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## **Gaining access to agency and structure in industrial marketing theory: a critical pluralist approach**

### **Abstract**

This paper is concerned with gaining greater insight into the interplay between agency and structure in industrial marketing scholarship. The paper's intent is to embed Midgley's notion of critical pluralism within this endeavour. The paper commends the movement towards increased deployment of critical realism, but cautions against the dangers of creating further atomism in marketing theory by generating another paradigm of thought with strongly defended boundaries, impervious to outside influence. The paper advances a case for critical pluralism within industrial marketing scholarship and offers a three dimensional (theoretical, methodological and methodical) framework to aid this. The discussion demonstrates how critical pluralism can be deployed to gain insights into agency and structure using a number of 'integrative' theoretical perspectives.

### **Keywords**

Integrative theory, critical pluralism, process theory, general theory, structuration, critical realism

## **Introduction**

Critical realism is an increasingly important theoretical perspective in industrial marketing (IM) scholarship. Indeed we believe that, by advancing this perspective, industrial marketers are moving in the direction of something that could have extensive theoretical and practical value within the marketing discipline more broadly, and perhaps even beyond the borders of the business disciplines. The increasing prominence of critical realism seems to acknowledge the value of empirical contributions that expose agency and structure in network and business interactions. We declare our support for such progress. However, we contend that the value of critical realism is in what it delivers; namely, insight into the interplay between agency and structure. It is this insight that should excite IM scholars, rather than the deployment of a particular theoretical framework. There is a risk that, in uncritically advocating critical realism, a further atomistic and crenellated paradigm will be created in competition with the already heavily entrenched ‘dichotomy’ of functionalism versus interpretivism; in essence creating a ‘trichotomy’ for researchers to negotiate. This may close off a number of promising avenues for theory development capable of achieving insight into agency and structure that would otherwise be more accessible to IM scholars. If this were to happen, a significant opportunity for IM scholars may be lost.

The embedded nature of industrial interactions means that interactions have strong temporal and process implications and thus, we argue, require imaginative but philosophically rigorous approaches to fully capture their dynamic and processual qualities. In particular, industrial interaction involves individual and organisational agency on the one hand, and institutional enablers and constraints on that agency on

the other, so there is a real need for novel, non-dichotomous theoretical approaches: i.e., capable of integrating insights into both agency and structure. Due to the embedded nature of interaction, the case for integrative theory is more compelling in industrial marketing than in a consumer context.

A further important contemporary debate in IM scholarship concerns the nature of general theory (see for instance Peters et al., 2013a). A call for more discussion of general theory is interpreted in this paper as a call for greater ontological coherence (the ability to hold, sustain and communicate an ontological position with an internally consistent logic) in theoretical contributions. A concern of this paper is therefore how to achieve ontological coherence whilst explicitly integrating insights on agency and structure in theoretical contributions – given that these insights are usually found in separate, seemingly incommensurate paradigms. We will present an integrating framework through which greater and more diverse insight into the interplay between agency and structure in IM scholarship could be achieved.

The argument advanced here has work from three authors at its core. Midgley (2000) visualizes three dimensions of research design: theoretical (including philosophical), methodological and methodical. Of central concern to Midgley are issues of critical plurality in and between all three dimensions. The term ‘critical pluralism’ has been adopted by us to describe Midgley’s position, We believe that the term ‘critical pluralism’ is more accessible to the IM research community, and captures the essential elements of the ideas of relevance to us: a plurality of theories and methods deployed through a critical process of inquiry. We identify two opportunities from this work for IM scholarship. First, the use of a plurality of paradoxical ontological

perspectives (incorporating agency and structure) within a single research design. Second, the exploration of a plurality of different boundary judgements so that IM researchers as a community can gain multiple insights into the interplay between agency and structure. Midgley's notion of critical pluralism aids this endeavour by challenging the idea that integrative approaches (e.g., ones that seek to reconcile ideas about agency and structure, usually found in different paradigms) are ever 'meta-paradigmatic': in seeking to unify ideas from different paradigms they inevitably make new assumptions that are resisted by the authors whose work is being 'subsumed', so integrative approaches become new paradigms at the same level of analysis as the ones they seek to reconcile. Realising this led to Midgley advocating learning across paradigms without ever thinking that one can understand the work of someone based in another paradigm completely in their own terms. Thus new, more comprehensive perspectives can be developed that provide commensurability between ideas traditionally grounded in competing paradigms, without the pretence of transcending and unifying those paradigms.

Our foundation stone within the IM literature is the work of our second key author, Easton (1995, 2002, 2010). Similar to Midgley, Easton has proposed that research problems be addressed at three levels: theoretical, methodological and procedural. To combine the work of these first two authors and to develop a notion of a plurality of pluralistic perspectives, we identify our third influential work as that of Pozzebon (2004, – and colleagues in later work). Pozzebon juxtaposes several other important authors' integrative general theories/perspectives. A journey through various disciplines led to the realization that a number of these integrative theories have been underutilized or have not been utilized at all in IM scholarship. Critical realism is one

such underutilized approach. The central pillar of our paper is therefore built around the work of Midgley, Easton and Pozzebon, but upon this pillar, various fixtures and fittings are attached from other disciplines to make a coherent whole. The central contribution of this paper is therefore a three dimensional (theoretical, methodological, and methodical) framework that allows an IM researcher to better consider the explicit link between integrative theories and meaningful empirical outcomes. Such a framework is not presented as a prescription, but rather as a series of dimensions of decision making to be considered by a researcher.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we explore agency and structure in industrial marketing discourse. Midgley's notion of critical pluralism is then briefly outlined. In the remainder of the paper, the substance of our contribution is presented - a three dimensional framework which is explored in three subsequent sections. Finally we outline our conclusions and summarise the contributions made.

## **Conceptual background**

### **Agency and structure in industrial marketing research**

Underpinned by quantitative methodologies, the functionalist paradigm is the dominant one in Western social science (Tadajewski, 2008; Easton, 2010; Hanson & Grimmer, 2007), and is manifest within marketing as the Transaction Cost, Marketing Management and American schools of thought (Gronroos, 1997; Palmer et al., 2005; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Functionalists believe that all observed phenomena have evolved to play a role within a set of wider systemic relationships, and explaining any phenomenon requires the identification of these roles. The associated ontological and epistemological assumptions are (i) that a real world exists, and (ii) that this world is reflected in our knowledge, even though the latter can never be perfectly accurate.

However, rather than demonstrating a philosophical passion for functionalism as a general theory, quantitative studies in marketing have often seemed to be a pragmatic, default position, perhaps due to pressure (often driven by tenure and promotional exigencies) to submit to high-prestige journals that have a tradition of publishing almost exclusively quantitative studies (thus we concur with authors from this and other disciplines who have observed the same, such as Anderson, 1995; Eisenhardt, 1991; Schurr, 2007; Shankar & Patterson, 2001; Sminia, 2009; Svensson, 2006; Tadajewski, 2008).

Interpretivists, on the other hand, believe that all knowledge is constructed from particular subjective or inter-subjective perspectives. Tadajewski (2006: 430), for instance, suggests that “the emphasis in interpretive research is on the de-emphasis of an external concrete social world”. The associated assumptions are (i) that if a real world beyond our knowledge exists then the true nature of it is inherently unknowable, so (ii) we should always talk about the meaning that people make rather than what actually is. Ontology is therefore collapsed into epistemology in the interpretive paradigm (Fuenmayor, 1991). An interpretive paradigm of inquiry that has emerged in the IM field, which embraces anti-functionalist views and is grounded in qualitative methods, is the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group (IMP). As the drive to gain insight into agency and structure began within this tradition, it is to the IMP body of scholars that we primarily target this paper. However, the principles outlined in the remainder of this section may be applicable to a wider IM (and indeed a general marketing) audience, but to make such an argument is beyond the scope of a single article.

The product of the IMP has been substantially grounded in interpretive assumptions which disavow determinism (Easton, 2010) and which have enshrined agency at the heart of their theorizing (here we are defining prominent IMP scholars using the social network analysis of Henneberg et al. (2009), which provides positional information about key researchers in the field). Notably, Hakansson and Snehota (1998:20) observe that:

“Relationships always have a time dimension and thus a future that is uncertain and a history whose interpretations and memories are subjective. Relationships are thus undetermined; their meaning to those involved is changing over time and their development depends on how the parties interpret and re-interpret different acts ... Relationships are enacted, they become what the parties make them ...”

Similarly, Ford and Hakansson (2006: 7) contend that “all interaction has specific meanings for those involved and for those affected by it. All subsequent interaction will be based on these interpretations of that meaning by all of those who are affected by it.” A prominent voluntarist argument within the IMP is that there are grave difficulties associated with providing prescriptions for successful management action to firms. Ford et al. (2003) argue that all of the firms in a network are pursuing their own goals, and that the outcome of any individual firm’s actions will be affected by the actions of other network actors. Easton (2010: 118) indeed asserts that interpretivists “reject the possibility of discerning causality,” and equally Baraldi et al. (2007: 890) argue that “such determinism [inherent in neoclassic theory] is anathema to most IMP scholars.” Thus, by counter posing the American and IMP schools of thought, the dichotomy between functionalism and interpretivism in IM scholarship can be illustrated. Having identified this issue, we will next attempt to show that scholars associated with the IMP tradition have begun to engage with approaches capable of overcoming this dichotomy.



Both structuration (see, for instance, Ellis & Mayer, 2001; Nicholson et al., 2009; Nicholson et al., 2013; Peters et al., 2009) and critical realism (see for instance Easton, 2010; Ehret, 2013; Harrison & Easton, 2002; Matthyssens et al., 2013; Peters et al., 2013b; Ryan et al., 2012) have seen limited, but increasing, use in IM scholarship. It is clear that critical realism is gaining most traction, and our concern is that IM scholars may choose one perspective to the exclusion of alternatives when so much stands to be gained by learning from both structuration and critical realism (and others). Learning could be enhanced by consideration of a plurality of integrative perspectives.

Critical realism and structuration were conceived by their founders (Bhaskar and Giddens) as stratified rather than flat ontologies, with reality seen as recursive and emergent. Instead of visualizing a dualism between agency/structure and between voluntarism/determinism, they encapsulate insights from both sides of the dichotomies and, as such, these theoretical frameworks go beyond the functionalist and interpretivist lenses. Bhaskar and Giddens initially agreed that their work had many similarities, and it was Archer (1995) who has been credited with identifying a key distinction between critical realism and structuration. In her conception, structuration maintains synchrony between agency and structure, but in critical realism the tension between the two concepts is cherished. Archer is one of several scholars who have further developed critical realism (others include Lawson, 2002; Norrie, 2010; Sayer, 2000); indeed a further key distinction between critical realism and structuration is Bhaskar's continuing engagement with his ideas and these authors in developing his ideas. Structuration has also been developed by later authors (for

instance DeSanctis & Poole, 1994; Stones, 2005), and Stones (2001) has actually argued against Archer's arguments for incompatibilities between structuration and critical realism. The comparisons are ongoing. A case made in this paper is that IM scholars should continue to use both structuration and critical realism, and indeed explore similar 'other' frameworks that offer enhanced insights into agency and structure. However, we argue that to do so requires intellectual engagement with the notion of pluralism. To advance this argument we now turn to the work of another of our three core authors, Midgley. We will return to several of the debates broached in the introduction throughout the remainder of the paper.

### **Midgley's critical pluralism**

Midgley (2011) argues that we can draw upon a range of theories, and whether or not contradictions among them need to be resolved depends on our purposes. However, there would seem to be a fine line between pluralism and pragmatism, and we should heed the warning from Hunt (1994), who says that the distinction between critical pluralism and naïve pluralism is very important. To say that 'anything goes' is as naïve as fundamentalist faith in a single, supposed 'meta-theory' or narrow set of methods. Midgley (1992:149) also cautions as to the risks of a degraded form of pragmatism that is anti-theory. It seems apparent that the pursuit of pluralism needs some guiding principles. Here we propose Midgley's notion of critical pluralism as a significant aid in this respect. Whilst acknowledging the possible broader applicability of the arguments we present in this paper, we have limited discussion to increasing insight into agency and structure in IM research. We have further narrowed the scope

to ground our argument within the IMP school of thought. We note the comments of Midgley (2000: 251) who suggests that:-

“For paradigms to change, it must be possible for individual agents to propose new ideas that step outside old paradigmatic assumptions. The question is, what kind of ‘paradigm’ exists when an individual breaks the paradigmatic mould?”

It seems apparent that IMP scholars have in the past broken with the paradigmatic assumptions of the dominant functionalist paradigm, and again in favouring critical realism, seem more recently to be breaking with the interpretivist assumptions of the IMP and its Interaction and Networks Perspective (INWP). Therefore, twice, IMP scholars have stepped outside old paradigmatic assumptions. This suggests that it is possible for the mainstream to allow at least some plurality in our discipline, which is a good start. There is a danger in what we call a ‘crenellated’ paradigm: one where its defenders shoot arrows from the ramparts at those seeking to question the limitations of existing ideas. Use of critical realism does seem like a continuation of a pluralistic movement, in that it avoids the aspects of the incommensurability thesis which if accepted, divides agency and structure into two atomistic paradigms.

However, the integration of agency and structure has been said by some IMP engaged scholars to be a meta-level concern (Houman Andersen & Kragh, 2010; Järvensivu & Möller, 2009; Sousa, 2010; Matthyssens et al., 2013), and theories that do so, such as critical realism, presented as ‘the’ meta-theory; a sole route to expose the interplay between agency and structure. In this sense critical realism begins to sound very much like a new paradigm, which (following Midgley, 2000) we argue is inevitable – there is no space above and beyond the paradigm debate in which critical realism could sit. The danger is not that critical realism becomes a new paradigm; it is that it could so

easily become crenellated, with its defenders arguing that they have the only possible right answer to exposing agency and structure, so they denigrate others they could learn from. This situation seems intellectually unsatisfactory, and we will propose that Midgley's notion of critical pluralism may provide a compass to further guide the potentially pluralistic intent within the IMP.

It is probable that one incentive for using a so-called 'meta-theory' to ground findings is to enhance empirical robustness. Marketing has been accused of being theory weak (Burton, 2005; Hunt, 1994; Troye and Howell, 2004; Yadav, 2010). Unsurprisingly, therefore, there have been many calls for marketing scholars to strengthen the philosophical foundations of their theories (Peters et al., 2013a; Tadajewski, 2008). One solution that has been advanced in IM is a focus on mid-range theories (Brodie et al., 2011; Möller, 2013; Järvensivu and Möller, 2009; Woodside, 2003): i.e., theories that explain a sub-set of phenomena but which form a link between general theories and empirical contributions. See also work outside the discipline of marketing: Weick K.E. (1974), Pinder C.C. and Moore L.F. (1979), Bourgeois III L.J. (1979), and Eisenhardt K.M. and Bourgeois III L.J. (1988). However, we concur with Ehret (2013) that a particular weakness in mid-range theories is their inability to deal adequately with the competing theoretical assumptions of agency and structure, voluntarism and determinism. We further take issue with a number of marketing scholars who advocate intellectual engagement with concepts such as 'metatriangulation' (Matthyssens et al., 2013). A central problem that we highlight in this paper is that there remain intellectual problems with asserting the hierarchical primacy (including existence at a meta-level) of methods, methodologies or theories. In introducing Midgley's notion of critical pluralism to IM debate, and we argue that

this negates hierarchical imperatives in research design. The key elements of his position that inform our work here are:

The need to avoid advocacy of a single general theory that then prevents further learning;

Proposal of a position that detaches methods from their original methodologies, so a new approach can be developed (with its own explicit paradigmatic assumptions) that reinterprets and justifies the use of a plurality of such methods; and

The associated idea of being open to exploring insights from other paradigms. We here develop his ideas with work from Pozzebon and colleagues to propose a pluralism and pluralistic perspectives at a theoretical level.

These notions seem to address concerns expressed by several IM scholars, for instance Woodside and Baxter (2013: 382), when they state:

“Different general level theories, whether scholars use them individually or in blended forms that incorporate more than one theory or paradigm, can potentially inform marketing research in different ways. However, ontological and epistemological tensions may occur in adopting theories, particularly when they embrace a wide range of paradigms.”

The intellectual acceptance of our development of Midgley’s argument would seem to allow researchers to side-step claims of meta-paradigmatic operation. The acknowledgement that ideas from other paradigms are reinterpreted in our own terms, tells us that a synthesising theory is a new proposal with its own assumptions rather than a theory that seeks to transcend the paradigm debate. It is an offer of a potentially new paradigmatic position, but not of a crenellated variety (the paradigm that should now be defended religiously against others), but of a type that acknowledges a position has been taken that is different from others, while remaining open to learning

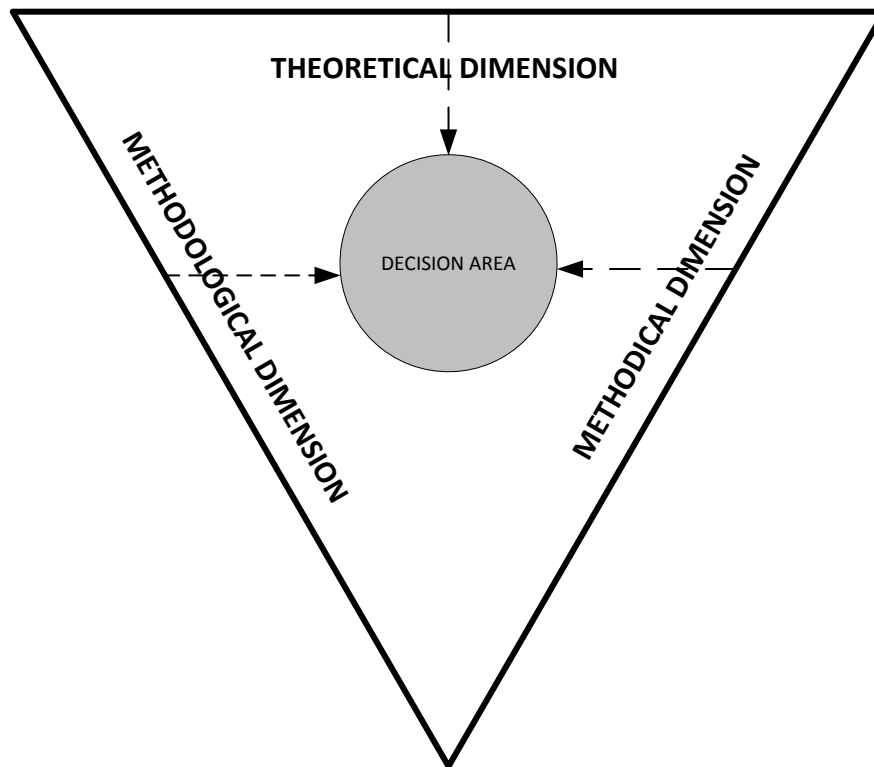
from those others. We feel this notion of critical pluralism will allow IM scholars to break out of some aspects of the incommensurability embranglement by arguing that they are unapologetically operating in new theoretical positions.

However, we also seek to further deploy Midgley's critical pluralism to avoid the establishment of a new 'crenellated paradigm' of critical realism, which becomes the sole means of gaining insight into agency and structure in IM thought. To do so, we will next explore an argument for critical plurality in three dimensions (theoretical, methodological and methodical), and we move to present the central contribution of our paper, a three dimensional decision framework. The framework recognises that ontological and epistemological considerations must be contextualised at moments in an inquiry and that incommensurability should be tackled in all three dimensions, not just one (authors advocating meta-theory tend to assume that the theoretical dimension is everything). This approach, while not resolving the incommensurability debate (because pluralism is itself a paradigmatic stance), offers an approach that increases the potential for commensurability within an evolving pluralist position.

### **Implementing three dimensional pluralism?**

Our aim is to show how critical pluralism can be implemented in each dimension (theory, methodology and method). In proposing our framework, we are heavily indebted to the contribution of Easton (1995; 1998; 2002; 2010) to the discussion of theoretical, methodological and methodical approaches to researching IM phenomena. Easton's (1995) three dimensional framework forms the foundation for what follows in the remainder of the paper.

Midgley (2000) argues that many of the terms discussed in this paper imply hierarchical connotations because of the conventional view in the philosophy of science that methods embody methodological assumptions, methodologies embody theoretical ones and theories embody philosophical assumptions. Thus, a prevailing view in the social sciences is that, because everything else flows from philosophy, the priority is to first get the philosophy (and then the subsequent theory) right. Following Easton (1995), a non-hierarchical perspective is advocated here in which theory (including philosophy), methodologies and methods are seen as three dimensions (rather than levels) of an intellectual position. Midgley (2000) argues that it is equally possible for insights from methodological development and practice to raise questions for philosophy and theory as it is for learning to move in the other direction. Hence the conventional hierarchy is undermined. Such a three-dimensional “vision of inquiry” (Midgley, 1992:169) is illustrated in Fig. 1 and includes a central decision area at the intersection of the three dimensions that negates hierarchical imperatives. Each dimension is addressed in turn in the following sections.



**Fig. 1: A vision of three dimensional pluralism**

We take each dimension of Fig. 1 in turn in the following sections.

### **The theoretical dimension**

Marketers have been for many years engaged in an attempt to unify the field of marketing under a single general theory of marketing (see for instance Ringold & Weitz, 2007; Hunt, 1983; Bartels, 1951; Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Hunt, 2013). However, conversely we also note suggestions that industrial marketers must call on a broad range of both epistemologies and methods (Woodside & Baxter, 2013; Nicholson et al., 2009) to explain IM phenomena. This plurality is, we argue, difficult to achieve under the auspices of a single general theory. Möller (2013: 325) highlights further problems when attempting to propose a single general theory when stating:



“There are several open issues in this commendable endeavour. For example, to what extent can the ‘root’ approaches of the new general theory be integrated? This is a moot point, which depends on the relative commensurability of metatheoretical assumptions concerning the ontology, epistemology, and methodology of the root theories.”

Hence to counter the argument for a single general theory and advance a case for critical pluralism, it is necessary to engage with both the notions of incommensurability and metatheoretical assumptions, which we will next attempt to do.

The term ‘paradigm’ is polysemic. One meaning is a “world view in any particular field” (Creswell, 1998: 74), like viewing the world through a particular instrument, such as an “x-ray machine or microscope” (Mingers, 1997: 9). As a researcher, being located in a ‘paradigm’ in this sense involves making ontological and epistemological assumptions (Schultz & Hatch, 1996; Lowe, Carr & Thomas, 2004; Lowe et al., 2005) about the existence of the world and human knowledge, which can be contrasted with the assumptions made by people in different paradigms. As discussed earlier, historically pertinent examples in respect of this paper are the functionalist and interpretivist paradigms (Burrell and Morgan, 1979).

The problem of paradigms is the entrenched positions they can occupy when they become crenellated, preventing learning from other positions, in contrast to a pluralistic intent. Paradigm incommensurability has been discussed in a seminal contribution by Burrell and Morgan (1979) and is supported in later work as being not only inevitable (because of people’s different underpinning assumptions) but also desirable, because otherwise a dominant paradigm could overwhelm others in an imperialistic move to declare itself the all-encompassing position (Jackson & Carter, 1991, 1993). Weaver and Gioia (1994:565) summarize incommensurability as

follows: “representatives of opposed paradigms live in different worlds, hold mutually exclusive beliefs, and use different vocabularies”. We argue that such beliefs and language denote the enactment of paradigms by researchers, and this can be breached with intentional action (which we have earlier contended that IMP scholars have done at least twice).

The extent to which the paradigms are really mutually exclusive has been the subject of much debate (see for instance De Cock & Jeanes, 2006; Tadjewski, 2009; Willmott, 1993). Although there are clearly theories that have been successfully developed through cross-paradigm learning, those that claim to be ‘metaparadigmatic’ (transcending and thereby uniting several paradigms) have been subject to criticisms on the grounds that they introduce new assumptions with which the proponents of the original paradigms being ‘integrated’ would not agree with (Gregory, 1992; Tsoukas, 1993; Midgley, 1989; Möller, 2013). Peters et al. (2013b: 337) note that:

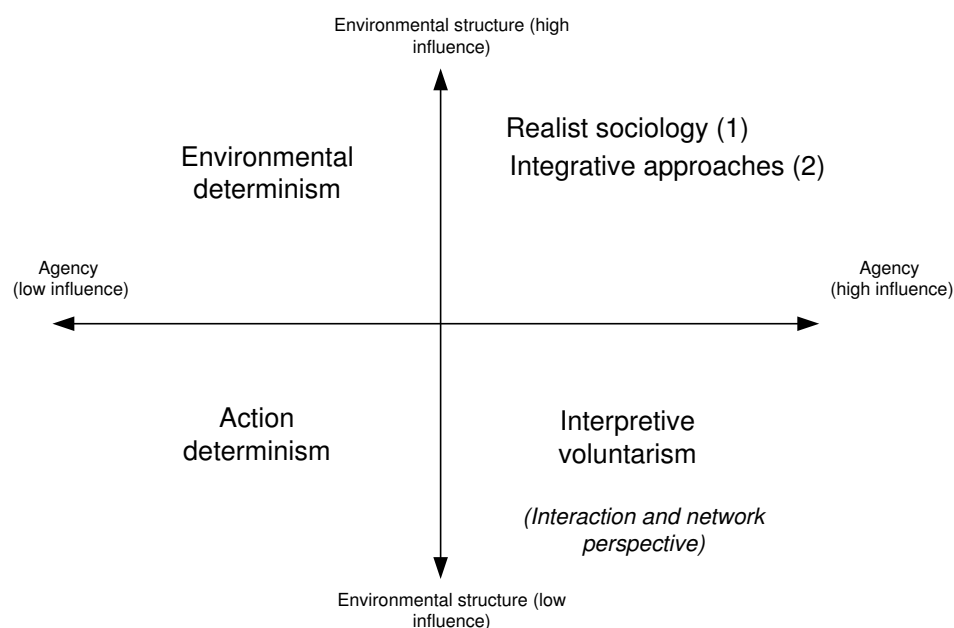
“...attempting to overcome incommensurability by forming teams of researchers from differing paradigms who try together to construct one explanation of the data is inherently problematic, as inevitably one or more researchers will be forced to abandon their ontological position.”

We therefore argue that ‘metatheories’ are not metaparadigmatic, in that they exist at the same level as the paradigms they are seeking to integrate, and they compete with them. Essentially, he proposes that claims that paradigms can be integrated in this way lack credibility, and suggests that there is a range of possibilities for the integration of ideas drawn from older paradigms and reinterpreted using new integrative assumptions, each of which is (implicitly or explicitly) a proposal for a new paradigm.

Parallel and analogous to the agency/structure dichotomy is the dichotomy between structurally grounded determinism and agency empowered voluntarism. Whittington (1988) describes determinism as having two fundamental forms: environmental and action. First, under environmental determinism, options are limited by the fact that only one option will lead to survival in given external environmental conditions, while the other options will result in extinction. Typically, cause and effect relationships between actors and external determinants have been exposed in quantitative variance theories (Lewis and Suchan, 2003; Markus & Robey, 1988; Langley, 1999) espoused in the majority of IM papers. In contrast, in action determinism, the environment is of secondary importance: outcomes are instead determined by the constitution and in-built preferences of the actors themselves. Such in-built preferences are knowledge-based and can be as causal as an environmental structure. Action determinism is different from voluntarism (Child, 1997), later termed interpretive voluntarism (Pozzebon, 2004; Whittington, 1988), which assumes the free choice and volition of conscious human agents in their environments. Whittington argues that, while voluntarist assumptions disavow the environmental constraint in favour of agency, they also disavow determinism flowing from the constitution of agents. In an attempt to move further beyond atomistic ‘either/or’ decisions in respect of agency/structure and voluntarism/determinism in a way that acknowledges the importance of an actor’s knowledgeability, Whittington (1992) positions critical realism (Bhaskar, 1978; 1979) as an attempt to break out of the dilemma. Whittington (1988: 528) proposed that critical realism recognizes:

“...both structure and agency in the explanation of human activity. Structure is not atomized, as in action determinism; nor does it crush human agency, as in environmental determinism; nor finally is it subordinate and fused continually in events as interpretive voluntarists assume”.

Unlike interpretive voluntarism, critical realism accepts the existence of structures; but, unlike determinism, it sees these structures as ‘facilitating’ as well as constraining agency. Pozzebon (2004) later proposed a modification to concepts introduced by Whittington, discussing integrative approaches rather than ‘realist sociology’ (critical realism). Fig. 2 brings together the original work of Whittington with the development of the ideas by Pozzebon, and includes our own conjectural positioning of the IMP’s interaction and networks perspective.



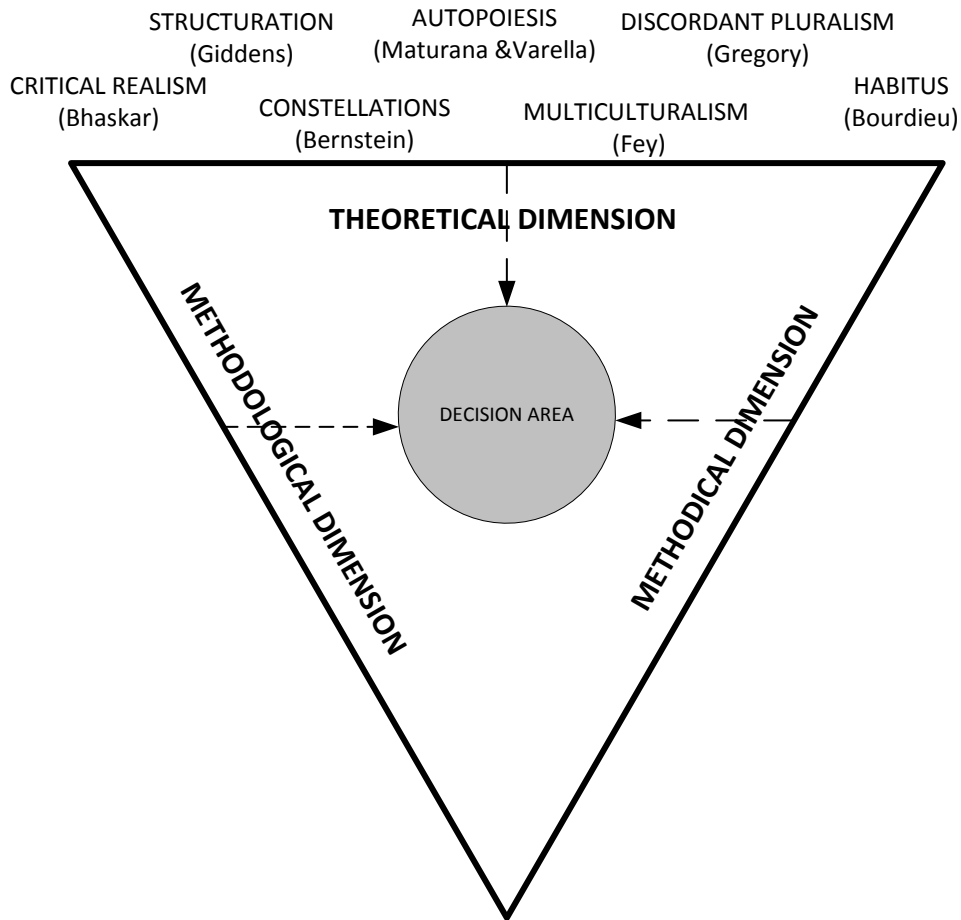
**Fig 2: The relative emphasis of agency and structure in theory development**

Original model by Whittington (1988) with top right-hand quadrant showing the original naming (1) by Whittington (1988: 524), and later renaming (2) by Pozzebon (2004: 265).

The critical realist position is increasingly being embraced by IMP scholars. However, Ryan et al. (2012: 309) seem to appreciate Pozzebon’s position when they note that:

“We neither assume that critical realism is the only choice available to business relationship and network researchers nor that it is without its critics.”

Offering pertinent choices, Pozzebon (2004: 265) argues that critical realism is just one of a number of ‘integrative approaches’; theories that “take into account both dimensions – structure and agency – thereby avoiding a dichotomist view and moving toward a more holistic understanding of human choice” (also see Pozzebon, 2004; Pozzebon & Pinsonneault, 2005; Pozzebon et al., 2009). Fay’s multiculturalism (1996); Bernstein’s (1983; 1991) work on overcoming the objectivity/subjectivity dichotomy by thinking in terms of ‘constellations’; Bourdieu’s (1990) habitus; and Giddens’ (1984) structuration are other possibilities. Further promising integrative approaches from the domain of systems thinking can be introduced too: the theories of autopoiesis (Maturana & Varela, 1992; Mingers, 1996) and discordant pluralism (Gregory, 1996). Undoubtedly others exist as well. We illustrate the position of these options in our three dimensional vision of inquiry (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3: A vision of three dimensional pluralism showing possible choices of integrative theories on the theoretical dimension**

Because any integrative approach operates at the same level as the theories it seeks to integrate (and is therefore not meta-paradigmatic), it follows that there can be multiple integrative theories (as proposed by Pozzebon, 2004, and illustrated in Fig. 3). Indeed, if one accepts the critical pluralist argument advanced here, an integrative theory can sit comfortably alongside any other general theory, integrative or otherwise. In declaring that it is possible to have multiple integrative theories, the authors are disagreeing with several authors who have rejected the possibility of meta-theoretical plurality (De Cock and Rickards, 1995; Weaver and Gioia, 1995). However, this disagreement is grounded in a rejection of the very notion of meta-theory. Instead, the paper follows the logic of that plurality can be embraced on both the theoretical and methodical dimensions, with a continually evolving

methodological position supporting critical thinking about choices of theories and methods in relation to the circumstances of an inquiry. Theoretical pluralism (and with it, acceptance of multiple integrative theories) is possible because of the observation that different theories assume different boundaries (or frames of reference) for analysis. Agents can explore different possible boundaries (and associated purposes and values) and choose between them in the local contexts of their research, and the exploration and choice of theories (including integrative theories) follows from this. See Midgley (2000) for an argument demonstrating with examples that different theories use different boundaries for analysis.

Importantly, Midgley's (2000: 159) perspective does not imply absolute relativism: it is still possible to have "principles and standards for choice, albeit standards that are locally and temporally relevant rather than universal". His notion of theoretical pluralism within locally and temporally relevant boundaries involves an acceptance that it is naïve to assert the possibility of a God-like theory of everything; a unifying grand theory or single paradigm under which all other methodological perspectives can be subsumed. In other words, just like functionalism and interpretivism, an integrative perspective should never be granted a universal or absolute status, placed beyond critique (Midgley, 2011). This is the risk we perceive in respect of the burgeoning interest in critical realism amongst IM scholars. An integrative theory intentionally reconstructs some of the key assumptions of the functionalist and interpretive paradigms. There will therefore inevitably be elements that people wedded to the functionalist or interpretive paradigms will not be able to accept. Thus, no single integrative theory will convince passionate functionalists or interpretivists to widen their horizons. This is not to say that researchers should avoid advancing

arguments for the advantages of integrative theories against the advocates of these two specific paradigms. However, it is best to advance these arguments with the humility that comes from knowing that:

1. All paradigmatic perspectives have a set of internally consistent assumptions that remain mutually exclusive in at least some respects, so the transcendence or subsumption of other paradigms is a mere pretence.
2. Arguments for the advantages of an integrative theory come down to what it yields in practice for IM research. For instance, one could argue that it is because critical realism and structuration both allow researchers to discuss agency and structure, rather than just one of these, that IM research drawing on one or both of these theories has greater conceptual variety and hence explanatory power.
3. Because even the most sophisticated integrative theory is still based on partial and fallible human knowledge, learning from other integrative (and for that matter non-integrative) theories remains important. This implies allowing space for a plurality of integrative theories as a resource for this learning.

It is also logically consistent to go one step further and argue from this critical pluralist position that a plurality of pluralist perspectives (Fig. 3) should be available to IM scholars, even though one pluralist approach must inevitably be chosen within the boundaries of a single research project in order to preserve methodological coherence.

### **The methodological dimension.**

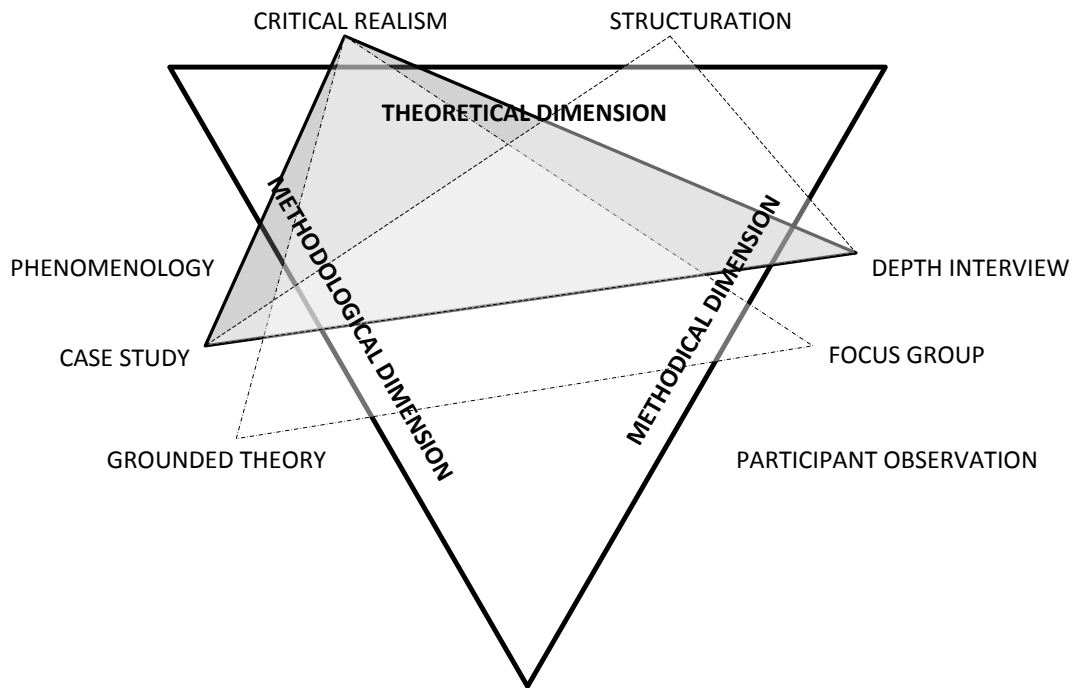
A distinction is made in this paper between methodologies and methods. While the boundary between the two is often blurred, we follow Checkland (1981), Jackson (1991) and Midgley (2000) in proposing that methods are a “set of techniques operated to achieve a given purpose”, and a methodology is a “set of theoretical ideas that justifies the use of a particular method or methods” (Midgley, 2000: 105). Easton (1995) similarly proposes that methodological and methodical (procedural) dimensions exist in addition to the theoretical dimension, so Midgley’s and Easton’s



arguments seem complementary. Methodologies, according to this way of viewing them, should contain some theoretical content, such as survey techniques being associated with the functionalist paradigm. Case study methodologies have often lacked explicit links to theoretical level considerations, many contributions derived from them therefore being at the mid-range of theory. A problem that we perceive in IM scholarship is the reduction of methodology to method, losing the theoretical content that justifies method choice.

The unwillingness for researchers in a methodological tradition to decouple a methodology from a tried and tested set of methods has been discussed as isolationist (Jackson, 1987). We have observed a rather worrying methodological trend in critical realist IM research: it appears that, for some authors, critical realism has become coupled with a case study approach (Easton, 1998, 2010). If this coupling is accepted uncritically, then opportunities for insights into agency and structure that could come from the use of other methods within a pluralist approach will be missed. If the problems to which this paper are addressed are defined as a quest for insight into agency and structure, rather than the promotion of critical realism, there would seem greater value in investigating industrial marketing phenomena using multiple integrative theories, multiple methodologies and multiple methods. The opportunity presented here is therefore for the potential of revelatory insight into agency and structure.

. The justification of methodical (procedural) choices is essential, and in the context of research on structure and agency, our methods must be capable of yielding insights into time and space. A methodical dimension will be discussed shortly.



**Fig 4: Three dimensional pluralism: Methodological dimension choices**

Fig. 4 offers a conjectural representation of the theoretical, methodological and methodical plurality available to IM researchers. The dark shaded triangle offers a view of a seemingly preferred approach in the IMP; a combination of critical realism, case-studies and depth interviewing. Theoretical plurality is achieved through a pluralism of integrative perspectives, and methodological plurality is achievable by decoupling a preferred methodological tradition (such as case-studies) from theoretical level choices and exploring different combinations across dimensions. In Fig. 4 we offer two (of many) such alternative combinations, an option to continue using critical realism but with, grounded theory (methodological dimension) and focus groups (methodical dimension). The third illustrated alternative would be to keep the case study-interview combination but instead use structuration at a theoretical dimension. However, what remains is to elaborate on how practical

empirical findings can be derived that allow the development of process theories containing explicit and distinctive exposition of agency and structure.

**The methodical (procedural) dimension.**

The instigation of critical pluralism in the methodical/procedural dimension could be interpreted as the use of mixed methods of data collection (see for instance Creswell, 2013; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003), and indeed we believe this should be encouraged. However, since the focus of this paper is on gaining insight into agency and structure, there are certain specific procedural elements that are particularly pertinent, and we focus solely on these for the remainder of this section.

Drawing on ideas presented by Pozzebon & Pinsonneault (2005), we propose that there are three key elements that should be exposed in a theoretical contribution using the three dimensional integrative framework we have outlined in this paper; time and space, agency and structure and an actors' knowledgeability. Knowledgeability in both critical realism and structuration includes notions of implicit and explicit knowledge. Actions may therefore contain a conditioned reaction in response to things that are socially real, but which may not exist in any concrete sense, as in the functionalist paradigm (Fleetwood, 2005; Riley, 1983). When a structure is intangible, its existence may only be detectable through having "causal efficacy" (Mingers, 2004: 409): essentially a reaction to something that is discernable only through its effect. Such social structures can cause a soft form of determinism (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994), grounded in the knowledgeability of actors; examples include cultural schemas, world-views or rules inherent in a role, rank or position (Stones, 2005). Makkonen et al. (2012: 289-290) argue that "events comprising human action alone are close to the concept of activity" in terms of the IMP's AAR model- essentially

affirming the voluntarist emphasis of much industrial networks research, whereas “action in time and place” consists of an actor’s “conscious and unconscious subjective purposes and perspectives.” Nevertheless, even if certain aspects of social phenomena have no objective existence, “if people behave as though they do exist [...] then the effect is as though those social phenomena do, in fact, exist” (Brennan, 2006: 831). Decisions at the methodical dimension determine how effective an actor’s knowledgeability is accessed by a researcher. For the aims of critical pluralism to be achieved, the interplay between agency and structure over time and space must be revealed in the subsequent built theory. The conceptualization of time in process theories has received notable attention from IM theorists (for instance Araujo & Easton, 2012; Halinen et al., 2012; Medlin, 2004) and the development of insight into agency and structure across time and space would seem a logical extension of this work. However, there are problems with pairing integrative theories with appropriate methods (rather than methodologies, which necessarily have an explicitly theoretical aspect) that have yet to be fully explored in IM scholarship (Ryan et al., 2012). We propose that there are three procedural aspects that need to be considered: 1) data types, 2) theorizing strategy and 3) built theory type.

**Data type.** In respect of opening up insight into time and space, different depths of analysis can therefore be applied in respect of three types of data: longitudinal (qualitative or quantitative) collected by measuring variances at set intervals; longitudinal (qualitative) with diachronic potential; and finally, retrospective (qualitative) with diachronic potential. Longitudinal, pitted against cross-sectional, emerges as yet another unhelpful dichotomy where pluralistic thinking would be beneficial. While longitudinal research might appear outwardly utopian when

developing process theory, in itself, it does not necessarily deliver 'evolutionary' process theory. Barley (1990: 224) argued that an "evolutionary perspective is especially important if one wishes to analyze transformations of action rather than merely identify and examine historical trends". Hence if we are to examine the interplay between agency and structure in time and space, then the process theories that arise should ideally be diachronic in character. Barley (1990) refers to diachronic study as distinctive from longitudinal in its evolutionary, and therefore processual and dynamic, potential. Thus, diachronic process theories best expose the impact of time 'on' interaction, rather than simply revealing interaction 'over' time. Qualitative, retrospective accounts, reports and event histories are appropriate methods of reconstructing the past (Golden, 1992; Golden, 1997; Miller et al., 1997; Bizzi & Langley, 2012). Access to an actor's implicit as well as explicit consciousness is achievable through retrospective accounts. Conscious recall is therefore only a partial requirement. Accessing the practical knowledgeability of actors is an opportunity to better develop diachronic process-based theories that contain explicit and distinct notions of agency and structure. Whether data collection is longitudinal or retrospective is of less significance than the effectiveness of the theorizing process that exposes the preconditions for action contained in the knowledge of actors. The impact of time 'on' process (diachronicity) can therefore be revealed using qualitative approaches. However, quantitative approaches may also be appropriately used longitudinally to reveal change 'over' time.

**Theorizing strategies.** The theorizing process becomes of distinct procedural importance in identifying preconditions in historical knowledge when using an integrative theory. Due to their virtual existence, some structures may only become

evident during theory building, not just due to appropriate coding procedures. Strategies for theory building are not often discussed within the IM literature and have not yet received significant attention within critical realist papers or in those deploying structuration. Strategies for theorizing from process data (Langley, 1999) and further strategies involving one such integrative theory, structuration (Pozzebon & Pinsonneault, 2005), have been discussed and implemented particularly well within the IT discipline to produce empirical papers (Jones & Karsten, 2008; Pozzebon et al., 2009; Pozzebon & Pinsonneault, 2005) and have recently been advocated in respect of research into industrial networks (Bizzi & Langley, 2012; Makkonen et al., 2012). Pozzebon and Pinsonneault helpfully discuss a series of non-mutually exclusive theorizing approaches that can be deployed, each of which expose time and space, the duality of agency and structure, and an actor's knowledgeability to different degrees. There would seem to be an opportunity to develop a plurality of different theoretical perspectives, methodologies and procedures within the IM discipline.

Pozzebon and Pinsonneault (2005) propose that a first stage of developing process theory from deployment of an integrative theory is Langley's grounded approach. A grounded approach is an inductive phase underpinning all other theorizing strategies. During this process, data can be coalesced into codes and emergent themes identified. A researcher can then deploy one of two organizing strategies: a narrative strategy, or a visual process map. In a narrative strategy, stories, meanings and mechanisms can be deployed as an initial step in order to explain the emergence of the constructs over the phases of the fieldwork, as an intermediate step, or as the main product of the research. Visual mapping involves the abstraction of more general concepts than is achievable in a grounded strategy. Finally, they propose two forms of temporal

bracketing, 'fine grained' and 'broad ranging.' These processes involve bracketing the interplay between agency and structure into episodes. Fine grained and broad ranging bracketing can be differentiated by the length of the time-periods used. For full explanations of these strategies see Langley (1999) and Pozzebon and Pinsonneault (2005). These strategies hold possibilities for the exposition of agency and structure using either qualitative or quantitative methods. Pozzebon and Pinsonneault advocate grounded and narrative strategies as effective in gaining access to the duality of agency and structure across time and space and for accessing an actor's knowledgeability, with visual mapping and temporal bracketing less effective for gaining access to an actor's knowledgeability. Access to an actor's knowledgeability is demanded to build diachronic theories from both longitudinal and retrospective data. Which theorizing process is appropriate is therefore closely associated with the type of data collected.

**Built theory types:** The product of a theorizing process has been classified into four types of process theory: lifecycle, teleological, dialectic and evolutionary (Van de Ven, 1992; Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). Each model has a starting point, an end point, and has an emergent process. Life-cycle models have received the greatest attention within IM scholarship (Dwyer et al., 1987; Eggert et al., 2006; Ford, 1980). In lifecycle models, the "trajectory to the end state is prefigured, and requires a specific historical sequence of events" (Van de Ven, 1992: 177). Life-cycle models are sufficient for revealing interaction over time but seem limited in their diachronic potential (Medlin, 2004). More recently, Peters et al. (2012) suggest that a more promising type of theory for diachronic insight is a teleological process theory. Teleological and lifecycle theories have predicated start and end points, but differ in that teleological process theories do not predict the intermediate

process of change. Notions of equifinality therefore underpin teleological process theories; different paths can be trodden to reach the same objective (Von Bertalanffy, 1968).

Arguably, some business relationships move from fixed and identifiable starting points to objectified end states, and in such circumstances, episodal research strategies (Schurr, 2004; 2007) may be appropriate to produce lifecycle or teleological process theories underpinned by temporal bracketing theorizing strategies. Such a strategy would involve bracketing the interplay between agency and structure into episodes. With fine grained temporal bracketing, the impact of changes in structure on action over shorter periods, or changes in action on structure, can be mapped. However, over short periods, episodal boundaries would need to be clearly definable. Both lifecycle and diachronic models could be built using an episodal bracketing strategy. A quantitative approach would reveal time and space, agency and structure. An advantage of these strategies is the ability to present a lot of data in a limited space, addressing concerns that process theories are difficult to publish due to the word limits on papers imposed by journals (Eisenhardt, 1991; Sminia, 2009). However, to gain access to an actor's knowledgably, and therefore build diachronic process theory, qualitative data would seem to be demanded.

The enactment of critical pluralism in the methodical dimension includes developing a body of work using mixed methods of inquiry. However, of equal importance is that researchers state their approach in respect of data type, theorizing strategy and built theory type. These three elements will help to determine the methods used to explicitly expose the interplay between agency and structure.



## **Conclusion and contributions**

A central contention in this paper was that a quest for greater insight into agency and structure in IM scholarship should embrace critical pluralism (through its lens, critical realism is viewed as one of a number of integrative perspectives) rather than seeing critical realism as the be-all and end-all solution to this ambition. Indeed, a parallel body of work embracing structuration theory is already emerging which seems to have similar ambitions to papers deploying critical realism. However, there are other integrative perspectives that have yet to be explored by IM scholars. A concern was to develop a framework that could enhance the potential for insight into agency and structure in IM scholarship.

Taking a lead from Easton, we have advocated consideration of critical plurality in three dimensions, rather than levels. The advantage here is to avoid either a bottom up or top down logic. Instead we propose a vision of inquiry in which the decision area (see Figs. 1 & 3) is an intersection of three dimensions, where new thinking in any one can lead to the consideration of implications for the others. However, the framework we have proposed follows Easton's (1995: 412) logic that such a framework "is meant to be neither normative nor positive but illuminative". Our proposed framework is therefore designed to illuminate the steps through which theorizing can be developed. We contend that approaching research in three dimensions offers greater opportunities for insight into agency and structure than discussing such matters at a purely ontological level (the primary domain of the paradigm wars), although we do not naively claim to be bypassing or transcending existing paradigms. We are instead proposing the basis for a new critical pluralist

paradigm. This, we argue, is preferable to existing approaches because of its implications for IM research practice: a vision of inquiry in three dimensions, with space provided for learning from multiple integrative theories, and support for theoretically-informed methodological pluralism, gives us the potential for a much more flexible and responsive research practice that could allow significant new insights into networks and business interactions. Through the approach outlined in this paper, we believe the potential for IM theory development is enhanced. It is possible therefore to conceive of a research endeavour that is both capable of theoretical rigour whilst being practically useful. The endeavour would allow us to gain insights into the interplay between agency and structure in IM interaction, and these could be obtained through the use of multiple theoretical, methodological and methodical lenses. Indeed, the potential for such an approach to expand beyond the boundaries of IM seems high. Through this approach, a deeper insight into the interplay between agency and structure in IM can be obtained.

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