Towards a Taxonomy of Strategic Research in the IMP Tradition

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Introduction

The project reported in this article is part of a wider project, the aim of which is to investigate the contribution that interaction and networks (IMP) research has made to the field of strategy (Baraldi et al 2006). The specific aim of the sub-project described here is to develop, from the archive of IMP research, a better understanding of both the implicit and the explicit contributions that IMP research has made to the strategy field. The method employed is a systematic analysis of the IMP research database, using a content analysis approach, with the aim of developing a robust taxonomy of strategic research that has emerged from this body of knowledge. Specifically, this paper concerns itself with the development of the analytical method for this task, and with the presentation of the results of a pilot study conducted on 55 IMP research papers to test the analytical approach.

The 'IMP approach to strategy'

Baraldi et al (2006) compared the 'IMP approach to strategy' with five important schools of thought in strategy – rational planning, positioning, resource-based, emergent, and strategy-as-practice. In doing so they attempted to summarise the explicit contribution that IMP researchers have made to the field of strategy. While strategy has not always been an important explicit theme in IMP research, it has played a significant role in the development of the body of knowledge that surrounds interaction, relationships and networks (Baraldi et al 2006). Intuitively, it seems that the earlier work in the IMP tradition (Håkansson, 1982, Turnbull and Valla, 1986, Ford, 1990 and Axelsson and Easton, 1992) contained more explicit discussion of strategy than has been the case in recent years. For example: in 'Understanding Business Markets, 1st edition' (Ford, 1990) the second section in the book is dedicated to *Developing Marketing Strategy*; the title of Turnbull and Valla's (1986) work was *Strategies for International Industrial Markets: the Management of Customer Relationships in European Industrial Markets* demonstrating a clear and explicit focus on the strategic management of customer relationships; the index to the 'IMP bible' (Håkansson 1982) has six references covering 36 pages to 'marketing strategy', and six references covering 28 pages to 'purchasing strategy'.

However, by the very nature of the research undertaken within the interaction and networks tradition, it is unlikely that strategy will emerge strongly as an *explicit* theme. Research within this tradition is usually not prescriptive; the emphasis is placed on describing and explaining marketing and purchasing phenomena and placing them in a theoretical context, rather than on attempting directly to answer managerial questions. Within the IMP research tradition one would expect to find less emphasis on consciously planned strategy, and more emphasis on emergent strategy. A prominent argument within the industrial networks literature is that the individual actor can exert very little control, from which it follows that deliberate, planned strategies for the 'development' of the network from the perspective of a single actor are unlikely to be realised (Ford and Håkansson 2006). It is far more likely that the actor will be able to construct a coherent narrative for his strategy retrospectively – that is to say, using Mintzberg's notion of emergent strategy. In a book that, according to the authors, is designed to summarise the IMP approach for managers and students, Ford et al (2003) quite explicitly set out to undermine the notion that strategy in industrial networks can reasonably be conceptualised as a carefully planned and implemented rational response to environmental and competitive circumstances. They do this through three 'myths': the myth of action, the myth of independence, and the

myth of completeness. These are all important for our purposes, but the 'myth of independence' is particularly important, asserting, bluntly, that it is a myth to suppose that a company is able to take strategic action independently: "Companies ... have limited freedom to act independently and the outcomes of their actions will be strongly influenced by the attitudes and actions of those with whom they have relationships" (Ford et al 2003, p6). Similarly, Håkansson and Ford (2000, p137) have argued that: "Interdependence between companies means that the strategy process is interactive, evolutionary and responsive, rather than independently developed and implemented".

Within a research tradition which largely avoids prescriptivism and which prefers rich descriptions of complex phenomena, we conclude that much of the 'strategy content' will be implicit rather than explicit. From this we conclude that an inductive approach is most suited to the task of extracting information about strategy from the IMP *oeuvre*.

Research approach

Empirically, this paper reports on a pilot study, applying a content analysis approach to selected IMP literature, in which we seek to identify how often strategic issues are addressed, what kinds of strategic issues are addressed, and from this analysis to develop a taxonomy of strategic issues in interaction, relationships and networks research.

The first difficulty in any study of 'strategy' is definitional. Conventionally, a distinction has been drawn between 'corporate strategy' (decisions made at the corporate level about the strategic business units in which the corporation chooses to invest, formulation of overall corporate mission and goals, and so on) and competitive strategy (decisions made at the business unit level about how to achieve the goals delegated to the business unit by the corporate headquarters). Our initial presumption is that when strategy is discussed within IMP papers it will largely or exclusively be competitive strategy that is concerned. Furthermore, and as exemplified by the coverage of strategy in Håkansson (1982), it is very likely that the great majority of the competitive strategy issues addressed in IMP research concern *functional* strategy, specifically marketing and purchasing strategy. The first component of the research approach will be to refine these observations into a sound operational definition of strategy in the IMP tradition, which can then be used in developing a coding framework to apply to the existing body of literature.

The notion of strategy is easier to operationalize in a theoretical context which assumes that an organization has control over its resources, is merely responding to environmental forces, and by following a predefined series of environmental analyses can choose an appropriate strategic approach to maintain its market position (e.g. Ansoff, 1965). IMP researchers have generally rejected this highly formalised conception of strategy and have considered the problems relating to the interactive nature of strategy, addressing issues such as shared access to resources (e.g. Håkansson and Snehota, 1989). It is intended that the taxonomy will identify the core elements that relate to strategy in an interactive context (i.e. relating to either relationships or networks).

Analytical method and sampling

The analytical method used was based on those employed by Easton, Zolkiewski and Bettany (2003), and by Furrer, Thomas and Goussevskaia (2008). The method involves coding the abstracts identified in the conference proceedings to identify 'strategic themes'. The strategic themes (codes) may either be standalone, or may be hierarchically related, so that there is a hierarchy of codes. In this article we refer only to first-order codes and second-order codes, although one could clearly work with third and higher-order codes, and it is likely that this will be the case when the analysis is extended beyond the scope of this pilot study. The strategic themes (codes) may be *a priori* (derived from prior theoretical literature, for example) or *in vivo* (derived from the articles themselves). For this pilot study we adopted an *in vivo* coding strategy (comparable with Furrer, Thomas and Goussevskaia, 2008). At this stage the codes we used have not been reviewed independently by experts in the field. However, one of the steps we will use to develop this study further will be to have our codes reviewed by experts from both within and outside the IMP area. Indeed, presenting this material at the IMP conference is a first step in that process.

For the pilot study we selected a sub-sample of articles from the online IMP research database, which contains a total of 1,342 research papers (for comparison, in a recent study of the 'IMP network', Henneberg et al (2007) used a database of 2,172 IMP research papers, because they included the papers from older conferences for which electronic databases are not available). We considered the use of a random sampling approach, but rejected this on the grounds that we wanted to concentrate our pilot analysis on research that was likely to include some 'strategy content' – we reasoned that a fairly small, random sample of articles from the IMP database could, conceivably, contain very few articles containing strategic themes. Accordingly, we selected for our sample the 55 articles in the database that had included 'strategy' as a keyword. The abstracts for these papers were combined into a single Microsoft word document to facilitate coding and each abstract was given a unique number. Coding was undertaken by three individual coders, all of whom have been involved in research in the IMP tradition for a number of years and who, therefore, could be considered to be experienced in the field. Each coder coded between 21 and 22 papers. To cross-check agreement with respect to allocation of codes, three abstracts were coded by all three judges; all the coders derived the same codes (with some minor differences of nomenclature that were resolved through discussion) for these abstracts. This result could be considered surprising since one might expect some subjective interpretation of the qualitative data, but is perhaps explained by the relatively small amount of material that was coded and the experience of the coders in the area. The reliability of the judgement (as suggested by Perreault and Leigh, 1989) was not calculated at this stage, but will be calculated when further rounds of analysis are conducted.

The rationale for using abstracts rather than full articles was the same as that followed by Easton et al (2003) and acknowledges the benefits and limitations that this entails. Using abstracts as a proxy enables more articles to be included in the sample, yet it is recognized that some abstracts may not be truly representative of the material contained in the paper. One of the major questions that must be resolved following this pilot project is how to extend the work to cover more material; it is possible that abstract coding could be used as a method to identify core articles that are taken forward for further detailed analysis.

Brief details of these 55 articles are shown in Appendix 2. Table 1 summarises our sample in terms of the country of affiliation of the first-named author. For purposes of this pilot study it is sufficient to observe that Table 1 shows no strong bias, and includes authors from all of the principal IMP countries, in proportions that would not surprise any regular conference participant.

Table 1: Country of affiliation (by first authorship)

Country of affiliation of 1st author	Frequency
UK	9
Sweden	8
Finland	6
Australia	6
France	5
Norway	4
Italy	4
Portugal	3
Denmark	3
Other – once each (USA, Hungary, Slovenia, Poland, Tanzania, Japan, Russia)	7

Findings

Table 2 shows the frequency distribution for the number of times that the article abstracts were coded. The mean number of codes attached to each abstract was 2.6. That is to say that, on average, we coded each of the 55 articles to 2.6 'strategic themes'. This compares to an average of 3.6 codes per article reported by Furrer et al (2008) in their similar study of 2,125 articles in strategic management journals. However, in the Furrer et al (2008) study the researchers examined the whole of each article, whereas for this study we have adopted the method employed by Easton et al (2003), and have coded the *abstracts* rather than the entire article (for a discussion of the reasoning behind this approach see Easton et al (2003)). Therefore, while it may be that this indicates a lower density of strategic issues in the IMP literature, the result could be the outcome of slightly different analytical methods.

Table 2: Number of codes used per abstract

Number of terms used to code abstract	Frequency (number of abstracts)
1	16
2	16
3	12
4	4
5	3
6	3
7	1

The complete set of first and second-order codes that was used in the analysis can be seen in Appendix 2. Table 3 shows the 28 first-order codes, and the frequency with which each of these codes was used (for comparison, Furrer et al (2008) had a list of 26 "major keywords"). Of our 28 first-order codes, 14 were used at least twice, and 14 were used only once. It is hardly surprising that 'strategy' emerges as the most common first-order code, since the abstracts were pre-selected to have 'strategy' as a keyword. The more detailed analysis of the second-order codes within the overall strategy code, presented in Table 4, is more illuminating in this respect. Nevertheless, what Table 3 does show is that more 'traditional' conceptions of marketing strategy – such as competition and the environment – are far from absent from IMP studies. However, as expected, they are less common in our sample than the core IMP concepts of 'network' and 'relationship'. Notice that, in our analysis, we have selected references to 'network' and 'relationship' that demonstrate a strategic orientation; instances where the authors have referred to networks or relationships purely descriptively, with no strategic content, were not coded for this study. See sub-codes in Appendix 2.

Greater detail is provided about the first-order code 'strategy' in Table 4. This Table shows the second-order codes of 'strategy', and the frequency with which they were employed in the analysis. There are 24 second-order codes associated with 'strategy', of which 10 were employed at least twice, and 14 were used only once. The largest single sub-category of 'strategy is 'marketing strategy' (frequency 10), which suggests, at first sight, that marketing aspects of strategy are better represented than other aspects of strategy within our sample. However, the other cornerstone of the IMP Group, namely procurement, is also well represented. Both purchasing/sourcing strategy and supply/supplier management fall within the general field of procurement, and they have an aggregate frequency of 7. Lying between marketing strategy and procurement strategy we find 'relationship strategy' and 'interaction/interactive strategy', which can be thought of as a dyadic approach to either or both of marketing and procurement strategy. On the basis of this pilot study, therefore, it appears that 50% of the references to 'strategy' concern marketing or purchasing strategy within a buyer-seller dyad.

Table 3: Frequency with which first-order codes were used

Concept	Frequency
Strategy	50
Network	15
Relationship	11
Value	8
Environment	7
Competition	6
Internationalisation	4
Core competences	4
Strategic supply	4
Strategic development	4
Market positioning	3
Strategic acting	2
Organisational learning	2
Competitive advantage	2
Other – used once each (Strategic resource; Competitive behaviour; Cooperativeness; Dynamic capabilities; Strategic implementation; Strategic management; Strategic theorizing; Strategic alliances; Strategic network partners; Governance; Vertical integration; Bidding strategy; Global strategy; Expectation	15

management; Marketing control)	

Table 4: Frequency with which sub-codes of 'strategy' were used

Concept	Frequency
Marketing strategy	10
Relationship strategy	4
Interaction/interactive strategy	4
Purchasing/sourcing strategy	4
Supply/supplier management (supply base)	3
Corporate strategy	3
Business strategy	2
Communication strategy	2
Soft-assembled	2
Key account management strategy	2
Other – used once each (Exit strategy; Conflict strategy; Differentiation strategy; Adaptation; Long-term; Network; Individual; Relationalism; Networking; Global; Restructuring; Outsourcing/insourcing; Supply base; Intended)	14
Total	50

We turn now to the final analysis to be considered in this working paper. This is the analysis that suffers most from the small sample that has been used for the pilot study, and so for the present purpose should be considered illustrative of what might be achievable when the analysis is applied to a larger dataset. So far our analysis has considered only the one-dimensional application of each strategic theme (code) to the data (IMP abstracts). Clearly, however, interesting conclusions may emerge from the analysis of 'intersections' between the strategic themes (codes). Each abstract must be coded against at least one strategic theme; otherwise it would be excluded from the study. However, many abstracts (according to Table 1, the great majority) are coded against several different strategic themes. An 'intersection' is defined as one instance of an abstract being coded at two different strategic themes.

Table 5: Intersections between the 'top 6' codes

Intersection	Frequency
Three-way intersections	
Strategy-Value-Network	1
Strategy-Environment-Network	1
Strategy-Environment-Competition	1
Two-way intersections	
Strategy-Network	5
Strategy-Relationship	4
Strategy-Environment	3
Strategy-Competition	3
Strategy-Value	2
Relationship-Competition	2
Other two-way intersections (once each) (Relationship-environment; Relationship-network; Network-value; Network-environment; Value-competition; Environment-competition)	6
Feasible two-way intersections with zero frequency (Network-competition; Relationship-value; Value-environment)	0

Because of the small scale of our pilot dataset there are comparatively few intersections to analyse, and it only makes sense to examine the intersections for the six most frequently occurring first-order codes (Strategy, Network, Relationship, Value, Environment, and Competition). Between 6 separate variables there are 15 (= 0.5 n(n-1)) feasible two-way intersections. Table 5 shows that, for our sample, three of these are empty, six occurred once, and six occurred more than once. Since 'strategy' is much the commonest code, it appears in

the five most frequent two-way intersections (and in all of the three-way intersections that were found in this analysis – see the top of Table 5). At this stage the scope of the study is too limited to enable conclusions to be drawn from this analysis; nevertheless, even this first glimpse suggests that the analysis of coding intersections could provide some interesting insights.

Conclusion

This paper draws on a pilot study, limited in scope and depth. However, some tentative conclusions are drawn, also indicating directions for extending the study.

First, from a total of 1,342 papers on the IMP database at the time of the analysis, 55 (4.1%) contained 'strategy' in the abstract. From this we conclude that, in line with expectations, a relatively small proportion of IMP papers deal with strategy explicitly. However, a similar search on 'strategic' provided 99 hits (7.4%), which suggests that by adding near synonyms for 'strategy' we can usefully extend our analysis. Similarly, many of the first- and second-order codes developed from this pilot project could be used to search through the 1,342 abstracts in order to identify more abstracts that deal with strategic aspects within IMP. Furthermore, IMP research is often considered to deal with strategy implicitly, that is to say making use of strategy, or generating clear implications for strategy, without any explicit mention of the concept. This suggests a need to approach the development of codes and sub-codes in an iterative way in order to create a clearer picture of the use of, or implications for strategy in its widest sense within IMP as a field of research.

Second, the pilot study shows that the concept of strategy is used in a variety of ways within IMP papers, as illustrated in Appendix 2. A large proportion of the papers deal with strategy in relation to network, relationship, interaction, supplier and customer, implying, as expected, a focus on 'business unit strategy', as opposed to 'corporate strategy'. However, it is perhaps surprising that some more traditional strategic concepts such as the environment and competition are also used fairly frequently. This variety is potentially interesting, and may form a foundation for development of a systematic classification or taxonomy of strategic concepts used in IMP research. In addition to Appendix 2, Tables 3 and 4 are first steps in this direction. In simple terms, this will consolidate our knowledge of what IMP work has been done addressing strategy and so make it easier to define future strategic studies that will add to knowledge in this field.

Third, the pilot study makes use of IMP papers. By doing so, some tentative conclusions are drawn regarding the share of papers that deal with strategy, and the variety of ways in which this concept is used. However, after having extended these findings, they should be compared with similar studies of bodies of knowledge outside the IMP research field. Such comparisons could comprise the share of papers that deals with strategy, and how strategy is used (the variability in the use of the terminology), either for specific academic journals or for bodies of work produced by fairly well-defined schools of thought. In particular, different interpretations of terms concerning strategy are of potential interest. In IMP research scholars are encouraged to use the network of business relationships as the unit of analysis and to investigate interdependencies among companies. In the more conventional strategy literature one expects that the unit of analysis will normally be the individual firm and investigations will focus on how the firm (regarded as capable of planning and implementing an independent strategy) deals with challenges and opportunities at the industry and macro-environmental levels. A comparison of different studies may point out similarities and differences concerning the way that strategy is conceptualised. As a small example of a comparison that deals with the codes on strategy, our sample contains on average 2.6 codes per article, whereas the study by Furrer et al. (2008) contains 3.6. This may be taken as tentative evidence that IMP literature, even literature pre-selected to deal with 'strategy' – does contain less 'strategic content' than mainstream strategic management literature. However, a systematic search for implicit use of 'strategy' as suggested above may change this picture.

To sum up, our principal conclusion is that the furthering of this pilot study is worthwhile, and that it should be extended in line with the above mentioned directions.

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Appendix 1: Summary of the articles used in the analysis

Year	Location	1st author affiliation	Authors
2000	Bath	UK	Cousins, Spekman
2000	Bath	Finland	Helander, Hirvonen
2000	Bath	Sweden	Johanson (M.)
2000	Bath	France	Lemaire
2000	Bath	France	Durrieu, Mandjak
2000	Bath	Sweden	Rundh
2001	Oslo	Sweden	Baraldi
2001	Oslo	Sweden	Brunninge
2001	Oslo	Norway	Buvik, Gulbrandsen, Sandvik
2001	Oslo	France	Cova, Crespin-Mazet, Salle
2001	Oslo	Australia	Barrett, Fletcher
2001	Oslo	Australia	Freeman
2001	Oslo	Finland	Törnroos, Hedaa
2001	Oslo	Norway	Jevnaker
2001	Oslo	USA	Johnson (H.), Johnson (W.C.)
2001	Oslo	Denmark	Jørgensen
2001	Oslo	UK	Harland, Walker, Knight, Sutton
2001	Oslo	Finland	Järvelin, Mittilä
2001	Oslo	UK	Mouzas
2001	Oslo	France	Sauvée
2001	Oslo	Hungary	Lanyi, Mandjak, Veres
2001	Oslo	Slovenia	Brenèiè, Žabkar
2002	Perth	UK	Ford, Håkansson, Snehota, Gadde

2002	Perth	Sweden	Axelsson, Agndal
2002	Perth	Sweden	Lindberg-Repo
2002	Other	Australia	Wilkinson, Young
2002	Other	Australia	Wilkinson, Debenham
2003	Lugano	Portugal	Brito, Roseira
2003	Lugano	Italy	Ancarani, Shankar
2003	Lugano	UK	Brady
2003	Lugano	Portugal	Brito, Roseira
2003	Lugano	Italy	Stocchetti, Volpato, Buzzavo
2003	Lugano	Portugal	Ferreira
2003	Lugano	France	Pardo, Georges, Guenzi
2003	Lugano	Australia	Olaru, Purchase
2003	Lugano	Sweden	Rundh
2003	Lugano	Italy	Tunisini, Snehota
2003	Lugano	Poland	Talarczyk
2003	Lugano	Finland	Halinen, Tikkanen
2003	Lugano	Norway	Pedersen, Holmen, Håkansson
2004	Copenhagen	UK	Gilchrist, Easton, Lenney
2004	Copenhagen	UK	Canning, Brennan
2004	Copenhagen	UK	Cunningham (M.)
2004	Copenhagen	Denmark	Freytag
2004	Copenhagen	Denmark	Mikkelsen, Freytag
2004	Copenhagen	Norway	Solberg, Durrieu
2004	Copenhagen	Finland	Westerlund
2005	Rotterdam	Sweden	Dubois, Wynstra
2005	Rotterdam	UK	Ford, Redwood
2005	Rotterdam	Finland	Lindblom, Olkkonen
2005	Rotterdam	Tanzania	Mukasa, Jaensson, Rutashobya
2005	Rotterdam	Japan	Hosoi, Ohnishi, Takemura, Wang
2005	Rotterdam	Russia	Tretyak, Sheresheva
2005	Rotterdam	Italy	Tunisini, Bocconcelli
2005	Other	Australia	Wilkinson, Young

Appendix 2: Codes & sub-codes used in the analysis

Code	Sub-codes
Strategy	Marketing strategy; Relationship strategy; Interaction/interactive strategy; Purchasing/sourcing strategy; Supply/supplier management (supply base); Corporate strategy; Business strategy; Communication strategy; Soft-assembled; Key account management strategy; Exit strategy; Conflict strategy; Differentiation strategy; Adaptation; Long-term; Network; Individual; Relationalism; Networking; Global; Restructuring; Outsourcing/insourcing; Supply base; Intended strategy
Network	Network strategy; Strategic network; Network position; Interorganisational strategy; Strategic interdependence; Centrality as network strategy; Supply network positioning; ARA strategy.
Relationship	Building relationships; Relationship orientation; Relationship marketing; Relationship portfolio; Strategic alliance.
Value	Value creation process; Relationship value; Value to customer; Value dimensions; Value-driven management.
Environment	Environmental pressures; Market environment; International environment; Business environment; Systems properties.
Competition	Competition intensification; Competitive situation; International competition; Market competition; Competition analysis; Competitive tension.
Internationalisation	Internationalisation strategy; Export marketing strategy.
Core competences	Competence framework
Strategic supply	Supply strategy
Strategic development	
Market positioning	
Strategic acting	
Organisational learning	Learning & knowledge
Competitive advantage	
Strategic resource	
Competitive behaviour	
Cooperativeness	Marketing practices
Dynamic capabilities	
Strategic implementation	
Strategic theorizing	
Strategic network partners	
Strategic alliances	
Vertical integration	
Governance	
Bidding strategy	
Global strategy	
Expectation management	
Marketing control	