency approach yields a mutable sociocognitive reality produced and reproduced in the interactions by the human mind (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Goffman, 1983). Individuals are viewed as relationally and socially embedded (Granovetter, 1985, 1992), which emphasizes their social agency (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000) as well as their capacity to envisage alternative possibilities through projective agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Thus, the future is always evolving and becoming, as new ideas and actors enter into interactions that lead to new interpretations of business relationships (Medlin & Saren, 2012; Nayak & Chia, 2011; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

The agency approach has been present in the INL since the early 1980s, but it has not been explicitly integrated into the theory. As Medlin and Törnroos (2007, p. 1) stated, there has been a "lack of distinction between the firm and individuals as actors so that the role of humans has been underplayed." Thus, the capability of individuals to instigate change and seek autonomy by breaking free from stable and rigidified social relationships (Rindova et al., 2009) has not been fully elaborated in the INL. The agency approach requires a 'micro' focus on individuals

as the center of interaction and must resist the simplicity of using different variables as being synonymous with change in business relationships; the latter distracts from the fundamentally dynamic nature of business relationships.

Implications for business relationships research

Studying change in business relationships from an agency approach places the key individuals, their relationships, shared ideas and their interpretations of the social world at the center. Understanding how their influence evolves over time and how they instigate, mediate or suppress change is essential to the inquiry. Accordingly, agency is situated in the interactions between individuals, and it is therefore necessarily shared. The agency approach stresses the voluntary role of individuals, yet it makes them interdependent on each other's interpretations of the social world. Ontologically, reality is considered endogenous to and created by human minds. Consequently, we define business relationships as mutable sociocognitive entities that provide the means for individuals to act within and change their environment.

STRUCTURE APPROACH ON BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS

Related research streams in the INL

In our literature review, we identified 21 papers that assume a structure approach to change in business relationships. The papers are based, on one hand, on predetermined progressions such as normative or evolutionary paths and stages or longstanding social, material or technical interdependencies. For example, Zerbini and Castaldo (2007, p. 952) argued that research on business relationships is needed to “further advance the understanding of the short-term

equilibriums and long-term evolutionary pathways that not only favor relationship maintenance but also its performance in the marketplace.” On the other hand, we found studies conceptualizing change in business relationships as a reaction to exogeny. Those papers rely on technological developments and market and wider network influences, such as Chou and Zolkiewski’s (2012, p. 189) study: “The evolution of the technology-based business net is path-dependent. The continuous resource interaction defines norms and routines and freezes certain features of the resources for the purpose of collective actions and exploitation, allowing the emergence of a major path.”

Structure-based business relationship research in the INL has conceptualized business relationships with a wider systems interdependence view on markets (Mattsson & Johanson, 2006: 259). This view has its roots in neo-institutionalism (Ford, 1980), which describes the emergence of stable and socially integrating organizational patterns (Selznick, 1996). First, the relationship development frameworks (e.g., Wilson, 1995) painted a picture of prescribed and linear change. This longstanding and dominant view of change in business relationships is driven by normative evolutionary paths and stages (Ford, 1980; Batonda & Perry, 2003; Chou & Zolkiewski, 2012; Claycomb & Frankwick, 2010; Polonsky et al., 2010; Schurr et al., 2008; Zerbini & Castaldo, 2007; Wilson, 1995).

Second, starting in the mid-1990s, a research focus explained the causal relationships between observed external influences of markets and wider networks and their outcomes in business relationships (e.g., Baptista, 2013; Forkmann et al., 2012; Hadjickani & Thilenius, 2005; Kalafatis, 2002; Prenkert & Følgesvold, 2014; Wren & Simpson, 1996). This is typical in input-process-output models (Van De Ven, 1992) in which researchers focus on a plethora of variables and constructs. Third, and relatedly, scholars have emphasized technological

developments and their impact on business relationships. For example, starting in the end of the 1990s, several studies (Holm et al., 1999; Gadde et al., 2012; Quinton & Wilson, 2016; Salo & Wendelin, 2013) analyzed how digitization guided the course of business relationships.

Fourth, longstanding social and technological interdependencies have been credited for driving change in business relationships (Baraldi & Nadin, 2006). A similar rationale can be seen in INL's expansion to networks and the ARA model (Actors–Resources–Activities), which created predefined models of interaction among relationship partners (Håkansson & Ingemansson, 2013; Håkansson & Johanson, 1992; Håkansson & Snehota, 1995; Lenney & Easton, 2009). Modeling relationships, consisting of substances and functions, as social, and even more so, material interdependencies between firms has been argued to not only influence managerial actions (Håkansson & Ford, 2002) but also limit the autonomy of individual actors (La Rocca et al., 2015). Figure 3 depicts the prevalence of the first-order themes over time for articles explicitly using the structure approach on business relationships in the INL.

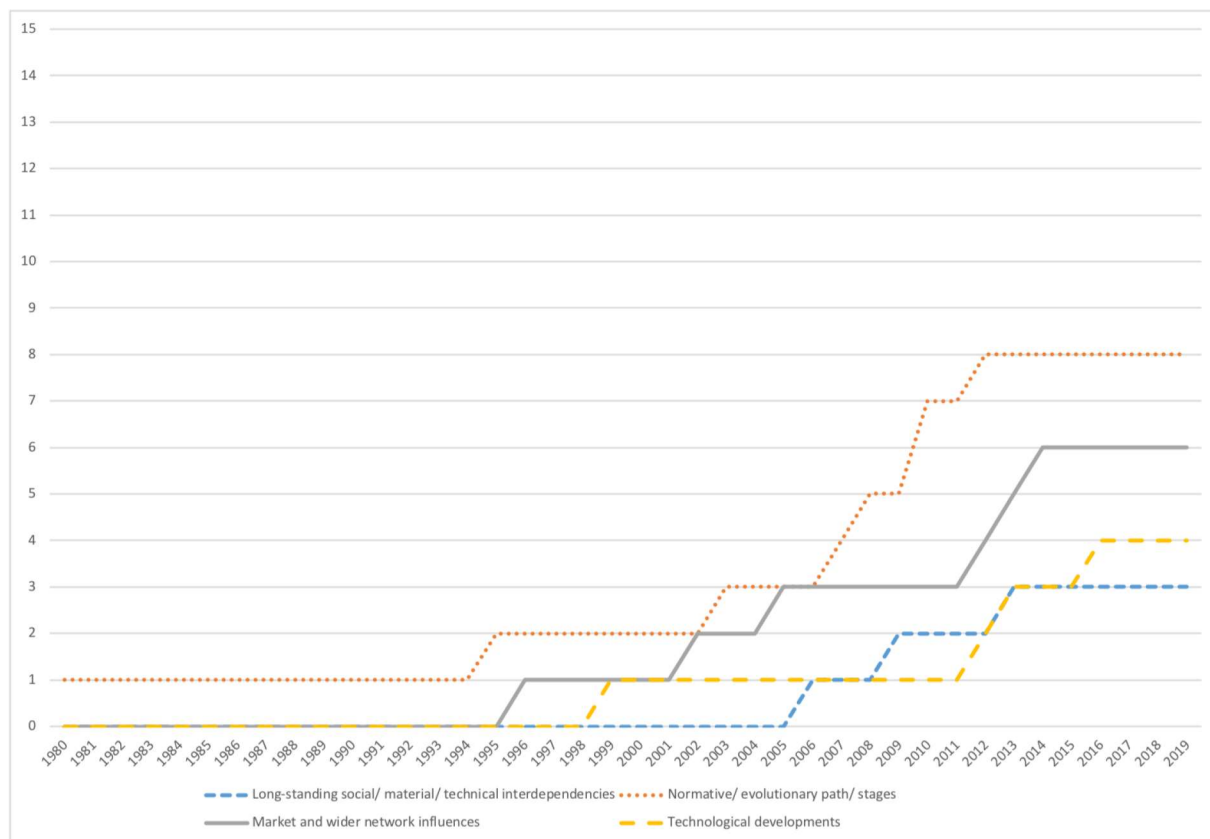


Figure 3. Cumulative article count, 1976–2018.

Key assumptions

Based on realist ontology, the structure approach assumes a reality external to human minds (Matthyssens et al., 2013) and is characterized by deterministic assumptions about human nature in which humans and their experience are perceived as products of their external social environments (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Hence, change in business relationships is seen to originate from external structures.

Key constructs

A structure-dominated and status-quo naturalizing social environment consists, on the one hand, of formal institutions reified through regulative and normative guidance and restricting elements in human life (Delbridge & Edwards 2013). On the other hand, such an environment

also comprises informal, cognitive institutional forces (see Scott, 2008; Delbridge & Edwards, 2013) in the form of routinized, taken-for-granted sets of ideas, beliefs, and actions within it (Jennings et al., 2013). These characteristics are also preeminent as key constructs in the INL:

“While business relationships are often complex and informal, they tend to become institutionalized over time. Routines, explicit and implied rules of behavior, and rituals in conduct emerge in the [...] relationships that a company maintains with its customers and suppliers.” (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995, p. 10)

In other words, the social world is viewed as embedded and surrounding human beings as a structure of recurrent patterns of social interaction that become institutionalized over time by being both reproduced and immersed in people’s everyday lives and activities. Berger and Luckmann (1966) described the emergence of institutions through the habitualization of social patterns; the repetition of these guiding patterns over generations leads from simple habitualization to their profound institutionalization.

The presumed dominance of institutions, i.e., guiding and restricting patterns of human interaction, in structure-based ‘macro’ social science reduces human agency to reactionary behavior. Actors occupy positions in institutional structure and enter relationships that depend on these positions (Coleman et al., 1998). In other words, agency is simply the a priori determined fulfilment of socially approved organizational templates (Greenwood & Suddaby 2006). We conclude that business relationships, as a kind of organizational template, can also be understood as a stable and taken-for-granted structural element that organizes the interactions among firms. Business actors assume positions within these relationships and

restrictedly fulfil the prescribed patterns of interaction that are guided by certain norms, rules or routines of doing business and acting in business relationships.

Implications for business relationships research

Taking a structure approach on business relationships means focusing on interactions that occur among higher-order entities such as firms, networks and institutions. Interactions between individuals are of secondary importance, as individuals are considered a ‘small cog in a large wheel’ with limited influence. The structure approach views business relationships as composed of deterministic institutional structures. Change in business relationships originates from surrounding structures. Ontologically, this approach assumes a reality prior and external to human minds. To conclude, we define business relationships as persistent structures that provide continuity and stability to economic exchange and guide the behavior of involved actors.

PRACTICE APPROACH ON BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS

In our literature review, we also identified five papers (out of 64) that shared some of the features with those papers categorized in agency or structure approaches – that is, they were focusing on people and what they do while also looking at those wider contexts in which that activity was embedded. However, we saw them to be also different in their focus on the relation between actor/activity and its context as well as the logic that underlies that particular activity. The data-rooted first-order coding highlighted interdependence of actors and activities, and related identity work and shared values, rules, and norms in the form of, e.g., rituals and contracts. We identified two related themes that categorize the first-order coding: relationality

of actors and activities; and following from this, business relationships understood as shared norms and rules governing the activities of individuals. With relationality, we refer to the priority of relations over substance; that the meaningfulness of the object under investigation is seen in context, as part of a whole, and it is this relation that the research takes interest in and not the substance of the object (e.g., Mohr, 2013; Aspers, 2010). Values, rules and norms, on the other hand, can be understood as those constituents of a practice that people draw on in their everyday activities (see, e.g., Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina & Von Savigny, 2001, rules and teleoaffective structure in site ontology or modalities, and Giddens's, 1984, rules and resources in the model of structuration).

In the only conceptual paper in our review, La Rocca, Hoholm and Mørk (2017) discuss the methodological implications of practice theory in interaction studies. The other four papers are empirical: Cova and Salle (2000) investigate business relationships and their change through rituals; Möhring and Finch (2015) use the concept of 'living contracts' to highlight the shared understanding forming a relationship, while Mouzas and Ford (2009) consider relationships and networks to be constituted by higher-order conventions. In addition, Simoes and Mason (2012) use identity to capture the development of business relationships. Although diverse in their approaches and loci of interest, these papers seem to share a view of business relationships as something that can be understood in terms of the logic underlying activities:

“The relationship identity embodies what is unique to a relationship that makes it work, such as rules, statements and shared values that form a platform to sustain the dyadic relationship development” (Simoes & Mason, 2012, p. 691).

In the process of theoretical integration (Dubois & Gadde, 2014), we sought to connect these second-order themes (emphasizing relationality and shared norms and rules) into the ‘practice turn’ that is emerging also in the field of marketing (La Rocca et al., 2017). Philosophical questions that surfaced in the INL in the twenty-first century already heralded this turn as researchers debated whether business networks, which consist of a series of business relationships, could be managed or whether they were naturally emerging (Håkansson & Ford, 2002; Möller, Rajala & Svahn, 2005; Ritter, Wilkinson & Johnston, 2004). While some researchers viewed networks as intentionally developed by a hub firm in the form of ‘strategic nets’ (e.g., Möller & Rajala, 2007; Parolini, 1999), others (e.g., Ford, 2011; Håkansson & Ford, 2002) considered networks as organically emerging and beyond the control of a single company. This question of agency in the development and change of business relationships indicates different ontological assumptions underlying the theories developed within the INL. In addition, some INL researchers have addressed the importance of relations: how human actors are immersed in a wider context (‘situational, meaningful totality’, Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011) by taking interest in the expressive element of human actors as well as the context in which the events occur (e.g., Hingley, Leek & Lindgreen, 2008; Edvardsson, Holmlund & Strandvik, 2008; Medlin, 2012).

To date, only a few INL-oriented business relationship papers have explicitly adopted a practice approach; even those papers that were included in this category in our literature review were not presented as practice studies (except for the conceptual paper by La Rocca et al., 2017, which discusses practice theory and the study of interaction in business relationships) in the sense that they would explicitly draw on practice theories or foreground practices in their analysis. What they do, however, is point to a direction that is difficult to approach with the

existing lines of research: e.g., situations in which the actual business relationship based on exchange is on hold:

“Thus, the aim of this paper is to argue and to explore a comprehensive framework for all the factors connected with social exchanges outside any project opportunity, based on an approach through ‘profane rituals’ (Rivie`re, 1995) or ‘contemporary rituals’ (Segalen, 1998) which are put into play to construct a basis of commonality and share a group identity between the parties involved.” (Cova & Salle, 2000, p. 670)

Key Assumptions

Although the papers in the third category do not really form a coherent approach, they share commonalities on an ontological level. The key assumptions underlying the research conducted seem to highlight social practices as the basic locus of analysis for explaining business relationships and their development (e.g., Emirbayer, 1997; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). Primacy is given to relations over the individual or organization (Chia & MacKay, 2007). As practice studies tend to ‘praxeologise’ phenomena (Nicolini & Monteiro, 2016), the study of business relationships also becomes the study of ‘making of’ business relationships. Any activity that is under investigation is, however, seen in context, as part of a whole: “their meaningfulness is determined not by the characteristic properties, attributes, or essences of the thing itself, but rather with reference to the field of objects, practices, or activities within which they are embedded” (Mohr, 2013, p. 101).

Key constructs

The practice approach offers an alternative view of the agency-structure debate (e.g., Reed, 2003) where this tension is played out as a dialectical relationship (Skålén & Hackley, 2011). Drawing on social theories of practice, which eschews methodological individualism, ontological priority is given to practice. Practices are generally conceived as “embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding” (Schatzki et al., 2001, p. 11). From this approach, actors are viewed as ‘carriers’ of practices rather than the initiators all the action (Reckwitz, 2002).

Implications for business relationships research

Taking a practice approach on business relationships means that the focus shifts away from actors and structures toward duality: ongoing activities and the logic of such activities shaped and transmitted by the cultural and historical context (Schatzki, 1996; Schatzki et al., 2001; Chia & MacKay, 2007). Ontological priority is given to practice: forces of change are not imposed by the will of conscious actors but are immanent in things and human situations (Chia & MacKay, 2007; Tsoukas, 2010). From the practice approach, we define business relationships as enacted and relatively stabilized, yet constantly reproduced, relational configurations of sociocultural practices.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper attempted to increase the construct clarity of business relationships within the INL through systematically reviewing and analyzing its current corpus. The purpose of our study was to uncover the nature of business relationships in the INL and to determine what types of underlying assumptions often remain implicit when choices about the study are made. In the

past, INL definitions of business relationships have been rare and have lacked deeper onto-epistemological elaboration (e.g., Hadjikhani & LaPlaca, 2013; Håkansson & Waluszewski, 2016; La Rocca, 2013). Indeed, the ambivalence of concepts “hinders us in coming to close grips with our empirical world, for we are not sure what to grip” (Blumer, 1954, p. 5). If we cannot come to terms with the nature of business relationships, how can we ask pertinent questions and set relevant problems for research? For example, when we talk about ‘change’ in business relationships, what do we actually assume is changing? Supposing ‘exchange’ as one of the key elements of business relationships (e.g., Håkansson, 1982), what is the necessary embodiment of exchange to differentiate business relationships from other ‘extra’ relationships (Cova & Salle, 2000; Hadjikhani, 1996)?

In this research, we sought to elucidate the value of onto-epistemological questions by asking ‘How have business relationships been approached within the INL and what are their underlying assumptions?’ We found three approaches that each assume ‘change’ uniquely, deriving it implicitly from what people do, the surrounding structures, or the logic underlying their action. Each approach highlights certain aspects of business relationships as real-life phenomena and, while shedding light on these aspects, eclipses the others. In essence, each of the three approaches, with differing underlying assumptions, guides researchers to understand business relationships differently.

The agency approach is the most prevalent in the INL (59 percent of the articles in the literature review). It represents a voluntarist view in which change is initiated and owned by conscious agents; therefore, business relationships are largely defined by the interactions between individuals. Business relationships allow actors (collectively) the autonomy to fulfil their goals and operate in business networks. The structure approach was notable in the INL literature (33

percent of the articles in the literature review). It regards change in business relationships dependent on institutionalized structures, typically field-level ‘faceless’ market forces. Business relationships can be understood both as an outcome of a higher-level dependent structure and as a structure itself. The structure and structure-giving nature of business relationships make them inherently deterministic. Change in business relationships is unowned and precedes the individual actions of managers.

The use of the practice approach, or even those papers influenced by it, has been scant in the INL literature (8 percent of the articles in the literature review). In the practice approach, change in business relationships emerges through the practices and the related norms and rules of the relationship partners: as the actors renew the structures governing their activities, the logic of those activities changes. The focus is on trans-individual social practices such as meetings, events, logistics, exchange, administration, coordination, governance, information processing and the interactions through which the business relationships continually emerge.

Interestingly, some of the papers in the literature review categorized as ‘agency’ were in fact examining practices, but with a focus on observable activities: what people do. The difference between ‘action’ and ‘practice’ made here is subtle but important: the former points toward methodological individualism and the emergent processes driven by or created through individuals, whereas in the latter, business relationships are understood as an array of human activities organized around shared practical understanding (Chia & MacKay 2007; Schatzki et al., 2001). While the agency and structure approaches focus on entities as in a substantivist view (e.g., Langley et al., 2013), either through individuals performing actions or structures guiding the activities of individuals, the practice approach foregrounds the practice and the logic underlying these activities. Change is both owned and unowned, as the actions of individuals

have both intended and unintended consequences (MacKay & Chia, 2013). In Table 2, we summarize the key findings of the research.

Table 2. The key assumptions and key constructs of the three approaches and their implications for business rela

Characteristics of business relationships	Agency approach	Structure approach	Practice approach
Key assumptions			
– Ontological underpinnings	Nominalism: Reality as endogenous to and created by human minds	Realism: Reality as external and prior to human minds	Relationality: Reality as constituted by social entities
– Human nature	Voluntarist: Humans act within and influence their shared social environment	Determinist: Humans and their experience are viewed as products of their external environment	Combined of structures and agency: Structures become institutionalized and transformed
– Ownership of change in business relationships	Change is initiated by humans Change in business relationships is a sociocognitive perception rooted in: –Interaction strategy/mode/orientation –Interpretation and representation of meaning Change in business relationships is a social construction of culture rooted in: –Cultural embeddedness –Temporality and spatiality of interaction –Human expressive element	Change originates from structures Change in business relationships is a predetermined progression rooted in: –Normative/evolutionary path/stages –Longstanding social/material/technical interdependencies Change in business relationships is a reaction to exogeny rooted in: –Technological developments –Market and wider network influences	Change is initiated by human situations Change in business relationships is relative to a social context –Interdependencies –Boundary conditions Change in business relationships happens through a process rooted in: –Rituals –Higher-order structures –Living conditions
Key constructs	Ideas, schemas, free will, shared symbolic representations/understandings	Institutionalization, habitualization, determinism, reactionary behavior	Logic of practice, order, array, practical understanding
Implications for business relationships research			
– Unit of analysis	Focus on individuals, their relationships, shared ideas and their interpretations of the social world	Focus on institutional mechanisms that specify the causal relationships between antecedent conditions and their consequences	Focus on transactions, practices and structures in which these are reproduced
– Business relationship defined	Mutable sociocognitive entity that provides the means for individuals to act within and change their environment	Persistent structure that provides continuity and stability to economic exchange and guides the behavior of actors	Enacted and constantly reconfigured configuration

We find great potential in the practice approach as it could enrich the INL by pointing to another direction in which to look when trying to understand the dynamics of business relationships. As La Rocca et al. (2017, p. 187) concluded, “some of the themes emerging in practice-based approaches...could yield a better understanding of the dynamics of organizing across organizational boundaries”. They especially see potential in paying attention to the production and reproduction of interaction practices and “transcending the ‘fixed’ conceptualization of two actor levels – individual and organizational” (La Rocca et al. 2017, p. 187). Foregrounding practice also provides opportunities in studying business relationships with a strong process ontology, as this view sees everything reflecting continuous activity (Burgelman et al., 2018).

When a researcher approaches the phenomenon as predefined entities following a substantivist view, the understanding of the phenomenon’s contextual richness is compromised because the world “does not come ready-partitioned” (Hernes, 2008, p. 12). When people interact with each other and with material elements, this interaction also changes what they ‘are’ (Hernes, 2008). As Spinoza, Flores and Dreyfus (1997, p. 17–18) note: “a researcher does not explore stand-alone entities but, rather, meaningful relational totalities—namely, interrelated humans and objects that show up in terms of familiar practices for dealing with them.” When studying interaction and processes in business relationships, drawing lines between predefined entities such as firms and departments may not be unproblematic and, moreover, might leave important aspects of the phenomenon unnoticed. For example, the broadly adopted dyadic viewpoint on business relationships (e.g., Ford & Håkansson, 2006b) may actually simplify them, as the buyer and seller ‘sides’ are likely to involve various individuals as well as departments and firms with multiple views and logics impacting relationship development (Ojansivu & Medlin, 2018).

Often in INL, ontology has been reduced to epistemology; that is, the methodological choices of research rather than its ontological foundations have been emphasized. Reducing business relationships into a predefined ‘thing’ and searching for generalizable features takes the focus away from those aspects of interaction that make the relationship meaningful for the particular actors in the particular context in the particular moment. The aim of the INL has always been to explore this meaningful totality, the relational web, instead of prescribed variables. Unfortunately, the relationality of the INL has stalled on a methodological level, as ontology is far more demanding to work with (see Aspers, 2010; Thompson, 2011). Taking relationality seriously would help shed light on the processual aspects of business relationships, thereby providing situationally and historically sensitive explanations for their development.

Although we see great potential in the practice approach, we refrain from arguing in its favor (or any of the three approaches); instead, we wish to emphasize the value of ontological plurality (Midgley, 2011; Tsoukas, 2017). As Nicholson et al. (2014) noted, on the one hand, choosing a specific approach without careful consideration may lead to the adoption of an atomistic paradigm. On the other hand, integrating (or even forcing) conflicting approaches together may produce a conflated understanding (Delbridge & Edwards, 2013) where the originality of the thinking is lost. What is needed is a sense of ontological consciousness: researchers need to be aware of and responsive to the assumptions made in the business relationship literature.

As pinpointed by Cornelissen (2017) and Foucault (1980), scholars tend to enact the ‘generally accepted’ interpretation of phenomena without much self-awareness. By bringing these assumptions forward through the three implicit approaches identified in the INL, we seek to generate construct clarity in terms of those key concepts that build the basis of the whole

research field, business relationships being one of them. This approach will be valuable for theory development and research design within the INL (e.g., Möller, 2013; Peters et al., 2013; Wilkinson & Young, 2013) as it develops through maturity.

While we are convinced of the contribution our study makes for business relationship research in the INL, it also features limitations. On the one hand, ‘change’ as our chosen vehicle to analyze business relationships in the INL limits the selection of articles. As discussed before, we argue that ‘change’ functions as an umbrella term to capture relevant articles. It must, however, not be seen as leading to an exhaustive overview. On the other hand, albeit the presented categorization of selected articles for the literature review of this study was crafted with utmost transparency and based on both the individual and collective consensus-driven analysis of all three authors, we are aware that other researchers may arrive at alternative categorizations. This may particularly be the case with studies featuring more than one dominant approach. The challenge at hand is, as we are at pain to demonstrate, deeply rooted in the implicit assumptions made about business relationships in the INL.

We see three paths for future research based on our study. To begin with, the clarity we hope to have brought to the concept of business relationships in the INL lends itself to further scrutiny of business relationship studies and their roots in agency, structure and practice approaches. Ontological consciousness can help both in critically reviewing existing studies on change in business relationships, their development, etc. and in developing theoretically stronger, more rigorous and nuanced research in the INL. The ‘trending’ practice approach, as examined by La Rocca et al. (2017), particularly holds the potential for understanding business relationships through their logic. Moreover, considering the tight connection of onto-epistemological and methodological choices, we regard a review (and clarification) of prevalent and emerging

methodologies in the INL as fruitful and necessary. Finally, we see great potential in the process research (e.g., Hernes, 2008; Langley et al., 2013) and note the recent advancements made in the process understanding of business networks (e.g., Andersen, Medlin & Törnroos, 2019; Kaartemo, Coviello & Nummela, 2019), hoping this trend would also attract business relationship scholars to become immersed in the dichotomy between entity and process-based research and their benefits for our understanding of business relationships.

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