



## Theoretical developments in industrial marketing management: Multidisciplinary perspectives

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### ABSTRACT

Marketing as a discipline in general, and industrial marketing in particular, has drawn upon a number of different theoretical perspectives from domains as diverse as organisational theory, systems analysis, economics, psychology, sociology and anthropology to further our understanding. However, to build this understanding and increase the relevance of marketing research, we need to be aware of the ontological assumptions and stances that such theoretical perspectives use. The purpose of this special issue is therefore to offer a platform for the exploration, comparison, application, and consideration of ontological choice and its implications in industrial marketing research. To achieve this we review early industrial marketing scholarship in this first section. In the second section, we identify the larger ebbs and flows that mark the development and advancement of industrial marketing research. In the final section, we provide an overview of the papers in this special issue in the form of a thematic exploration of theoretical developments in industrial marketing management research.

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### 1. Introduction: Reviewing the past and exploring the future of industrial marketing research

Marketing as a discipline in general, and industrial marketing in particular, has drawn upon a number of different theoretical perspectives from domains as diverse as organisational theory, systems analysis, economics, psychology, sociology and anthropology (Buvik, 2001; Murgolo-Poore, Pitt, & Berthon, 2003). As marketing researchers we not only draw upon these diverse theoretical perspectives, but we also regularly combine differing theoretical perspectives, from within and outside the management and marketing disciplines, to further our understanding. However, to build these new theoretical understandings and increase the relevance of marketing research, we need to be aware of the ontological assumptions and stances that such theoretical perspectives use. Knowing how conceptually close or distant differing theoretical approaches are to the marketing phenomena of interest and how compatible they are in terms of their underlying properties and characteristics in providing explanations will have a major impact on the contribution researchers may make in using such theories (Okhuysen & Bonardi, 2011).

Given the importance of ontology in framing research contributions, it is surprising that greater attention is not paid to exploring different ontological and epistemological approaches in industrial marketing research (Easton, 1998). The purpose of this special issue is therefore to offer a

platform for the exploration, comparison, application, and consideration of ontological choice and its implications in industrial marketing research. To achieve this we review early industrial marketing scholarship in this first section. In the second section, we identify the larger ebbs and flows that mark the development and advancement of industrial marketing research. In the final section, we provide an overview of the papers in this special issue in the form of a thematic exploration of theoretical developments in industrial marketing management research.

#### 1.1. Taking stock of early industrial marketing scholarship

Why would our introduction to this special issue of *IMM*, with a remit to explore the role and development of theory in industrial marketing, consider the origins and identity of the field? George Day (1996:14) reflected on the importance of histories thus: "Histories serve many functions. They reveal our origins, celebrate our successes, and remind us of our debts to our intellectual ancestors. A history also helps interpret the past by identifying the reasons for important transitions." Therefore, prior to embarking on an exposition of theory in industrial marketing it is worth pausing momentarily to consider the foundations of the field. In so doing, we will be much better served when appraising current thinking on the topic in the subsequent papers in this issue and industrial marketing scholarship in general. With almost a century of industrial marketing research having been undertaken, it also seems fitting that we pay tribute to early contributions from neophyte industrial marketers. The purpose of this section is not to provide a periodization of industrial

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marketing, nor is it intended to consider schools of industrial marketing thought, – many good examples of this already exist (cf. Shaw & Jones, 2005; Wilkie & Moore, 2003) – or even provide a historiography of industrial marketing<sup>1</sup> but rather to revisit our disciplinary identity.

Identifying the genesis of industrial marketing is problematic. Although it was not until the latter half of the 20th century before industrial marketing really began to gain momentum as a field of interest within marketing in its own right, considerations of transactions between organisations are as old as the discipline of marketing itself (cf. Copeland, 1924; Elder, 1935; Mehren, 1930; Shaw, 1916; Weld, 1916). It was, however, with Melvin T. Copeland's collection of short case studies, *Marketing Problems* (1920) and *Cases in Industrial Marketing* (1930), that the subject of industrial marketing arguably receives its earliest mention and consideration, although the first dedicated text to deal with the topic was John Hutchinson Frederick's (1934) *Industrial Marketing*. Although one can argue that the discipline of marketing itself was conceived with studies of industrial markets as noted: the origins of industrial marketing lie in the Mid-West of the USA and are rooted (pun intended) in studies of the marketing of agricultural products (e.g. Weld's, 1916 *Studies in the Marketing of Farm Products*).

Although industrial marketing is regarded as one of the traditional elements of marketing (Zober, 1971), it was not, however, until the publication of *IMM* in September 1971 that the first dedicated outlet for industrial marketing scholarship was available. With its publication, industrial marketing finally emerged as a legitimate sub-field within marketing. Since then, research on industrial marketing has flourished (cf. Reid & Plank, 2000; Webster, 1978; Wilkinson, 2001, for thoughtful discussions of the evolution of industrial marketing scholarship). However, it was quite some time before the first courses in industrial marketing were being offered, and research in industrial marketing began to gain any critical momentum. The early momentum in industrial marketing research had appeared to stall for a short period between the mid-1930s and mid-1960s. Indeed, by the early 1960s E. Raymond Corey<sup>2</sup> (Professor of Marketing at Harvard Business School for over forty years, and one of the founders of the Harvard Business School Press in 1984) was lamenting the paucity of scholarship on industrial marketing. He notes; "Surveying the great volume of marketing literature, one is struck by the fact that a relatively small amount of it is devoted to the problems and techniques of marketing industrial goods. Instead, particular interest has been shown in consumer goods selling on the part of those writing in the marketing field" (Corey, 1962: v).

Corey (1962) introduced a text on cases and concepts in industrial marketing and taught what is regarded as the first university course dedicated to industrial marketing in 1957 at the Harvard Business School (Vargo & Lusch, 2011). Other institutions followed Harvard's lead, and arguably the greatest advance in marketing scholarship in the latter part of the twentieth-century was in the domain of industrial marketing. Contributions from numerous researchers (cf. Choffray & Lilien, 1978; Heinritz, 1971; Robinson, Faris, & Wind, 1967; Sheth, 1973; Webster & Wind, 1972a, 1972b) laid the foundations of the field and raised its profile in areas such as organisational buying behaviour and industrial marketing. This resulted in hundreds of papers being published by scholars being drawn to the emerging area of industrial marketing (Johnston & Lewin, 1996). The mid-life crises had been averted.

## 1.2. Industrial marketing and its major areas of research: A view from the field

In a comprehensive review of scholarship in industrial marketing, LaPlaca and Katrichi (2009) identified six major areas of industrial marketing discourse: sales and sales management, buyer behaviour,

innovation/NPD, marketing strategy/management, channels/distribution, and buyer–seller relationships. It is to these topics that we now briefly turn. In so doing, we issue a caveat concerning the period in which our discussion is framed. Our attempt to take stock of the field largely confines itself to scholarly texts between Copeland's contribution of collected cases (1930) and the early 1980s, when conferences and academic movements devoted to the topic of industrial marketing (e.g. the inaugural Industrial Marketing and Purchasing group conference held in Manchester in 1984, the Institute for the Study of Business Markets founded in 1983 at Penn State, and the Centre for Business and Industrial Marketing founded in 1996 at Georgia State) would indicate the formalization of the field. A second caveat refers to the extent to which industrial marketing scholars can fairly lay claim to these topics, given that they are also in some cases distinct fields in their own right (e.g. innovation/NPD). Nevertheless, we have endeavoured to restrict our discussion where possible to recognised industrial marketing scholars.

### 1.2.1. Sales and sales management

In a survey-based paper published in the *Journal of Marketing* in 1945, training and supervising salespersons was ranked by scholars in the field as of considerable importance in terms of key concepts to teach students (Converse, 1945: 16). Although admittedly much of the content in such classes was probably devoted to the issue of retail sales to the public, we might assume that some pioneers were already thinking about the marketing practices that occur within the supply chain. It is not surprising that early studies in industrial marketing emphasised selling given that much of the early momentum in marketing scholarship take place against a backdrop of financial hardship in the early- to mid-part of the 20th century. The sales era (1930–1950) is one regarded as companies promoting hard-selling techniques, and the customer frequently taking a secondary role to profit (Friedman, 1998). This coincided with the Great Depression, which ultimately forced companies to pay more attention to the needs of customers. Particularly notable during this period is the efforts of Fredericks' 1919 text *Modern Salesmanagement*, in which he emphasises the importance of sales strategy, territory management and expounds the qualities of sales personnel in a comprehensive text for its time providing coverage of 34 sales-related topics. This work was later advanced by Thomas (1982) who published on aspects of interpersonal purchase influence in organisations in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

### 1.2.2. Buyer/buying behaviour

Of all the areas in which industrial marketing research has been undertaken, organisational buying behaviour arguably has the greatest lineage (cf. Fearon, 1989 for an insightful historical discussion of the evolution of the purchasing function). The Wall Street crash of October 1929 ushered in the period of the Great Depression in the U.S. (which became ultimately a global recession), and would continue during the early part of the second global World War, causing an era of fiscal concern, high unemployment, and devastation to numerous key sectors (including construction, forestry, and most heavy industries). The first New Deal (1933–1934), witnessed the inception of the National Recovery Administration, which oversaw the policy decision to set maximum prices and wages, and attempts to control cutthroat competition. These necessitated businesses to manage their buying decisions and budgets more carefully. Against this backdrop, there was considerable optimism over the broader role that marketing could play during the Second World War and in a post-war world with the promotion of democratic forms of government (cf. Bernays, 1942, calling for marketers to extol the virtues of democracy).

### 1.2.3. Innovation/NPD

Although the viability of certain new products has been a long-standing area of interest to marketers (Burchard, 1935), the area of innovation and new product development (NPD) is a somewhat curious

<sup>1</sup> Studies concerning the history and/or contribution of industrial marketing are unfortunately few in number (LaPlaca, 1997; Lilien, 1987; Reid & Plank, 2000; Wilkinson, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> For more information on E. Raymond Corey see: <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/2004/06.10/39-coreyobit.html>.

sub-field within industrial marketing research as it straddles many domains and disciplines, such as design and technology studies. This said, early contributions around product development can be found in industrial marketing scholarship. For example, in the first edition of the *Journal of Marketing*, Bernard Lester (1936) emphasised the importance of invention and new product creation. However, considerations of NPD and innovation in marketing (and industrial marketing) literature have been somewhat limited. A reading of the contents of several early texts on industrial marketing also offers little or no consideration to issues of products or product development, instead dealing with commodity goods (Weld, 1916). Even as recently as the 1960s, academics were bemoaning the paucity of research on innovation and new product adoption within industrial marketing (Webster, 1969), and marketing management in general (Shaw, 1995). Despite some insightful contributions on NPD and innovation from industrial marketers (Choffray & Lilien, 1978; Choffray & Lilien, 1980; Mansfield, 1968; Souder & Chakrabarti, 1978; Von Hippel, 1978), such studies are relatively few in number. This may be due in part to the interface between the marketing function and the R&D function not being characterised as amicable (Souder, 1980), and with marketers questioning where within the organization the role of innovation rests (Kebker, 1951).

#### 1.2.4. Marketing strategy/management

Considerations of industrial marketing management and strategy can be traced back to the founding of the discipline (Lester, 1936; Weld, 1916), and particularly in the work of Charles W. Hoyt (1912) and Percival White (1927), in their research on scientific marketing management. The work of Hoyt and White attempted to introduce scientific principles to the function of sales and marketing activities and provide the foundation for marketing management that foreshadowed "... the marketing concept and marketing management of the 1950s" (Cochoy, 1998: 204). It was, however, arguably not until the 1950s and 60s, with pioneering companies such as General Electric (*Business Week*, June 24, 1950) that marketing management became more prominent in the corporate planning and strategy process (Biggadike, 1981). Although, curiously, much of this marketing strategy literature was being developed by non-marketers (Wind & Robertson, 1983). Unfortunately, the influence that marketing and marketers enjoyed in the broader strategy literature has been in decline since this period (cf. Day, 1992; Wind & Robertson, 1983). This situation is perhaps best summed up by Ames (1970) who, in examining trappings vs. substance in industrial marketing, observed that marketing concepts, methods and inputs are frequently ignored in the decision perspectives of other business functions.

#### 1.2.5. Channels/distribution

Arguably, the oldest of the industrial marketing topics is the concept of distribution channels. This term was coined by Clark, 1922, and some of the earliest contributions in industrial marketing can be found in the area of distribution channels (or routes to market) which Breyer (1934, 1964:163) characterised as "the elemental structure" of the marketing institution. Economists in the US, as the first marketers, attempted to understand how agricultural markets operated (Converse, 1959); "... which led them to study the functioning of real marketing channels, and more precisely the shipment of perishable commodities from rural areas to urban places" (Cochoy, 1998: 196). The study of channels grew in popularity as several excellent books of readings appeared, in particular Mallen's (1967) *The Marketing Channel: A Conceptual Viewpoint*; Stern's (1969) *Distribution Channels: Behavioral Dimensions*; and Bucklin's (1970) *Vertical Marketing Systems*, among others.

#### 1.2.6. Buyer–supplier relationships

Perhaps the most recent of the six major areas of industrial marketing relates to that of buyer–supplier relationships, particularly given the substantial interest in concepts such as relationship marketing in the 1980s and 90s. This said, however, the nature of exchange and relationships between organisations and social actors is long-standing, and has been a

subject of interest in the broader social sciences literature for some time (Bagozzi, 1978; Levine & White, 1961; Tadajewski, 2009). Indeed, interest in various facets of dyadic relational exchange can be traced across all areas of the social sciences in sociology (Lombard, 1955; Riley, 1954), psychology (Husband, 1953; Roe, 1956), organisational behaviour (Aldrich & Whetten, 1981), and even human resources (Kirchner & Dunnette, 1959), where the main headway in research was being made outside of the marketing field. Previous marketing scholarship focused on the level of individual firms or entire channels of distribution (Achrol, Reve, & Stern, 1983). This trend continued to be reversed from the 1980s onwards with growing interest in the concept of relationship marketing and relational exchange in mainstream marketing (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987; Jackson, 1985). Indeed, work in the 70s by Bonoma, Zaltman, and Johnston (1977) provided early (perhaps the first) conceptual dyadic and network models of buying behaviour. In addition, members of the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) group showed an interest in relationships and interactions (Ford, 1980; Ford, Hakansson, & Johanson, 1986; Håkansson, 1982), which later evolved into a network perspective (Easton & Araujo, 1986).

## 2. Industrial marketing research ebbs and flows

As Williams and Plouffe (2007: 418) observe: "Evaluating an academic discipline's knowledge production and diffusion is a daunting, complex, and ultimately essential responsibility for any community of scholars ... When aggregated together, however, a collection of journal articles can reveal the larger ebbs and flows that mark a field's advancement as well as issues in need of addressing before future progress can be achieved". What then can we take from the foregoing discussion in terms of identifying and understanding the ebbs and flows of industrial marketing discourse?

Although the focus of scholarly research in marketing has and continues to be from a perspective of consumer marketing, much to the lament of some industrial marketers, Webster (1978) predicted that industrial marketing would grow as a discipline due to the distinctive nature of the topic, a prediction that seems to have been vindicated. The field has not been without its detractors, however; Fern and Brown (1984) maintained that industrial marketing did not warrant a separate specialist sub-field of study. As the editors of this special issue, we contend that the papers presented here offer support for Webster's assertion. The present special issue also has a role to play in theory development and reflection on industrial marketing scholarship. So, having taken stock of prior theoretical developments in industrial marketing research, what are the larger ebbs and flow that are revealed?

Flows:

- Industrial marketing has considerable lineage. Almost a century of scholarship has passed in industrial marketing and its foundations have been established. With the global recession and changes to marketplaces, however, industrial marketing scholars may have to question many of these foundations and consider new approaches to industrial marketing.
- Industrial marketing scholarship has retained its tradition of focusing on practice. The industrial marketing literature has the custom of producing research that has relevance for its constituent audience (practicing managers) and not merely for internal consumption for other scholars.
- No one epistemological or ontological viewpoint dominates. Industrial marketing research is characterised by contrasts, with studies using a wide range of methodological approaches and research traditions (i.e. critical realism, social constructivism, positivism).
- Industrial marketing scholarship has an important role in wider marketing theory development. Although the representation of industrial marketing themed papers in leading journals (e.g. *Journal of Marketing*) tends to be rather limited, those papers that are published often receive very high citation figures. For example, Morgan



and Hunt's (1994) paper on relationship commitment and trust has received close to nine thousand citations to date and Dwyer et al.'s (1987) conceptualisation of relationships has received close to six thousand citations. Indeed, the 1994 *Journal of Marketing* paper by Shelby Hunt (a contributor to this special issue) and Robert Morgan is one of the most highly cited marketing papers outside of the marketing discipline.

- Industrial marketing scholarship has retained a strong disciplinary identity. With the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing annual conference, and the Institute for the Study of Business Markets, as well as its scholarly journals (chiefly *IMM*), industrial marketing has created a highly engaged community of scholars.

Ebbs: As well as these flows, industrial marketing scholarship faces a number of challenges.

- Arguably, the singular challenge that is most pressing in industrial marketing scholarship is its underrepresentation in the broader marketing literature (cf. LaPlaca & Katrichi, 2009). For example, although outlets such as the *Journal of Consumer Research* (first published in 1978; a similar period to *IMM*), were introduced with the stated editorial remit to explore all aspects of consumers and consumerism (including buyers in a conventional business-to-business sense; see Thomas, 1982), a strong bias towards research in consumer behaviour has remained evident.
- The challenge for B2B marketers in this regard rests with their capability to propose, defend and refine theory that helps explain phenomena in industrial markets. This shortcoming has been observed in earlier studies of the field. For example, Reid and Plank (2000: 120) observed in their extensive review of two decades research in business-to-business marketing research: "We do not believe that we are generally at the stage where we have tested one or more particular theories extensively enough that further research could not yield additional insights and knowledge." At present, we may argue that such endeavours remain limited, particularly when comparisons are drawn with the consumer behaviour literature and the popularity of mid-range theory such as Consumer Culture Theory.

Reflecting on these ebbs and flows in industrial marketing management research, we may ask the question – how is theory commonly used in industrial marketing research? In an evaluation of papers on the topic since 1978, Reid and Plank (2000: 123) argued that "Theory building efforts [in B2B marketing] have ... been mixed. Only limited success has been achieved in developing mid-range theory..." This situation appears to have improved little in the interim. In addition, a widely accepted general theory of marketing has yet to be formulated and adopted by the marketing research community. Nevertheless, there is a wealth of general theoretical models that marketing researchers use, both implicitly and explicitly, to guide their research. General theories are intentionally both broad and integrative and removed from any specific social setting (e.g. a particular culture, industry sector, business type such as goods or services, or market context such as business or consumer markets). This means that they are broad enough to be used to explain a larger number of phenomena, while at the same time their integrative nature means that their use serves to unify less general theories (Brodie, Saren, & Pels, 2009). The explicit use of general theories provides an invaluable indication as to how and why theoretical unity may be attained in some situations. In addition, general theories may also explain key problems in attaining this unity.

General theories differ from the common mid-range theories typically used to explain industrial marketing and network phenomena. Mid-range theories are closer to the social data and seek to provide a theoretical bridge between empirical findings and general theory (Merton, 1968). For example, the mid-range theory, dissonance theory, is neither a collection of empirical observations made of a certain culture at a certain time (i.e. empiricist) nor a sort of totalizing theory of

behaviour as proposed by Parsons (i.e. general), but is characterised as an intermediate theory that fulfilled a necessary next step in the progression of sociology to a total system theory (Rappert, 2007). In industrial marketing management we have the example of social exchange theory (which views social change and stability as a process of negotiated exchanges between parties: Blau, 1964) as a commonly used mid-range theory. Of relevance to industrial marketing researchers, Holt (2011) reviewed thirty-one organization theories that could provide mid-range theoretical support for the study of marketing organization, which lends further support to the importance and interest in the growth of industrial marketing as a discipline.

### 3. An overview of the content of the special issue

This brings us to a summary of the contributions to the present special issue on the role of theory in industrial marketing research. It is fitting given the remit of the special issue that many of the authors have played an important role in advancing the topic of marketing (industrial and general) over many years. The papers in this collection will help provide guidance and shape thinking for both students and scholars alike through the corpus of industrial marketing research as we embark on a second century of industrial marketing scholarship.

In our call for papers for this special issue of *Industrial Marketing Management*, we invited contributions that explored, compared, and/or contrasted differing general theoretical perspectives, and contributions that focused on the application of general theoretical perspectives to specific issues in industrial marketing research. We sought contributions that would help to build stronger theoretical linkages between the industrial marketing literature and the common issues it identifies in industrial marketing practice, and general theory. There are two types of contributions to this special issue. On the one hand, we have a number of invited papers from leading thinkers in the field of industrial marketing research. On the other hand, we have a number of competitive papers that were selected from those submitted to our call for papers. All papers were subject to review. These papers fell into four broad themes; (i) general theoretical approaches to industrial marketing research, (ii) the choice and use of mid-range theory, (iii) methodology in industrial marketing research, and (iv) clarifying concepts in industrial marketing research. We present each of these themes in turn.

#### 3.1. General theoretical approaches to industrial marketing research

In our initial call for papers, we asked the question; how might different general level theories inform an industrial marketing research question in different ways, and what are the implications for researchers in making such theoretical choices? We have three invited and three competitive papers addressing this topic.

Our first paper, invited from one of the most well-known and respected theoreticians in marketing, Shelby Hunt, explores the relationship between a number of key theoretical and research perspectives. In his article, *A General Theory of Business Marketing: R-A Theory, Alderson, the ISBM Framework, and the IMP Theoretical Structure* Hunt asserts that the resource advantage theory of competition provides a foundation for a general theory of marketing. He argues that this is because it extends prior theory (notably Alderson's functionalist theory of market behaviour), it accommodates both B2B and B2C marketing scenarios, and in relation to industrial marketing in particular it focuses on how R-A theory can provide a theoretical foundation for two prominent approaches to business marketing: ISBM's Value Delivery Framework and IMP's theoretical structure.

Our second invited paper is by Amjad Hadjikhani and Peter LaPlaca entitled *Development of B2B Marketing Theory*. They argue that despite the practice of B2B marketing dating back several thousand years, B2B marketing studies did not exist in significant numbers prior to the last three decades and we are now in the a stage of accelerated theory

development. The transition from an economic foundation to one built on the behavioural sciences and the recent wider applicability of B2B marketing theory towards other marketing fields is viewed in this paper as an exciting journey, one that looks at B2B marketing theory development firstly by contrasting exchange theory (transaction based marketing) and behavioural theory (relationship based marketing). They then look at recent developments in B2B marketing theory and finally look at some unresolved issues and speculate how researchers might seek answers to these issues.

Our third paper is a competitive paper, *On the promise and premises of a Darwinian theory in research on business relationships*, from Tobias Johansson and Johan Kask in which they explore the use of Darwinism and generalizations of Darwin's idea outside the domain of its traditional biological application. They combine the general advancements of Darwinism in social science with the recent Darwinian-inspired theorising on business relationships. A significant implication of their review is that investigations into the evolution of business relationships should account not only for the mechanism of selection but also for the mechanisms of variation and retention, in order to take proper account of the Darwinian explanatory paradigm. They put forward suggestions on how central Darwinian mechanisms could be warranted and conceptualized in a theory explaining the evolution of business relationships.

The fourth paper, a competitive paper by Michael Ehert entitled *Emergence of business markets – A critical realist foundation for open-system-theories of business markets*, focuses on the use of critical realism as a basis for industrial marketing research. Ehert argues that while the epicentre of value creation has been shifting from the vertically integrated firm to the network of connected businesses, marketing research is short of explanations for the emergence of business markets. He maintains that critical realism (and Archers morphogenetic model in particular) provides an ontological foundation for theories of business markets, by disentangling agents, structures and relationships as distinctive forces that stimulate and shape the rise of business markets. The article presents a critical realist ontology of business markets, an agenda for the research of business markets and managerial implications.

Paper five, a competitive paper entitled *Theory map of business marketing: Relationships and networks perspectives* by Kristian Möller, argues that business marketing is a complex, multilayered, and dynamic social phenomenon that has been examined using a variety of theories from disciplines as diverse as economics and psychology, and that this theoretical evolution has led to a fragmented knowledge base. Based on an extensive metatheoretical review, the study shows that these approaches are based on incompatible theoretical assumptions and cannot be integrated into a general relationship marketing theory. By constructing an articulated theory map, the paper provides a positioning space and analysis of five approaches to business marketing: CRM, behaviorally driven relationship marketing, channel relationships, market as networks and actor relationships, and focal networks and strategic nets. The paper then suggests pursuing the development of two middle-range theories: market-based business marketing and network-based business marketing. These developments are used to offer an articulated research agenda for advancing business marketing theory and a discussion on the possibility of a general theory of marketing.

Our final paper in this theme comes from the editors of this special issue. The paper by Linda Peters, Andrew Pressey, Markus Vanharanta and Wesley Johnston entitled *Constructivism and critical realism as alternative approaches to the study of business networks: Convergences and divergences in theory and in research practice* examines the implications for understanding the practices of researching business networks that result from the ontological paradigm choices that researchers make. Based on three common building blocks in understanding social systems (individuals, social practices and processes, and social structures), they examine the implications of adopting two different research traditions, namely: critical realism and constructivism. Drawing on data from an in-depth investigation of a construction project undertaken in the UK, they apply these research

traditions to a managerial phenomenon, specifically the practice of novation in temporary organisational networks. In so doing they examine what we may realistically learn from each approach and ask what are the implications for the practice of research.

### 3.2. The choice and use of mid-range theory

As mid-range theories seek to provide a bridge between empirical findings and general theory this makes them more easily applicable to empirical investigation, whereas empiricism privileges direct experience (particularly sensory perception) in the formulation of our ideas. However, due to the quest for explanatory simplicity, mid-range theories are often implicitly dependent upon general theories. This can provide mid-range theories with the required ontological positioning and a more in-depth grounding. As a result, mid-range industrial marketing theories are often theoretically indebted to general theories in a way that is difficult to indicate by referencing alone. This also means that mid-range theoretical conceptualizations cannot afford to lose track of the overall progress made at the level of general theory, as omitting the general level of theorising can also lead to mid-range theories losing their deeper coherence. Overly simplistic mid-range theories may hence fail to do justice to the complex ontological and epistemological nature of industrial marketing interactions and the process orientation of much industrial networks research.

Problematically, mid-range and empiricist research in industrial marketing has made relatively limited progress in attaining theoretical unity in our understanding of buyer–seller relationships and industrial networks. For example, it is clear that blind empiricism cannot guide our knowledge towards a more unified theoretical understanding (e.g. Bierstedt, 1949; Freese, 1980a, 1980b). While empiricist research is driven by clearly articulated propositions, it is not clear how this research tradition ...“obtains such propositions in the first place? At what level of abstraction ought these propositions to be aimed? In addition, it is not clear how might insight into various middle-level constructs eventually meld into a unified theory?” (Raab & Goodyear, 1984: 257). We therefore asked, in our call for papers, for work that examined how the choice and use of mid-range theories might better reflect the underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions of a general theoretical perspective. We have one invited and two competitive papers addressing these issues.

In the invited contribution *Causal Social Mechanisms; from the what to the why*, Katy Mason, Geoff Easton and Peter Lenney focus on what Merton called theories of the mid-range, specifically his theory of casual social mechanisms. They describe the birth and development of the Causal Social Mechanism movement and explore various possible ontologies in terms of their compatibility with the concept. They suggest that the Causal Social Mechanisms approach is useful in helping theoreticians work across multiple ontologies and so offers significant opportunities for theory development.

The first competitive paper in this section, *Network dynamics in the UK pharmaceutical network: A network-as-practice perspective* by Ronika Chakrabarti, Carla Ramos, and Stephan Henneberg looks at performative aspects of an exchange system. Their approach, based on the practice-turn, describes practices, translations, as well as mediations of change within the business network. This is suggested as an alternative to traditional business marketing perspective (e.g. those of the Industrial Network Approach (INA)). Case study based, they analyse the UK pharmaceutical distribution network between 2007 and 2011. Of particular interest are the network dynamics (i.e. changes between the past and today). By analysing the UK pharmaceutical network as a case and by exploring the processes of interactions, translations, and mediations in this unstable network, the paper contributes to the growing body of literature on network dynamics and reinforces using a practice perspective within the INA.

The second competitive paper, *The structuration of relational space: Implications for firm and regional competitiveness* by John Nicholson,

Dimitrios Tsagdis and Ross Brennan draws upon structuration theory and economic geography to explore spatial embeddedness in business relationships. They propose a conceptual framework built around the processes of proximation and distanciation, which they argue can be either competitively generative or competitively degenerative. These processes are investigated empirically through a qualitative study, grounded in structuration theory, of a peripheral region of England that has suffered lengthy industrial decline. Competitively generative proximation processes were found to be the most prominent in the region; such processes involve a mixture of cognitive cost-benefit calculation and affective commitment to the region. Important enduring relational states are identified and elaborated, notably regional loyalty and relational isolation.

### 3.3. Methodology in industrial marketing research

The question of methodological choice and approach is an important one for theory development in any discipline. We therefore asked for papers that addressed the question; how might general level theories inform new or novel methodological approaches to industrial marketing issues? We have two invited and two competitive papers addressing this topic.

In the first invited contribution *Achieving accuracy, generalization-to-contexts, and complexity in theories of business-to-business decision processes* Arch Woodside and Roger Baxter explore case study research (CSR), and argue that that bridging qualitative and quantitative research methods is possible to achieve accuracy, complexity, and generality across cases in B2B decision processes. It describes several CSR theories and methods that are useful for describing, explaining, and forecasting processes occurring in business-to-business (B2B) contexts. Their discussion includes summaries of six B2B case studies spanning more than 60 years of research. They advocate a paradigm shift from the current empirical-positivistic matrix-algebra dominant logic to case-based Boolean-algebra logic for management decision researchers, embracing the view that isomorphic theory of realities of B2B processes is possible via advances in CSR methods.

In the second invited contribution, *The past and the future of business marketing theory*, Ian Wilkinson and Louise Young take a complex systems approach to understanding and modelling business marketing systems. Their focus is on the dynamics and evolution of such systems and the processes and mechanisms driving this, rather than the more usual comparative static, variables based statistical models. They maintain that order emerges in a self-organising, bottom up way from the local or micro actions and interactions of those involved. In particular, they describe the development of agent based simulation models and the identification and modelling of underlying mechanisms and processes, and conclude by discussing the implications of this approach for business marketing theory and research.

In the first competitive paper *Structural antecedents of institutional entrepreneurship in industrial networks: A critical realist explanation*, Wouter Van Bockhaven, Paul Matthyssens, and Koen Vandenbempt focus on the ongoing debate regarding the manageability of networks. They explore how a critical realist epistemology can facilitate a more multi-layered explanation of collective change. In line with recent literature, they combine the IMP approach with neo-institutional theory and identify the cognitive and normative boundary conditions for unmanaged change in networks. The mechanisms underlying the transition from emergent to intentional change are illustrated with a case study describing difficulties experienced by Dutch steel wholesalers in realigning their business strategy with market conditions even when it is necessitated by upstream and downstream pressures. This paper is one of few examples of critical realist case-study research to guide scholars on how to translate this epistemological orientation into methodological choices.

The second competitive paper by James McCabe, Philip Stern and Scott G. Dacko entitled *Purposeful empiricism: How stochastic modelling*

*informs industrial marketing research* draws upon non-traditional research perspectives and domains (specifically Dirichlet stochastic modelling) in order to understand, explain, and better predict key aspects of buyer-seller relationships and industrial networks. Using stochastic modelling, large-scale regularities that emerge from the individual interactions between idiosyncratic actors can be characterised by a well-understood theoretical model. When these macroscopic patterns repeat across a wide range of firms, industries and business types this commonality suggests directions for further research. They provide empirical examples that support the argument for the use of stochastic modelling techniques in industrial marketing management. They maintain that analysis of the behavioural patterns that emerge from networks of overlapping buyer-seller relationships in the different markets acts as a lens to inform and focus research towards integrated theories of the evolution of market structure and network relationships.

### 3.4. Clarifying concepts in industrial marketing research

The clarification of concepts and constructs is a vital part of theory construction, and an important aspect of what Weick (1995) terms theorising. We therefore asked for papers that examined how common concepts in industrial marketing research, such as interaction, action, actor, agency, practice, relationships, episodes, and value might be conceptualized and explored from different general theoretical perspectives. We have two invited and one competitive paper addressing this theme.

In the first invited contribution *The theory and practice of business networking*, David Ford and Stefanos Mouzas aim to contribute to the development of the concept of business networking which they define as the conscious attempts of an actor to change the structure or process of interactions within particular relationships or the wider network in which it operates. Their paper draws on early research in marketing and distribution that contributed strongly to the IMP research theme and contrasts this research with the more recent managerial tradition in marketing research. The paper builds on this early research and that of the IMP Group to present a structure for the analysis of business networking. The paper illustrates this analysis with a case study and draws conclusions on the concept of business networking and on its practice.

In the second invited contribution *A never ending story: Interaction patterns and economic development* by Håkan Håkansson and Alexandra Waluszewski, the concept of interaction is explored. They argue that when the content and the effects of industrial marketing and purchasing processes are scrutinised empirically, these activities appear as perhaps the most important source for business development, industrial renewal, efficiency and innovation. Based on extensive empirical research results, they suggest that interaction is the main ingredient in these processes. This implies that the supplier-customer interaction has a central development function for efficiency and innovativeness, for companies as well as for the economy at large. Thus, they contend that there is a strong need to include and consider this key engine for dynamics (and its role in developing materialised structures as well as ideas) in any theoretical study of economic development.

The competitive paper *The dynamics and evolution of trust in business relationships* by Yimin Huang and Ian Wilkinson focuses on the concept of trust. They maintain that trust is a dynamic and evolutionally process and that trust changes depending on the experience and outcomes of the actions and interactions and other events taking place over time in the focal as well as in connected relations. They propose a view of business relations as complex adaptive systems, and the psychological, social and economic mechanisms driving these changes in trust are identified. Their model has important implications for generating, sustaining and protecting trust in business relationships and networks and for future research.

We end this extended commentary and introduction to the special issue with a word of thanks to everyone who was involved in its creation. We were overwhelmed by the support and delighted by the profound



interest that the topic generated. The many authors who submitted papers commented on how much they enjoyed the opportunity to address issues of theory and theory development in industrial marketing research as a topic in its own right. As editors, we were humbled by their efforts. As researchers, we were inspired by their passion.

Linda D. Peters  
Andrew D. Pressey  
Markus Vanharanta  
Wesley J. Johnston

#### 4. Our Reviewers

It is with sincere gratitude that we acknowledge the contribution made by the many knowledgeable and dedicated researchers that helped with the review process for this special issue.

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