

The Pursuit of Relevance in Interaction and Networks Research

Ross Brennan
Middlesex University,
The Burroughs,
Hendon, NW4 4BT.
Tel 0181 362 5861.
Email r.brennan@mdx.ac.uk.

Peter W Turnbull

Abstract

The paper investigates the perceptions of researchers working in interaction and networks research concerning the relevance of academic research in the field to practical management decision-making. Managerial relevance was defined along five dimensions – level of interest, potential practical value, lead-time, development required, and overall relevance. Perceptions of relevance were measured using a face-to-face questionnaire administered to researchers in the field. The perceived relevance of their own work and of work presented at the 15th IMP conference were measured. A “relevance gap” was identified, with researchers perceiving their own work to be of much greater practical relevance than the conference proceedings. Hypotheses to explain differences in perceptions of relevance are tested. Implications for the research agenda are considered, in terms of making research more relevant, and communicating more effectively with managers.

Introduction

The interaction and networks approach to business marketing and purchasing grew out of a concern that research into business marketing was too concerned with the analysis of individual exchange transactions (Turnbull, Ford and Cunningham 1996). The conviction arose that, owing to the complex, multi-person nature of inter-firm exchange, and the concentration of demand typical of business markets, the reality of business purchasing and marketing was more to do with relationship management than marketing mix manipulation. Many subsequent empirical studies have shown that this approach does, indeed, better reflect the underlying reality of business marketing and purchasing (e.g. Hakansson 1982, Hakansson and Snehota 1995).

Paradoxically, the pursuit of a research agenda more closely aligned with business reality does not guarantee direct relevance to the decision-making needs of managers. Brennan and Turnbull (1999) proposed, on the basis of earlier analyses by Gemunden (1997) and Ford (1998), that, *prima facie*, the case could be argued that interaction and networks research had not had as much impact on managerial practice as might be expected, given the weight of scientific endeavour. They suggested that this might be attributed to a sophistic orientation in the research (cf. Astley 1984), to a failure to keep up with rapid changes in the business environment, and to a failure explicitly to address the difficulties in transferring managerial technologies from “laboratory” to practice. However, Brennan and Turnbull failed to provide any data to support their arguments, which were explicitly polemical, and did not define their central construct – managerial relevance of research. The purpose of this paper is to present

the views of researchers in the field on the relevance of interaction and networks research to managers, and to explore the meaning of managerial relevance with reference to this field.

The paper begins with a description of the method employed to gather data on researchers' perceptions of the managerial relevance of academic research. Subsequently, the results from the empirical study are discussed, focusing primarily on the quantitative data that were collected, but with a brief discussion of the qualitative data collected by means of an open-ended question. There follows a broader exploration of the meaning of relevance in management research, drawing upon the empirical data and upon prior literature on managerial relevance.

Researchers' Perceptions of Relevance - Method

A self-completion questionnaire was administered to participants at the 15th IMP conference (University College, Dublin, 1999), to investigate their perceptions of managerial relevance in their own work and in the proceedings of the conference (the questionnaire is included as an appendix). Random sampling was not attempted, and the respondents to the questionnaire were essentially self-selecting. In all, 58 completed and usable questionnaires were collected. While a formal response rate cannot be reported owing to the sampling method, the number of responses approximated to 20% of those attending the conference. The possibility of non-response bias cannot be ruled out, but a reasonable cross-section of participants did respond, measured in terms of nationality, academic status, years of academic and non-academic experience, and number of prior IMP conferences attended

Managerial relevance was operationalised in five dimensions:

- level of interest to managers,
- potential practical value to managers,
- time period within which the research could be of use to managers
- amount of development required to make the research useful to managers
- overall relevance of the work to management needs.

Each of these dimensions was measured using a four-point semantic scale, with respondents asked to rate their own current research in business marketing and purchasing, and the proceedings of the 15th IMP conference, against these dimensions. A few supplementary questions were also asked, including an open question providing respondents with the opportunity to express their views unconstrained by rating scales – 26 respondents availed themselves of this opportunity, demonstrating a variety of divergent views on the meaning and importance of managerial relevance to the research community.

For purposes of analysis the semantic scales used to measure dimensions of relevance were converted into 4 point numeric scales. Quantitative analysis focused on testing the hypotheses that academics' perceptions of the managerial relevance of the proceedings of the 15th IMP conference (henceforth "IMP15"), and of their own research, could be explained by academic status, nationality, academic experience and consulting experience. Additionally prior IMP conference attendance was included as an explanatory variable in case a process of "IMP socialisation" was at work, influencing perceptions of relevance. These hypotheses may be stated formally as follows:

H1: perceptions of managerial relevance vary with academic seniority

- H2: there are national differences in perceptions of managerial relevance⁶²
H3: perceptions of managerial relevance vary with the extent of academic experience
H4: perceptions of managerial relevance vary with consulting experience
H5: perceptions of managerial relevance vary with prior conference attendance.

These hypotheses were tested using both univariate analysis and multiple regression. For purposes of analysis the explanatory variables were reduced to categorical form (either two or three categories). This was necessary owing to the small overall sample size, which had the effect that sub-sample numbers could easily become too small to be meaningful. An example is the nationality variable, where only two sub-samples (British and Finns) were 10 or greater.

The data from the questionnaire provided an opportunity to investigate empirically the reliability of the 5-item scale used to measure perceptions of managerial relevance. Coefficient alpha for the 5-item “own work relevance” scale was 0.8095, and for the “IMP15 relevance” scale was 0.6753. In both cases, coefficient alpha was improved by excluding the item “development required” from the analysis (to 0.8456 and 0.7841 respectively). Two explanations suggest themselves. First, that respondents see “development required” as not belonging to the construct “managerial relevance”. Second, that the method of measurement affected the result – while the other 4 items were measured (semantically) with relevance increasing from left to right on the scale, “development required” was measured with relevance decreasing from left to right. The former explanation cannot be investigated using the data collected, and would prove an interesting subject for further research. The latter explanation is unlikely to be correct, given the data collected. The difference in “development required” between respondents’ own work and IMP15 was of the same sign and similar magnitude to the other measured items. In other words, respondents reported that IMP15 was as much less relevant than their own current research along the dimension “development required” as along the other dimensions of relevance. If many respondents had been misled by the reversed scale for this question, then the relevance gap score for “development required” should be expected to be much smaller or even of opposite sign.

Researchers’ Perceptions of Relevance - Discussion of Results

Table 1 shows the differences in mean responses between the categories of respondent represented in the sample. Column 3, “mean relevance score for 15th IMP proceedings”, is the mean score for the 5 items used to measure perceptions of the managerial relevance of the 15th IMP conference proceedings (IMP15). Column 4, “mean relevance score for own work”, is the mean score for the 5 items used to measure perceptions of managerial relevance in the respondents’ own current research in business marketing and purchasing. Columns 5 and 6 are calculated, respectively, as the difference between the two mean relevance scores, and the sum of the two mean relevance scores. Column 5 can be interpreted as a measure of the extent to which respondents felt that their own work was of greater managerial relevance than IMP15. Column 6 provides an indication of the overall optimism or pessimism of the respondents concerning the relevance of academic research in business marketing and purchasing to management practice.

⁶² In addition to nationality, a “country of employment” question was included. However, there was high correspondence between nationality and country of employment. Inclusion of the two variables separately in the analysis would have been inappropriate.

Table 1: 15th IMP Conference Delegates Perceptions of Relevance – Comparison of Means

Respondent category	N	Mean relevance score for 15 th IMP proceedings	Mean relevance score for “own work”	Perceived “relevance gap” = column 4 minus column 3	Mean “total relevance” = column 4 plus column 3
1	2	3	4	5	6
First time IMP attendance	27	2.31	3.10	0.79	5.41
Has previously attended IMP	31	2.21	3.15	0.94	5.36
<i>Professor</i>	12	2.20	2.95	0.75	5.15
Other academic	26	2.23	3.12	0.89	5.35
Research student	18	2.33	3.22	0.89	5.55
<i>British</i>	17	2.18	3.02	0.84	5.20
Other ⁶³	41	2.29	3.17	0.88	5.46
No non-academic experience	15	2.13	2.99	0.86	5.12
Some non-academic experience	43	2.30	3.18	0.88	5.48
Academic experience 1 year	9	2.33	3.09	0.76	5.42
Academic experience 2-5 yrs	21	2.30	3.20	0.90	5.50
Academic experience > 5 yrs	28	2.20	3.09	0.89	5.29
No consulting experience	26	2.32	3.02	0.70	5.34
Some consulting experience	32	2.21	3.21	1.00	5.42
Sample means	58	2.26	3.13	0.87	5.39

Clearly, all respondent categories believe that their own current work in business marketing and purchasing has greater managerial relevance than the proceedings of the 15th IMP conference. The variable which discriminates most clearly on this “relevance gap” is the consulting experience of respondents – those with consulting experience perceive the relevance gap to be greater than those with none. It is a reasonable hypothesis that respondents perceived the purpose of the conference to be the exchange of leading-edge academic ideas, rather than the development of practical tools. Perhaps it is also reasonable to suggest that those who have tried to apply academic ideas as consultants are more sceptical of the “transferability” of leading-edge ideas into practice, and more aware of the problems of management technology transfer (Brennan and Turnbull 1999).

Other than in the case of consulting experience, on none of the other variables was there anywhere near a statistically significant difference between categories of respondent in terms

⁶³ The only nationality other than British represented in double figures in the sample was Finnish (10).

of their perceptions of managerial relevance. Those who had no practical experience outside the academic world were slightly more pessimistic about the managerial relevance of both their own work, and of IMP15. Whether or not it was the respondent's first IMP conference made no difference (in other words, there is no support for the notion that regular delegates may be socialised into a particular view of relevance).

Although delegate nationality made little or no difference to perceptions of managerial relevance, this is certainly a variable that would be worth studying further. Since the overall sample size was 58, there were insufficient respondents in the individual national categories to make sensible comparisons (hence the decision to combine all nationalities other than British into a single category). However, there were intriguing differences at the national level which, although they could not be statistically significant owing to the small sample size, might indicate real, national differences of opinion. For example, the mean score of Finns (n=10) on the IMP15 and "own work" relevance scales was 2.54 (British = 2.18) and 3.12 (British = 3.02) respectively. Although these results do not indicate a statistically significant difference of perception between British and Finnish academics, they are clearly suggestive of a difference of opinion

Similarly, although there were no statistically significant differences between the members of different academic status groups, the data do show an intriguing negative relationship between academic seniority and perceptions of managerial relevance. Research students were the most optimistic about the managerial relevance of both IMP15 and of their own work. Full professors were least optimistic on both measures. These results could be the result of random chance. If not, then it is interesting to speculate – does increased seniority in the academic world bring about greater realism concerning the extent of the contribution that academic research can make to the practice of business marketing and purchasing? Is this an inevitable process, whereby idealistic research students set out with high hopes of changing the business world, but find their hopes dashed? If so, one might ask, why?

Table 2: Linear regression of "15th IMP conference mean relevance" against respondent category variables

Explanatory variable	Beta coefficient	Value of t
Intercept	8.665	3.238**
Prior IMP attendance	-.044	-.295
Academic status	.030	.185
Nationality	.146	1.062
Non-academic experience	.229	1.628
Academic experience	-.087	-.507
Consulting experience	-.084	-.548

** p<.01

F statistic is not significant

R² = 0.08

Table 3: Linear regression of “own work mean relevance” against respondent category variables

Explanatory variable	Beta coefficient	Value of t
Intercept	8.501	3.082**
Prior IMP attendance	.093	.661
Academic status	.381	2.493*
Nationality	.170	1.326
Non-academic experience	.187	1.419
Academic experience	-.029	-.184
Consulting experience	.303	2.108*

** p<0.01

* p<0.05

F statistic, p = 0.069

R² = 0.198

Tables 2 and 3 represent an attempt to go beyond the discussion of simple differences between categories of respondents, and to explore the interactions between these variables through multiple regression modelling. The dependent variables are the mean scores for IMP15 (table 2) and “own work” managerial relevance (table 3). The regression equation for perceptions of the managerial relevance of IMP15 has virtually no explanatory power at all. Clearly, the explanatory variables measured are not good predictors for the dependent variable. However, in the regression equation for perceptions of “own work” managerial relevance two explanatory variables – academic status and consulting experience – have statistically significant coefficients. This result is in agreement with the discussion of table 1, the comparative mean scores for the different categories of respondent. Increased academic status is associated with lower perceived “own work” managerial relevance; the presence of consulting experience is associated with higher perceived “own work” managerial relevance. Inspection of the data confirms that research students with consulting experience are, indeed, the most optimistic about the managerial relevance of their own work – however, the overall sample size is not large enough to justify analysis at this level of detail, since cell size becomes very small.

Results from the supplementary questions

In addition to the series of questions measuring dimensions of relevance in research, respondents completed 4 further scaled questions on the relationship between academic research and management practice. Respondents were also offered the opportunity to include free text responses in the final question on the questionnaire. Of the 58 respondents, 26 responded to this question. A number of recurring themes did emerge from this qualitative data. For example, British respondents mentioned the Research Assessment Exercise (a periodic audit of the research output of British universities, which has considerable funding implications) as having had a negative effect on relevance in management research.

The majority of respondents (68%) thought that managers were “moderately enthusiastic” or “very enthusiastic” to adopt ideas from business-to-business marketing and purchasing research. In contrast a minority (41%) thought that managers were moderately or very enthusiastic to adopt ideas from IMP research. A great majority (82%) thought that it was moderately or very important for academic research to be of potential practical value to managers.

There was a marked polarisation of opinion on the risk of conflict between the pursuit of practical relevance and academic rigour in management research. On a 4-point scale from “no risk at all” to “substantial risk”, the responses to this question were equally split between the four response categories – with as many respondents saying that there was a “substantial risk” as that there was “no risk. Much of this polarisation may be explicable by nationality. British respondents gave much greater credence than their Finnish colleagues to the risk of conflict between relevance and rigour (these were the only two national groups represented in sufficient numbers to make a test of difference feasible – the difference between them was significant at the 5% level).

Several of those choosing to answer the open question where they were asked for any further views chose to comment upon the perceptions of managers, and on how the academic community should communicate with them. For example: “Managers are interested in theories which can be put into direct action – and give results. They are not interested in theoretical hypotheses – more ‘hard facts’ and guidelines. The manager has to buy it in 5 minutes, understand it after less than an hour, be able to apply it after 1 or 2 days training.” Or, more straightforwardly, “they [managers] are looking for easy solutions”. However, these rather stark views of what managers want were balanced by others: “I can think of some managers who could find relevance and practical application quite easily [in academic research], and others who have no interest”, and “most managers (e.g. during MBAs) feel that issues such as relationship portfolios, focal net analysis are of crucial strategic interest”.

This disparity of views on what managers want was reflected in differences of opinion concerning the appropriate medium to communicate with the managerial community. For example: “The IMP conference is not the place for the dialogue with the manager. It must take place in other contexts. You mix the research context and the communications process towards managers.” Which point of view can be contrasted with: “Some managers should be brought to the IMP community, to become interested in research (and, even, researchers themselves). IMP researchers should help to construct networks, not only to study them afterwards.”

Exploring the Meaning of Managerial Relevance

It is taken as axiomatic that managerial relevance is a construct of interest to a network of researchers investigating business marketing and purchasing phenomena. Nevertheless, a broad spectrum of opinion exists on the nature and importance of relevance in management research. While it is undoubtedly a simplification, two key dimensions seem to differentiate thinking on this issue – complexity and instrumentality. Along the complexity dimension are to be found differences of opinion regarding the *feasibility* of delivering solutions to management problems. Three typical positions along this dimension are “everything is a checklist” (simple solutions), “the world is complex but soluble” (complex solutions), and “everything is idiosyncratic” (no meaningful general solutions). Along the instrumentality dimension are to be found opinions regarding the *desirability* of delivering solutions to management problems. Typical positions here are “management research exists to serve business” (managerialism), “research exists to serve business and wider interests (including ‘science’)”, and “research exists to serve science”. This latter dimension reflects Dehler’s (1998) duality between the instrumental and the scholarly in management research. According to Dehler (1998, p70) instrumentalism implies that: “organizational researchers have an explicit imperative to undertake their investigations within the parameters of interest to management practitioners”. On the other hand, a “scholarly” position implies that:

“academic researchers and business practitioners have distinctly disparate orientations. As a result, they serve different constituencies whose objectives are orthogonal and perhaps even contradictory ... the application of research findings to the realm of business is secondary to generating fundamental knowledge.”

The two dimensions of instrumentality and complexity are used, in table 4, to construct a simple matrix within which views on managerial relevance can be located.

Clearly, no single position measured against these dimensions can constitute “the view” of researchers into interaction and networks phenomena. Nevertheless, it is proposed that an explicit understanding of one’s own position, of the positions of co-workers, and of the positions of other researchers within the same paradigm, would avoid misunderstandings and facilitate academic debate. Otherwise, there is the considerable risk that debates will be conducted at cross-purposes, and will ultimately be futile. A few clues to the diversity of positions adopted by interaction and networks researchers have emerged from the empirical study described above (illustrative quotations are provided with the table). It would be very surprising to find anything like a naïve managerialist view – that research is conducted to develop checklists to solve management problems – among interaction and networks researchers. However, more sophisticated managerialist views appear to co-exist with a critical management theory perspective (Alvesson and Willmott 1992) and the notion of organisation science as a ‘language game’ (Astley and Zammuto 1992).

Astley and Zammuto engaged with the argument that business school research is largely ignored by practitioners and that its impact on practice is perceived to be nil – in sum, that academic management research is irrelevant. Rather than seeking “solutions” to this “problem”, however, Astley and Zammuto explain it in terms of the concept (attributed to Wittgenstein) of language games. Organisation science and management practice each have their own specialised forms of discourse, their distinct linguistic traditions. The transfer of knowledge between the scientific and managerial domains, therefore, cannot take place in such simple terms as researchers telling managers what to do, based on their empirical investigations. Rather: “organization science affects managerial practice indirectly through the linguistic medium of conceptual and symbolic discourse ... in other words, infuses practical experience with cosmic significance, providing a means of coming to terms with reality in the face of ever-changing and ambiguous situations.” (Astley and Zammuto 1992, p 457) Clearly, Astley and Zammuto are particularly concerned with the sub-discipline of organisation theory. Arguably, industrial marketing and purchasing is a less esoteric and more pragmatic sub-discipline than organisation science. Nevertheless, some of the views expressed by respondents to the questionnaire suggest that the community of interaction and networks researchers does, indeed, have its own linguistic tradition, which would be alien to most practitioners.

Table 4: Instrumentality and Complexity in Management Research

		COMPLEXITY		
		Low: everything a checklist, simple solutions	Medium: general solutions exist but are complex	High: every situation is idiosyncratic, no general solutions
INSTRUMENTALITY	High: the purpose of research is to serve business	Naïve managerialism	Sophisticated managerialism	
	Medium: the purpose of research is to serve science and business		Sophisticated managerialism	
	Low: The purpose of research is to serve science		Critical management theory	Critical management theory

Quotations from the survey, illustrating different positions on table 4

“Researchers should spend several years in practice before generating empirical results. That way, how they approach problems would change dramatically and lead to much more substantial work for management practice.” (High instrumentality)

“The conference is about throwing up questions in the air, formulating abstract descriptive theories which never progresses to interesting application to the world under study.” (Low instrumentality)

“The best that can be given to managers is a framework of analysis and relatively clear cut concepts that they can grasp (albeit ambiguously).” (High complexity)

“Managers are interested in theories which can be put into direct action – and give results. They are not interested in theoretical hypotheses – more ‘hard facts’ and guidelines. The manager has to buy it in 5 minutes, understand it after less than an hour, be able to apply it after 1 or 2 days training.” (Attributes a low complexity position to managers)

Conclusion and Further Work

The interaction and networks approach to business marketing and purchasing grew out of a conviction that academic research in this field had become both scientifically invalid and practically redundant. Research should focus on relationships and networks rather than transactions, and should generate practical advice on the management of relational phenomena rather than the marketing mix. Concern has been expressed by some researchers within the field that relevance has once again been lost. A project to retrieve lost relevance has been launched (Naude 1999). It has been suggested (Brennan and Turnbull 1999) that low perceived managerial relevance in interaction and networks research could be the result of other factors besides the passage of time and changes in the business environment. Sophistry on the part of researchers, and failure to take seriously the problems associated with the transfer of management technologies were suggested as additional explanations for low relevance.

Before diagnosing a solution to the perceived problem of low managerial relevance, would it not be a good idea to conceptualise, define and operationalise relevance? Before implementing a solution to the problem, would it not be advisable first to attempt to measure the “relevance gap”? Those are the premises upon which this paper was based.

An operational definition of managerial relevance has been proposed, and seems to form the basis for robust measurement of perceptions of relevance. The place of the measurement item “amount of development needed to make the research of practical value” in the overall measurement of managerial relevance needs further investigation.

What seems clear is that researchers see greater managerial relevance in their own current research into business marketing and purchasing than in the proceedings of the leading academic conference in the field. One may be comforted by the (perfectly reasonable) belief that this “relevance gap” can be explained by the leading-edge nature of an academic conference, on the understanding that researchers present their most *avant-garde* work to their peers alone. Or one can ask (as some respondents did, equally reasonably) why there is no greater attempt to engage with managerial realities in a conference dedicated to international industrial marketing and purchasing.

While the study was insufficiently rigorous of method, and insufficiently large of sample, to claim definitive answers, it is suggested that the nationality, academic seniority, and consulting experience of researchers influence their perceptions of managerial relevance. While there is scope to improve the rigour of these tentative conclusions, it would certainly be more interesting to establish whether similar influences affect perceptions of research relevance among management practitioners.

There is, perhaps, a tendency to stereotype management researchers. Common stereotypes tend to reflect either a naïve managerialism, or an ivory tower scientism. The former, so obsessed with solving the manager’s problems that intellectual abstraction is regarded as pure self-indulgence. The latter, so obsessed with advancing pure knowledge that engaging with managerial problem-solving is regarded as *infra dig*. These stereotypes reflect genuine, and legitimate, differences of opinion between researchers about the nature of managerial relevance. In the paper, such differences of opinion have been made manifest – by examining the views of researchers into interaction and network phenomena – and some progress has been made towards a common understanding of the managerial relevance construct. Having defined the construct from an academic perspective, and having measured

academic opinions on relevance, the next logical step will be to investigate managers' views on the relevance of academic research into business marketing and purchasing.

Failing that, I propose that we all concentrate on infusing the practical experience of marketing and purchasing managers with cosmic significance, which has to be more fun than working for a living.

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