

**Merchants, banks, builders and bastards:
Towards a parsimonious analysis of socio-economic behaviour.**

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Abstract

This paper has three aims: Firstly to test the explanatory power in different empirical areas of a parsimonious set of classical, but often ignored concepts, centring on role structure and performance; secondly to search for similarities in socio-economic life in apparently different contexts and thirdly to draw lessons for the applicability of these concepts for research in business networks.

The paper examines aspects of socio-economic life in a variety of situations using a limited range of concepts and draws conclusions from this examination for research in the areas of business marketing and purchasing.

The paper is based on the authors' conviction that our understanding of marketing and purchasing behaviour may be restricted by using generalised and loaded terms such as "consumer", "supplier", "purchaser", "manufacturer" or "retailer" etc and by constructing complex and supposedly situation-specific theoretical structures. The idea of the paper is not to produce new words or neologisms in order to "do science". This is something that seems to occur frequently within our discipline and leads to over-complication within some or other theoretical structure. On the contrary, our aim is to try to re-embed existing words and descriptions, such as "customer", "buyer" or "producer" in a larger whole with the aim of throwing a little new light on what is at play inside "markets" and "networks".

Metaphorically, we could say that our project is less to “zoom-in” on particular phenomena or subsets of economic activity and more to “zoom-out” in order to see these with a wider perspective. Our basic aim is to search for commonalities within supposedly different notions, areas and aspects of socio-economic life. A second unifying thought behind the paper is our perception of the need to broadly reinterpret our area of study without the implicit or explicit assumptions of “managerial marketing” and “market behaviour”, without limiting it to one of the supposedly separate business or consumer areas and without restricting ourselves to a single narrowing theoretical structure.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to develop some ideas on the nature of socio-economic life using insights from a number of areas whilst avoiding at least some of the limitations that are imposed by the loaded and restrictive terms that are conventionally used such as consumer, customer or supplier; client or buyer; manufacturer or retailer. Our attention is directed towards some of the fundamentals of socio-economic behaviour, but we are also aware of the evolution of that behaviour related to changes in the ideas of those involved in it and in the resources at their disposal.

“Whether one chooses ‘protagonist,’ ‘consum’actor,’ ‘prosumer’ or some other neologism of choice, the point of these awkward verbal gestures is that the co-creative producer of genuine, political, less commercial experiences is far removed from the passive mass market consumer of the post-war consumerist boom” (Arnould, 2007, p. 192).

Our idea here is not to produce yet more new words or neologisms in order ‘to do science’; something that seems to occur frequently within our discipline and which leads to over-complication and risks over-determination by some or other fashionable theoretical background. On the contrary, our aim is to seek conceptual simplicity and to try to re-embed existing words (consumer, customer, buyer, producer or supplier, etc) in a larger and more simple whole with the aim of throwing a little new light on what is at play inside “markets” (Venkatesh and Peñalosa, 2006).

Metaphorically, we could say that our project is less to “zoom-in” on particular phenomena or subsets of economic activity and more to “zoom-out” in order to see these with a wider perspective. The basic aim is to search for commonalities within supposedly different notions, areas and aspects of socio-economic life. A unifying thought behind the paper is our perception of the need to broadly reinterpret our area of study without the implicit or explicit assumptions of “managerial marketing” and without limiting it to one of the supposedly separate business or consumer areas.

This paper is not positioned externally to the discipline of marketing practice. Our objectives are not the same as those of the sociologists of consumption or organizations (eg Cochoy, 1999). Instead, we take a reflexive internal stance towards marketing as a disciplinary field, as per the precepts developed by the critical marketing school (Saren et al, 2007). This means that we will need to relate to at least some existing perspectives: These include the work of the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group (IMP Group) that has “zoomed-in” on the subset of socio-economic activity comprising the interdependencies and relationships within networks of business actors; the work of those researchers within Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) who have sought to develop and refine understanding of the social and cultural dynamics within consumers as a particular group of economic actors (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) and those of researchers within Service Dominant Logic (SDL) who have “zoomed-out” by attempting to encapsulate the totality of market activity within the single notion of service provision (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). The particular perspective that we are taking here is that of marketing researchers looking broadly at socio-economic life using a limited range of pre-existing concepts and with the hope of finding some empirical and conceptual commonalities across its different

manifestations. Thus, the paper does not directly address the specific processes of consumption, marketing or purchasing, nor is it centred on the particular behaviour of those who may be called suppliers or customers, businesses or consumers. Instead, the paper seeks some insight into socio-economic activity¹ in its broadest sense by examining how and why *actors*, without categorisation, interact with others in the multiplicity of different *contexts* in which they find themselves. The paper mobilizes role theory in order to support the quest for a parsimonious approach of analyzing socio-economic life.

OUR APPROACH

We all have academic backgrounds that are closely linked to Business Marketing and particularly to the IMP Group. We are all senior professors: We have all been involved in developing the relational approach in Business Marketing and have expertise in supplier-retailer relationships. The second and third authors also have specific expertise in business project relationships. The second author has a post-modern background and this has led him to study consumer communities.

The initial idea for the project came when one of the authors proposed an attempt to examine consumer marketing and purchasing by using concepts developed within the IMP Group about business to business relationships. This was immediately rejected by the other two as a crude extension of concepts from one theoretical area to another – “IMP tries to take over the world!” Further discussion centred on using a limited

¹ We use the term socio-economic because we are not concerned with economic activities such as production or consumption but with the economic activities of individuals that involve other individuals

number of ideas, partially inspired by IMP research, to cover all aspects of socio-economic activity in terms of interdependency, interaction and uncertainty.

However, this approach would have exemplified some of the problems that we were coming to identify in our area of study. Among these were the propensity to construct ever more complex terminological and theoretical structures and the rigid categorisation of economic actors and the contexts in which they were found. This approach would also conflict with our evolving ontological position that could be outlined as follows:

The words “customer” and “supplier” do not capture the reality of discrete economic actors. These words simply represent the outward faces or masks of actors and provide simplifying labels for our analytical convenience. Behind these masks, all economic actors perform a wide variety of *roles* as they *interact* with others in order to address the numerous issues that they face and cope with the diverse contexts in which they find themselves. Thus, no socio-economic actor can realistically be categorised on the basis of a single overall role or descriptor and the performance of a particular role is not restricted to any one type of actor.

The idea that the behaviour of economic actors is varied and complex is unremarkable. But this ontological position did lead us to a number of important analytical consequences that relate to both our academic and our life experience:

- It de-emphasises the particularity of differently labelled actors and emphasises the potential similarities between their behaviours;
- It emphasises that actors may perform a multiplicity of roles in the same context and de-emphasises the notion that any economic actor could be described or analysed in terms of a single role;
- It emphasises the variability of actor behaviour between different contexts and within those contexts over time.

THE CONCEPTS OF ROLE AND INTERACTION

This paper is based on the search for a parsimonious conceptual structure without using loaded or restrictive concepts from elsewhere or inventing new ones. So far in the paper we have restricted ourselves to the concepts of role and interaction which we have used in the same common-sense way that they are used in daily life so as to be almost synonymous with “behaviour”.

But the concept of role is deep in the sub-consciousness of almost all of those who have studied social science, and so it was with us. For example, one of us wrote his thesis on the *role expectations*, *role performance* and *role conflict* of different actors in their role episodes in channels of distribution. Similarly, our involvement in the work of the IMP Group and our research and consulting experience over the past 30 years has been predicated on the idea that business marketing and purchasing take place within

inter-active processes, each of which consists multiple *episodes*, involving a number of individual actors² and each of which is unique.

In order to make progress we needed to avoid the limitations that would arise from a concentration on some supposedly distinctive types of economic activity. We also had to encompass the idea of interaction as a process over time, in all its variety and involving a wide range of potential behaviours or role performance: In short, we had to cut the umbilical cord that tied us to IMP and this led us to the following:

“We seek some insight into socio-economic life in its broadest sense by examining how actors, without categorisation, interact with others in the multiplicity of different contexts in which they find themselves”.

Thus our search for parsimony led us to three concepts: The *actors* that are involved in a specific *context* and the *processes* of interaction between them. Together, these three concepts lead to a view of each actor performing a multiplicity of roles as it faces a multiplicity of issues and interacts with a multiplicity of counterparts in a multiplicity of situations.

At this point, one of us wanted to integrate elements of the fashionable Practice Theory into our study, arguing that “*social ordering occurs within practices*” and that “*every role performance is made up of several practices*”. The other two of us saw some drawbacks to the association of the practice theory with the concept of the role:

² Thus the concept of the socio-economic actor may refer to individuals, sub-groups or companies (Hakansson et al 2009). Throughout this paper we will refer to an actor as “it” to encompass both the single individual actor and the collective or corporate actor.

“The idea that every role performance is made up of several practices is close to saying that a role is simply an overall “label” for an actor such as consumer or supplier and that role determines the practices it will follow. We are trying to avoid this role stereotyping and examine role performance as a continuing interactive process”.

ROLE INTERACTION THEORY

The minimalist conceptual framework of actor, context and process and the wish to avoid re-inventing wheels led us to the well developed theory of “Role Interaction” – a part of Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969) - as a basis for our attempts to analyse socio-economic activity within our criteria of conceptual parsimony and generality: We went back to academic childhoods and to Goffman (1959).

The interactionist perspective (Goffman 1959) focuses on how individuals adopt and act out an evolving role during interaction with others. Individuals perform their roles towards others in a social context (role-performing), analogous to actors on a stage. According to Goffman (1983), social interaction can be identified narrowly as that which uniquely transpires in social situations, i.e. environments in which two or more individuals are physically in one another's “response presence”. Role, in his conception, is seldom fixed or prescribed but something that is constantly negotiated between individuals.

The vision developed by Goffman has been used in marketing mainly by researchers investigating how service management fosters the mobilization of scripts and

scenarios (Solomon, Surprenant, Czepiel and Gutnam, 1985). It has served as a foundation for identifying consumer role typologies in service experiences (Ligas and Coulter, 2001): “the contented customer, the helpful customer, the discontented customer, and the disgusted customer”. However in this research stream, the notion of role is not used in the sense of the multiple roles that individual consumers may play in evolving interaction, but rather as a categorisation for the different single types of role as played by the individual as consumer. Goffman’s perspective has also been used by interpretive researchers in consumer behaviour, notably the CCT members, to analyse consumers’ negotiation of role and identity transitions (Bonsu and Belk 2003; McAlexander, Schouten, and Roberts 1993; McCracken 1986; Holt, 1995). However in both research streams, the consumer’s role is not considered as an evolving and interactive concept and the actor cannot escape from the single status or pre-attributed role of “consumer”. Our position is that each socio-economic actor, whether labelled as “consumer”, “business customer”, “supplier” or “distributor” may play multiple roles both sequentially in a single interaction process and simultaneously in interactions with different counterparts.

DEVELOPING AND USING THE CONCEPTS

The development of comprehensive but parsimonious descriptions of socio-economic interaction employing the three concepts of actor, context and process raises a number of theoretical and methodological issues. Some of these may be outlined as follows:

Actors: A socio-economic process has its starting point in the pre-existing resources, abilities, experiences and uncertainties of the actors involved in it and in the issues

that they face. The view of socio-economic interaction as a continuing series of episodes that build on the interpretations of those involved emphasises the descriptive value of self-reporting by actors as the process evolves.

Context: The context of socio-economic interaction is complicated because context can be analysed on multiple levels and because context evolves over time. For example on one level, context may be described in terms of the particular issue or issues that are being addressed by one or more of the participants. On another level, context may be examined using the physical, economic or temporal singularities of the situation in which the process takes place. Further, context may be described in terms of the overall situation of the actors or the multiple situations or contexts in which they interact, such as with multiple customers or suppliers or with dependence on one.

The approach taken in this paper is that all of us carry around a range of issues and problems. We meet with other actors personally or impersonally in particular contexts and that is where some of these issues and problems are addressed. Thus, socio-economic activity³ takes place in a wide variety of contexts: Some of these contexts may appear to be contrived by a single actor; some by many in concert or in opposition to each other. But all of these contexts involve more than one actor “a person who takes an active part, who plays a major role” (Petit Robert) and all actors are involved in many different contexts. Each of these contexts overlaps with others. Some may appear to arise accidentally or without warning, but all have their connections to other and previous contexts. Some contexts may develop at the

³ For the purposes of this paper we distinguish between socio-economic activity that involve multiple actors in interaction and those economic activities involved in producing or consuming, that may to a greater or lesser extent be carried out by individual actors in isolation from others.

initiative of those who are not directly involved in them. Some of these contexts may appear to only last for a moment, whilst others appear to be long-term. But what happens between socio-economic actors at any one time will always have its precursors, whether in that context or others and all will have effects on the evolution of that context, or of others. Some of these contexts may seem only to involve or affect identifiable individuals, others to include organised collectivities or aggregates of similar individuals. Some of these contexts may appear to be closely related to a recognisable economic activity such as a single shopping expedition, a series of purchases or sales or a long-term financial investment or a product development process. These are the types of contexts with which we are mainly concerned. Others may appear to be part of broader patterns of life such as university education or motherhood. We are less directly concerned with these, except insofar as they form a wider framework for more specific situations. We are concerned with the respective initial and evolving views of involved actors of a particular context and their expectations of the interactions within it and of their counterparts. More broadly, this context needs to be set against the specific and general experiences of the actors and the other contexts they are in and the issues addressed in them. The term context inevitably raises methodological issues because no context is exclusive. Each context has subsets and each is part of many wider contexts. This means that the definition of context is a function of the specific research question being addressed.

Thus, our area of interest is not the economic actor itself or its overall role as customer or supplier or its generalised socio-economic situation or its characteristics,

resources or problems⁴. Instead, we start from the different contexts in which socio-economic interaction occurs.

Interaction: The idea of interaction in this paper draws heavily from the work of the IMP Group (Hakansson et al 2009). In this work, interaction is seen as a process of successive actions and interpretations by each of the participants involved in a particular context. Depending on the context, the process may be continuous or intermittent; it may relate to a single issue or to many; it may be important to one or more actors and individually insignificant to others. In this interpretation, interaction is not restricted to conversation or to the transfer of information or negotiation: Interaction may involve requests, requirements, signals as well as actions, investments or changes by both parties. Thus interaction is substantive process that may lead to adaptation and transformation of the activities and resources of the involved actors and to the attitudes and behaviours of those actors themselves.

ROLE PERFORMANCE IN INTERACTION

Attempts to explore, clarify and develop the concept of role have inevitably led to a broad and elaborate conceptual structure that has been widely applied within the social sciences. For the purposes of this study, we need to examine the aspects of role that relate to specific actors, their multiple contexts and to the process of interaction between them.

⁴ Throughout this paper we refer to an actor as “it” to encompass both the single individual actor and the collective or corporate actor.

Role and Context: The *Role-Set* of an individual actor refers to the range of counterparts with which the actor interacts and this provides an important dimension of the wider context for interaction. “Each person in an organization is linked to some set of other members by virtue of the functional requirements of the system which are heavily implemented through the expectations those members have of him; he is the focal person for that set. An organization can be viewed as consisting of a number of such sets, one for each person in the organization” (Katz & Kahn, 1966, p.197).

Role and the Actor: The *Role Attributions* of an actor are the actor’s perceptions of the role performance of different actors and these are likely to differ from each actor’s *Role Expectations* “which are evaluative standards applied to the behaviour of any person who occupies a given organizational office or position” (Katz & Kahn, 1966, p.182); “in the aggregate they help to define his role, the behaviours which are expected of him” (Katz & Kahn, 1966, p.175).

An actor’s multiple roles may lead to *Role Strain*, “a felt difficulty in fulfilling role obligations” (Goode, 1960): every interaction implies the risk for the actor to be obliged to play a role he/she doesn’t master (Strauss, 1959). A particular form of role strain which occurs when a person is subject to incompatible role expectations from different members of his role set is *Role Conflict* (Pettigrew, 1968). The term *Person Role Conflict* has been used to refer to the conflict that may exist between the needs and values of a person and the demands of his role set (Kahn et al, 1964, p 20). The *Role Conflict* may result in *Role Distance* (Goffman, 1961) which is Goffman’s term for actions which effectively convey some disdainful detachment of the actor from a role it is performing. On the contrary, there is *Role Embrace* when there is no

role conflict. Goffman (1961) did not limit himself to placing role embracement and role distance simply as absolutely bi-polar performative behaviours but rather as disparate points on a continuum of real-world self-identification. Globally, the multiplicity of roles played by the actor implies that the actor commits only a limited part of itself in any interaction. Research has further developed these concepts in examining person-role conflict and its implications for independent and inter-dependent self-concepts. Empirical research within the Human Relations area has examined the behaviour of a range of individuals within various organisational settings, for example, sales assistants, development engineers and foremen etc (eg Goode, 1960). The concept of the role of an organisation as actor was developed by Evan (1965) with his term “organisation set” and of individual interaction in an organisational context by Turk and Lefkowitz (1962) with the theory of representative roles.

Role and Interaction: The idea of the *Role Episode* encapsulates the sequential and evolving nature of the role performance of actors and links closely with the IMP view of business interaction (Hakansson et al, 2009). An actor is likely to be both a *Role Sender* and *Role Receiver* to members of its role set in particular episodes (Kahn et al, 1964) within the pattern of actions and interpretations of which interaction consists. Role sending in socio-economic interaction involves communication of the role expectations of an actor by the members of that actor’s role-set. These communications may take many forms: Demands, instructions, assessments, attitudes, intentions, bargaining, reciprocity and mutuality. Role sending may relate to specific issues or more general relationships and may be oriented towards both the short and long term. Role sending may be both intentional and unintentional. For example, a

late delivery by a supplier may be an intentional attempt to gain the attention of a customer to a failure to pay its bills or as a way of fulfilling the expectations of another counterpart. On the other hand, the late delivery may simply be the result of administrative failure in the supplier, without a particular expectation, but with a particular effect. Role sending may be trivial and continuous or may be lead to significant changes in the activities or structure of both receiver and sender.

A contextual view of socio-economic life would suggest that an actor does not have a single identifiable set of characteristics or behaviours that could be readily categorised as those of producer or consumer, teacher or learner etc. Each actor faces a multiplicity of different contexts, counterparts and a variety of their own issues as well as those of others. An actor's experiences, the issues it faces, its own expectations and those of others lead it to *perform different roles* in specific contexts and episodes at particular points in time. For example, a single actor may confidently perform the role of advisor in a particular episode in a particular context. But on other occasions in the same or in a different context, it may perform the role of advice-seeker⁵. For example, the US Department of Defence is experienced in working with contractors in the long processes of specification development and military procurement. It can provide extensive advice to some of its suppliers on what is needed to improve the battlefield performance of existing equipment. However, its role performance is quite different when interaction focuses on emerging technologies when it is likely to seek advice from a number of other counterparts to bolster its interactions with a particular development counterpart. The Department of Defence is also increasingly interacting with quite different suppliers that are used to

⁵ Thus the suggestion is not that an actor *is* an advisor as its sole role in any continuing situation in contrast to the description of an actor's role as "supplier" or "customer".

performing quite different roles with their other customers. These suppliers are producers of low-cost, off-the-shelf electronic devices that can be built into or modified for military equipment. It recently ordered 2200 Sony Play Station 3 (P63) for incorporation in a super-computer and it uses an iPhone application called “Bullet Flight” to calculate range and trajectory for its shots (The Economist, 12th December 2009, 85)

Each actor performs a role when it acts or reacts towards others in a particular context or at a particular point in a series of episodes within which the actor or its counterparts seeks to address particular issues. All actors simultaneously perform a range of roles in interaction with a set of different counterparts or in different contexts Some of these roles support each other and some conflict.

EXPLORING ROLE INTERACTION

Our aims were to explore the viability of our parsimonious set of variables; actors/context/interaction, to test the empirical value of the concept of evolving role performance and to challenge the validity of pre-defined or restricting labels that seek to subdivide socio-economic behaviour.

We have tried to do this using a number of *vignettes* written in everyday language and taken from the personal or professional experience of the three of us. They were selected simply on the basis of situations that came readily to mind as descriptions of interesting processes of role interaction.

Role Attributions, Role Expectations and Role Conflict in the Context of Grocery Purchases

The first vignette briefly explores some aspects of the grocery shopping context:

“Freshly”⁶, a large British supermarket group regularly subscribed to tracking studies to compare consumers’ views of its offerings in different product areas with those of its two largest competitors Sainsbury and Tesco. All three companies had stores of a similar size range and similar outward appearance. Freshly’s management were shocked when a consultant suggested to them that, “You are not a competitor of these companies. No-one chooses between you them”. Analysis of store data showed that the average purchase value of Freshly’s customers on each visit to the store was much lower than those at Sainsbury or Tesco. It became clear that many customers saw these two as the source for their major shopping expeditions and Freshly was used almost exclusively for “top-up” shopping or emergency purchases or for purchases limited to individually deep-discounted lines.

There were some exceptions to this, including customers who didn’t have a car or access to a Sainsbury’s or Tesco’s. A large group of these were single mothers. These women walked to the store with their children and could often be seen talking to each other in small groups outside the store. The store was a valuable meeting place for them.

⁶ The name of the company in this vignette has been disguised.

To develop this analysis, the consultant and the managers conducted an experiment: One manager was asked to imagine that he was one of these single mothers and that he had only a small amount of money left on the day before her welfare payment arrived. The manager was asked to go to the store with this amount of cash and buy food for the family for two days. He came back pleased with his efforts: He had bought a selection of low price but reasonably healthy items to feed the family within the available budget. A second manager was asked to imagine that she had received a call from a friend who planned to call on her that day for lunch. The manager was asked to imagine that she wanted to impress this guest. She was asked to go to Freshly and buy food to cook for lunch. Money was not a problem. But when she returned she said simply; “I’ll take her to a restaurant”.

This first vignette uses the conventional terms of “supermarket”, “customer” and “competitor” to provide convenient labels for the involved groups of actors. However, when we look more closely, it is clear that these customers have well developed and quite different role expectations of apparently similar supermarkets within their role-set. Many expect Freshly to perform a specific and limited role whilst attributing a quite different role to another “competitor” store.

One sub-group sees the store as fulfilling a role both as meeting place and a source of low-price items, whilst others see it as only an emergency supplier. It was apparent that those individual actors responsible for store buying and operations had followed the role expectations of these sub-groups in its stocking policy and hence the store was performing a quite different role to that conceived by its senior management.

The role expectations held of customers by the senior management, that they would use the store for “main” shopping were clearly not being fulfilled. Significantly, the actual role performed by the store was the outcome of the role expectations of its customers, not its own strategy. At the same time, the store faced a clear role-conflict in its inability to simultaneously meet the expectations of low-income and high-income customers within the same physical store and brand. The “low-price” episode involved clear and simple role sending by the single parents, which the store was able to perform. In contrast, the “social-support” episode was equally clear but led to an expectation that the store could not fulfil. In this simple example, we can also see how the role performance of the actors in the shopping context relates to role expectations and performance in their social contexts. Wide variations in role attributions and expectations are common in business relationships. For example, a supplier may attribute to itself the role as “strategic partner” of a particular customer, whilst the customer’s expectations of the supplier are that it should simply perform the role of supplying standardised items involving no development activity.

Analysis of the product range of another large supermarket group revealed an unusually wide and uneconomic product range in some discretionary purchase items, such as soy sauce and flavoured teas. Further enquiries revealed that these had been listed in response to specific requests by customers who had chosen to use the items themselves or had read of them in recipes. In other words and to an unusual extent this store had attributed the role of product selector to its individual customers.

Another supermarket group had a long-established and strong reputation for the quality of its merchandise and its fair-trading ethos. Over several years it ran a series of television ads with in-store back up describing new recipes for customers to try. One of these recipes involved a particular cheese that was not in widespread use in the UK at that time. In the weeks following the advertising, sales of the cheese increased by 800%, not just in that supermarket group but in the country as a whole. The store group's managers explained this process as follows: Most meal decisions are taken by women and approval is given or withheld by the children or the husband. "It's scary for women, but we provide the reassurance for them. It's our role to make choices for them".

The roles performed by the two stores were clearly different. It was apparent that the first store had not appreciated the economic implications of attributing an enhanced selection role to its customers whilst the other has traded effectively on its attributed role as guide and adviser. At this time, this particular store-group was achieving gross margins significantly greater than those of any comparable major group. Again, we may expect similar variations in attributed roles across the full range of socio-economic interaction. For example, business relationships commonly evolve in directions that are unintended by those involved so that product, pricing or logistics choices fall within the role performance of one of the participants. Similarly, the evolving attribution of the role of advisor to one of the actors in a relationship may strongly affect the respective benefits from the relationship achieved by the counterparts.

Stable and Evolving Role Expectations in a Long-Term Financial Context

This vignette briefly describes some of the interactions between an individual and a number of financial service providers and points to different, evolving and often conflicting role expectations and attributions:

I have been using the same bank since I was eight years old, when I had my first savings account. When I received my first salary I opened a current account with the same bank. The savings account had never had more than a few pounds in it. I wanted nothing more from the bank. They were big, safe and reasonably efficient. I thought that insurance was for insurance brokers, mortgages for a building society and pensions either from my employer or via a collection of different Independent Financial Advisers at various times. I expected the bank to operate my current account without charge although they had use of whatever was in my account and occasionally they charged me when I was overdrawn, but they always honoured my cheques. Once I borrowed £500 from them to buy a car. My mother was appalled at the idea of being in debt to anyone and gave me the £500 so that I could pay back the loan.

I took this experience of banking to the US and had similar expectations of American banks when I lived there. One bank came complete with drive-in tellers. But I was astonished to find that they only had a single branch and couldn't transfer money internationally. Somehow this seemed far too parochial for me so I signed up at the "First National Bank of Austin", which

also had only one branch but it was big and in town. At first there was some hitch in payments into my account, but I continued writing cheques until I got a call from the bank to say that I had committed an offence by being overdrawn! I was shocked. Somehow I always imagined that my UK bank, like my Building Society was always vaguely on my side and would always try to help me.

Things returned to normal when I returned to the UK, except that I did flirt with one of the first wholly telephone banks. They were a delight to deal with, but they wanted me to pay the whole of my salary into the account or they would charge me a monthly fee. I closed the account. Slowly over the years I have sensed that the comfortable, reassuring view that I had of banks was no longer accurate – if it ever was – and banks would foreclose on you without compunction. My expectations are now of having a much harsher set of financial relationships.

More recently I had a large deposit into my existing bank – my retirement cheque. The bank called me and said that they wanted to make me a “Premier Customer” with my own financial adviser for investments and supposedly preferential rates on my savings. But after various misadventures I had developed a relationship with a financial adviser elsewhere, who seemed to be both efficient and effective. The Bank’s financial adviser called me, but we had nothing to talk about and he didn’t seem to know much more than I did. Later when I had invested most of my retirement cheque with my financial adviser, the Bank called to say that I no longer qualified for Premier Status

unless I used their financial services or kept a large deposit with them – or paid them a monthly fee.

I am changing back to my old account with them.

This vignette illustrates a common situation in which the evolving role expectations held by one counterpart of the other counterpart conflict with the more stable expectations of that counterpart. Actors commonly seek to extend their role with particular counterparts in order to maximise the volume of the transactions involved or to increase their convenience, often referred to as “the one-stop shop”. This move is likely to be associated with a misunderstanding between the concept of “role as a label” with that of “role as an evolving descriptor”: For example, a customer or supplier with one set of role expectations in one context is unlikely to have the same set of expectation in another one.

The vignette also illustrates how role expectations are likely to extend beyond the provision of product/service or revenue/profit in socio-economic interaction. My role expectations of a bank were much strongly, if naively expressed in terms of the bank somehow “looking after” me than in terms of the day to day service delivery.

Role Attributions within a Corporate Actor

The third vignette extends the idea of actor, context interaction to a context involving individual and corporate role attributions and expectations:

“The bastards: They have sabotaged me again!”

These were the words of the Chief Executive Officer of Global⁷, a multi-national distributor of electronic and mechanical components. The CEO was talking about his own Senior Management.

Global had grown by distributing small quantities of a huge range of components used in MRO – Maintenance, Repair and Operating and by those involved in research and development. The company had many thousands of customers and delivered in small quantities, often to several different individuals within each of its customers. It treated all of its customers the same, whether they were large, small, individual or corporate. It was proud of the claim that if a customer placed an order by 20.00 hours it would be delivered the next morning, almost anywhere in the industrialised world. It was also proud (although it didn't say it to others) that it was almost impossible to pay a higher price for the items it sold from any other supplier and everyone paid the same price. Global's management saw its role to deliver vital supplies efficiently, often to customers that were not efficient and not nearly as well organised as it was.

The bonuses paid to Global's managers depended on its efficient operations, on remorseless cost cutting and effectively managing its huge inventories. But not all of the company's customers needed next-day delivery for all their purchases. And its major customers were expecting more and different things

⁷ The name of the company in this vignette has been disguised.

from it. These extended beyond variations in price and delivery and included requests for Global to manage local stocks of spare parts at their premises and to take responsibility for the effects on their operations of any shortages of spare parts.

The Chief Executive thought that his managers were attempting to sabotage his moves in these directions. The managers had a clear view of their own personal role in the company expressed in terms of ever-increasing efficiency. They knew very little about what happened in their customers and were entirely happy with their own very limited interactions with those customers. Similarly, they attributed a limited role to the company, based on an entirely homogeneous pattern of interaction across all customers. Customers often needed advice and information, but this could be provided remotely and they believed that any complication of the company's or their own role would lead to dramatic reductions in efficiency and damage to the company.

This vignette illustrates the differences in role attributions made by individuals for themselves and for their company. The situation faced by this Chief Executive in seeking to change individual and corporate role performance is common across business interaction. In this case the changes and extensions to role performance will inevitably affect the cost structure of the company, the roles of individuals within and outside it.

The Evolution of Roles in a Project Context

The next vignette explores the development, complexity and variability of role expectations and attributions across a role set and over time:

We live in a house that we bought in 1992, and we have had several improvements carried out to it over the years. I have also done some painting myself in order to freshen up the walls. But fifteen years came and went, our children grew up and left home and we paid off the mortgage. Then all we could see was what was wrong with the house.

We finally decided in 2007 to look into the possibility of renovation to give the house a new lease of life. It then became a question of how much renovation to carry out and how to reconcile our different ideas.

2007 - The project begins

We finally settled on a likely list of work to do: the kitchen, the entrance hall, the lounge/dining room and the toilets. We had a basic idea of what we wanted to do, but we weren't exactly over-enthusiastic despite the piles of home-decoration magazines that we had read.

We went to see Camif Habitat. They operate a services cooperative for teachers and are particularly well known for their mail order facilities. They also enjoy an excellent reputation for their professionalism and the quality of

the products in their catalogue. They offer a complete service which includes the organisation of work to be carried out as well as the coordination of the contractors. The contractors in turn coordinate the various sub-contracted tradesmen. Camif Habitat guarantees the quality of work done in terms of costs, quality and completion dates and the client pays just one global bill.

I was encouraged by the practical knowledge of the Camif Habitat representative and the precision of his answers. He measured absolutely everything and took into account all aspects of the house and its installations. But we also realised that he was basing his calculations only on our ideas: He didn't suggest any alternatives. He asked us to give him details of our budget and we received the quote two weeks later.

But we were still asking ourselves exactly what it was we wanted and, given the size of the investment, we were definite that the renovations should be exactly what we wanted. We were still asking ourselves a lot of questions. The quote contained prices for each renovated room. But there was no price per square metre and we had no idea if the price we were being quoted was "within the norms" or not.

I decided to find out how the price could be broken down into detail so I asked colleagues who had already had similar work done what price per square metre they paid. I was also told by a friend who worked in real estate sales that the amount retained by the contractor was usually between 8 and 11%. I called Camif Habitat to see if it would be possible to negotiate the quoted

price, thinking naively that a member of their staff would be able to tell and because of the associative nature of the Camif that they would do their best to help me. I then discovered that Camif Habitat charged around 20% for verifying who contractors were and to serve as an intermediary between them and the clients. Shortly afterwards the Camif ran into serious financial difficulty and some of their subsidiaries were declared bankrupt. This made me question the reliability of the guarantee that they could give me.

It was around that time that I considered replacing the fireplace with a wood stove. I like the shape and style of wooden stoves and I was attracted by the eco-friendly aspect too. So the first catalogues arrived with their offers of well-designed stoves at high prices. These stoves are efficient and give considerable tax rebates. I contacted a retailer who explained that before installing a stove I had to make various changes to the chimney for safety reasons. Afterwards, a discussion with colleagues as well as my participation in internet discussion groups led me to discover that these stoves are mostly suitable for large rooms.

Then summer 2007 arrived and the project took a back seat. We were back at square one and we remembered that our desire to renovate the house had led to question whether we should even live in it.

September 2008

Our indecision led us to consult an interior designer with the idea of being able to create just what we wanted. We chose a small local company with only two

young staff. They asked us some general questions about what we wanted: which was more light as well as a change in colour schemes and tiling.

Their services consisted of one visit to our house, a discussion concerning our wishes and their proposal to supply us with plans and drawings in 3D. The visit went very smoothly. They made a few suggestions, most notably concerning colour choices for the walls and floors, and the best way to give the house a light and airy feel. These conceptual services were invoiced for €500 and we were supposed to pay immediately, before seeing their plans. We suddenly understood why, given their lack of material resources, why certain clients may be reluctant to pay. If we accepted their project they would choose which tradesmen would carry out the work and supervise them, and they would not be paid for those services, but would receive a percentage of the total cost of work carried out.

Our disappointment must have been visible to the consultants when we picked up the plans. They were going to tear down walls to create an open space with a few mid-height movable partitions dotted around. It appeared that they had not considered the available natural light properly and we didn't like the overall style. I noticed that the electrical installations had not been properly considered and I could not see how the workmen would be able to carry out the work. It was then that I began to ask myself serious questions about the capacity and authority of the consultants to be able to coordinate the different tradesmen and their work. So we left things there and they did not contact us

again. We were back to square one again, although we were beginning to understand exactly what we wanted.

End 2008

Our kitchen needed a few minor modifications so we invited a kitchen specialist to give us his ideas and send us a quote. He had a showroom in the area and produced made-to-measure kitchens. He didn't have a catalogue and he didn't run advertising campaigns, but he did have an impressive local clientele. Also, he had already done some refitting work for our existing kitchen, and that had gone very well.

His visit was very instructive and we realised that the existing kitchen would have to be dismantled and then rebuilt afterwards with the addition of some new elements. The first problem was that the dismantling/rebuilding work was technically difficult and would be expensive given the limited improvement that would be made. He finally suggested that we consider a totally new approach to the kitchen furniture, saying that it was, after all, a long-term investment.

From that moment onwards the project took on a larger aspect, as did the price. We began to imagine a new design and we visited the designer's showroom quite often to think about layout and structure. It became clear that the further we went, the more it would cost. Still, this was just the ideas stage after all.

I was able to talk to friends who were also refitting their kitchens using the large kitchen specialist networks and make rough price estimates according to what kind of work was involved. I also went online to look at catalogues, some of which gave details of prices. I knew that some kitchen specialists started with very high prices, only to make big reductions during negotiations, so you wouldn't know whether you were getting a good deal or not. The characteristics of my new kitchen began to become clearer in my mind and discussions became more focused on installation details. As we didn't have a definite price we contacted a national company. Then I realised that if I was to play the different companies off against each other I would need to go through a process almost as long as the previous one because the products proposed were not the same. So we decided not to get a second quote and we began to work more closely with the local kitchen specialist on his quote, which we received in March 2009. After some price negotiations we accepted his quote at the end of the month.

Since September 2008

As things progressed we talked with people to get their advice, points of view and ideas. Some friends gave us their opinion: to have more light, why not install large glass patio doors in the outside wall? We thought that was an interesting idea, although I had the impression that the construction of the house may make the work difficult to carry out. But we said "why not?".

We decided to install the biggest patio doors possible and I asked a builder who specialised in renovation work and who had previously put in a window

for us, for his advice. He was a friendly guy and he had worked tidily and well. He came to see us at the end of 2008 and declared that the work presented no particular problem. However, the layout of the house meant that the patio doors would have to be carried through the house itself to their location and this would be difficult given their size.

He said that there was no problem because the doors would be delivered in kit form and that he would assemble them where they were to be installed. He said that knocking down enough wall to allow the installation would not be a problem either. But, wanting to be absolutely sure about it, I looked for another point of view because the builder didn't have a design department.

I have an ex-student who worked in construction so I sent him the plans and asked him if he could have them checked by the company's design department. He said that to be absolutely sure it would probably be advisable to put two supporting pillars into the wall. I began to feel a little worried so during one of my regular visits to the student's construction company I consulted a technician who confirmed that the builder was right.

To avoid having to coordinate the various workmen – builders, tilers and painters – myself, I asked the builder to prepare a quote for the building work, as well as the tiling, plastering and painting. It was at that moment that the choice of tiling became necessary, and so a series of visits to tiling specialists began. Which colour, what tile sizes, what price, and how should I match it all to the walls, for which I hadn't yet chosen the colour? You also need

authorisation from the town hall to enlarge a window and the application takes two months. So the choice was made to begin work on May 11 2009.

I got the name of an electrician from the kitchen specialist. This is an important choice because it is preferable that the kitchen specialist and the electrician get on well. I worked things out so that they could work in a complementary manner and I built in a week's leeway based on the building work schedule. That meant that I could adapt to any slippage without problems.

Everything seemed thus to be well-organised: the dates had been decided upon as well as the total length of time needed to complete the job.

Then I began to consider the possibility of changing the front door. To help me with my choice I went to a tiling specialist who sold quality products. He gave me delivery dates (6 weeks) and prices. As a door size needs to be very precisely calculated and as it was the builder's job to install the door after delivery I left him to do the measurements and order the door. Taking into account the six-week delivery date my idea was that the door arrive at the end, which was scheduled for the beginning of June. So at that moment – the end of April 2009 - there was more than enough time and everything had been planned.

June 11 2009. Work begins

Before things got underway I prepared a few detailed drawings for the builder and his men so that all dimensions would be clearly stated. He arrived on the due date with his men and they began to take down the portion of wall that needed to go as well as doing the same to the interior walls, as agreed. The drawings showed that one wall had to be cut horizontally 120cm and vertically 90cm, and when they arrived I repeated those figures to them. But when I got home that evening I found that they had done the exact opposite. They had cut a 90cm horizontal by 120cm vertical hole. But that wasn't a real problem, said the builder. All he had to do was to use plasterboard to hide the excess and everything would be fine. In the next few days the workmen came and went according to a schedule I did not understand and I wondered if the work would be completed on time. But the builder assured me that everything was going well and would be ready on time. Sometimes he would tell me before leaving that he would be there the next day. But he wasn't.

On the day that the patio doors were to be installed I popped by during the day to see how things were going and talk to the builder. I saw that the patio doors had not been delivered in kit form and the builders were busy lugging the complete doors over my neighbour's garage in order to get them to their destination. I had to explain things as diplomatically as possible to him afterwards.

The builder thought that he could install the new tiling on top of the original tiling because the floor appeared to be relatively flat. There were a couple of

dips here and there but he said that they could be dealt with by using a little more glue. But when the work was done it became apparent that the tiling was badly laid in certain areas because the floor hadn't been flat enough. When I mentioned this to the builder he suggested that I may have walked on the tiling before the glue had dried! It was finally decided that the builder would refix certain badly-placed tiles. The result was still less than satisfactory, but there was nothing that could be done about it unless I decided to begin a long legal process to obtain satisfaction.

During a discussion at the beginning of June I learned from the builder that the walls could not be painted before the kitchen had been installed. His previous obligations counted for nothing and the building work thus stopped temporarily so that the kitchen specialist could do his work. All the kitchen components were duly delivered. I checked the contents of each delivery and everything was in order except for the worktops, which were in a different colour to that which I had ordered (grey instead of brown.)

We contacted the kitchen specialist and he attempted to persuade us to accept the brown worktops in exchange for a partial refund. He also said that the delivery date for the gray ones would be six weeks, which we managed to reduce to two weeks after contacting the manufacturer.

The kitchen was finally installed one week later except for the worktops, which could be easily and rapidly installed, so the builders returned to do the painting. We had chosen the colours two months beforehand, so everything

was ready. But when the painting was finished the effect was not to our liking. So we decided to have the work redone in another colour. This pushed back the completion date and increased the bill.

The remaining work restarted during the last week of August, the door was installed and it was all over at the end of the month.....the month of August 2009.

This vignette provides another illustration of the distinction between the concept of role as a labelling device and role as an evolving description of behaviours. The consumer is not simply a “consumer”, but at various times, advisor, instructor, operative, decision-taker, subject to the decisions of others, learner and teacher, although conveniently labelled as “owner”. The variability between leading and following, teaching and learning has been referred to in the IMP literature as the managerial choices between “conforming” and “confronting” in business interaction (Ford et al 2002). The vignette illustrates the numerous role episodes in a long-term context, each with more or less ambiguity in the role expectations and attributions of the actors. Each of these roles arises from the continuing context, from the various actors involved and the different issues that they face and from the interaction between those actors. For example, some of the roles performed by the owner are linked with his *continuing* and over-arching roles as house owner/custodian/decider. Some of his other roles arise from differences between his expectations of others and their actual role performance.

The role performed by some actors in several episodes are in line with what it is expected by the owner as a customer. One example is the episode of designing and installing the kitchen by the kitchen specialist: The kitchen specialist manages the process of designing the kitchen by answering to all questions asked by the owner and by integrating his ideas. He suggests some alternatives ideas based on his expertise. The installation is completed on time. When the problem of the worktops color appears, he tries to negotiate but finally he solves the problem. The role of customer taken by the owner does not change during this process. He always acts simply as a customer. The kitchen specialist acts as a tailor made solution provider.

The roles performed by some actors are not in line with what it is expected by the owner as a customer. Either the owner is frustrated or he adopts another approach by working with another actor as a customer. Alternatively, the owner has to change his role according to the characteristics of the episode. Thus he moves from a role as customer to another role in order to continue the project context.

An example of the gap between expectations and attributions is the episode of first design and definition of the characteristics by Camif and the contractor. As a member of Camif, the owner expects his project be properly carried out. This role is taken on in a professional way. Given that Camif is an association and a cooperative of which the owner has been a member for a long time, he also expects his interests to be defended. This is particularly in terms of the prices charged by the contractor. Here he discovers the ambiguity of the intermediary role performed by Camif. The owner expects creative proposals from the contractor taking on the role of interior designer that go beyond his list of specifications. The contractor's reply concentrates solely on

completing the project in accordance with the list of specifications supplied. Because expected roles are not performed the owner, as a customer, looks for alternatives.

Another example of the gap between expectations and attributions is the episode of completion by the craftsmen. The craftsman does not, or cannot fulfil the role that is attributed to him by the owner and the development of the context involves a succession of ambiguous positions for each of the actors. This leads to role strain. In most of the episodes, the owner seeks to reduce his uncertainty by adopting the role that is being attributed to him by others. A good example of this can be found in the validation of technical choice by the design department of the construction company. Because he is not quite sure about the expertise of the craftsman and their technical decisions, the owner consults a construction company and gains its advice on the feasibility of building the patio door. In this episode, the owner is still taking the role of controlling the progress of the project and compensating for any weakness on the part of the supplier.

This vignette describes the interactions between an individual actor and an evolving role-set. It is written from the perspective of that individual actor. A description of the evolving context from the perspective any of the other counterparts would have produced similar, but very different role expectations and attributions within the wider context of each of the actor's role set. The importance of the different "network pictures" of actors in influencing their approaches to business interaction and to the roles that they attribute and expect from others and for themselves has been an important theme in IMP research in recent years (Ford et al., 2002; Henneberg et al., 2006).

This description of an evolving project context for an individual actor has strong parallels with the evolving context between business companies. Experience suggests that role attributions and expectations commonly vary widely both between an actor and different counterparts within its role set and with particular counterparts over time. For example, it is common for an actor to take on additional development work in a particular context, to incur additional costs or to have to interact with a wider role set in order to achieve its aims.

Role Expectations, Attributions and Interactions in the Context of a Large Business Project.

Our final vignette develops the idea of varying roles within a major business project and describes the efforts of an actor to alter the role expectations of it held by a counterpart:

In late 1994, EuroElectric⁸ an Italian supplier of electrical equipment learned of a project involving World Trucks' Italian factory in Pistoia, close to the city of Florence. World Trucks is the industrial vehicle division of the German World Motors company. World Trucks wanted to develop a new automated engine assembly line that would serve not only the needs of World Trucks, but also those of other European truck manufacturers.

⁸ The names of all companies in this vignette have been disguised.

The Pistoia factory is administratively part of the Italian Division of World Trucks. However technical and commercial purchasing decisions are centralised at the corporate head-office in Bavaria. World Motors' own engineering subsidiary – World Motors Engineering – is often (but not necessarily) called upon to handle the development projects of the various companies within the World Motors Corporation. EuroElectric found out that World Motors Engineering is to be in charge of coordinating the site modernisation which forms the first part of the project and that the electrical layout of the Pistoia factory is to be completely renewed.

The electrical part of the Pistoia project will represent 7 to 8% of the total budget. This means that if EuroElectric is to act as a conventional supplier of electrical generating equipment: 1) Its share of the total project will not exceed 8%; 2) It will have to bid for each of the numerous calls for tenders that will be issued by the engineering company.

In order to prepare their approach to the project, EuroElectric marketing and sales team met Mertin Hetter, the electrical engineer within the Ecology/Energy Department of World Trucks in Munich. Hetter confirmed that the project feasibility study had been given to World Motors Engineering, but that other companies will still be consulted for the design and implementation of the project. Immediately after this meeting, the marketing and sales team met with World Motors Engineering's managers in an effort to increase their understanding of World Motor's approach and to obtain more information on the project. Based on this meeting, EuroElectric summarised

World Motors Engineering's vision of the electrical part of the project as: "*a brick in the total budget*". In other words, EuroElectric's role would be to work efficiently within a brief that came from World Motors Engineering.

At the beginning of 1995, the EuroElectric marketing and sales team, together with its technical experts from the company had several meetings in Munich with Mertin Hetter and World Motors Engineering. From these, EuroElectric are able to precisely define the Pistoia factory's energy need and layout. EuroElectric were impressed by Hetter's knowledge and openness to innovation. His relationship with EuroElectric's team involves the transfer of technical know-how between the two and this leads progressively to an atmosphere of mutual trust. Throughout these meetings, EuroElectric were trying and to some extent succeeding in changing their involvement in the project towards a more advisory relationship and away from simply being a subcontractor.

It then became clearer that World Trucks' ambition was to turn the Pistoia factory into a reference-factory that integrated as many technical innovations as possible. EuroElectric started to appreciate the greater potential that this had for their involvement.

In the meantime, EuroElectric's team met electrical installers that usually worked with World Trucks and World Motors Engineering. In parallel, the German subsidiary of EuroElectric in Munich gathered more information from the customer's head offices and transmitted this to the various EuroElectric

units involved in the project. Thus EuroElectric built up a clear picture of the customer, its habits, purchasing organisation, supply management, buyer/seller relationships, etc. EuroElectric also developed a clear idea of the roles that they wished to perform in the relationship and of what they wished to achieve through this.

At the end of March 1995, the EuroElectric marketing and sales team started to organise the follow-up of actions, given that: several calls for tender would soon be issued on the project electrical works, each representing a separate “brick” in the total project. Both German and Italian suppliers were to be contacted and World Motors Engineering would be in competition with other engineering companies involved the project.

The goal of EuroElectric was to avoid having to bid for tenders issued by any other company or World Motors Engineering. . They wanted to draw up the technical specifications on behalf of the World Trucks electrician Mertin Hetter. Hetter was gradually won over by the innovative project presented by EuroElectric. He agreed work with EuroElectric so that EuroElectric would be paid to develop the specification for the electrical part of the project together with Hetter and without the involvement of World Motors Engineering. This approach would enable Hetter to keep control over this part of the factory’s modernisation.

This tactic proved to be successful and in June 1995, World Trucks withdrew the electrical contract and civil works initially allocated to World Motors

Engineering. This decision greatly enhanced Hetter's influence and changed EuroElectric's role from that of contractor to that of developer/specifier/advisor with their consequent involvement in drafting the technical specifications for the several electrical calls for tender.

This vignette deals with the interactions between at least three actors in a complex multi-level and multi-actor context. The vignette illustrates the interplay between individual and corporate actors in socio-economic interaction and the complexity and evolution of role attributions and expectations. The vignette illustrates the connections between single role episodes and continuing interaction. In this case, the role sending and role receiving involving EuroElectric and World Motors Engineering is connected and its outcomes ultimately determined by the processes between EuroElectric and Hetter. The interactions between EuroElectric and Hetter show how the actors' interactions in a narrowly defined context can be used to affect interactions in a wider context and how interaction with one or more actors within a role-set may be affected by interactions with others. In this case we see how EuroElectric is seeking to avoid interaction with other engineering companies and especially World Motors Engineering by building its role performance in interaction with Hetter.

EuroElectric is seeking to perform a different role from that attributed to it by World Motors Engineering and by other engineering companies. It does that in order to escape (Role distance) the classic role expectation of "electrical supplier" which will limit its chances to win a greater part of the project. With its innovative ideas EuroElectric acts more as a consultant for Mertin Hetter than as a supplier but this is incompatible with role expectations from the engineering companies. This type of

role strain between actors on a project is becoming more apparent in socio-economic life: Business actors that traditionally delivered products or services are now trying to sell “solutions”, using a consultative selling approach. These actors aim to perform the role of consultant and/or front-end supplier (Role embracement) without being obliged to sell through an engineering company or a project manager (Role distance). However, in many cases, this approach is unrealistic, either because of the spurious nature of the supposed solution or because their counterparts still attribute to them the role of ‘supplier’ of a part of a project in which they or others perform an enhanced role. Thus, the task of marketing and sales department is to modify the role attributed to the company by the client and its network of actors (the role set) in order to meet its new role expectations.

CONCLUSIONS

Socio-economic interaction is a pervasive phenomenon throughout society involving complex combinations of individual and corporate actors. This paper has been based on the idea that socio-economic interaction cannot be neatly compartmentalised into business and non-business, nor can its participants be characterised by simple labels or categories. Socio-economic interaction stretches between the forms of the social and the economic and always involves the combined performances of individual and aggregate actors. Socio-economic activity is not composed of isolated episodes, nor does it occur in separate situations. All socio-economic activity is part of a process over time and takes place within multi-layers of interaction and interpretation.

We started this paper with the idea of the commonalities of socio-economic interaction across supposed boundaries and with a concern that our conventional labels for actors and activities hid more than they revealed. We also did not wish to add to our already existing set of concepts nor to build grand theory. Instead, we planned simply to examine some of our own experiences using a parsimonious and well established set of concepts; actors, context and interaction.

Does the use of role interaction theory mean that we can get rid of conventional notions of the role of the customer, the supplier, etc? The vignettes that we have taken from our own personal and professional experience still use these terms. However, these vignettes and our analysis suggest that the terms can only be used for the purpose of initial labelling and only to distinguish between different actors. The analysis of actual role performance by similar labelled actors shows wide variation between actors and for each actor over time. Similarly the analysis of actual role performance shows clear similarities between differently labelled actors. At the simplest level, both “customers” and “suppliers” may develop the products that form part of their interaction.

This is a preliminary paper: The vignettes are those that are convenient and the analysis is superficial. The next task is to use the idea of role interaction in more complex situations and to build on our abilities to differentiate between role interaction in all its forms, to examine the effects and connections between contexts and to explore the concept of the interacting actor and its roles.

The search for conceptual simplicity goes on.....

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