Agency in business networks: combining IMP research with a relational sociological perspective to challenge views on sustainability and ethics

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to clarify the ontological assumptions regarding the concept of agency and sociality within business networks in the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group (IMP) research by refining these assumptions with a relational sociological (RS) perspective. This paper reinforces the robustness of the actors-resources-activities (ARA) model with an in-depth investigation of the actor dimension, where local interactions between interdependent individuals play a central role in building common futures within business networks through organisational reflexivity.

Design/methodology/approach – This conceptual paper investigates the social ontology of research. It challenges the implicit assumptions of IMP research regarding agency and sociality within business networks with a problematisation strategy (Sandberg and Alvesson, 2011). Combining IMP views on agency with the RS perspective, it sets this combined framework as an alternative for the analysis of sustainability and ethics within business networks.

Findings – Combining IMP research and an RS perspective allows us to extend the knowledge of sociality within business networks, highlighting the centrality of meaning sharing in the process of network change. By focusing on symbolic interaction processes, an RS perspective contributes to a deeper theoretical understanding of the relationship between local communication and business network patterns. Combined with an IMP perspective on agency, it provides researchers with an alternative conceptual framework for examining sustainability by considering ethics and leadership dialectically.

Research limitations/implications – RS is still an emerging stream within sociology, characterised by diverse views. Not all relational sociologists, as scientists, feel obliged to engage with sustainability research. Thus, the paper is a two-sided invitation to IMP researchers and relational sociologists to delve into the adaptation processes in business networks in highly uncertain environments.

Practical implications – RS focusing on the centrality of communication in local interactions, business network researchers can show that organisational leaders are not the ones with a charismatic vision isolated from any natural and social environment; rather, they are the people with “the capacity to assist the group to continue acting ethically, creatively and courageously in the unknown” (Stacey,2013).

Social implications – Adopting an RS perspective on agency in business networks can help managers and researchers determine how business networks can be managed in a more sustainable way. Combined with a dialectical and processual understanding of ethics, the IMP-RS perspective emphasises day-to-day local communication practices within and between organisations that challenges microeconomic views on nature, strategy, ethics and leadership. This paper thus places the social at the centre of sustainability approaches.

Originality/value – From an RS perspective, business networks are analysed as patterns of interactions between many organisations and individuals. The value of this conceptual paper is in showing that change within business networks is negotiated through local interactions and symbolic communication between individuals. Thus, it suggests the need to combine the individual and the organisational levels to analyse agency within business networks and to examine the adaptation of business networks to sustainability.

Keywords Ethics, Business networks, Social ontology, Sustainability or business sustainability, Local interactions, Relational sociology

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction
Since its origins, the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group (IMP) research has focused on relationships in business networks, unlike mainstream management disciplines, which generally focus on transactions (Möller, 2013; Midgley et al., 2017; Andersen et al., 2020). In IMP research, economic exchanges are deemed to be sustained by interdependent interacting actors, and relationships are central resources on which companies rely to conduct their activities (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995; Ford et al., 2003). Over time, IMP research on business networks has become highly diversified, from markets-as-networks to strategic nets (Möller, 2013). In the IMP scientific paradigm, “relationships”,
“networks” and “interactions” are the key conceptual lenses to examine businesses (Munskgaard et al., 2017) and network dynamics have been observed, categorised and theorised using the actors-resources-activities (ARA) framework (Håkansson and Johanson, 1992; Munskgaard et al., 2017). Due to the technicality and complexity of business networks, IMP researchers have investigated many resource dimensions of the ARA framework, as well as a wide set of activities conducted within business networks.

However, to become more theory driven, IMP research needs to better conceptualise the actor dimension of the ARA framework while clarifying what it really means to be in relation to other actors within business networks. To this end, IMP researchers must interrogate the social ontology of business networks. Social ontology is concerned with understanding and explaining social life: according to Schatzki (2003), “social ontology concerns the nature of the social”. It addresses such questions as “What is sociality?”, “In and of what does the social consist?” and “What are the basic structures of social life?” (p. 174). In terms of business networks, social ontology questions the nature of relationships and addresses change within business networks fostered by the interplay of structure and agency. For IMP research on business networks, this means that the concept of agency must be investigated through the actor dimension of the ARA framework to gain “deeper ontological consciousness” (Ojansivu et al., 2020). Emirbayer and Mische (1998) defined agency as follows:

A temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented towards the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and towards the present (as a capacity to contextualise past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment) (p. 963).

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) highlighted the central role of temporal and relational contexts of action, showing that agentic orientations vary according to these contexts. According to Emirbayer and Mische (1998), agency corresponds to the process whereby individuals form their intentionality in specific temporal and relational contexts, which is an important dynamic in the change process of social life (p. 1004).

The first aim of this research was to clarify the ontological assumptions regarding agency within business networks in IMP research from a relational sociological (RS) perspective and propose an alternative framework challenging microeconomic views on agency within business networks. RS researchers typically analyse the consequences of the interdependences human beings experience in their diverse social networks. Hence, RS can be considered as a sociology of human interdependence that takes a processual, temporal and relational perspective on agency. The second aim of this research was to investigate how agentic orientations vary according to the interactions of interdependent actors and allow business networks to adapt to uncertain contexts. To illustrate this, we propose combining IMP and RS research in the context of sustainability as an alternative framework for examining everyday local interactions as the locus of adaptation.

Regarding the research design, we adopted a problematisation contribution strategy (Sandberg and Alvesson, 2011) for this conceptual paper, which led us to structure the article as follows: in the first part of the paper, we explain the implicit assumptions of IMP research regarding agency within business networks. In the second part, we introduce the tenets of RS. In the third part, we discuss how to integrate both theoretical lenses into the analysis of sustainable business networks. In the fourth part, we analyse the limitations of integrating an RS perspective into the study of business networks and propose avenues for future research.

**Explicating industrial marketing and purchasing group assumptions regarding agency in business networks**

The actor dimension in the actors-resources-activities framework

Interdependence, interaction and relations are the keystones of IMP research on business networks (Ford et al., 2003; Abrahamsen et al., 2012; Möller and Halinen, 2017). The IMP project in the late 1970s aimed to understand the dynamics of business markets based on the formation and transformation of business relationships, unlike mainstream marketing and management disciplines, which focused solely on transactions (Möller and Wilson, 1995). Since the first ARA framework was developed in 1992 (Håkansson and Johanson, 1992), IMP research has considerably extended our knowledge of business network dynamics by analysing business relationships. Today, business networks are conceptualised in IMP research as complex structures “where a change in one element may involve changes in others” (Möller and Halinen, 2022). In IMP research, business networks consist of interdependent companies or organisations that combine their resources to co-create value through new activities (Ford et al., 2003; Håkansson and Snehota, 1997; Håkansson et al., 2009).

From this perspective, the ARA framework (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995) provides an analytical grid for conceptualising different interaction subprocesses. Regarding the actor dimension of the ARA framework, the strength of IMP research is that it links cognition and action in a processual and temporal way through the strategising concept (Möller and Halinen, 2017). In IMP research, the strategising process involves examining the nature of actors’ strategic behaviours at the corporate, business unit or functional levels and in different areas of the network context (Gadde et al., 2003; Möller and Halinen, 2017). This contrasts with the traditional firm-centric strategy literature, which postulates the independence and isolation of firms in defining their strategies. The strategising concept encompasses all the choices and activities a firm can engage in based on its interdependencies within a business network: it defines “how to interact with, and mobilize as well as influence, other actors through connected business relationships” (Abrahamsen et al., 2016, p. 107). In this process, actors make their decisions informed by the past decisions of other actors in the network and based on their interpretations of their future “ambitions and activities” (Gadde et al., 2003, p. 361). Since business networks are characterised by high levels of interdependence among their members, a firm’s strategy is shaped by the strategies of other members and shapes them in return. Hence, the strategising concept highlights the dialectical and processual nature of strategic decision-making in business networks since, from this perspective, networks are conceived both as “a structure of opportunities and constraints for strategic action” (Möller and Halinen, 2017, p. 7).
Over time, IMP research has demonstrated that the strategising process relies on the network theory of the actors embedded in a specific network. Indeed, decisions about the influence of strategic relationships within the business network are made according to the evolution of the network pictures managers keep in their mind over time. Abrahamsen et al. (2016) defined a network picture as a process of “representing actors’ knowledge of their network, [...] helping them to make sense of their complex environment and to guide their decision-making and managerial behaviour” (p. 108). A network picture encompasses managers’ mental representations of their business contexts across different stages of those contexts, the way they make sense of their surroundings and their “subjective logic for managerial actions” (Laari-Salmela et al., 2015, p. 117). Like the strategising concept, the network picture concept is processual because network pictures co-evolve in business network contexts through managers’ interactions in their business network. The originality of IMP research stems from this processual, dialectical and temporal perspective on strategy, which considers external relationships as critical antecedents of managerial strategic decisions (Laari-Salmela et al., 2015). This explains why Möller and Halinen (2017) deemed network pictures to be powerful cognitive resources for facilitating the formation of an actor-network theory (ANT) and the development of strategic action within business networks. With its emphasis on the role of external relationships in shaping strategic actions, IMP research offers a good basis for challenging mainstream perspectives on strategy and its role in network change.

However, to develop a robust alternative framework for analysing complex phenomena within business networks, such as sustainability, IMP researchers must advance their understanding of the individual and the organisational levels of decision-making. The notion of an actor can be somewhat blurred in IMP research, and the network picture concept tends to highlight this. From an IMP perspective, there is a confusing overlap between actors at the individual and organisational levels as the actor’s notion implicitly refers to a firm, or a business unit of a firm, whereas in sociology, an actor is always an individual (Weber, 1978). Munskgaard et al. (2017) acknowledged that the idea of an actor “remains unproblematised” in IMP research (p. 4) and showed how, although Håkansson and Snehota (1995) first included individuals in their analysis of intentions, over time, the conceptualisation of actors in the ARA framework has evolved towards interactive collectives. For example, Håkansson et al. (2009) claimed that “actors are actors to the extent that some others acknowledge them as such” (Munskgaard et al., 2017, p. 5). Consequently, the individual level of intentionality has rarely been investigated in IMP research on business networks. Aware of this knowledge gap, some IMP researchers have attempted to extend the theorising of managers and agency through the concept of interactivity, acknowledging the difficulty of the task.

Towards a conceptualisation of agency through the interactivity concept
Håkansson and Snehota (2017) defined the concept of interactivity as “properties of the context conducive of interaction in business relationships” (p. 1). Their objective was to provide a better explanation of variations in the patterns and intensities of business relationships over time and across companies. They recognised that individuals are at the centre of interactions and integrate various dimensions of individual agency into the process:

Individuals trigger interaction behaviours, react on actions of others in a sequence of interactions. Individual managers from the involved companies are acting in relation to each other and bring their experiences and motivation into the interaction process (p. 8).

From this viewpoint, individuals are managers. Håkansson and Snehota (2017) acknowledged the difficulty of analytically considering managers as factors of interactivity. For them, the nested identities of managers as both individual actors and corporate agents representing organisations made it hard to categorise and theorise how managers link the context of interactions and actions within business networks. This might explain why they did not use the term “agency” in their conceptualisation of interactivity.

However, through their analysis of the ways in which managers enter specific relations and interactions, Håkansson and Snehota (2017) provided an analytical lens for examining the agency in business relationships. They recognised that first, managers have personal attitudes and perceptions informed by their experiences and knowledge of earlier interactions. As corporate agents, managers also engage with the policies, routines organisational activities and resources of their specific organisations. Thirdly, managers representing third parties also have networks of other relationships, activities and resources. Managers’ orientations towards the future depend on how they perceive “the actual context with its interdependences and their insight about the developmental effects that can be achieved interacting with and relating to others” (p. 6). In addition, Håkansson and Snehota (2017) implicitly established the social ontology of interaction within business relationships by noting that “actors both as individuals and agents for organisations develop bonds (i.e. mutual orientations and commitments) that result in social structures”. Thus, social structures are produced in the interaction processes “set in motion” by individual actors, and the interaction processes reflect social structures and shape “the identities of the actors and their meaning for others” (p. 8). From this perspective, one can categorise interaction processes from an IMP perspective as dialectics based on the interplay between structure and agency.

However, Håkansson and Snehota (2017) did not straightforwardly explain this assumption. To extend the theorising of the 2017 interactivity concept, Vanharanta and Prenkert (2018) proposed the notion of nested multilevel agency in business networks. Stressing that the actor concept in IMP research is plastic because it can refer to individuals, managers, business units and even networks, they underlined the difficulty in investigating the nature of agency in IMP research. To clarify the nature of agency within business networks, they distinguished between primary agency characterised by “atomistic reaction, uncoordinated co-action or associational interaction” and corporate agency, which “manifests itself in strategic teams, firm, dyad, and network-level interaction and collaboration with others” (p. 3). According to Vanharanta and Prenkert (2018), managers evolve from primary agents into corporate agents through shared understanding in micro-level social interactions. Thereafter, when agents engage in social interactions, they negotiate what Vanharanta and Prenkert termed “ephemeral emergents” (p. 3), which encompass the interaction topic.
context, frames, participation structure and relative roles and statuses. These “ephemeral emergents” are completed in the interaction process by long lasting “stable emergents” that form the specific institutions of the network. The last level of agency identified by Vanharanta and Prenkert (2018) encompasses a material and objective structure composed of written texts, material systems and business infrastructure, all communication, financial and logistic networks. Surprisingly, Vanharanta and Prenkert (2018) called this level of agency “social structure” (p. 3). Here, the term “social structure” requires clarification since it conflicts with the traditional sociological definition of social structures as patterns of social life (Schatzki, 2003).

This brief overview of IMP assumptions regarding agency within business networks illustrates the difficulty that IMP researchers face in explicating the implications of relations with others within business networks. This difficulty probably stems from the IMP legacy of social exchange theory (SET). IMP researchers have long recognised SET as a theoretical foundation for their approaches to business networks (Harrison et al., 2023; Möller and Wilson, 1995). SET is a stream of sociology that analyses how social structures created by exchange relations “constrain and enable actors to exercise power and influence in their daily lives” (Cook et al., 2013). It takes an economic and utilitarian view of behaviours in social structures: actors are deemed to anticipate rewards that benefit them, and they act to maximise their benefit while minimising costs. From the SET perspective, actors enter relationships and do favours for others with the expectation of some future returns. Thus, the first motivation for actors to engage in business relationships is to obtain economic gains. The originality of SET lies in its “examination of large-scale social issues by means of the investigation of small-scale social situations” (Stolte et al., 2001). This perspective explains the orientation towards the analytical descriptions of complex and interactive settings in IMP studies on business networks (Möller and Halinen, 2022), in which relationships are mostly analysed in terms of opportunities to access new resources and develop new activities. In these studies, the sociological implications of social bonds are rarely questioned. However, to advance the current knowledge about change within business networks, it is crucial for IMP researchers to consider the interplay between agency and structure within business networks. As an alternative to SET, we propose combining an IMP perspective on business networks with an RS perspective. RS is, namely, a stream of sociology that “conceives of the social world as a network of interaction between human actors” (Crossley, 2018, p. 481).

### The relational sociological perspective on business networks as patterns of interaction between many organisations and many individuals

A short introduction to relational sociology
RS considers relationships to be the unit of analysis of social life. Mustafa Emirbayer officially launched this discipline with his “Manifesto for a RS” (1997) and the seminal article “What is agency?” (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). As a discipline, RS gathers sociologists who strive to reformulate social life in relational, processual and dialectical terms. To date, relational sociologists have been polarised around three main epistemological poles. First, “the structuralist pole” (Vandenberghe, 2018) attracts sociologists interested in system theories. These sociologists adopt a realist social ontology since they consider that structures have the casual power to influence social interactions. Consequently, they recognise a certain degree of social determinism in social interactions since they believe that actors’ practices derive from structures. These sociologists were partly influenced by structuralist sociologists like Parsons, Giddens and Bourdieu. This group links the New York School of Network Analysts (Mische and Emirbayer) with Lahire and Crossley.

The second pole – the so-called processual-pragmatist – attracts sociologists who view society as a complex web of fluid and dynamic relations and reject any idea of social determinism – any dualism between agency and structure. They assume a flat ontology where “everything is in flux, either structures or actions, and connectable” (Vandenberghe, 2018, p. 39). Their work is partly rooted in the work of processual and dialectical sociologists like Mead, Elias, Deleuze and Latour.

The third pole called the relational critical realist pole, has notably been supported by Donati based on Bashkar’s work. According to Donati (2018), social facts exist, but they are sociologists have long recognised SET as a theoretical foundation for their approaches to business networks (Harrison et al., 2023). This perspective explains the orientation towards the analytical descriptions of complex and interactive settings in IMP studies on business networks (Möller and Halinen, 2022), in which relationships are mostly analysed in terms of opportunities to access new resources and develop new activities. In these studies, the sociological implications of social bonds are rarely questioned. However, to advance the current knowledge about change within business networks, it is crucial for IMP researchers to consider the interplay between agency and structure within business networks. As an alternative to SET, we propose combining an IMP perspective on business networks with an RS perspective. RS is, namely, a stream of sociology that “conceives of the social world as a network of interaction between human actors” (Crossley, 2018, p. 481).

The relational ontology of business networks
No matter the pole, for relational sociologists, “a social network is a network of meanings” (White, 1992, in Powell and Démelteau, 2013, p. 90). In RS, individuals are considered based on the interdependencies within the networks of which these individuals are a part. RS has found in Norbert Elias’ theory “significant sharpness, rigor, and interdisciplinary impetus” (Tsekeris, 2013, p. 87). The German sociologist scrutinised the concept of relationships in The Society of the Individuals (2001). Elias considered society and individuals as a whole: a subject is a person who is both fully social and fully human at the same time. Moreover, Elias located social action within local interactions between individuals, all embedded in “a seamless and power-infused web of interdependent and interplayed networks (beyond human planning and control)” (Tsekeris, 2013, p. 89). Consequently, Elias conceived of business networks as “complex webs of interdependent human beings” in which people meaningfully interact and structure networks of mutual interdependence.

From an RS perspective, business networks are patterns of interaction between many organisations and many individuals that are always in process and cannot be captured outside the flow of time:

The agentic dimension of social action can be only captured in its full complexity, we argue, if it is analytically situated within the flow of time. More radically, we also argue that the structural contexts of action are themselves temporal as well as relational fields (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p. 963).
Consequently, relationships within networks may seem stable but only relatively since they are constantly reproduced by the ongoing interactions between individuals who form the organisations within specific business networks. The originality of the RS perspective is in centralising the analysis of business networks at the individual level in a temporal and processual way. The main assumption of RS is that agency and structure cannot be separate because, in social life, nothing exists outside relationships and interactions between individuals. This relational ontology is best summarised as the “the-self-in-relation-with-others” paradigm (Elias, 2001, in Tsekiris, 2013). Because human beings are inherently relational, interdependence and interactions are the fundamental characteristics of business networks. The social patterns of business networks are produced through the local interactions between many individuals who act based on meaningful interactions.

There are some similarities between the IMP view of business networks and the RS perspective. Indeed, both view business networks as temporal processes defined by specific contexts that have specific temporarities and form the “emergent outcomes of interactions which are contingent upon these interactions and sensitive to variations within them” (Crossley, 2018, p. 483). From an RS perspective, individuals (e.g. managers) are themselves emergent properties of social interaction since norms, roles, modes of production and practices constitute, in fact, the patterns of human interaction. This echoes Häkansson et al. (2009) assumption that actors are actors only because others recognise them as such. However, from an RS perspective, primacy in the theorising of business networks is given to the culture of the human actors involved. From this perspective, individuals’ reflexivity within business networks is a function of processes that are internal to individuals and of the “many forms of support, stabilisation and control they receive from others in the networks to which they belong” (Crossley, 2018, p. 486). By analysing the various forms of support, stabilisation and control, relational sociologists scale up to the analysis of networks constituting what they call “the global order”. The global order is based on interactions between corporate actors. Business networks are analysed as combinations of multiple networks of corporate actors, such as trade unions, firms, national governments and international institutions, which “interact with one another, forming their own relations and networks” (Crossley, 2018, p. 488). From an RS perspective, business networks correspond to networks at a “higher level” (p. 488). However, Crossley (2018) argued that the network concept and the network-related processes and dynamics do not lose their applicability when scaled up to this higher level. Indeed, from an RS perspective, higher-level social networks have a wide range of properties that cannot be reduced to the mere sum of the properties of the different networks composing them. Furthermore, the micro- and macro-level patterns of interaction are indivisible in real life: it is only in the analytical abstraction of researchers that they are separate. To determine the patterns of interaction within business networks, relational sociologists first analyse the local communication between managers and employees and how they make sense of their interdependencies through symbolic interactions.

**From symbolic interactions in local communication to relational agency**

For relational sociologists, local communication is the locus at which patterns of interaction emerge, develop and collapse since it is not companies that interact with each other but the individuals embedded within them. This emphasis on local communication relates to the fact that it is through local interactions that individuals reflect “population-wide generalizations, idealizations most of which we are not conscious of” (Stacey, 2013, p. 108). From an RS perspective, individuals permanently experience an immersion-abstraction process in local interactions. Within organisations, individuals immerse themselves in the experience of local interactions and at the same time, they abstract “from that experience by simplifying, generalising and categorising in the forms of narrative and philosophy as first order abstracting” (Stacey, 2013, p. 109). Stacey (2013) claimed that the articulation of these generalisations and idealisation of the categories of experience leads to management models and mental representations, that constitute the second order abstracting. These models and mental representations are the takeaways from the micro diversity of the specific contexts of ordinary local interactions happening in ordinary, local physical situations.

Figure 1 shows why, regarding local communication, relational sociologists first consider symbolic interactions. Through such interactions, individuals access a meaning-sharing process that enables them to act in line with their network’s expectations. Hence, from an RS perspective, agency is shaped through symbolic interactions by integrating others’ expectations corresponding to the system of norms that Elias called “the generalised other” (Tsekiris, 2013, p. 94). Within business networks, interpersonally established expectations correspond to the behaviours, communication, types of agreements and types of supplier-buyer relationships expected in an industrial sector. These expectations vary according to the temporal-relational context of the business network, the level of perception of each company, the perception of the individuals that form it and their individual expectations in terms of role-and-position, profit, innovativeness or short-term versus long-term orientation. Fuhse claimed that inner subjective meaning plays a role in interactions, but “what is shared and communicated is more important, and this is the primary source of regularity on the network level” (Fuhse, 2009, p. 68).

In fact, subjective meaning is shaped by shared symbols and schemata specific to each network context. From an RS perspective, thanks to symbols, individuals share “a symbolically and commonly meaningful world” (Tsekiris, 2013, p. 95) and, over time, acquire a reflexive capacity through which they receive indications of their self-action in relation to others. Once they know what kind of action they can take to integrate others’ expectations, they can develop their lines of action through the mobilisation of formal and informal relationships. Organisations do not only comprise official roles and relations but also relations that are unofficial at a certain moment and later become more official and dominant. Relationships in business networks are twofold: interpersonal and impersonal, as well as official and non-official. Interpersonal relations, such as in acquaintance or friendship networks, can explain the institutionalisation of some business networks. From an RS perspective, it is through the process of
evaluating mobilisable relationships and the resulting interactions that structures emerge (Figure 2). This is why RS emphasises the role of organisational reflexivity.

From relational agency to organisational reflexivity and change within business networks
The RS perspective on business networks holds that agency relates to individual agents who perform actions. It is associated with reflexivity because “agency involves knowledgeable interventions that result from conscious deliberation on external situations” (Burkitt, 2018, p. 531). This reflexivity is based on perception and cognition which are phases of action, directed or redirected by the dialectical process of interaction. In this process, “choices are imagined, evaluated, and contingently reconstructed by actors in ongoing dialogue with unfolding situations” (Emirbayer et Mische, 1998, p. 966). During symbolic interactions, interactants define and redefine problems that occur therein as well as a new horizon of possibilities for solving these problems. Thus, they reconstruct the meaning of their joint actions and the situations in which they are participating. Reflexivity emerges in interactions when interactants feel that “current relations and interactions are no longer fulfilling” (Burkitt, 2018, p. 533).

Within business networks, relational agency leads to a form of organisational reflexivity through which actors who form organisations redefine available resources and “manoeuvre across the multiplicity of legitimating principles and strategically exploit ambiguities in the polyphony of agencies of the manifold interactants” (Burkitt, 2018, p. 527). Through organisational reflexivity, agents adjust to new uncertainty and improvise based on practised routines. Change occurs when interdependent actors experience an increasing number of failures in their practices. Practices are routinised until interactants experience a crisis. At this breaking point, they adjust to new uncertainties and reorganise their actor bonds according to their redefinition of available resources. The originality of RS lies in its wide understanding of resources, which can be physical, practical, emotional, meaningful, social, political or economic (Burkitt, 2018, p. 527). From an RS perspective, resources are critical since they compose the “instrumental components of relations” (Donati, 2018), that determine the uniqueness of each relational context. These components comprise:

- the physical and technological resources that enable goal achievement;
- the value environment containing all possible values;
- the normative environment consisting of alternative norms; and
- the situated goals that require the evaluation of differing relationships with concurrent finalities (Donati, 2018, p. 437).

The outcomes of organisational reflexivity cannot be predicted or planned since individuals are always located in overlapping temporal-relational contexts. Indeed, sociality in RS refers to “the capacity to be both temporally and relationally in a variety of systems at once” (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, pp. 970–971). The positive or negative outcomes of organisational reflexivity depend on the need interactants have from one another and on the degree to which they share the same meaning of the situation in their interactive communication. Creative interactions occur only when interactants have the freedom to explore new possibilities to emerge from a situation (Dewey, 1983, in Burkitt, 2018). If differences in the meanings regarding a situation are too great, interactants relationships become more vulnerable to breakdown due to conflicting communication. Interactive communication establishes power relations (Elias, 2001): in all relationships, interactants constrain and are constrained by others, and they enable and are enabled by others. RS holds that power itself is a characteristic of all human relations (Stacey, 2007). In relationships, the “power balance is tilted in favour of some and against others depending on the relative need they
have for each other” (Stacey, 2007, p. 299). This power balance creates a powerful feeling of belonging to a group, leading, for example, to the “we” identity of organisations. Relationships thus foster a process through which collective identities emerge, in addition to relational agency, in a specific temporal context. Therefore, agency does not rely on the relationships individuals have with a fixed, stable and abstract structure but on the nature of their interdependence with others. Powerful groups possess the relational resources to “establish the rules for interaction that apply to all groups” (Burkitt, 2018, p. 527).

This relational approach to agency has significant implications for business network management. Organisations are not conceived as fixed entities that exist outside human practical experiences; rather, they are “patterns of interaction between people that are iterated in each present” (Stacey, 2007, p. 298). There are no such things as an organisational purpose or a competitive position directing the running of a company. Organisations are not mysterious social forces acting upon human beings, and there are no abstract cultures charismatic leaders can envision. Instead, organisations are “complex responsive processes of relating made of acts of communication, relations of power, and the interplay between peoples’ choices arising in acts of evaluation” (Stacey, 2007, p. 299). From an RS perspective, business networks are composed of interacting individuals who make decisions based on their relational agency and the organisational reflexivity of their organisations. Their choices are constrained by the power of the groups in their networks of relationships that benefit from key nodes, with the groups establishing the rules for interaction. Within interactions, meaning sharing is the fundamental process through which business networks acquire their dynamics. In the following section, we illustrate the relevance of combining RS and IMP perspectives on agency and sociality to study the interplay between relational agency and organisational reflexivity through local interactions in the emergence of sustainable business networks.

**Challenging mainstream views on sustainability via a perspective that combines industrial marketing and purchasing group and relational sociology regarding sociality within business networks**

In this section, we adopt an interdisciplinary approach that combines IMP and RS research on sociality. Business networks are currently experiencing turbulent times and need to evolve despite uncertainty (Zafari et al., 2023). Such uncertain contexts require a strong capacity for adaptation and involve a high degree of complexity that mainstream management research has difficulty addressing. In business-to-business (B2B) marketing, Möller and Halinen (2022) recommended “megamarketing” or “micromarketing” approaches to help B2B marketing researchers “take […] responsibility for solving global economic, social, and environmental issues by contributing to sustainable markets and marketing” (p. 294). Indeed, although most industrial companies now engage in decarbonisation (IPCC, 2023), the pace is still slow and some states, populations and companies are resisting decarbonisation. We argue that a new view on sustainability is required that combines the IMP focus on business networks with an RS focus on sociality.

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**Figure 2** Dialectical interplay between structure and relational agency within business networks

*Source: Author's own work*
Reconnecting to the social and nature in the analysis of sustainability within business networks

The United Nations Brundtland Commission first defined sustainability in 1987 as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (UN, 2024). Due to the severe threat of climate change, companies and nations increasingly develop sustainable policies as a radical reorganisation of our current economies is required to achieve sustainable societies (Elkington, 2018, in Harrison et al., 2023). However, much of the literature on sustainable businesses deals with the difficulties implementing such sustainability policies, especially for small and medium enterprises (Brammer et al., 2012; Yadav et al., 2018; Burlea-Schiopoiu and Mihai, 2019). Consequently, Harrison et al. (2023) postulated that the radical reorganisation of industries “requires systemic solutions by multiple interconnected organisations” (p. A10). Sustainability should be investigated not only within firms or dyads but also at a network level. Sharma (2020) and Siemeniako et al. (2022) even claimed that studies must be designed to consider not only the network level with business actors but also the relations between business actors and non-business actors and the interactions between these actors and natural ecosystems.

However, very few studies on sustainability in B2B settings have dealt with the social dimension of sustainability. When analysing sustainability within business networks, B2B researchers have mainly focused on the resource and activity dimensions of the ARA framework, with most articles considering economics and technology, such as new product development and innovation processes, the role of start-ups or the circular economy (Harrison et al., 2023). Extraordinarily, little has been said about the role of actors’ bonds in the development of sustainable business networks. Business marketing research is not isolated from this trend. Most supply chain management researchers analyse sustainability separately from any deep investigation of sociality within business networks (Miemczyk et al., 2012; Stål and Corvellec, 2018; Fritz, 2022). This leads us to propose combining IMP and RS perspectives on sociality to promote an alternative and holistic view of sustainability.

Business networks as parts of their natural environments

The first step of this approach consists of analysing the implications of the interdependent nature of human beings in business networks by examining the actor dimension of the ARA framework. Emirbayer’s seminal statement that “in the beginning there is the relation” (Emirbayer, 1997, p. 17) illustrates that RS analyses social life using a relational lens: relational sociologists generally assume that the identities of individual or corporate social actors gradually emerge from the multiple roles they perform in their personal networks, (i.e. in families or companies). By analysing all phenomena in terms of relations, relational sociologists refute the substantiality of social phenomena. Relational sociologists consider that there exists no such things as “social facts” that have a separate reality from individuals. This also applies to sustainability. RS holds that the environment does not stand outside individuals and companies since, as human beings, we are part of this environment. All our interactions lead to significant outcomes on nature.

With such a view, the RS perspective avoids two pitfalls regarding sustainability. Firstly, it refutes the determinism with which individual identity is positioned within a social hierarchy, as in the Middle Ages in Europe, when each subject was defined in relation to a cosmic order and natural environment created according to God’s will. Secondly, it refutes the modernist conception of individuals acting autonomously from the external world, leading to societies having no relation to the natural world (Stacey, 2007). The “self-in-relation-with-others” paradigm thus constitutes a break with the Kantian philosophy of the self that led to the concept of economic actors in the 19th century. In the RS paradigm, nature is not reified as a system separate from human experience that evolves on its own. Consequently, by adopting this paradigm, IMP researchers could develop a wider perspective on business networks, including their daily existence in relation to the natural world. They could, for instance, study how natural resources are affected by the interactions between and within companies and how these resources shape the interactions. In addition, since RS does not reify sustainability but sees it as the outcome of interaction patterns among many individuals and organisations, it prevents companies from avoiding their responsibilities towards the ecological situation. Thus, researchers should emphasise the effects of human actions on the environmental deterioration while studying how interacting individuals within business networks conceptualise their responsibilities towards nature in their local communications. This emphasis on companies’ responsibilities towards natural resources and the environment should foster a new way of considering ethics, which is an important dimension of sustainability. From an RS perspective, even ethics can be thought of as a dialectical, emergent relational process.

Redefining business ethics as a dialectical relational process

The Kantian view of ethics as an individual fixed moral characteristic

Sherwin (1983) defined ethics as a “set of moral norms, principles, or values and the nature and grounds of morality that guide people’s behaviour. These guides may take the form of moral judgements, standards, and rules of conduct” (Sherwin, 1983, in Anand et al., 2023a, p. 422). As sustainability concerns have emerged within business marketing, ethics have become a central issue in B2B research. However, the B2B marketing literature regarding ethics highlights the limitations of relying solely on institutional rules of conduct since these rules do not prevent unethical misconduct, especially among salespeople (Anand et al., 2023b). Brown et al. (2005) emphasised the importance of ethical leadership, defined as “the demonstration of appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers in two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (Brown et al., 2005, in Anand et al., 2023a, p. 426). Schwepker (2019) claims that ethical leadership can be observed in personal and professional behaviours that centralise honesty and fairness (Schwepker, 2019, in Anand et al., 2023a, p. 426). These
authors thus considered ethical leadership to be the individual qualities that managers should have to guide their teams ethically; however, they said little about the source of these qualities. We believe this is related to the way most organisations conceptualise ethics, management and leadership. Since the 1950s, management has been considered a science by business schools or companies, with managers thought to be autonomous, rational and moral leaders. They are supposed to promote inspiring visions for their teams to pursue. Thus, organisations are seen as systems that managers can control by planning their strategic actions. Stacey (2007) stated that “a great many of the explanations of and prescription for acting in organisations today amount to the construction of a fantasy world so that we preserve the illusion that someone is in control” (p. 297). In this fantasy world, codes of conduct are considered ethical universals.

This view of ethics originates with the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Kant believed that reason was the basis of ethics and postulated that “human beings are the only creatures that are free, and it is the fact that we are free that enables us to be rational and moral. Our free will is what gives us our dignity and unconditioned worth” (Bowie, 2002, p. 2). This conception of ethics has several consequences that explain the difficulty companies and researchers currently face in dealing with complex phenomena, such as ethics and sustainability. According to Kant, some ethical universals exist that he called “categorical imperatives” (Bowie, 2002, p. 2). Within companies, these ethical universals are often transcribed into codes of conduct that constitute a fixed reality. The point of this reification of ethics is that people may consider ethics just rules that stand outside themselves, possibly explaining some instances of misconduct. Here again, combining IMP and RS views on management can be highly beneficial for both researchers and companies.

Ethics as co-constructed in local interactions between individuals
RS postulates that individual human action is action that “is always and everywhere in and through relations”. From this perspective, ethics is no longer a fixed reality but a dialectical process co-constructed in local interactions within and between companies. For relational sociologists, there are no moral principles without contingencies; instead, moral principles are negotiated in novel ways in the everyday present of social interactions (Stacey, 2013, p. 219). Within these interactions conflicts about ethics emerge because organisations attract “different kinds of person with a purpose, and a direction of their own, both of which can be chosen by the organisations’ most powerful members” (Stacey, 2007, p. 297). These conflicts are necessary for business networks to evolve into sustainable networks. Hence, it is precisely through these conflict-competition and harmony-cooperation dialectics that novelty and change emerge. In line with Elias, RS holds that individuals and groups within companies interact with each other in their local situations in intentional and planned ways, but they cannot foresee the outcomes of the interplay between their intentions and intentions (Stacey, 2013). It is precisely through the meaning-sharing process in symbolic interactions that ethics emerge as a strong code of conduct adapted to local cultures.

In this context, the role of managers and their views on strategy differ from those ascribed in mainstream management literature. As IMP has long claimed, within local interactions:

Rather than pursuing “victory” over others based on firm-specific resources, activities or monopoly-like industry positions, strategic thinking involves a company coping with all of those with which it has important relationships or on which it depends, including its suppliers, customers as well as its competitors (Ford et al., 2003, in Abrahamsen et al., 2016).

In the current context of fostering sustainable networks, strategising thus means being identified within webs of interacting companies as a reliable and ethical partner owning relational resources that facilitate collaboration and minimise the waste of natural resources in interactive and responsible innovation processes. In addition, instead of perceiving uncertainty as an obstacle to strategic planning, combining the processual and interactive views of IMP and RS facilitates a focus on the day-to-day organisational processes that enable organisations to build their futures through present communication. This organisational reflexivity considers agency to be a “process whereby choices are imagined, evaluated, and contingently reconstructed by actors in an ongoing dialogue with unfolding situations” (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p. 966). In this dialogue, the role of leaders involves participating in interactions with others in reflective and imaginative ways. Combining the IMP concept of strategising and an RS perspective on ethics thus leads to a breakthrough conception of the role of managers and leaders within organisations.

Towards managers involved in wider and deeper communication in the unknown
According to us, a major contribution of adopting a combined IMP-RS perspective on ethics consists of proposing a much more realistic and pragmatic approach to the role of managers and leaders in the move towards sustainability. In this combined perspective, the role of leaders constantly emerges in a social process of recognition based on interactions with others: leaders are recognised as such when they use their capacity for empathy and attunement, emotional awareness and skills to widen and deepen communication within groups so that new meaning and new horizons emerge:

“What becomes important from this perspective is the ongoing everyday local interactions, particularly the communicative interacting of ordinary conversation in which power relations are formed and are sustained by ideology or changed. The role of leader is to participate actively in local interactions to widen and deepen communication […] to co-create the perpetually constructed future of an organization” (Stacey, 2007, p. 301).

This processual and relational conception of leadership contrasts with the mainstream management literature, where leaders reveal the visions and values of their organisations to the employees. In that conception, ethics is proposed to employees as a “harmonious whole” outside any interaction (Stacey, 2013, p. 219), to which employees are required to submit themselves. Consequently, people within organisations may think that their actions are insignificant in that external harmonious whole and can act ethically. Setting ethics as a set of universal moral principles, outside the interactions people within organisations experience in their daily lives, allows them to escape their responsibilities and partly explains why organisations and individuals may resist sustainability. For
change towards sustainable business networks to happen, diversity and conflicts within interactions are required since novelty emerges within dialectical processes of local interactions. Hence, in business network research, combining IMP and RS should lead researchers to pay more attention to the local conversations that business network members have with one another to understand their specific meaning-sharing processes.

**Highlighting meaning sharing and local communication in interactions within empirical research**

Combining IMP views on interactions within business networks with an RS perspective would allow researchers to improve their understanding of the mechanisms of interactions and to analyse the meaning-sharing process within symbolic interactions. Relational sociologists focus greatly on narrative-like schemata. A good way for researchers to examine these is through roundtables that gather a dozen of practitioners to discuss how they see their common future. Roundtables are a common method in social sciences and humanities, “providing interaction space” (Ostanello and Tsoukias, 1993) for practitioners outside transaction contexts, thus stimulating collective reflexivity. From an RS perspective, roundtables afford opportunities to access:

- the respective relational agency of each participant;
- the expected behaviours of individuals and organisations sharing the same network context; and
- the organisational reflexivity of each actor.

Furthermore, during roundtables, practitioners use their own words to tell their own stories. Using these narratives, researchers can access managers’ inner maps of meaning (Van Maanen, 1979), particularly ways in which words are interpreted and symbols are mobilised to favour a common understanding of uncertainty. Roundtables are thus relational in that they support strong theorising of patterns of interactions within complex, responsive and adaptive networks, such as business networks, all of which are based on observations of interactions in the making. Consequently, refining IMP ontological assumption regarding actors within business networks by combining RS perspectives offers promising avenues for research. However, as an emerging stream within sociology, RS has some limitations.

**Limitations and future avenues for research**

**Relational sociology as a scattered emerging discipline**

In this paper, we have articulated the contribution of RS to IMP research for theorising agency and sociality. Throughout the paper, we have emphasised the complementarity of both perspectives to stand as an alternative for investigating phenomena such as sustainability, which are characterised by complexity and uncertainty. However, this theorising approach is somehow audacious because RS is currently a scattered discipline. Despite the efforts of Dépelteau and Vandenberghhe to foster collaboration between sociologists involved in explaining the social world in relational terms, relational sociologists do not constitute a coherent community as IMP researchers do. As explained in Section 2.1, there are some controversies between the three RS poles. In addition, some sociologists, as sociologists of complexity like Stacey, despite thinking in terms of relations, do not claim to be relational sociologists: Stacey just positions himself in relation to Elias’s dialectical and relational legacy. Regarding sustainability, not all relational sociologists consider their role as scientists to engage with this research topic.

Researchers should not fear these controversies. Sociology is a scientific discipline that has always evolved through constant controversies between structuralists, constructionists and interpretivist views, especially in Europe. ANT even considers that it is through controversies that knowledge is produced and disseminated (Law, 1992). One of the objectives of the founders of RS was to invite researchers with different influences to develop a “new space of scientific deliberations and creativity” (Dépelteau, 2018, p. 4) based on relational hypotheses, concepts, methods and observation. In line with Dépelteau (2018), we consider dialogue with relational sociologists a promising future avenue for business networks research.

**Developing dialogue with relational sociologists to strengthen theory-building in business networks research**

Developing a dialogue with relational sociologists would allow IMP researchers to stimulate creativity in theory building. Research topics that matter for the IMP community and relational sociologists are numerous. The dialogue could deal with sustainability, ethics, strategy, management, forms of communication and could deal with research questions such as “Through which symbols and schemata do managers share meaning within business networks?”, “How do companies construct a common future with their suppliers?”, “How can business networks negotiate their use of water/energy throughout their combined activities?” and “How can business networks improve their decarbonisation processes with a collaborative approach?”.

The openness of RS to theoretical, epistemological and methodological pluralism can contribute to increasing our understanding of change within business networks. Further, the focus on local communication can extend our knowledge regarding the sense-making process and how agency and patterns of interaction are practically interrelated. Since IMP and RS research share the same approach of business networks as temporal, relational and processual patterns of interactions between many individuals and many organisations, this dialogue could be creative and imaginative. In the interactions between relational sociologists and IMP researchers, new approaches to research can emerge for investigating the complexity and uncertainty of business networks. This dialogue could be a response to the call for pluralism in current business marketing research that is growing louder (Lowe et al., 2020; Möller, 2013; Nicholson et al., 2014; Midgley et al., 2017).

**Conclusion**

This conceptual paper questions IMP ontological assumptions regarding agency within business networks. Based on a problematisation contribution strategy, it highlights the need for a better theorisation regarding the actor dimension of the ARA framework. By conceptualising of individuals in terms of “self-in-relation-to-others”, RS provides business network researchers with
opportunities to clarify the interplay between agency and structure in business networks. Combining IMP and RS views on sustainability and ethics as an alternative to the mainstream business literature, this paper also emphasizes the complementarity between strategising, network picture, relational agency and organisational reflexivity. Our multi-lens strategy thus paves the way for more conscious conceptions of the holistic, processual and dialectical nature of interactive business networks.

Theoretical contributions
While highlighting the centrality of local interactions and communication for understanding the patterns of interaction within business networks, we assume that an RS perspective provides new orientations for IMP research, notably regarding sustainability, ethics, strategy and leadership within business networks. Adopting an RS perspective on business networks can help better understand the role of local communication within interactions. In addition, since resources play a key role in the ARA framework, an RS perspective can emphasise the roles of intangible resources, such as symbols, schemata and emotions, in the shaping of actions. It can also help researchers to better theorise natural resources.

Managerial contributions
Adopting an RS perspective on business networks can give leaders and individuals within organisations opportunities to improve their local communication and construct their common futures. By providing organisations with the “self-in-relation-with-others” paradigm, the combined IMP-RS lens on interdependence opens promising doors for achieving a more holistic understanding of the impact of all organisational actions on others, be they humans, animals or natural environments. This combined lens deeply challenges the microeconomic and individualistic theory of management which is foundational for many firms today. By taking more holistic, interactive and ethical perspectives, companies and their managers can foster new cultures within firms that centralise the social dimension of sustainability.

References


Further reading


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