Knowing and Doing Action-Orientated Research in Business Networks: The Use of Subjective Personal Introspection

Abstract

This paper engages with debates over the most appropriate methodologies that can be employed in order to build theories in management research, debates that are also becoming increasingly salient in business marketing scholarship. Our approach embraces calls for B2B scholarship not to view science as merely “synonymous with quantification” and, moreover, to bring to the B2B context studies that draw from across the organizational and broader social science spectrum. The link between the research question(s) posed and the research method(s) selected, will influence the findings obtained and ultimately, the usefulness of the results and the practical implications. In this paper, we provide overviews of action-orientated research and ‘subjective personal introspection’ (SPI) – and in so doing, illustrate a methodological approach that has the potential to provide a rich ‘emic’ perspective for those who undertake action-orientated B2B or network research. Because the focus of this conceptual paper is subjective, personal, and introspective, it illustrates reflections and insights about the possibility of engaging in this particular qualitative research process, rather than a description of a particular piece of qualitative research per se. The aim is to introduce a novel methodological approach to action-orientated B2B research.
Introduction

This paper engages with debates over the most appropriate methodologies that can be employed in order to build theories in management research, debates that are also becoming increasingly salient in business marketing scholarship. Our approach embraces calls for B2B scholarship not to view science as merely “synonymous with quantification” (Malhotra & Uslay, 2009, p. 29) and, moreover, to bring to the B2B context studies that draw from across the organizational and broader social science spectrum (cf. Spekman, 2004). In the organizational studies field it has long been noted that, as research methodology is becoming more sophisticated, there is an ever-widening gap between organizational problem-solving theory and utility; and that this ‘crisis’ is rooted in the limitations and inappropriateness of a positivist approach to studying human organizations (Susman & Evered, 1978). It is the limitations of positivist organizational inquiry that have led to the development of philosophical and methodological approaches to the study of social science phenomena that fall under the rubric of ‘action-orientated’ inquiry.

There is much about action orientated inquiry that should appeal to industrial network scholars, especially those from the IMP Group (e.g. Turnbull, Ford, & Cunningham, 1996), who tend to favour a case study-based, idiographic perspective on methodology, producing results that have potential resonance for members of the network under investigation as much as for marketing scholarship in general (cf. Wilson & Woodside, 1999). Most action researchers subscribe to the idea that research output results from “an involvement with members of an organization over a matter which is of genuine concern to them” (Eden & Huxham, 1996a) and that rigorous research can lead to theory-development where theory is grounded in action-orientated data that is both meaningful and useful to both researchers and practitioners alike (Eden & Huxham, 1996b). Indeed, it is scholars such as Chris Huxham and her colleagues who have significantly raised the profile of action research in the study of inter-organizational collaboration (e.g. Beech & Huxham, 2003; Huxham & Beech, 2003).

In considering the collaboration literature, however, we should be mindful of its contextual limitations in terms of the insights it can provide to the challenges of managing in the marketing arena. Easton (1995) observes that much of what might be called traditional inter-organizational theory has avoided economic issues by concentrating research on not-for-profit organizations (cf. Jarillo, 1988). For instance, Hardy, Lawrence and Phillips (1998) examine cases of inter-organizational collaboration with great analytical sensitivity, but acknowledge that their study is confined to a ‘non-competitive’ context. In a later paper, Phillips, Lawrence and Hardy (2000) also confirm that their definition of ‘collaboration’ limits relationships to those that are not mediated by market mechanisms.

We hope to build on existing action-orientated perspectives in the study of network relationships in market contexts (e.g. Little & Motion, 2004). In particular we argue that, in order to explore the potential utility of action research for B2B marketing researchers, the approach can be enhanced by subjective personal introspection. The next section of the article will review the key tenets of action inquiry methodologies. This will be followed by a review and analysis of subjective personal introspection. By reviewing the methodological and ideological foundations for an action inquiry approach to organizational analysis through the incorporation of a subjective personal introspective ethos, a case for decreasing the gap between theory and practice in B2B marketing scholarship will be made, but in such a way as to address the concerns of those who are troubled by the ongoing and counter-productive ‘relevance versus rigour’ debate (Gulati, 2007).
Overall our aim is to make an argument for the incorporation of subjective personal introspection into action-orientated research within industrial networks where it is assumed that the researcher will have the opportunity to influence practice in a timely fashion by virtue of conducting the actual research (which can include the introduction and evaluation of various organizational interventions). This is as opposed to possibly influencing practice via the traditional route whereby the academic research is published such that the published paper can be read by practitioners who choose to implement this knowledge – an obvious limitation being that despite many journals requiring attention to the managerial implications of the work, much research produces knowledge that lacks practical relevance for corporate actors because of translational problems of knowledge transfer or knowledge production (Shapiro, Kirkman, & Courtney, 2007; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). The aim of this paper is therefore to discuss the issue of the separation between theory and practice or knowing, and to do so through an examination of whether subjective personal introspection might legitimately facilitate action research’s mandate to decrease these separations.

Reflecting on Action-Orientated Inquiry

Although its origins are somewhat disputed, social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1946) is generally credited with coining the term ‘action research’, as a means of generating knowledge about a social system while at the same time, attempting to change it. He conceived of action research as a cyclical inquiry process consisting of diagnosing a problem situation, planning action steps, followed by implementing and evaluating outcomes (Elden & Chisholm, 1993).

Focusing on the goals of action research, Robinson (1993) cites a definition developed by Kemmis: “Action research is a form of self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social (including educational) situations in order to improve the rationality and social justice of: (a) their own social or educational practices, (b) their understanding of these practices, and (c) the situation in which the practices are carried out.” This acknowledgement that action research involves self-reflective inquiry suggests a role for subjective personal introspection. We will return to this idea later. Robinson (1993) concludes that in examining the various definitions of action research, three main goals can be derived. Thus, action research involves: the improvement of practice; the improvement of practitioners’ ability to improve their practice, including relevant practice contexts, and; the generation of knowledge about practice and the improvement process.

We have begun to see a great deal more written in the area of ‘practice’ in management/organizational research – especially the strategy as practice literature focussing on what firms know or have in conjunction with or versus what they do regarding strategy (Chia & MacKay, 2007; Whittington, 2006). The development of Western thought based on the “knowledge-creation-application-performance” (Chia, 2003, p. 953) style presumes that knowledge needs to be objective and to precede action (i.e. through hypothesis testing). Chia (2004) makes it clear that the ‘practice turn’ as applied to strategy, mostly by ‘processualists’ such as Mintzberg (1987) and Pettigrew (1997), has resulted in a welcome departure from abstract theorising. He also, however, suggests that further interrogation of ‘practice’ needs to be understood with regard to the contributions of praxis social theorists and their influence on the ‘practice turn’ in social theory. In particular notions of practice have tended to presuppose rational action and reliance of the practitioner on instrumental reason and cognitive representations. Chia (2004) blames the privileging of observer-led, means-end, causal logic on
an intellectualisation / academic ‘logocentrism’ that fails to understand practice within its own practical logic and its non-rational, non-linear and non-causal terms.

Israel, Schurman, and Hugentobler (1992) further support this view in their assessment of the six necessary conditions for conducting action research. They state that action research is participatory, cooperative/collaborative, a co-learning experience, involving system development, an empowering process and attempting to achieve a balance between research and action. It involves researchers actively taking part in real organizational problem-solving by being accountable participants in problem-solving, and not merely outside observers of the situation (Checkland, 2010).

Chisholm and Elden (1993) and Elden and Chisholm (1993) illustrate a number of dimensions of action research that can be placed on continua, continua that would appear to correspond quite closely to notions of ‘levels’ of industrial network inquiry (cf. Wilke & Ritter, 2006). They first note that action research is beginning to examine more complex target system levels - with increasing complexity occurring as one goes from groups to organizations to the networks that comprise society and trans-societal systems. Action research also spans the entire spectrum of organization in systems - from the tightly to the loosely organised. Action research change objectives span the entire spectrum - from improving organizational performance and generating social science theory to the more critical action research that attempts to raise consciousness explore new approaches to social problems and emancipate or empower groups that have traditionally been oppressed.

Therefore, the action research process itself can range from being largely a predetermined closed process to an emergent open process. This follows closely on how the role of the researcher is seen - from dominating the action research process to collaboratively managing the process with system members. As will be demonstrated in the next section illustrating subjective personal introspection, the role of the researcher is extremely important in attempting to bridge this gap between theory and practice in the simplest form by merely feeding back results to the organization(s) being studied.

Johansson and Lindhult (2008) argue that action research with more of a critical (theory-building/refining) agenda or a pragmatic (action) orientation will be a reflection of the research context. The pragmatic orientation is preferred where decisive and immediate action is needed, whereas the critical is more appropriate where critical thinking and reflection is required before implementing any significant action. They further state that the responsibility of the researcher, as well as the type of knowledge gained, may differ between the two orientations. However, as we will argue in this paper, this should not necessarily be a dichotomy and that regardless of orientation, critical thinking and reflection via subjective personal introspection is useful in both scenarios and can only assist the action-orientated researcher in negotiating multiple roles/responsibilities in generating different forms of knowledge. Notwithstanding the numerous distinctions and refinements that occur under the rubric of action research, the key aspects of how action inquiry is defined and its operations can be simplified to draw out the commonalities between the various approaches to and intentions of action research. McTaggart (1991) illustrates the cyclical nature of this methodological approach such that:

1. Constructive discourse among participants leads to a plan.
2. Constructive practice involves acting on that plan.
3. Reconstructive practice denotes making observations of the action that has taken place.
4. Such that reconstructive discourse can occur. This is simply a reflection on these observations such that the plan can be evaluated and modified which brings the process back to stage 1 again.

Having introduced the notion of action inquiry in a broad sense, we will now turn our attention to some specific issues within this domain that lend themselves to a degree of subjective personal introspection.

**Action-Orientated Research and Subjective Personal Introspection**

As a methodological approach, subjective personal introspection (SPI) comprises the creation of rich, impressionistic stories of our own experiences regarding particular phenomena of interest (Holbrook, 2005). For the most part in marketing scholarship, SPI has only been utilised by consumer behaviourists describing their own personal consumption experiences (Gould, 1991; 1995; Holbrook, 1986, 1995, 2005; Shankar, 2000).

SPI is a controversial research technique because it involves examining one’s own mental and emotional processes related to a topic of interest and collecting these introspections as personal narratives or autobiographical essays (Brown & Reid, 1997). By controversial we mean that more hypothetico-deductive, quantitative researchers feel that SPI does not adequately addresses issues of reliability, validity and other such positivist research requirements since their view is that subjective experience doesn’t meet generally accepted criteria for ‘scientific’ analysis due to its lack of objectivity, replicability, and being public.

Even for some post-positivist researchers, it is seen to be “rather self-indulgent” (Baron, 2008, p. 313) or that it requires the elimination of its subjectivity bias in favour of confirmation (Woodside, 2004) in order to “overcome the fundamental attribution error, inherent cultural prejudices, and the general bias toward self-fabrication (Woodside, 2006, p. 257) or that it fails to include sufficient complexity to “accurately explain real-life processes” (Woodside, 2010, p. 66). Additionally, it is acknowledged that there could be issues due to SPI’s reliance upon the author’s memories which are arguably susceptible to mental lapses (Holbrook, 2005). These controversies would appear to mainly stem from differences in what researchers deem to be the way to conduct research – that is, differing methodological approaches that presuppose very different epistemological and ontological orientations. However, Brown (1998, p. 25) notes “Just because introspection fails to meet the formal criteria for scientific acceptability does not mean that the technique is uninsightful”.

As previously mentioned, SPI has only really been seen in the consumer behaviour marketing literature. This makes sense given that in addition to being researchers, we also are consumers ourselves; affording us the opportunity to introspect on our own consumption behaviour. Thus, what we are proposing is that as qualitative, interpretivist, phenomenological, action-orientated organizational researchers, SPI entails looking inwards and assessing our own experiences working within organizations and/or business networks. Based upon these experiences there is an opportunity to create insightful narratives through introspection and to “interrogate the way in which [our] own perspectives and frames of reference help shape [our] questions and interpretations, as well as, most fundamentally, the very way in which the area of inquiry is framed” (Ladkin, 2005, p. 109). We believe that this is essential since the subjectively, personal, introspective researcher is both research instrument as well as research subject. Gould (1995) nicely summarises why we see utility in incorporating SPI into (some) action-orientated organizational research in noting that it is an approach that relies on the ‘reflexive mediation’
between one’s personal and one’s research insights with the added power of ‘mindful self-
observation’.

We argue that this critical reflection inherent in SPI should also be a component of action-
orientated research in industrial network contexts. After all, action researchers are encouraged to employ ‘critical subjectivity’ in that they must notice their frames of reference, as well as their political, racial, cultural and/or gendered orientation and they should question their routinised reactions to people and events (Ladkin, 2005). Marshall (2001) takes this accounting for subjectivity further, asking us to pay attention to how we perceive, make meaning, frames issues, make assumptions as well as reach outside ourselves by actively questioning or raising issues with others in order to ‘test’ and develop ideas. Essentially, for critical subjectivity to play a significant role in action-orientated research, it should assume a personal introspective orientation since subjectivity and reflection both involve noticing the way in which our consciousness moulds and contributes to the context of the inquiry (Ladkin, 2005).

**Using SPI to Better ‘Know’ and ‘Do’ Action-Orientated Research**

Recall Checkland’s (2010) observation that an action research approach involves researchers actively taking part in real organizational problem-solving by being accountable participants in this problem-solving, and not merely outside observers of the situation. This lends support to the notion that incorporating SPI into one’s action-orientated research might, in fact, enhance the accountability in organizational problem-solving because it helps B2B researchers to genuinely think about their multiple roles and how best to work through any perceived tensions in order to better realise both the academic (theory) and practitioner (action) facets of their research.

By illustrating that SPI is essentially a form of self-reflexivity, we hope to have successfully argued that personal narratives and making explicit one’s feelings and tensions in conducting research can lead to both personal as well as shared awareness about social, political and personal processes (Swan, 2008). We also hope that we have widened the forum for incorporating SPI beyond the consumer behaviour context to the context in which action-orientated researchers incorporate introspection in their study of industrial marketing. In addition, we hope that the paper causes qualitative, action-orientated organizational researchers to contemplate a number of questions: what is the role of the researcher; what is the source of their authority to narrate and what are they authorised to recount; and what are the consequences of this (Quattrone, 2006).

This paper has highlighted the significance of the marketing researcher for the research process, so that the researcher is seen as implicated in the data that are generated by virtue of his or her involvement in data collection and interpretation (Bryman & Cassell, 2006). We thus believe that in conducting action-orientated research, subjective personal introspection (perhaps simply as another term for reflexivity) can be a valuable aid in maximising the success of assuming multiple roles in order to better achieve the dual goals of theory-building/refinement in addition to contributing directly to industrial marketing practice.
References


