

Progress by renaming old ideas? Ideas about ideas and their role and importance in understanding Business Networks*

Ian Wilkinson
Discipline of Marketing
The University of Sydney Business School

Version 2.0 9 September 2011

(Invited comment for IMM Special Issue on IMP Research in 2011 later not published)

* Acknowledgement. I would like to thank Jens Geersbro, Thomas Ritter and Louise Young for calming me down and helping me to better frame and express my ideas.

Abstract

The Corsaro et al (2011) article in this special issue involves a selective rewriting and recasting of the history ideas about management ideas that is unfair to others in and outside IMP, who have made significant contributions to our understanding of the role, importance and evolution of management ideas, cognitions and schemas and their links with behaviour. I do not believe that the renaming of old established ideas and claiming this as groundbreaking is not scientific progress. I also critique the validity of the empirical research as being more a study of managers perceptions of academic terms than about the real fit between relationship structures and strategies.

1. Introduction

New ideas come from existing ideas being combined and recombined in new ways that have value in advancing understanding (Romer 2007). Or, as Matt Ridley (2010) describes it: ideas having sex with each other. It is appropriate to acknowledge the pedigree of new ideas in terms of the ideas they are built from. It is not appropriate to pretend that a new idea is an island all by itself with no network of links to other ideas from which it arose, and/or to rename existing ideas in order to claim them as substantially your creation. The progress of science takes place step by step, as we stand on the shoulders of giants that have gone before, not by carving out fictitious boundaries of knowledge invention, in order to argue that a particular idea has not been invented in my neck of the woods before, so it can be claimed it as significant advance in understanding. For example the following statement: "Currently no such understanding exist regarding the specifics of network-related cognition and networking strategies in the IMP Field of research" exemplifies this approach (Corsaro et al 2011 p920).

There has been much work before on managers' ideas, cognitions, schemas, sensemaking (whatever words you want to use), but of course not using the specific term "network pictures", outside and inside IMP. Within IMP they

include significant contributions by, among others: Anderson, Hakansson and Johanson (1994), Johanson and Mattsson (1992), Samli, Havila and Andersen (2001) and Welch and Wilkinson (2002). Corsaro (2101) even refer to these people in their literature review section, so they are aware of them. Because of this it is difficult to understand the above statement. There is clearly much previous research, including substantial research by IMP linked researchers. IMP research and researchers cover a broad church, which is very interdisciplinary and integrating. I am concerned that at least some of the IMP network of business network researchers are falling into the same traps they railed against when they were younger, which led to the formation of the IMP research group in the first place.

The next sentence in the paper takes this approach further: “Given this gap in the literature, the objective of this paper is to empirically investigate how aspects of actors' network pictures affect, condition and frame strategic managerial decisions, specifically networking”. I do not believe they have identified a gap in the literature and they take a rather narrow view of what constitutes IMP research and researchers.

A failure to acknowledge the sources of ideas and the process of building from them is like repacking old wine in new bottles. And the resulting concept, “network pictures”, is the poorer for it. It gets distorted to include missing elements that are a natural part of prior concepts and terms, such as ideas, schemas, memes or cognitions. An example of the problems arising is the need to declare that network pictures actually include words (and presumably numbers)! Actually I think the idea (note the use of this word here) of picturing a network, actually drawing a picture of a network as a manager sees it, is a useful addition to the techniques of surfacing managers thinking and cognitions and sensemaking. However this too - is only part of a much large corpus of theory and methodology, a tweak, and psychological interviews have used such picturing techniques for a long time to reveal something about the mental state of people. So even -the idea, of network pictures itself is not new; but this is not acknowledged in the paper.

The literature review of previous research on management cognition is solid but then seems to be totally ignored for the remainder of the paper. Instead further assertions are to be found that no one has done any empirical studies of the relations between network pictures and management action. This is right only in the sense that the words “network pictures” were not used in previous research reported in the literature. But lots of empirical studies have been done using more commonly-used terms like sensemaking, schemas, cognitions. etc. For an introduction and overview of some of these see Rong and Wilkinson (2011). And there is one example of empirical work in this area from researchers linked to IMP. Welch and Wilkinson (2002) discussion of idea logics was based on an extensive in depth case history of the evolution of the international industrial networks for sugar cane. It involved a great number of interviews, tracking down of reports and commentaries and extensive archival research in Australia and the UK. This is empirical research.

More generally the concept of network pictures lacks depth and coherence because it merely pays lip service to prior research and theorising, preferring exclusively to refer to their own earlier papers. This plays down the long and distinguished history of research and theories regarding human cognition – in psychology (cognitive consistency, selective perception, self serving biases, ideas, beliefs, values), biology (genese, memes and memetics), complex systems theory (schemas), management (sensemaking) and marketing (network position, network horizons, network theories, idea logics).

A central analytical framework of IMP, the ARA model, leaves out a major component of business relations and networks, specifically that of ideas, and this is increasingly recognized within both this IMP group and the wider IMP community. Retrofitting network pictures into this model as a natural of it is rather narrow-minded, incestuous and self-serving.

2. On Ideas and Being Human

Some I am sure will dismiss my concerns as mere sour grapes. After all I co-authored with Catherine Welch an award winning paper in 2002 in the *Journal of Business to Business Marketing* on the topic of idea logics in business networks and this is an important piece of what is being marginalized in the Corsaro et al (2011) article. In our paper we made plain that our addition to ARA came from a rich intellectual history of ideas about ideas and their place in the scheme of things. We refer to earlier concepts of network theories by Johanson and Mattsson (1992) and to the cognitive turn in psychology and management as new methods of studying the brain and mind have revolutionised cognitive theories of conscious and non conscious brain functioning.

Since 2002 there has been further progress. We now can literally see thinking going on in a brain and we can model it. One thing I still regret is taking out the references to Richard Dawkins' and others' work on memes as the new type of replicator in the world – units of thought, ideas, that jump from mind to mind through communication and copying processes and the way cultural evolution takes place and impacts on our actions and performance generally (see Blackmore 2000; Dawkins 1976; Richerson and Boyd 2006). A reviewer was obviously not familiar with this work, thought it not worthy and advised against including it. I gave in to get it published and removed the references. Shame on me!

Human minds are embedded in the world and minds of others and so it is in business (Clark 1997). And this is what was missing in the original ARA or AAR or RAA model, the idea of the model itself and the ideas in the minds of managers! Ideas are agents in the world juts like people (actors), resources and activities. Some may try to force fit ideas into the As or the R but we considered this in our 2002 paper and showed why this is not appropriate. Others have taken up the challenge and meaning, business models, sensemaking, management theories, value and, yes, network pictures are examples of this. But they are all aspects of the one underlying neglected dimension.

Humans are unique. Ants, chemicals and atoms are not self-reflective; they do not interpret their world like we do. They do not have theories of being an ant or chemistry or physics or engineering. We are different. Four things together make us unique compare to other living things- bigger brains, voluntary memory recall, mirror neurons and a symbol language. The result is that we have a theory of mind – our own and others. We can be at our desk managing some firm but in our mind be far away in a forest communing with nature and what we are thinking and remembering is affecting our behaviour. Other animals only respond to their immediate environment, thought they can and do learn to avoid danger and find food and rewards. They do not represent the world in symbols, have a language, and use these symbols in speech and thought to refer to things that are not present and respond to these symbols. Autism is sometimes characterised in terms of a person’s inability to have a theory of mind and thus to have any empathy with others but most of us do. Because of these development we have empathy with others, we can literally put ourselves into another’s mind. Someone else’s hurt or joy can become our own. An informative overview of how humans evolved these traits is to be found in Merlin (2000) and in a very entertaining and informative Channel 4 BBC Television documentary, “What Makes us Human” written and presented by Armand Leroi (channel4.com/science).

3. Reviewing the Review

I was one of the reviewers of this paper and made a number of criticisms of it and recommended that it not be published until the authors changed the misleading representation of the intellectual history in this area. Out of this comes this commentary, which was sent to the authors in order that they be able to write a rejoinder.

Here is what I wrote in my review of their revised paper. My comments go to the rewriting of intellectual history in this area as well as to the methods employed in their study and to the way the results are interpreted. In each case I quote from their responses to my comments on their original paper and give my reply. I have tidied up the English and spelling a bit and toned it down a might. Having since read the published version, I add further comments at the end in terms of how well the published version addresses the issues raised.

My comments on an earlier version of their paper included said (amongst other things): “The perceptions of managers and people more generally goes back to all of the interpretivist type literature, such as we see in consumer behavior for example. Also, the true origin of this focus goes back (in IMP) to Lars-Gunnar Mattsson and his concept of network theories. I get kind of annoyed when new words are used to refer to older concepts and then used as if they have an independent life of their own. I read articles using the term network pictures that seem blissfully unaware of the general theories and concepts. Sensemaking is the commonly used term and there is much literature on this in management and elsewhere. There is also the cognitive turn in psych and social psych that allows us to focus on perceptions and how they are developed and used. So let’s not play silly games with words to carve out non-existing niches in the literature. Network pictures are used to refer to sensemaking the network managers operate in.”

Their response, when they submitted a revised version of the paper, which essentially is the one published, was: “We completely agree with the reviewer about the origin of network pictures as derived from Lars-Gunnar’s work on network theories, with which we are familiar. The relevant is now mentioned in the manuscript, namely in the introduction section. However, from around 2002 onwards this theory generated a concept, i.e. network pictures, as part of the ‘managing in networks’ model by Ford et al. (2003). All studies following on from this have used the term ‘network pictures’ for what is essentially the ‘managers’ network theories’: see for example Henneberg et al. 2006; Kragh and Andersen, 2009, Leek and Mason, 2009; Ford and Ramos, 2010, etc.). The recent IMM Special Issue on cognition and sense-making (e.g. Henneberg et al., 2010) traces this development. Lars-Gunnar himself now uses the term ‘network pictures’ as well. In our manuscript we are therefore using the ‘terminology’ that is currently common within the IMP literature in order to define an actor’s representation of its surrounding business network. This clearly positions our study in the IMP debate, and relates it to the underlying ‘managing in networks’ model by Ford et al. (2003). We are therefore also very cautious in extending our findings to more general theories in cognitive and social psychology.”

My Response: Thank you for acknowledging that the concepts of management sensemaking and cognition in business marketing did not begin with the birth of the phrase “network pictures”. Acknowledging that Mattsson proposed the same essential idea, using the term managers’ “network theories” some years before is also appropriate. But you seem to be still engaged in a game of rewriting history in your own best interests. Dare I say that this is a perfect example of the very concepts you are focusing on in the paper! That is our theories or ideas or sensemaking of our worlds, including our academic theories, research and literature worlds. Thus I reject assertions that “All studies following on from this have used the term ‘network pictures’ for what is essentially the ‘managers’ network theories.” You list a self serving set of references that conform to what you wish to assert but which are not “proving” that all studies following on from this have used the term network pictures. Far from it, work on management sensemaking has been on going in many publications, papers by Kristian Moller have examined the cognitive dimension – all of them not necessarily aware of or using the term network pictures. There is also the earlier paper by Welch and Wilkinson (2002) “Idea Logics and Network Theory in Business Marketing” *Journal of Business to Business Marketing*, 8 (3), 27-48 (and in earlier IMP conference papers). This clearly linked their concepts of manager’s ideas, mental model or schemas to Mattsson’s earlier work, sensemaking and other research and integrated these into and extended the more general ARA model of IMP to include schemas, schema couplings and schema configurations. This paper even won best paper award in the journal. So why is all this and the literature these people refer to ignored or marginalized in favour of some intellectual catch phrase that some may prefer to use for various reasons and agendas? The answer is that this is not balanced intellectual scholarship but some kind of advocacy that is unnecessary and out of place. You may choose to use the term network pictures to refer to what you are doing. I have no problem with this. But it is inappropriate, in my view, to make self-serving assertions make selective references to the literature to hide inconvenient truths. There is a vast

literature on cognition and schemas and cultural and knowledge evolution to be aware of and be humbled by. I like to go back to the concept of memes first proposed by Richard Dawkins and developed further by Susan Blackmore in *The Meme Machine*. Research papers should not be about selective promotion of some words and contributions. Isn't this what the IMP Group has been railing about for so long when people from across the Atlantic conveniently ignore and selectively feature or not IMP research.

You later say how ideas are fundamental and make the following comments:

“We agree that ‘ideas’ (in the wider sense) are at the heart of the network picture concept. Thus, the assertion that network pictures as drawings (i.e. merely pictorial descriptions) do not fully capture such ideas is in our view correct. Therefore, in our research we follow Henneberg et al.’s (2009) suggestion of network pictures consisting of pictorial AND textual components, which cover together cognitive representations of the surrounding business network. We make this point now clearer in the manuscript but also hope that the provision of some stimuli in the appendix (which show the interplay of pictorial and textual elements) clarifies this point. We agree with the reviewer that there exists a risk when network pictures are merely drawings. Thus, we carried out the extensive pre-test and assessed that the respondents understood the provided pictorial and textual stimuli together.”

My response: In this you admit that network pictures is a flawed term in that it implies that text is not included. Yet you cling to the network picture term despite this, using one convenient cite (to your own article no less!), when there are perfectly good, non-flawed terms in use in the literature, including the IMP literature itself! This further supports the comments I make above.

You say: “In our study we focus only on one part of the model (i.e. how cognition affect behaviour; a very ‘Kantian’ proposition) as we believe that including both directions in this phase of the research would add complexity to the manuscript that could reduce its readability.”

My response: I am sorry, I cannot see that the point of two-way interactions over time requires some rocket science that “would add complexity to the manuscript that could reduce its readability.” This is a silly argument. Yes you cannot cover everything in one paper. But clarify your boundaries and bed your research in the literature – not some self-serving part of it.

You say in response to my request to use well established IMP conceptualisations of the dimensions of business relations and networks instead of the somewhat arbitrary “dimensions” you propose: “Instead of considering all the proposed dimensions in our study, we choose to focus on those which have a potentially stronger impact on actors’ networking choices, based on indications from the IMP Group and strategic management literature.”

My response: This is not an adequate response and merely tries to sidestep the issue with assertions of convenience ie “choose to focus on those which have a potentially stronger impact on actors’ networking choices” And how were these determined? By a selected literature review and asking managers themselves, i.e. getting their ideas about their ideas to compare their ideas with! And it is supported also by the magical

phrase “based on indications from the IMP Group and strategic management literature”. This is hardly science at work. The most established conceptualization of IMP is the ARA model and I would include its extension to ARAS (with S = Schemas) in light of Welch and Wilkinson (2002).

You say in reference to the different types of overlapping network frameworks discussed: “Findings show that Hoffman’s (2007) model is the one which works better to explain the relationships between actors’ beliefs regarding their surrounding business network and their networking choices”.

My response: Where is your evidence for this assertion that Hoffman’s works better? Assertion is not logic or evidence it is advocacy.

You say: “However, the Ford et al. (2003) model of networking has been extensively used in the literature and it represents (to the best of our knowledge) the networking model that is most widely recognized amongst IMP researchers, i.e. it is the ‘dominant model’.”

My response: This is yet further evidence of your own self-serving sensemaking regarding prior research. This is not appropriate for a top tier academic journal. It is not about advocacy but evidence, it is not about pushing one’s own views of the world on others.

The next comment (i.e. that I made in my original review of the paper) on power perceptions is basically ignored and side stepped. But what you are saying about managers’ idea of power and their actions is still too vague and not theory based. Your response about dynamics only adds to my confusion. Defining it as temporality? Why? Where does that get us? Dynamics is a term that has meaning, it cannot be conveniently redefined and narrowed. Also, saying that it is “included in the operationalization as a comparative-static representation” suggests to me the term is misunderstood – comparative statics is not the same as dynamics.

You say: The four dimensions that were selected and tested in our study resulted from a thorough process that drew on the extant literature of network picture operationalizations, and included academic experts in business-to-business marketing, as well as experienced managers, to validate our choices.

My response: You are still struggling to justify your dimensions and failing to do so for this reviewer at least. You have simply ignored alternative IMP and other theory in favour of some weird process you assert is valid. Hence you assert: “we believe that the dimensions of perceptions that are included in the study, although they obviously set the boundaries of the explanatory power of our study, reflect important and pivotal aspects of the relationship between cognition and behaviors in a business network setting.” No amount of strong assertion can overcome problems of logic and theory.

I am still unconvinced that you have used manager relevant concepts in your experiments. Your dimensions are academic speak not manager speak. I know we can go to managers and offer them new terms and they will try to make sense of them but that is the problem you are trying to study.

You defend your methods this way: We therefore checked in-depth that there were no flaws in our experimental design. To do that, we met on different occasions several experts, respectively, from the areas of social psychology, managerial cognition and experimental design. We discuss this issue now more clearly in the methodology section.

My response: I am sure you met with other experts but mere process evidence is not evidence of validity of result. This has to be justified itself and my comments about what managers in your experiments are responding to stand – we have no real idea. You present no convincing support for your conclusions.

4. Conclusions

Having read the published version of the paper I find nothing has changed and that all my comments have been ignored. Maybe my schemas are twisted and my sensemaking warped?

I could go into more depth about my reservations about the type of research methodologies employed in their paper, in which managers perceptions, responses and recall are used to make inferences about the way real markets, relations and networks work. In this case forcing managers to respond to and match abstract descriptions of business situations based on concepts and dimensions they do not used that are imposed on them by academics. This is a game and we only learn about how managers try to make sense of academics' questions. But I will not repeat what has already been well argued, and commented on by a number of very senior marketing academics, in their responses to a recent paper in the *Australasian Marketing Journal* by Rong and Wilkinson (2011) (see comments by Wensley, Woodside and the like in the same issue). Is this self serving? Probably but if they can keep quoting and referring to themselves then so can I.

5. References

Anderson, J., Håkansson, H., & Johanson, J. (1994). Dyadic business relationships within a business network context. *Journal of Marketing*, 58(4), 1–16.

Blackmore, S. (2000). *The Meme Machine*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Clark, A. (1997) *Being There: Putting Brain, Body and the World Together*. Boston, MA: MIT Press.

Corsaro, D., Ramos, C., Henneberg, S. C., and Naudé, P. (2011). Actor network pictures and networking activities in business networks: An experimental study. *Industrial Marketing Management* 40 (6), 919-932

Dawkins, R. (1976). *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Johanson, J., & Mattsson, L. -G. (1992). Network positions and strategic action — An analytical framework. In D. Ford (Ed.), *Understanding Business Markets* (3rd edition).

- Merlin, D. (2000) "Cognitive Evolution and the Definition of Human Nature." *Philosophy of Science Monographs*, Morris Foundation, Little Rock, Arkansas.
- Richerson, Peter. J., and Robert Boyd. 2006. *Not by Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Ridley, M. 2010. *The Rational Optimist: How Prosperity Evolves*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Salmi, A., Havila, V., & Anderson, H. (2001). Acquisitions and network horizons. *Nordic Organization Studies*, 3(4), 59–81.
- Rong, B and Wilkinson, I. F. (2011). What do managers' survey responses mean and what affects them. The case of marketing orientation and firm performance. *Australasian Marketing Journal*, 19(3), 137-147.
- Welch, C., & Wilkinson, I. (2002). Idea logics and network theory in business marketing. *Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing*, 9(3), 27–48.