

Towards a conceptual model explaining change in networks

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Abstract

This paper discusses the role that actor perceptions play in network changes. It presents a model which analyse change at actor, dyad and network levels in terms of how actors explain changes (“what is happening”) and how they make sense of them (“why it is happening”). The model is tested on empirical data from interviews with Norwegian exporters of fresh salmon to Japan, and their Japanese business partners. The model is a novel attempt to understand how actors perceive and explain changes by integrating two recent concepts in the network tradition: network pictures and network change.

Key words: Network pictures, actor perceptions, network change, seafood, Japan

Introduction

Japanese distribution is undergoing considerable changes at the moment. Historically, Japanese multi-layered distribution has been seen as a major barrier to entry by foreign firms and have been described as time-consuming, expensive, complex, confusing inefficient and archaic (Lazer et al. 1995; Rajaratnam and McKinney 1995; Shimaguchi and Lazer 1979). This system is now under threat from increasing direct distribution (Bestor 2004). Adding to this are changes in Japanese retail structure towards fewer, but larger retailers (Lohtia et al. 1999; Lohtia and Subramaniam 2000; Min 1995), and less powerful wholesalers (Maruyama 2005). Changes are also evident in terms of Norwegian exports of salmon to Japan. If we look at recent export statistics, Norwegian salmon exports to Japan are in decline. The price of Norwegian salmon is high at the moment, and Norwegian salmon has difficulty competing with Chilean salmon in Japan. According to Statistics Norway (2006) there has been a steady decline in export volumes to Japan, whereas European markets are increasing in volumes. The main reason for the price increase is the lack of supply of salmon on the world market. An analysis by Kontali (2006) predicts an increase in demand for salmon of 15-20% in the coming years, but only an increase in production of 5%. The world demand for salmon is increasing due to growing health awareness among consumers. For instance, the scare concerning the "bird flu" earlier this year has shifted demand from white meat to fish.

Explaining change: The industrial network approach

There are a number of theoretical approaches attempting to explain change in business relationships. Relationships are for instance seen as marketing channels (Alderson 1957; Bucklin 1966; Gaski 1984; Stern 1969), supply chains (Christopher 1992), or value chains (Porter 1985). These approaches treat business relationships as separate entities where companies have to respond favourably to changes in their marketing environment. The industrial network approach challenges this assumption and suggests that relationships should rather be seen as interconnected and interdependent in a network of relationships (Ford et al. 2002; Håkansson and Snehota 1995). In a relationship companies adapt through interaction, and interaction in turn makes them interdependent. Interdependence is characterised in terms of how *activities* are linked together, how *resources* are utilised, and the strength of bonds between the *actors* (Håkansson and Snehota 1995). Here, change is seen as transmitted through connected relationships. A number of studies in this research tradition has looked at change in terms of these three dimensions: Changes in resource ties (Baraldi et al. 2001; Håkansson and Waluszewski 2002), activity links (Fredriksson and Gadde 2005; Gadde 2004; Gadde and Håkansson 2001) and actor bonds (Gadde and Håkansson 2001; Håkansson and Snehota 1995). No major study has however been undertaken using the network approach to analyse the Japanese distribution systems. This approach is highly relevant in our context as it highlights the interdependence between actors, which seems to be a major characteristic of Japanese distribution (Bestor 2004) .

As a starting point, we introduced the following model (fig. 1) to explain network change (Abrahamsen et al. 2007). Here, change at actor level transmits to the dyad/relationship level (as actor bonds, resource ties and activity links) and to the network level (influencing connected relationships) and vice versa:

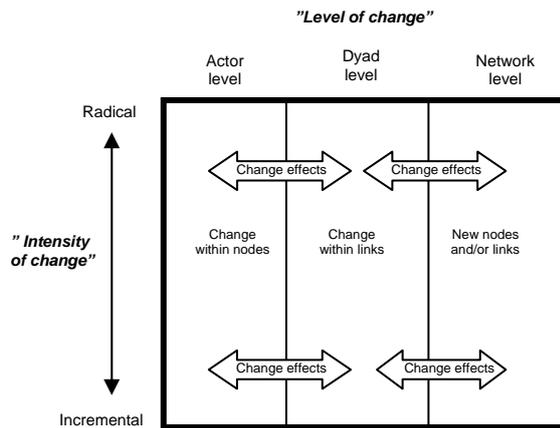


Fig. 1: Initial model explaining network change

In the network approach adaptations are made in terms of actor bonds, resource ties and activity links. Changes may therefore be studied in terms of how these three dimensions change. Following from the decision to use the industrial network approach to analyse network changes, a key question then becomes “**how do actors in business networks adapt to changes?**”

Research method: Initial study

To answer this question, an initial study of five Norwegian salmon exporters and seven Japanese salmon importers was undertaken in 2006 (see table 1 below). The Norwegian sample was identified by crosschecking information from preliminary discussions with key actors in the seafood industry and official Norwegian export statistics. Subsequent data analysis indicated that we had identified the main actors, as our sample holds a 69% share of salmon exports to Japan. The Japanese sample was identified by information given during the interviews with the Norwegian suppliers. Finally, we ended up with seven respondents in Japan out of approximately 20 large importers (names have been altered).

Company	Type of business	Key respondent
Norwegian sample		
Global Seafood	Farmer, processor, exporter	Sales director + Key account manager, Japan
Rocky Coast	Farmer, processor, exporter	Trade and development manager + KAM
Norway Salmon	Farmer, processor, exporter	Team manager, Asia
Viking Seafood	Farmer, processor, exporter	Sales unit manager, fresh dept. Asia
Ocean Salmon	Trader, processor, exporter	Sales manager frozen dept. + sales manager
Japanese sample		
Karatsu Co. Ltd.	Importer, wholesaler, trader	General Manager, int. trade and marketing dept.
GMC Inc.	Importer, trader (<i>sogo sosha</i>)	Manager, seafood dept.
Japan Corporation	Importer, trader (<i>sogo sosha</i>)	Manager of marine products
Tokyo Fisheries Corp.	Importer, wholesaler, trader	Deputy general manager, overseas department
Nippon Trading	Importer, trader	President
Kato Marine Products	Importer, trader, processor	President
Global Seafood Japan	Importer, trader, sales subsidiary	Managing director

Table 1: List of sample, initial study

Initial study: Some results and implications

Our initial study confirmed that traditional fish distribution is being replaced by direct distribution, where large importers and retailers are bypassing layers at the traditional fish markets (Abrahamsen et al. 2007). Perhaps the most interesting finding was that actor's perceptions seem to play a role in network changes. For instance, Norwegian exporters perceive the Japanese traditional distribution system as inefficient and long-winded, whereas the Japanese importers believe the system works well. However, perceptions held by the Norwegian exporters have taken them to new customers in other countries. Similarly, Japanese importers' frustration with their suppliers' lack of attention and continued efforts to short-cut traditional distribution has resulted in new ties to business partners in Chile and Canada.

This may indicate that it is the perception of change rather than the change itself which has effect on networks. This has been noted in a number of academic studies, but is still relatively unexplored: Lundgren (1992) suggests that an actor's perceived uncertainty is a prerequisite for change: "*Stability in the network will reduce the actor's perceived uncertainty and thereby increase the propensity to participate in change activities*" (p. 148). Håkansson and Snehota (1995) argue that "*the different and contrasting perceptions of the [activity links] are at the origin of some changes*" (p. 272). Hertz (1992) states that "*...The perceptions of integration might cause greater effects that otherwise might be expected from the actual change*" (p. 121). Håkansson (1992) argues that "*the network is shaped though interactions but these in turn take place in accordance with the perceptions of the network held by individual companies*" (p. 130).

Apparently, to understand change we must look at the interface between **network changes** and **perception of changes**. In our first model (fig. 1), we did not make this separation. One way to look at change in networks is proposed by Håkansson and Waluszewski (2002), (fig. 2) using the term *activated structure* and *idea structure* describing the structures where changes occur. The activated structure is the visible and measurable set of actor bonds, activity links and resource ties which exists, or the "real" or "underlying" network. Opposed to the activated structure is the idea structure. Håkansson and Waluszewski (2002) give two definitions of idea structure, one by Brunsson (1998) who says that "*the idea system defines what is handled in mental and communicative processes, and the action system what is handled in material processed*" (p. 168). They also refer to Czarniawska and Joerges (1996) arguing that "*ideas can be regarded as images that have become known in the form of pictures or sounds and then be materialized in different ways*" (p. 20).

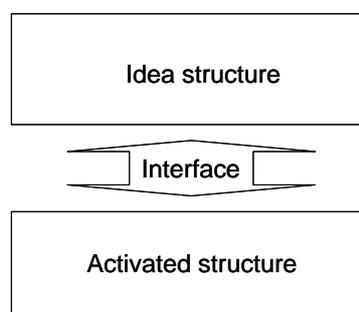


Fig. 2: The relationship between idea structure and activated structure

The interface between the idea structure and the activity structure is presented in the following model (fig. 3) by Håkansson and Waluszewski (2002):

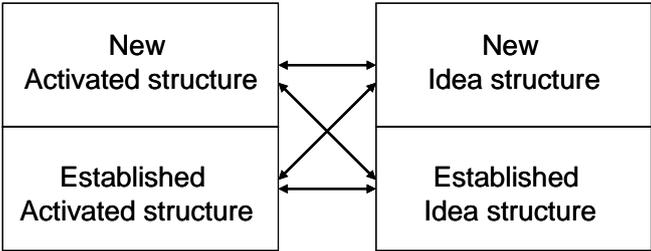


Fig. 3: Interfaces between idea structure and activated structure

As this model suggests, there is an ever-changing interplay between the activated and idea structure: New ideas challenge established ideas, new activated structures replace established idea structures, new ideas challenges established activated structures, and new structures challenge established ideas, etc.

As previously explained, change is transmitted through the network by interaction. One way of looking at how change is transmitted is to assume that change follows some pattern of development through the network (fig. 4). According to this model, a change from an established pattern at the actor level to a new pattern at the actor level creates at change at the established dyad level, resulting in new patterns such as a change in resource ties, activity links and actor bonds. These changes again will confront the established pattern of the network, creating new network structures. Changes at the actor level are of course related to the network structure in which the company is embedded, more precisely the resource ties, activity links and actor bonds which the company has to its wider network. Hence, we see a change in these interactions in terms of new resource structures, new activity links, and new actor bonds. These changes at dyad level in turn have impact on the wider network structure; ties to some actors are weakened, some are strengthened, some disseminated. New ties are created, new actors are approached and old actors take on new roles.

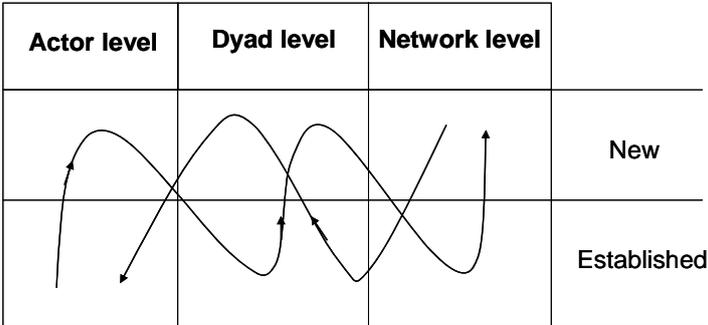


Fig 4: Change in terms of new and established interaction patterns

If we extend this model by taking into account the change processes within and between the four structures as suggested in fig. 3, we arrive at the following representation (fig. 5):

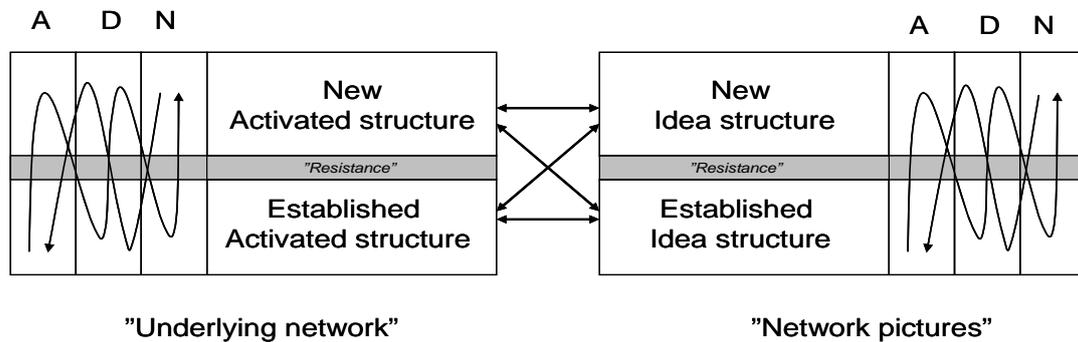


Fig. 5: Relationship between network structure and network change

Network change according to this model can be explained by the interfaces between the two-level structures, and between the established and the idea structure.

This model exemplifies the relationship between network structure and network change. The interplay between these structures is therefore a key point of analysis, and a relevant research question is therefore ***“what role do actor perceptions play in network changes?”***

Research method: Follow-up study

In an attempt to answer this question, a follow-up study was undertaken in 2007 (see list of sample in table 2 and figure 6).

Company	Type	Key respondent
Norwegian sample		
Global Seafood	Exporter	Sales director , Managing director
Norway Salmon	Exporter	Team manager, Asia
Viking Seafood	Exporter	Sales unit manager, fresh dept. Asia
Ocean Salmon	Exporter	Asia manager
Japanese sample		
Karatsu Co. Ltd	Primary Wholesaler	General Manager, int. trade and marketing dept.
Akimoto Ltd.	Primary Wholesaler	General manager
Tokyo Fisheries Corp.	Importer/secondary wholesaler	Deputy general manager, overseas department
Rocky Coast Japan	Importer	General Manager
Kato Marine Products	Importer	President
Blue Water Trading	Importer	Vice President
Asahi Retail	Retailer	Head Buyer
BCC	Retailer	Head Buyer
Shoitachi	Retailer	Head Buyer
Sensei Transport	Distributor	General Manager
Narita Distributors	Distributor	General Manager
Yamanochi	Processor	President
Norwegian Seafood Council	Gov agency	Counsellor, fisheries section
Tokyo Metro. Government	Gov administration, Tsukiji	Director General
+ various other actors		

Table 2: Sample in follow-up study

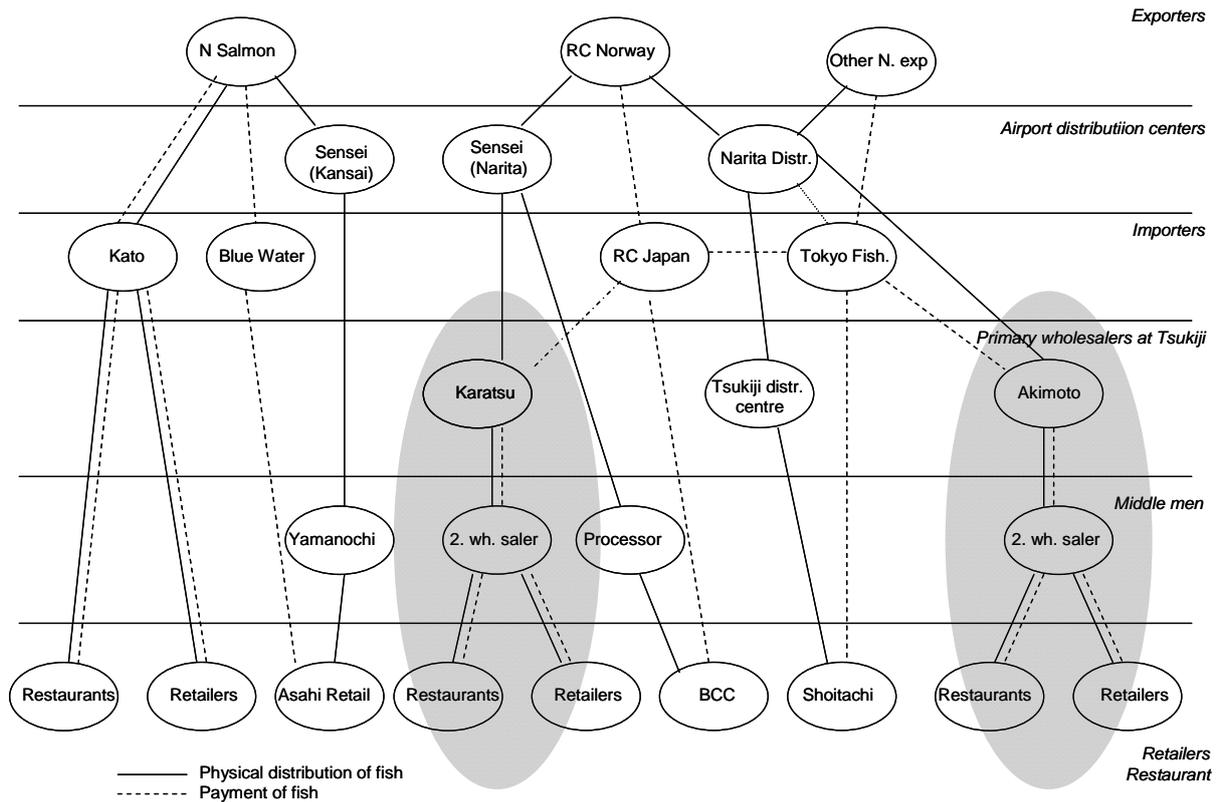


Fig. 6: An alternative presentation of sample in follow-up study. The shaded areas represent the traditional fish market

This time we traced the route of the salmon through the two systems; the traditional and the direct distribution systems (i.e. the established activated structure and new activated structure in terms of the model in fig 5). We made observations and interviewed actors in the two systems, and asked questions about how they understood and explained change (ie. the established and new idea structure) collecting the respondents' *network pictures* (Ford et al. 2002; Henneberg et al. 2006). Network pictures is a recent concept in the industrial network tradition. It draws many of its underlying assumptions from psychology and more specifically Weick's sensemaking concept (Weick, 1995). Ford, et al (2006) define network pictures as "a conceptualisation by the observer of the network views of the participants. It is a representational technique that aims to capture or illustrate views that specific actors have of the networked environment within which they operate". Network pictures are not neutral, but are biased views on how actors perceive the network, how they perceive themselves, and their place within the network. In other words, when we analyse a network we actually look at peoples perceptions of the network, rather the "real" network. Although network pictures has gained a lot of interest, so far it has been developed mainly as a theoretical construct (Henneberg et al. 2006; Mouzas et al. 2004).

Follow-up study: Some results and implications

Analysing the data in terms of the model presented in fig. 5, we found that several of the changes discussed by the respondents could be mapped along the dimensions *established* and *new activated structure*, and it made sense analysing change in these dimensions as suggested in the model. However, it became more challenging using the boxes to the right, the idea or network picture dimensions. We had problems deciding whether a change should

be classified as a change in the respondent's idea structure/network picture, or a change in the actual network. As an example, one respondent said that they "...sell about 50% to the old distribution channel, which is the fish market, and 50% is a kind of direct distribution...For us this framework has increased significantly". Does he talk about the "real" changes here, or is this his interpretation of the changes? Another quote illustrates this further: "We haven't seen the main changes yet. Compared to the other main seafood markets things are slow in Japan. But the underlying change which we see is accelerating is a more direct contact between suppliers and end user, i.e. primary actors in the production and end users in the consumption end...This is a global [retail] trend...." Here he talks about a range of issues; changes and why these changes are appearing. But it is difficult to isolate whether this is a real change, something that is actually happening, or the respondent's own perception of what is happening. This prompted us to ask some vital questions: Are we looking at the actual changes here, or are we looking at the respondent's account of these changes? Is it at all possible to discern or draw the line between real and perceived changes? If so, how can this be measured, and have we accounted for this in the research design?

It is perhaps more accurate to look at the interviews as an account of changes as seen by the actors. Whether they are real or perceived is of less importance. As we have discussed previously, studies indicate that actors take actions on basis of their perception of changes, not necessarily the changes themselves. Our interviews are representations of the respondent's views, and should be treated as such during the analysis. Our empirical base is thus a representation of actor's perceptions of change; they are not a measure of change in itself. If we had developed a different research design, it might have been possible to identify and isolate factors that would have been open to unbiased verification or measurement, such as quantities, volumes, money transfers, temperature changes, etc. which could be classified as changes in a "real structure", less open to personal interpretation. But that would have called for a different set of measurements, not included in this research methodology.

Our empirical base is made up of in-depth interviews with actors in the distribution chain. We have further collected their network pictures and used these network pictures to discuss changes at broadly two dimensions; *level* (actor, dyad and network) and *time* (past, present and future). In addition we have made personal observations of activity links, resource ties and actor bonds as they are today, i.e. we have a number of observations about the present state of the network.

What we can generate from the data is therefore an analysis of how the network has changed up until today, what future direction the network is likely to take, and how the actors are coping with and adapting to these changes. Finally, it is possible to say something about how the actors make sense of these changes. This is an important point. Our initial attempt to analyse the second round of data indicated that it is useful to include some facets of how actors make sense of changes in the analysis, not merely look at the changes themselves. In other words, we still need to use some of the boxes to the "right" in the model (fig. 3/5) but they need to be termed differently.

Arriving at a conceptual model

Subsequently, we present a new model not only including *level of change* (actor, dyad and network) and *time* (past, present and future), but also taking into account how actors explain and *make sense of changes*. Looking at perceptions then, it is possible to distinguish between how a respondent describes a change, and how he sees what causes this change.

It may be useful to look at change from something that *was* and towards something that *is*, and subsequently how will be in the *future* (fig. 7). Along the vertical axis in this model is the time dimension, or more precisely the respondent's recollection of what the network used to

look like then (*past*), how it looks now (*present*) and how it will be (*future*). The network pictures that we have collected can be fitted into this model because we asked the respondents to draw their network pictures along these three time dimensions, using *five years ago*, *today* and *five years from now* as the basis for the interviews. Further, on each three of these dimensions, changes can be classified as to whether they occur at the actor, dyad or network level. For simplification, we call this the “*what*”-column, because here we can map what is happening in the network. But the picture is not complete without the “*why*”-column, because the actors need to try to make sense out of what is happening in the network, i.e. why things are happening, or why companies act as they do. For the sake of analysis we call these issues “sensemaking devices”, i.e. *how an actor makes sense of what is happening around him*. This type of sensemaking device can be found at three levels: the actor, the dyad and the network level. For instance, one actor may attribute a change to some action taken by a company, another may explain a change by referring to how his relationships with other actors is changing, and a third actor may look at changes at network level to say something about why a particular change occurs. It is also likely that some actors will have no explanation of why the changes are happening, they merely observe them.

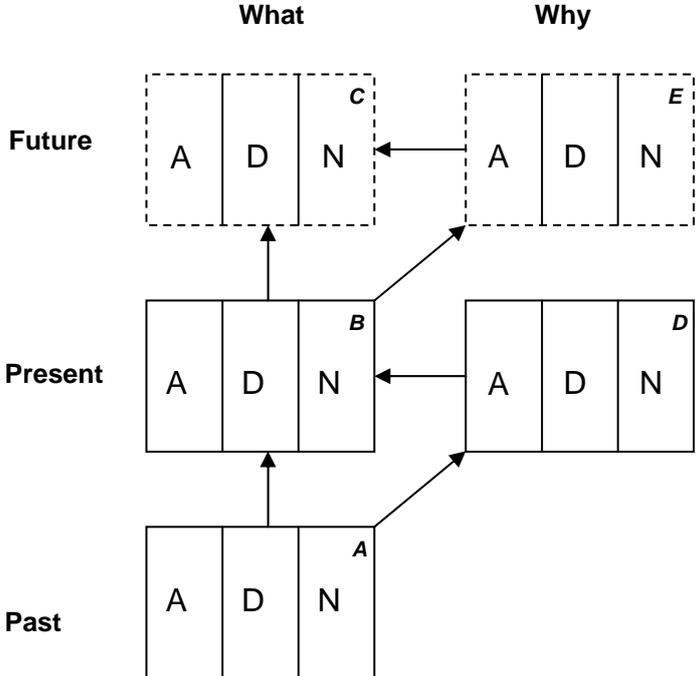


Fig. 7: Conceptual model

According to this model, changes occur along the *what*-column (boxes A, B and C) at actor, dyad and network level. Driving the change or making sense of the change is a *sensemaking processes* or *sensemaking devices* in the *why*-column (boxes D and E). This explains the arrows between boxes A and D, and B and E. Boxes C and E are dotted as they are concerned with the future. Boxes A, B and D represent changes that are happening or have happened, and thus may be accounted for.

One way to use this model is to copy the respondent’s network picture into the N frame of boxes A, B and C. The changes discusses during the interview can then be presented as to whether they occur at A, D or N level in there three boxes. Boxes D and E can be used for describing how the respondent reason around why these changes have happened (box D) and why changes will happen in the future (box E).

Analysing changes using this model: An example

Using template analysis (King 2004) we were able to map the changes described by the respondents into the model. Figure 8 gives an example of the analysis of the interview made with a major Norwegian salmon exporter:

Norway Salmon						
<i>Further integration</i>						
	Higher volumes to retailers Will develop new concepts with retailers Financial ties and ownership	Future integration of network More integrated network Direct control over processors Mergers with Japanese partners	C	Actors must change their views (4) Needs to find others sharing the same view Must change his partners perspective		E
<i>Development of category management</i>						
Japanese are slowly taking to Category Management				Strong belief in category management, wants to contribute	Needs to work closer with the retailers to develop category management	New health trends appearing in Japan
<i>From whole fish to fillets</i>						
	Fillets become more important than fresh fish					Direct distribution more suitable for fillets
<i>Fishmarket still important</i>						
		FM will grow in importance		Wants strong ties to the FM		Needs to keep ties to the fishmarket
				No. 1 ambition in Japan Needs to produce top quality salmon		Possible new network discussed but rejected Current cooperation model better than direct ownership
<i>Change from fishmarket to direct distribution</i>						
Exporter has created new positions within the company	New positions have improved cooperation	Closer ties to actors in direct distribution General trend towards direct distribution, bypassing the fishmarket	B	Retailers are adopting new purchasing strategies Increased retail power		D
<i>Fishmarket slow to change</i>						
		The fishmarket is slow to change			Pricing is more effective in the fishmarket system	Fishmarket has distinct functions that are not easily replaced
<i>Change from whole fish to fillets</i>						
	From whole fish to fillets			Fillets are cheaper to produce		Network will save costs by switching to fillets
<i>Cooperation, integration, new model, old model</i>						
	Current model means more commitment					

Fig. 8 Analysing transcriptions using the model. Note that box A is omitted here because all the respondent's statements about changes from A to B are listed in box B. Likewise, all the statements about changes from B to C is listed in box C.

Looking at boxes B (what is happening) and D (why is it happening), three issues emerge:

General change from fishmarket to direct distribution

First, in box B, the respondent describes how the network changes from the fishmarket system to increasing direct distribution. The general trend is bypassing the fishmarket, and developing closer ties to importers, processors and retailers (change at network level). As a result, he has created new positions within his company (change at actor level) which has improved cooperation with his partners. The increased ties and integration of the network has led to greater commitment between the actors (change at dyad level). The best way to

explain these changes using box D, is the role of the retailers which are increasingly powerful and are adopting new purchasing strategies (sensemaking at actor level).

The fishmarket is slow to change

Second, in box B he discusses the pace of this change at network level as the fishmarket is slow to change. Looking to box D to find the reason behind this, at the network level he says that the fishmarket has some distinct functions that are not easily replaced, on the dyad level the fishmarket is an effective way to determine prices between the actors.

Change from whole fish to fillets

Third, there is a change from whole fish to fillets on the dyad level (box B). Driving this change in box D is a belief among the actors that fillets are cheaper to produce (sensemaking at actor level). Hence, this transition is beneficial to the whole network as other the actors also will save costs (sensemaking at network level).

Turning to boxes C (what will happen) and E (why will this happen/what needs to be to make this happen), some interesting issues emerges:

Further integration

Regarding future change at network level (box C), he believes that the network will become more integrated. He will work directly with the processors and possibly merge with some of his partners in Japan. At the dyad level this will imply higher volumes, new concepts being developed and stronger ties in terms of financial ownership. For this to happen (box E), he needs to find partners which shares the same view of reality as he does. Another way to achieve this is to change the view of reality of his current partners. He must also have a strong determination to produce top quality salmon (sensemaking at actor level).

He also has an ambition to become no. 1 in Japan. This is sensemaking at the actor level and serves as a way of explaining several of the changes he sees coming in box C.

Development of category management

As a second future change, he describes that Japanese actors will become more professional at developing category management, but this is a slow process (change at actor level). Explaining the forces behind this trend (box E), he refers to his own strong belief in category management (sensemaking at actor level), a need to develop this in cooperation with retailers (sensemaking at dyad level) and general health focus in the Japanese population (sensemaking at network level).

From whole fish to fillets

Third, in box C he talks about the shift from whole fish to fillets (change at dyad level). He refers to direct distribution being more suitable for fillets as an explanation for this change (sensemaking at dyad level).

Importance of the fish market

Third, he believes that the fishmarket will become more important to him (change at network level). To explain this change (box E) he holds that this is a part of their strategy (sensemaking at actor level), and that he must work with the fishmarket to get access to retailers that are only reachable through the fishmarket (sensemaking at network level).

There is a connection between boxes B and E that may be noted here (dotted line). In box E he discusses a possible future network, but he rejects this because he believes that the current cooperation model works better. This sensemaking at network level has led to more commitment with his current partners (change at dyad level in box B). At the same time, he discusses new models of cooperation with his partners, even ownership (boxes C and E).

Maybe this statement would better fit in box D as it represents discussions that have taken place and that explain the layout of the current network.

The respondent's rich account of future changes may be explained by personal factors of the respondent. He obviously has a very broad knowledge about future marketing trends. He demonstrates detailed knowledge of the Japanese market, and he is able to compare where the Japanese market is heading compared to other export markets. He has a broad scope when discussing changes. In all boxes except box E, he refers to changes along all three dimensions (network, dyad and actor level). From the interview, it appears that he is quite optimistic regarding the Japanese market, and this is evident from his template as the majority of his concerns are about the future.

Conclusion

This paper has presented two things: a description of our journey to develop a model to illustrate how actors describe and explain changes, and our final iteration is then used to do this. It is a novel attempt to integrate the concept of network pictures and the concept of change and to analyse the relationship between these concepts. It suggests that we cannot explain network change without first understanding how managers understand their surrounding networks and their network position. Strategy and general management literature generally advocates that management should base their decisions upon an analysis of a company's "environmental forces" and build their actions on this analysis. Rather, we believe that a perception of a company's network represents a better way of explaining the options open to management, or the limitations for their actions. Managers base their decisions on how their future network positions are believed or desired to be. Strategy thereby becomes a way of changing or maneuvering the network toward this desired position rather than mere reactions and responses to changing economic conditions.

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