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Using a 'lens' to re-search business markets, relationships and networks

*Tensions, challenges and possibilities*

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*Published in:*  
Industrial Marketing Management

*DOI (link to publication from Publisher):*  
[10.1016/j.indmarman.2021.10.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2021.10.008)

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*Publication date:*  
2022

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Ojansivu, I., Medlin, C. J., Andersen, P. H., & Kim, W. (2022). Using a 'lens' to re-search business markets, relationships and networks: Tensions, challenges and possibilities. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 100, 49-61. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2021.10.008>

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# Industrial Marketing Management

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/indmarman](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/indmarman)

Research paper

## Using a ‘lens’ to re-search business markets, relationships and networks: Tensions, challenges and possibilities

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Lens  
 Re-search  
 Ontology, meta-questions, business relationships  
 Networks

## ABSTRACT

In this research, we wish to address the tension tucked away in scholarly work: the simultaneous need to break in and break out of academic communities and their ways of thinking. More precisely, we are interested in social research (i.e., searching again) processes and how scholars authenticate their research within an established cultural convention. For that purpose, we focus on the use of the term ‘lens’, which is omnipresent in research texts but rarely defined. Upon completing an integrative literature review and considering the embeddedness of a lens in culture, language, research communities and our ontological assumptions, we define a ‘research lens’ as a sociocultural representation and tool that helps to negotiate our scientific interpretation of the world. Our contribution to industrial marketing stems from surfacing and discussing four uses of a lens evident in the industrial marketing literature, introducing a metaphorical lens as a way to reform knowledge, and finally exemplifying how our lens tends to either mirror, reflect, symbolize or mirage the contours of our world without our full awareness of it.

### 1. Introduction

As researchers, we walk a thin line between complying with socially accepted norms of research, ‘epistemes’ as Foucault (1980) refers to them, and our own thinking. What we do seems best described as *re-search* (i.e., searching again): our understanding is socially and culturally rooted in knowledge that has been constructed iteratively over time (see Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011; Shotter, 1991). Acknowledging and paying tribute to the current and previous academic generations is necessary to frame and legitimize our thinking (e.g., Nicolini, 2009; Okhuysen & Bonardi, 2011). However, we need to think ‘outside the box’ to reform knowledge (Gergen, 2001). In this paper, we wish to address this unavoidable *tension* by discussing how re-search processes unfold.

The tension between ‘breaking in’ to and ‘breaking out’ from a research community plays out in many ways. Some speak of positioning (e.g., Baert, 2012; Baert & Morgan, 2018), some of performativity (e.g., Alexander, 2011; Gond, Cabantous, Harding, & Learmonth, 2016; Simpson, Tracey, & Weston, 2018), while others refer to the negotiation

of meanings in research (Shotter, 1993). As Shotter (1975, pp. 13–14) points out, “...man is not simply a being immersed directly in nature but is a being in a culture in nature”. Thus, as researchers we want to ‘explain ourselves’ within our research culture, we want others in our academic community to see a research phenomenon as we do, and, therefore, need something, a representation, or a vehicle to negotiate *our* interpretation of this phenomenon with other researchers. One such apparatus, evident in research texts, is the use of the term ‘lens’ (e.g., Ancona, Goodman, Lawrence, & Tushman, 2001; Chen & Tan, 2009; Kaplan & Tripsas, 2008; Nicolini, 2009; Okhuysen & Bonardi, 2011; Stevens & Dimitriadis, 2004; Voorhees et al., 2017). However, the omnipresent use of the lens is very rarely discussed or elaborated, and many times appears only as a stage prop. Indeed, many scholars use the term in a taken-for-granted way to play the scene and to mark their research territory. One might consider that these researchers are using a lens similar to a placeholder to avoid being explicit about ontological and epistemological matters. Not addressing these issues can lead researchers to endless confusion, as illustrated in the ‘Tower of Babel’ (e.g., Demers, 2011). Furthermore, innovation by researchers requires

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Received 30 March 2021; Received in revised form 20 October 2021; Accepted 21 October 2021

Available online 17 November 2021

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some letting go of successful past research approaches, some questioning of one's own way of thinking and appreciating that alternative viewpoints lead to different research outcomes. Indeed, parallax issues arise when interpreting research: the same phenomenon appears in a different light depending on the chosen lens. In this paper, to avoid the 'boxes' and boundaries imposed by past ontological and epistemological discussions, we want to explore re-searching via the concept of a lens, as we think this offers a novel start for addressing the social practices of research without the baggage of the paradigm wars (e.g., Given, 2017; Willmott, 1993).

If researchers and research communities are ever to break out of research forms and modes into new understandings, without waiting for generational change, then one must consider different research lenses. The use of a lens in academic parlance is evocative; it spurs and stirs our thinking and surfaces various images of thought. Indeed, the concept of a lens is a multifaceted term that should not be deconstructed hastily because inquiring into such a sensitive space requires careful signposting, underlining and post scripting. In the interim, we consider a lens in its broadest sense as a researcher's tool for viewing, framing, and authenticating a research problem. This *working* definition allows us to bypass the issues of incommensurability (Czarniawska, 1998) and to seek new research ideas. Following these thoughts, the purpose of this paper is twofold. First, we are interested in the social re-search processes of academic communities and how scholars authenticate their research within an established cultural convention. Second, we seek to elucidate how a lens is tied to our underlying assumptions about reality within research communities and how scholars can come to terms with these self-propelling processes through introspection. Thus, we ask: How can a researcher in an academic community apply a lens to generate new ideas?

Using a 'lens' is broadly adopted among industrial marketing scholars (see e.g., Jaakkola & Aarikka-Stenroos, 2019; Kaartemo, Covello, & Nummela, 2020; Möller, 2013); therefore, our results will be of interest to a wide readership. More precisely, our contribution to the business markets, relationships and networks literature is threefold. First, we surface and discuss four uses of a lens evident in industrial marketing research. Second, we elucidate how a metaphorical lens can be used to reform knowledge. Third, we exemplify how our lens tends to either mirror, reflect, symbolize or mirage the contours of our world without our full awareness of it, leading to a carefully curated *sui generis* definition of an academic lens. More broadly, we deliberate how research is a simultaneous process of breaking *in* to and breaking *out* of a cultural convention.

The paper is organized as follows. We begin by reviewing how 'lens' is typically portrayed within the business market, relationship and network literatures. We thereafter revisit the use of metaphors and symbolism more broadly as a distinct yet largely ignored lens into researching business markets, relationships and networks. We then elaborate on the underlying assumptions about reality associated with the use of lenses and provide a definition for lens that integrates the different parts of the paper together. Finally, we discuss some of the tensions, possibilities and challenges associated with using a lens in academic writing.

## 2. Background on the use of a 'lens' in the business market, relationship and network literatures

We follow the path of past researchers, seeking to detect the underlying assumptions and patterns and undergirding theorizing efforts in marketing. There have been several of these endeavors, initially with the intent to break away from what was seen as a positivist straight jacket to marketing science and include other ways of seeing (Arndt, 1985a; Deshpande, 1983). Many of these studies have sided with Burrell and Morgan's (1979) seminal attempts to provide a rational schematic of sociological paradigms and their influences on organizational (and marketing management) theorizing. As a result, ontological assumptions

about markets and market actors have emerged, defining the perspectives and debates in the field and creating incommensurable boundaries between schools of thought as they rest on mutually exclusive axiomatic assumptions (Lowe, Carr, & Thomas, 2004; Pels, Möller, & Saren, 2009). We are critical to this type of 'Cartesian' ideal (Adam, 1995) that (over) structures our way of thinking into either/or categories and segregated academic debates (Gergen, 2015). In a sense, these frameworks defy the richness of the marketing theory landscape and curtail the lived experiences of co-creating researchers who jointly seek to reconstruct marketing theory. This reconstruction occurs through debate, yet scholars may refrain from such activity, as they are unaware of whether their paradigmatic standpoint in principle allows them to do so. Therefore, in this paper, we are interested in the use of a 'lens' that we see as a way for scholars to more freely express their interpretation of a research phenomenon.

The etymology of a lens is from the Latin *lens*, denoting a double-convex lentil shape, while the modern meaning refers to an object, typically of glass that has the capacity to regulate, transmit or reflect light and in the process, focus, change or blur vision (Stevenson, 2010). For researchers from the Western world, the concept of a 'lens' derives its intellectual inheritance from Anglo-Saxon culture and language, where vision (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999) and "images of thought" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 131) have an important role in conveying knowledge and thinking. Social science is never absolute and therefore 'intellectual interventions', as Baert (2012) refers to academic outputs, require cultural and symbolic staging to achieve academic attention and recognition. To use the analogy of Goffman (1959), scholars puzzle at the 'back stage' and put on a faultless show on the 'front stage', where their work is neatly aligned with whatever the selected lens might represent in an academic community. Indeed, scholars often use a lens as a framing and a sensemaking tool in research (see e.g., Nicolini, 2009; Okhuysen & Bonardi, 2011).

Undertaking re-search is an intuitive process, and using a lens helps to make sense of empirical phenomena and to "abstract up" from a context (Fischer, Gopaldas, & Scaraboto, 2017, p. 63). However, the use of a lens is sometimes arbitrary and without a clear logic. For example, Alvesson and Spicer (2019) criticized scholars for using institutional theory as a lens without fully understanding the attached meanings and nuances (see also Aguilera & Grøgaard, 2019; Tolbert & Zucker, 1999). Any lens may enable researchers to understand, discover, create and proclaim their interpretation of a research phenomenon. However, the way they the research community interprets this 'on stage' performance (i.e., journal articles, book chapters, presentations) is less straightforward, as so-called double or triple hermeneutics interfere in the process (e.g., Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018; Giddens, 1993). As Alexander (2011, p. 3) explicates, "It is up to the actors to play the scene, to convince those watching that they truly are the characters they say they are, that the pretend life on stage is truthful, that, being a simulation, it is the real thing all right." Whether the research community interprets the researchers' view or framing of the research problem as intended largely depends on the researcher's ability to define his or her lens.

### 2.1. Literature search strategy

To understand the various ways in which researchers apply lenses in business market, relationship and industrial network research, we searched the relevant literature for exemplars of the ways in which research was positioned with the lens construct in the broadest sense. Our approach follows an integrative review (see e.g., Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005) where the aim is not to embark on an exhaustive review of literature but to explore an emerging topic and "create initial or preliminary conceptualizations" (Snyder, 2019, p. 336). We followed the three stages of planning, execution and reporting as suggested by Tranfield, Denyer and Smart (2003). In the planning stage, we decided to aim for an initial taxonomy (Doty & Glick, 1994) of the use of lenses within the industrial marketing and business-to-business literature. We

focused our search on articles published in the leading business-to-business marketing journals: *Industrial Marketing Management* journal (IMM), the *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing* (JBIM), the *Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing* (JBBM) and the *IMP Journal* (IMP). We used both Web of Science and Google Scholar as our databases of records because of their complementary characteristics.

During execution, we used Web of Science to conduct a broad review of the use of a lens in the industrial marketing and business-to-business literature. Our search string was simply ‘lens’, covering the title, abstract and keywords of the articles published in these four journals. This search resulted in 87 articles: 54 in IMM, 26 in JBIM, 4 in JBBM and 3 in IMP. We then conducted a more specific search with Google Scholar, as it reliably retains the main body of articles (not just the titles, abstracts and keywords), allowing a more nuanced search. We focused our search on the IMM journal as the premier outlet for industrial marketing and business-to-business research. We were interested in the use of a lens among business relationships and business network scholars affiliated with the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group (IMP Group). We therefore used a focused search string ‘lens’ combined with ‘industrial network approach’, resulting in 25 additional papers after crosscheck and a raw set of 112 papers (87 + 25).

One important aspect to consider in the process of article exclusion is intercoder reliability and quality assessment more broadly. Increasing internal consistency necessitates transparency in resolving disagreements about article selection (Tranfield et al., 2003). Our approach was to flag all articles that needed more thorough inspection and then discuss their relevance among the author team. We downloaded the articles and used the ‘find’ command to locate the term ‘lens’ in the articles. When the term lens featured several times in an article, we reviewed all occasions to determine its principal use. To narrow down the number of articles and to find those that were the most revelatory, we used three exclusion criteria. First, we excluded articles in which the use of a lens was superficial or ambiguous (10 articles). Many of these articles used a lens to illustrate a phenomenon through the viewpoint of a specific stakeholder, such as customer, seller, franchisee, or practitioner, without theorizing the lens or affiliating it with the ideas/thinking of other researchers/research community. Other articles in this category referred to a lens several times and each time differently, making the use of a lens arbitrary. Second, we excluded papers that did not adopt a lens in their research but rather cited other researchers using a lens (5 articles). Third, we excluded papers in which the authors referred to their contribution (framework, model, tool, process, etc.) as a lens without applying the lens in their own research (2 articles). We retained three papers that were at first flagged for exclusion but through later discussion deemed fitting for the review. As a result of this exclusion process, we ended up with 95 articles: 72 selected via Web of Science and 23 via Google Scholar (indicated by # in Table 1). We then added 14 papers (indicated by + in Table 1) that we had identified during the review or which we knew based on our own expertise, but which were not identified by Web of Science or Google Scholar, leading to a final selection of 109 articles.

We then initiated data synthesis and analyzed the content of the 109 papers following an inductive approach (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013) without predefined themes or codes. Our coding process could be best described as iterative, as we read and re-read the articles asking the same question: How do researchers in an academic community apply a lens to generate new ideas? Our coding proceeded in the following way. The corresponding author analyzed the content and coded approximately 1/3 of the papers and identified four initial uses for the term lens. Another author then reviewed the remaining 2/3 of the papers using the four already established categories. Subsequently, the two authors cross-checked their results by recoding each other’s work. When two authors had coded the articles differently or had doubts about the coding (9 articles), we resolved these disagreements by discussing the coding jointly among all authors. We found two articles that were between two categories (Martinelli, Tunisini, & Guercini, 2017; Siadou-Martin, Vidal,

Poujol, & Tanner, 2017) that we then coded with the most fitting code of the two.

The first theme that emerged from reading the papers was a theoretical use (57 papers, 52%), followed by an instrumental use (36 papers, 33%). The former refers to the use of a specific theory as a lens, whereas the latter approaches a research phenomenon through a carefully selected concept. While these two themes were the most predominant in the literature, we also came across two themes that were less prominent but significant in their specific use of the lens (see Table 1). Meta-theoretical use (12 papers, 11%) is an advanced and perhaps the most challenging use of a lens. Here, scholars use a lens to probe the existing theory, often critically with meta-questions, to open up new research avenues. The last theme uncovered in the literature, contextual use (4 papers, 4%), is an attempt to examine a phenomenon from a particular spatial/cultural viewpoint (see Table 1).

In most of the reviewed articles, the use of a lens is embodied in the veneer, expression and framing of writing. Only in a few articles (see e.g., Hopkinson, 2015; Ojansivu et al., 2020) do the authors elaborate on their use of a lens by providing reasoning for its meaning and application. Perhaps the effortless use of the term ‘lens’ is sometimes a conscious choice, as Alexander (2011, p. 5) hints: “Successful performance seems natural, not contrived, not a performance but an effortless expression, true to life.” In the reporting stage, the aim is to summarize the literature from which the review was derived, identify and discuss the surfaced themes and links between them (Tranfield et al., 2003). In the following, we analyze the four uses of a lens uncovered in the literature. We begin not with the most common use but rather with the lens use that is most straightforward.

## 2.2. Instrumental use

First, many scholars use a specific concept as their lens to valorize a phenomenon. Using a carefully selected concept as a lens provides a precise and manageable approach to theorizing, as it helps to sharpen the argument and highlight certain aspects of a phenomenon. For example, Corsaro et al. (2011) apply an actor’s network picture, Laari-Salmela et al. (2019) identity, Sallnäs and Hüge-Brodin (2018) a paradox, Abrahamsen et al. (2012) a dottogram, Gnyawali and Song (2016) rigor, Jaakkola and Aarikka-Stenroos (2019) engagement, Ditrach et al. (2006) duality, Leminen et al. (2020) a network, McGrath et al. (2019) temporality, Hopkinson (2015) a mental apparatus, Tzannis (2013) time and space, while Murfield and Esper (2016) employ relational dynamics as distinctive concepts to understand network structures.

An instrumental use of a ‘conceptual’ lens sharpens the focus by applying a unit of analysis to the context being studied (see Henneberg et al., 2010). On the other hand, implications are inevitably pre-described and unsurprisingly so, because they will follow the contours of the concept, much like a cookie cutter in dough. The data reported typically serve the role of illustration with the intention to convince the reader about the usefulness of the concepts presented in exploring aspects of the researched phenomenon (Burawoy, 1998). For example, when you watch the world through a purple lens, the world will appear purple. Indeed, Alvesson and Kärreman (2011, p. 38) note that “researchers will always construct the phenomena they are studying”. That is, a scholar’s *a priori* affiliation with the lens in a research community and how the lens shapes their thinking during the re-search process becomes a central tenet of the inquiry.

## 2.3. Theoretical use

Second, we identify the use of a theory as a lens, where the aim is to interpret a phenomenon through several associated concepts, models or frameworks, without zooming in on one particular concept. With the term ‘theory’, we refer to a set of concepts associated according to a scientifically, and so rational as well as intuitively, understood set of

Table 1

The different uses of a lens discovered in the business market, relationship and industrial network research.

Author(s)	Date	Publication outlet*	Instrumental use of a lens	Theoretical use of a lens	Meta-theoretical use of a lens	Contextual use of a lens
Abrahamsen, Henneberg, & Naudé #	2012	IMM	X			
Ahola, Aaltonen, Artto, & Lehtinen #	2020	IMM		X		
Anderson, Christ, Dekker, & Sedatole	2015	IMM		X		
Arli, Bauer, & Palmatier	2018	IMM			X	
Bachkirov	2019	JBIM	X			
Ballantyne, Frow, Varey, & Payne	2011	IMM		X		
Bankvall, Dubois, & Lind #	2017	IMM		X		
Baron & Warnaby	2011	IMM	X			
Bessant, Öberg, & Trifilova	2014	IMM	X			
Blocker & Flint	2007	JBIM				X
Boehe, Qian, & Peng	2016	IMM		X		
Boldosova	2020	IMM	X			
Bonney, Plouffe, Hochstein, & Beeler	2020	IMM		X		
Borchardt, Ndubisi, Jabbour, Grebinevych, & Pereira	2020	IMM		X		
Chakrabarti, Ramos, & Henneberg #	2013	IMM		X		
Cheah	2019	JBIM		X		
Cheng & Holmen	2015	IMP		X		
Chou & Zolkiewski	2012	IMM	X			
Clauss & Tangpong	2018	IMM		X		
Colville & Pye	2010	IMM	X			
Conde & Prybutok	2020	JBIM	X			
Coreynen, Matthysens, & Van Bockhaven	2017	IMM		X		
Corsaro, Ramos, Henneberg, & Naudé #	2011	IMM	X			
Czakon & Czernek	2016	IMM	X			
Dittrich, Jaspers, van der Valk, & Wynstra #	2006	IMM	X			
Duncan, Chohan, & Ferreira	2019	JBIM	X			
Eggert, Ulaga, Frow, & Payne	2018	IMM			X	
Eklund & Waluszewski	2017	IMP			X	
Ferreira, Cova, Spencer, & Proença	2017	JBIM	X			
Filieri, McNally, O'Dwyer, & O'Malley +	2014	IMM		X		
Formentini, Ellram, Boem, & Da Re	2019	IMM		X		
Galkina & Lundgren-Henriksson	2017	IMM		X		
Gelderman, Mampaey, Semeijn, & Verhappen	2018	JBIM		X		
Gnyawali and Song	2016	IMM	X			
Graça, Barry, Kharé, & Yurova	2021	JBIM		X		
Guenzi & Storbacka	2015	IMM	X			
Guercini & Medlin +	2020	IMM			X	
Guercini & Milanese #	2019	IMM		X		
Guesalaga, Gabrielsson, Rogers, Ryals, & Marcos Cuevas	2018	IMM		X		
Guo, Yen, Geng, & Azar	2021	IMM		X		
Harini & Thomas	2020	JBIM			X	
Henneberg, Naudé, & Mouzas #	2010	IMM	X			
Hermes & Mainela +	2014	IMM				X
Hopkinson #	2015	IMM	X			
Hsu, Liu, Tsou, & Chen	2018	JBIM	X			
Huikkola, Rabetino, Kohtamäki, & Gebauer	2020	IMM	X			
Jaakkola & Aarikka-Stenroos +	2019	IMM	X			
Johnsen +	2018	IMM		X		
Johnsen, Miemczyk, & Howard	2017	IMM		X		
Kaartemo et al.	2020	IMM		X		
Karhunen & Kosonen +	2013	JBIM				X
Khan & Nicholson	2015	IMM			X	
Kraus, Håkansson, & Lind #	2015	IMM		X		
Laari-Salmela, Mainela, & Puhakka +	2019	IMM	X			
Lei, Ha, & Le	2019	JBIM	X			
Leminen, Nyström, & Westerlund #	2020	IMM	X			
Lim	2017	IMM		X		
Liu & Park	2020	JBIM		X		
Lowe & Tapachai #	2021b	JBIM			X	
Lowe & Hwang	2012	IMM			X	
Lowe & Rod	2020	IMM			X	
Lowe, Rod, & Hwang	2016	JBIM		X		
Lowe & Tapachai	2021a	JBIM		X		
Lundgren-Henriksson, & Kock	2016	IMM			X	
Luotola, Hellström, Gustafsson, & Perminova-Harikoski	2017	IMM	X			
Malik, Sinha, & Blumenfeld	2012	IMM	X			
Martinelli et al.	2017	IMP		X		
Mason & Leek +	2012	IMM		X		
Matthysens, Vandenbempt, & Van Bockhaven #	2013	IMM		X		

(continued on next page)



Table 1 (continued)

Author(s)	Date	Publication outlet*	Instrumental use of a lens	Theoretical use of a lens	Meta-theoretical use of a lens	Contextual use of a lens
McCabe, Stern, & Dacko	2013	IMM		X		
McGrath, Medlin, & O'Toole #	2019	IMM	X			
McShane, Pancer, & Poole	2019	JBBM	X			
Medlin +	2012	JBIM		X		
Möller #	2013	IMM		X		
Murfield & Esper #	2016	IMM	X			
Najafi-Tavani, Najafi-Tavani, Naudé, Oghazi, & Zeynaloo #	2018	IMM		X		
Nicholls & Huybrechts +	2016	JBE		X		
O'Toole & McGrath #	2018	IMM		X		
Ojansivu & Medlin #	2018	IMM		X		
Ojansivu, Hermes, & Laari-Salmela #	2020	IMM			X	
Palmer, Simmons, Robinson, & Fearné +	2015	IMM		X		
Panagopoulos, Hochstein, Baker, & Pimentel	2018	IMM		X		
Pardo, Ivens, & Wilson	2013	IMM		X		
Pedersen, Ellegaard, & Kragh	2020	IMM		X		
Peesker, Ryals, Rich, & Davis	2021	JBIM		X		
Powell & Swart	2010	IMM	X			
Press, Robert, & Maillefert	2020	IMM	X			
Quinton & Wilson +	2016	IMM				X
Reim, Sjödin, & Parida	2018	IMM		X		
Rinallo & Golfetto	2006	IMM			X	
Rodríguez, Svensson, Román, & Wood	2018	JBIM	X			
Sallnäs & Hüge-Brodin	2018	IMM	X			
Siadou-Martin et al.	2017	JBBM		X		
Singaraju, Nguyen, Niininen, & Sullivan-Mort +	2016	IMM		X		
Steinle, Schiele, & Bohnenkamp	2019	JBIM		X		
Tate, Ellram, Bals, Hartmann, & van der Valk	2010	IMM		X		
Thornton, Henneberg, & Naudé #	2013	IMM		X		
Thornton, Henneberg, & Naudé #	2014	IMM		X		
Tóth, Naudé, Henneberg, & Diaz Ruiz	2021	JBIM		X		
Töytäri, Rajala, & Alejandro +	2015	IMM		X		
Truong, Simmons, & Palmer	2012	IMM		X		
Turkulainen, Kujala, Artto, & Levitt	2013	IMM		X		
Tzannis #	2013	IMM	X			
Verganti & Öberg	2013	IMM		X		
Wilson	2019	IMM	X			
Yeniaras & Kaya	2021	JBIM		X		
Zahay, Peltier, Krishen, & Schultz	2014	JBIM		X		
Zhang & Watson IV	2020	IMM	X			
Öberg, Dahlin, & Pesämaa	2020	IMM	X			
Totals		109	36	57	12	4

Notes: # Google Scholar generated results; + added after search engine generated results, \* JBIM = Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing; IMM = Industrial Marketing Management; IMP = IMP Journal; JBBM = Journal of business-to-business marketing; JBE = Journal of Business Ethics.

ideas. For example, many scholars have recently applied institutional theory (e.g., Matthyssens et al., 2013; Nicholls & Huybrechts, 2016; Ojansivu & Medlin, 2018; Palmer et al., 2015; Töytäri et al., 2015), practice theory (Chakrabarti et al., 2013; Cheng & Holmen, 2015; Mason & Leek, 2012; Pedersen et al., 2020), capability theory (Najafi-Tavani et al., 2018), stochastic modeling (McCabe et al., 2013) and process theories (Ahola et al., 2020; Andersen, Medlin, & Törnroos, 2020a; Kaartemo et al., 2020) as distinct lenses to enrich the business network literature.

When using a 'theoretical' lens, research implications are less pre-described compared to a conceptual lens because a theoretical lens is broader and thus provides more maneuverability. Notably, the instrumental and theoretical use of a lens partly overlap: concepts form theories and theories prescribe certain terminologies. The value of a theoretical approach lies in cross-fertilization, i.e., an alternative elucidation of the same phenomenon is introduced to complement the original theory (e.g., Mencarelli & Rivière, 2015). However, this freedom comes with a price. Using a 'theoretical lens' is often challenging, as it requires boundary setting and sophisticated disciplinary expertise to convincingly claim theoretical authority (see e.g. Alvesson & Spicer, 2019). To achieve a contribution in a research community, scholars will need to define what their lens comprises, what elements are studied, what is left out and why. For example, Aguilera and Grøgaard

(2019) point out that institutional theory is not a unified lens because its various strands are incommensurable in their ontological and epistemological foundations. However, numerous scholars continue to apply an 'institutional lens' to various topics without careful consideration (Alvesson & Spicer, 2019). In a similar vein, many scholars consider the IMP Group's ([impgroup.org](http://impgroup.org)) 'interaction approach' (Håkansson, 1982) or 'industrial network approach' (Håkansson & Shenota, 1995) as a cohesive theoretical lens (e.g., Guercini & Milanese, 2019; Johnsen, 2018; Johnsen et al., 2017; Kraus et al., 2015; O'Toole & McGrath, 2018; Singaraju et al., 2016; Thornton et al., 2014), while others have been more reserved in applying smaller parts and specific concepts of this theory and acknowledging the different epochs in its development (e.g., Bankvall et al., 2017; Medlin, 2012; Möller, 2013; Thornton et al., 2013). We would argue that the most intriguing part of theoretical boundary setting, in this way of applying preexisting knowledge to research, is the abductive process. Our reasoning is that scholars conduct abductive re-research over and during different times so that there is a clear development of thinking and even changes or reversals (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Flyvbjerg, 2006) as a theoretical lens is used. Inevitably, scholars' own presuppositions will hide some aspects of the lens while valorizing others, suggesting that honest reflection is an underdeveloped, yet promising and exciting approach to using a theoretical lens.

#### 2.4. Meta-theoretical use

A third use of a lens has to do with theorizing about a theory itself (see e.g., Gergen, 1985). The aim is to use a lens to ask meta-questions (Tsoukas & Chia, 2011) and to provoke a reflective position from which to re-search a phenomenon (Hassard & Wolfram Cox, 2013; Järvensivu & Möller, 2009; Lukka & Vinnari, 2014). For example, Guercini and Medlin (2020) use radical constructivism, Lowe and Tapachai (2020) a Bourdieusian meta-framework, Lundgren-Henriksson and Kock (2016) a micro level, while Ojansivu, Hermes and Laari-Salmela (2020, p. 2) apply change as a lens to “tease out the underlying assumptions” within the business network literature. A ‘meta-theoretical’ lens is useful when the aim of the research is to ‘shake up’ the existing norms and ingrained ways of thinking (e.g., Reed & Burrell, 2018; Tolbert & Zucker, 1999). The challenge with a meta-theoretical lens is to genuinely surface the underlying assumptions concerning humanity and social orders rather than play word games and merely rephrase the original theory (Alvesson & Blom, 2021; Tsoukas, 1998). At worst, this could mean that rephrasing creates tautologies and pseudo-science that blur the original theory rather than clarify its heritage, strengths and limitations (Feyerabend, 1993; Priem & Butler, 2001). On the other hand, the surfacing of the underlying assumptions could also lead to an understanding that past research was tautological and oversimplified. Thus, we see that scientific contributions demand asking meta-questions, such as ‘why use a particular theory instead of another?’ or ‘what are the commonalities and differences between theories geared toward the same phenomena?’ Only by asking these deeper questions, concerning our own pre-suppositions and those of academic communities can a researcher break free from their institutionalized habits and ingrained ways of thinking (see Chomsky, 1995).

#### 2.5. Contextual use

Finally, a noticeable way of approaching theory is the use of a context as a specific lens to a phenomenon. A culture, place or space more broadly (see e.g., Lefebvre, 1991) offers an interesting layer or viewpoint to a theory. For example, Karhunen and Kosonen (2013) use Russia, Hermes and Mainela (2014) a crisis context, while Quinton and Wilson (2016) use LinkedIn as a particular lens in their research. Using context as a lens shares similarities with practice theories (see Pedersen et al., 2020) in that the aim is to understand a phenomenon through a local viewpoint by shedding light on everyday managerial realities. A contextual lens yields a rich local understanding with cultural and historical insights. However, there is a caveat. In some studies, a scholar needs to appropriately distance themselves from the context (Eriksson, 2010) and abstract from the local cultural fabric in order to draw conceptual and theoretical innovations that move the discipline forward (Brodie, 2017). The alternative approach is to come closer and go deeper into the context and even to find reversals of meanings as the researcher comes to understand the actors in their context (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Both approaches offer means for breaking out, but in different ways: the first is directed toward new theoretical insights and the second toward deeper understanding and then possibly to new theoretical insights.

In summary, each of the four lenses discussed above gives different priorities to preexisting theory and applies them quite differently. For this reason, they have the capacity to focus our vision on certain aspects of a phenomenon and blur other possible understandings and explanations. Here lies the parallax issue: the applications of a lens appear to be curtailed mainly by researchers’ imagination and, hence, are almost infinite. For example, specific concepts and a particular theory can together be a researcher’s lens, as not every study can encompass all concepts being studied to the same degree, nor take on every possible underlying assumption of a theoretical field. Thus, in practice, the pressure to produce legitimate representations of a phenomenon sets the limits for what can be considered an authentic lens in a research community (Bourdieu, 1975).

Indeed, attempting to reflect our own interpretation of a phenomenon to others by using an academic lens is a precarious process. Often, as researchers, we rely on our own intuitive understandings (Flyvbjerg, 2006). However, if we use our own unique lens gained through our own experience, that is, embodied knowledge or what Shotter (1993) terms ‘knowing of the third kind’, our ideas might lack credibility. On the other hand, should we use a preloaded lens, for example, institutional theory, the chances are that our own ideas and insights are buried by the lens that we hope will valorize our thinking. Some would suggest that ‘choosing’ one’s lens is possible (see Hassard, 1991; Kaartemo et al., 2020), while others assert that humans are incapable of changing their core assumptions (Lock & Strong, 2010; Parker & McHugh, 1991). We do know, however, that once socialized, researchers do not find it easy to change their lens, and so considerable work results only in expected outcomes (Foucault, 1980; Ghoshal, 2005; Lefebvre, 1991). Thus, being a researcher means crafting ideas rather than engineering or mechanically applying them. One cannot create only on the basis of an established way of thinking, for example, an accepted theory. Every accepted theory is limited by the presumptions needed to enclose and reproduce this thinking (Lefebvre, 1991). Thus, breaking out of our theoretical pre-suppositions is unlikely to take place from within; we need a different approach and so a different language. How is it then possible for a researcher in a community to apply a lens, or lenses, to generate new ideas? We suggest that metaphors could provide one way to break out from established norms. Hence, to address the re-search process by which scholars break away from an established insight or when their insights seem to challenge what is ‘known’ by others within a lens, another sensemaking tool is called for. We refer to this as the metaphorical lens.

### 3. Using metaphors as a lens to reform knowledge

Metaphors here refer to a linguistic tool used to communicate or even frame to others (and ourselves), a way of thinking and seeing a phenomenon (Morgan, 1980). In this sense, a metaphor includes more than symbolic language. It is a way of sharing understandings and communicating and jointly exploring aspects (and limitations), among others (Alvesson, 2018). Markets as networks (Johanson & Vahlne, 2011), network as a marriage (Alajoutsijärvi, Eriksson, & Tikkanen, 2001), business dancing (Wilkinson & Young, 1994), representations of networks as maps (Geiger & Finch, 2010) or exchange systems (Möller, Nenonen, & Storbacka, 2020) suggest different metaphors. Each metaphor is conveying basic signifiers among researchers within the industrial network research community concerning what matters and what is worthwhile to look for in researching markets and related phenomena. While metaphors are not referred to as a ‘lens’ *per se* in academic parlance, we resort to metaphors as a means to reform knowledge (e.g., Alvesson, 1993; Morgan, 1986). Thus, to discuss new ways to make academic contributions, we conduct our elaboration within the realm of open thought prodded by metaphors, which may serve to extend and expand but also to challenge dominant assumptions of research communities or possibly to establish dialogs at the boundary of otherwise separate research communities. Metaphors suggest a third space—a language allowing for a discourse among researchers of different theoretical observations that is not firmly rooted in formal theoretical language. As pointed out by Czarniawska (1998, p. 274):

There are much more serious dangers in life than dissonance in organization theory. Crossing the street every day is one such instance. We may also abandon this self-centered rhetoric [about incommensurability] and concentrate on a more practical issue: it seems that we would like to be able to talk to one another, and from time to time have an illusion of understanding what the Other is saying.

Each metaphor allows for jointly emphasizing particular aspects and downplaying others in conversation. Suggesting that a business

relationship is like a marriage or a dance may scope conversation or research to explore details or elements of that metaphor in the phenomenon investigated. What are the steps and the patterns of the dance? How is the notion of a dance floor grasped? Metaphors also rival each other with respect to framing what matters most and using them in creating collective efforts has limitations as well. Metaphors work by directing associations from one phenomenon to another, but it is often an error to expect that conceptual properties travel undisputed from one phenomenon to another. For example, because an association is possible or provides ‘an effective storyline’ for the interpreter (Morgan, 1980), it does not give a reason for use. Rather, with uncritical use, we risk losing sight of the important differences gained in transferring concepts. In other sciences, this has been addressed as the danger of anthropomorphism. Addressing again the ‘relationship-as-a-dance’ metaphor, some aspects of dancing may be inferred from the metaphor, but it may also make room for invention or make us see aspects from dancing that blur or obscure the process of inferring insights from observation and dialog. Does it add value or insight to describe a business contract in a relationship as a formal dance? Is a misstep in a waltz (or dropping your partner on the floor) to be likened to an event in a relationship? In this sense, metaphors can become rather silly prisons of thought.

Metaphors stem from our own experiences (Shotter, 1993) that develop within our lives. Herein lies what could provide a transformative process: viable lenses shared by a community are always in a stage of becoming. However, they flow with very low viscosities. Over time, there are inherent and sometimes bitter tensions between the commitments, ideas and interests of incumbent and new researchers and between existing and new research projects. In industrial marketing, tense discussions have taken place around the paradigms used, and metaphors have developed as a consequence (Brodie, Coviello, Brookes, & Little, 1997; Grönroos, 1994a). Strong and inspiring ideas may shape the conversation ground and be a motivating lens to collectively bring perspective and insights. We side with those that see research as a stride toward enlightenment and expect good researchers to look for the unexpected and wonder how anomalies reshape their own thinking and what that means for changing the knowledge and understanding of their academic community (see Weick, 1989).

#### 4. A mirror, a reflection, a symbol, or a mirage of a re-search phenomenon?

While metaphors provide a creative lens to interpret a phenomenon, they rely on the always present incompleteness of language and camouflage that “language has a reality constituting and distorting character” (Lowe, Ellis, & Purchase, 2008, p. 295). Metaphors, like the other four types of lenses apparent in the industrial marketing and business-to-business literature, leave open ontological questions about the studied phenomenon. More precisely, a metaphor leaves unanswered the researcher’s underlying assumptions about reality and how a research community (and affiliated conferences, workshops and journals) shapes these assumptions by defining legitimate research and prescribing “norm-fulfilling scientific behavior” (Knorr-Cetina, 1981, p. 71). These thoughts stem from the presumption that researchers participate in the production and reproduction of a research community and its cultural conventions (Gergen, 2001).

As scholars, we play epistemological word games (Taylor, 1995) and resort to established and well-received ontological standpoints such as realist, constructivist, and postmodernist. While playing this game, we are curtailed by the “prior doctrine of what we can know” (Taylor, 1995, p. viii). For example, when adopting Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) “radical humanist” approach, we need to follow this ‘ritual’ all the way; otherwise, our approach would lack authenticity (Shotter & Lannamann, 2002). We argue that staying within an established epistemological word game means we cannot get out into new research areas. Instead, we look to metaphorical lenses and open thought as ways to leave closed systemic views and thus find new research opportunities.

Indeed, when using a lens to frame our scholarly work, we make unconscious ontological assumptions about the contours of the world and the role theory plays in it (see Fig. 1). These assumptions are embodied in the language we (scholars) use in conjunction with theory, such as viewing theory as a ‘mirror’, ‘reflection’ or ‘symbol’ of the studied phenomena (see Gergen, 2015; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021; Tsoukas, 1998). This language, while often tacit and without forethought, provides an implicit and sometimes an explicit glimpse into our ontological assumptions as researchers. Let us assume that a team of scholars is interested in applying the Actor–Resources–Activities (ARA) framework (e.g., Håkansson & Snehota, 1995) as a theoretical lens to understand network development. Should the team assume that the ARA framework provides a full representation of managerial reality, they would adopt theory as a mirror into a network phenomenon (see Gergen, 2015; Tsoukas, 1998). This underlying ontological assumption of a mirror suggests logical empiricism and one-to-one correspondence between theory and an actual reality in the world (see Bacharach, 1989; Whetten, 1989). The team would determine the parameters that model the ARA concepts and then collect data. However, should the team discover findings that do not fit in the predetermined constructs, it would face an ontological conundrum: is there more to networks than what actors, resources and activities elucidate? This insight could spark the team to consider the ARA framework largely a ‘reflection’ of managerial life. Ontological assumptions derived from reflection suggest that theory bears an ideal relation with the world, not a full resemblance, and that interpretation intervenes between the empirical and perceived realities (see Archer, 1998; Bhaskar, 1998; Healy & Perry, 2000). Alternatively, conceptual ideals and plans enable managers to act jointly to create new business networks but not necessarily exactly those envisioned by their creators (see Medlin & Törnroos, 2015).

From an anti-representational perspective (see Rorty, 1979), our experience or language is not capable of mirroring reality. As Tsoukas (1998, p. 800) explicates, “Our models and theories are more like tools for doing things in social systems than mirrors reflecting the way social systems are”. Boltzmann in his *Bildtheorie* goes as far as proclaiming that theories are nothing but mental pictures with limited correspondence to reality (de Regt, 1999). From this point of view, considering the ARA framework commensurable with managerial practice is an oversimplification. Rather, ARA is a lens capturing networks through idealized concepts to help make sense of chaotic managerial life. Viewed as a reflection of a phenomenon presupposes that theory is a partial representation. For authors, this issue raises different meta-questions and requires that they provide as much detail as possible to enable the audience to follow their interpretations and reflections on the phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

However, an alternative ontological assumption could be that the ARA framework is not only a reflection of reality but also a cultural product with symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1975). As Tsoukas (1998, p. 800) points out, “Our descriptions of the world cannot be said to represent it; they are rather ways of talking about it and, therefore, for intervening in it”. Ontological assumptions rooted in symbolism refer to the use of symbolic constructs such as language and pictures as the means to create a narrative of the world (Astley, 1984; Morgan, 1980). However, here there is a further issue because as scholars we are part of the lens, as is the research community around us, and we use and create language in our interpretations of the world (Andersen, Medlin, & Törnroos, 2020b). Academic communities armed with a theoretical perspective domesticate the phenomena they address and create the world in their image (Arndt, 1985a). From a symbolic viewpoint, a dominant theoretical perspective or a ‘normal science’ colonizes new subjects for investigation and silences others seen as less fruitful or outside the scope of the research (Arndt, 1985b; Weick, 1989). Shared theoretical doctrines create a sense of order in academic communities in terms of a social status structure and a collectively accepted problem situation. Lenses are ‘places’ where researchers can meet like-minded people, pin their career aspirations, and focus their energy on puzzle



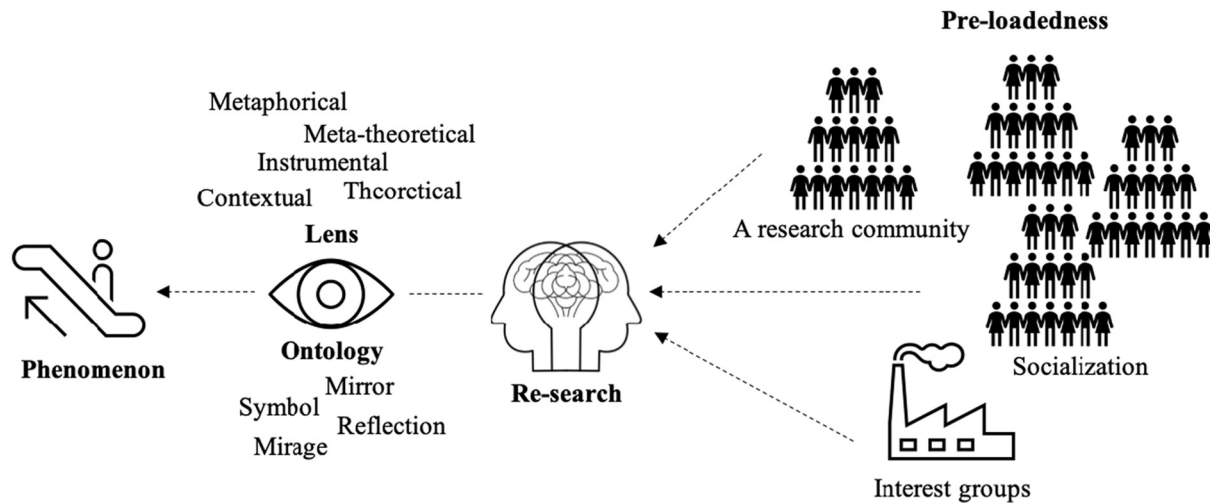


Fig. 1. The re-search process with various alternative lenses and unconscious ontological assumptions.

solving within an existing set of theoretical doctrines (Popper, 1965). A researcher is part of the organized fabric of a lens: both as an applicant and as a producer who helps in advancing its key tenets.

One could go as far as interpreting every theoretical framework as a result of scientific indoctrination into a particular perspective with distinct language and symbolic properties, for example Cartesian or Newtonian (Adam, 1995). A theoretical framework prescribes what can be considered an alternative (and erroneous) social reality (Donaldson, 1998), the accepted game of words (Mantere, 2010), which also holds the potential to ridicule alternative theorizing efforts. Such activities have been visible in relation to the proposed ‘idea dimension’ extension of the ARA framework (see Olsen, 2013). Particularly early on in the genesis of the ARA framework, researchers seeing themselves as ‘belonging to’ the IMP community were engaged in establishing the research territory and setting up boundaries and building or burning bridges to alternative research approaches (Grönroos, 1994b). Additionally, research manifestos fleshing out a research program fully equipped with analytical approaches and puzzles to be solved can be interpreted as an attempt to provide an ideological cornerstone for future research efforts. In this sense, all lenses include a mirage; some parts of the lens portray the contours of our world, while other parts yield illusions of our perception, culture and our indoctrination into a particular research community. Similarly, as sand can become hot when exposed to the sun, causing light rays to bend and creating an illusion of water in the desert, lenses can lead researchers astray by excessively narrowing and twisting their interpretation of a phenomenon.

Given the issue of different uses and unconscious ontological assumptions embodied in the use of lenses, we need to revisit our earlier definition. Clearly, a lens is more than a tool for viewing, framing, and authenticating a research problem. A lens is deeply ingrained into culture and society and will influence our representations of its organization. Thus, we define a research lens as a sociocultural representation and tool that helps to negotiate our scientific interpretations of the world. This *sui generis* definition for an academic lens is reminiscent of our research question: How can a researcher in an academic community apply a lens to generate new ideas? If all lenses hide other interpretations of research, where does this leave re-searchers? Is it that each area of theory does not talk/listen to others? If that is the case, from where does new theory arise? More importantly, are scholars able to use lenses to overcome incommensurability (Czarniawska, 1998)? We argue that theory is neither solely a mirror, a reflection nor a symbol of a research phenomenon, rather, it is a combination of these. Once one realizes that a mirror is embedded in a mirage, one must pass through the territory of the reflectionist to realize that reflections are also full of mirages, and so one starts to look at symbols and how differences are

everywhere (Deleuze, 1994). Therefore, pluralism and open thought processes are a way forward (Cornelissen, Höllerer, & Seidl, 2021; Donaldson, 1998). We can use the metaphor of road rules as an example. Viewing traffic from the underlying ontological standpoint of a mirror, we would model the social world as though it were the same as the physical world. Thus, road rules are mechanistic to address the mechanical reality of forces in the world of moving cars. However, road rules are also a social construction—they include symbols and require common language and meanings to be effective in society (Macneil, 1980). Clearly, there is a need to mix and match the research tools to provide a rich understanding of the phenomenon. In this sense, the ontological assumptions of a mirror, reflection, symbol and mirage are ‘signposts’ at ‘way-points’ on our way to understand the world. Using and moving between different lenses is challenging, as it goes against our deeply ingrained research identities and our research community’s hierarchical classification systems into which scholars are expected to fit (Arndt, 1985b). A pluralistic approach requires introspection and willingness to open up our own self-propelling thought processes, and to understand the pre-suppositions and the ontologies that our rituals espouse.

## 5. Conclusions

In this article, we sought to delve into the social research processes of academic communities and how scholars authenticate their re-search within an established cultural convention. Our starting point was the notion that although the term ‘lens’ is used widely to view, frame, and authenticate research (e.g., Ancona et al., 2001; Chen & Tan, 2009; Stevens & Dimitriadis, 2004; Voorhees et al., 2017), it remains largely unexamined. Consequently, we saw an opportunity to increase the clarity around the use of this peculiar, yet important, term. We saw a lens tied to our underlying assumptions about reality, thus making its use unconscious and promulgated by research communities (Bourdieu, 1975; Foucault, 1980). We sought to address this tension by asking: How can a researcher in an academic community apply a lens to generate new ideas?

We started by looking into the use of a lens in industrial marketing, business-to-business and industrial network research. We uncovered four applications: instrumental, theoretical, meta-theoretical and contextual. While these categories are by no means comprehensive, they do hint at the pre-loadedness of the current uses of academic lenses. Understanding how we (re-searchers) are preloaded and engage with pre-existing knowledge and the different ways in which research communities preload us has an impact on understanding how we add to the conversations. We need to be aware of how we are indoctrinated,

entrenched, or in some way ingrained in our different research communities. A community is a socializing movement structuring researchers' work (Kuhn, 1970). As researchers, we learn to take over the values, norms and categories of our fellow travelers. Communities grow as their lenses are applied to more areas and phenomena or as they spend more time fine-tuning and discussing their use. Refining a lens is similar to developing a photographic negative, bringing binoculars into a sharper focus, or gradually adding light to a darkened room, but the lens does not provide images of knowledge or understandings that last eternally. Research communities die out with an inability to attract attention, funds, talent and interest (Knorr-Cetina, 1981). Alternatively, research communities adjust their lenses, take in new viewpoints, develop different understandings, and so begin the slow social transformation to deeper and more profound understandings. In this way, the discourse of the research community rises among the plateaus, leaving paths and waypoints for others to follow. New researchers are attracted to the discourse, the language game (Shotter, 1996), and new socializations with additional riffs, adjustments and lenses arise. These new lenses are then contrasted and patterned to arrive and form empirical data in the 'world's progress' (see Adam, 2010). Persistence for academic communities is built upon socially relevant discourse and useful lenses, i.e., well sign-posted pathways that researchers may follow and adjust.

Finding socially relevant, interesting questions and issues is a key concern for a research community (Lefebvre, 1991; Lock & Strong, 2010; Parker & McHugh, 1991). Thus, a contradiction emerges: while a lens becomes more interesting, relevant and able to draw in more researchers, it turns the research community increasingly rigid, harder to access, and easier to criticize, attack and stain politically so that funding slows. In this sense, an established lens is also a midwife for novel perspectives and travels, as it provides perfect ground for mobilizing a critical dialog (Shepherd & Challenger, 2013). For example, many research communities have developed in protest against established traditions. Over time, however, they come to resemble the very same establishments. For a researcher in a community of researchers, any encounter of novelty contains the chance of a eureka moment: the movement away from an established lens and the creation/adoption of a new lens. However, it also entails an individual choice in terms of an active search for confirmation or dissent. What follows is a valid challenge, an awkward feeling in the stomach: whether to follow one's accustomed lens, or to embrace the unknown, to take an adventure and search for a lens that may open doors for new discovery and the possibility to reform knowledge.

The challenge for a researcher is, however, that we have an appetite for belonging and acceptance (Knorr-Cetina, 1981). We use established theories to cement our place within the academic community. Our own work is both building on those theories but also extending them (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011). One could even argue that the more our work gains recognition, the less we have elbow room to reflect and rephrase our own thinking. As Ghoshal (2005, p. 87) writes, "The currently dominant theories have so much commitment vested in them that the temptation of most scholars would be to incrementally adapt these theories, if and as necessary, rather than to start afresh". To write it overly bluntly: within our social milieu we are someone, outside of it we are no one. Our ideas become ingrained into the established lenses, so these lenses trap us inside. We become prisoners of our own ideas. However, this prison is reassuring, and its bars are almost transparent. Indeed, most scholars never realize their shackles, and those who do are worthy of careful reading to see their path among the plateaus of understanding and knowledge.

### 5.1. Implications for research practice

The challenge of simultaneously breaking *in* to and breaking *out* of a cultural convention in re-search creates an unavoidable tension for scholars. Einstein, Newton and many others did not rely on old

categories, knowledge and understandings; rather, they were able to break out into new understandings. Similarly, one of the most highly cited and respected philosophers, sociologists and social scientists of our times, Noam Chomsky, completely rearranged and repositioned his lifetime work after decades of long meta-theoretical reflection (Chomsky, 1995). How were they able to break out from the 'shackles' of research communities?

We arrived at our *sui generis* definition for a lens after considering their different academic uses, the possibilities for applying a metaphorical lens to reform knowledge, and the unconscious ontological assumptions embodied in their use. Defined as a sociocultural representation and tool that helps to negotiate our scientific interpretation of the world, an academic lens points out how our thinking is ingrained in and shaped by research communities (Bourdieu, 1975; Foucault, 1980). Consequently, our representations tend to mirror, reflect, symbolize or mirage the contours of our world without our full awareness. Since research is a social process, and necessarily so: How shall we define the meaning of social and where the individual ends and the research community begins? We each carry pieces of socialization and indoctrination with us (Durkheim, 1956) as the categories and ideas are social creations, but we each interpret them somewhat uniquely. Each researcher is on a different journey along many paths, starting from different birthplaces, education, life experiences, but gaining in understanding and knowledge according to paths that they also create through their reflections upon the literature of different research communities. We take different pathways: there are those that point out that Cartesian and Newtonian thinking have constrained academic research (Adam, 1995; Gergen, 2019; Shotter & Lannamann, 2002). In this non-Cartesian viewpoint of the social, the different interpretations by individuals, the new viewpoints and the contrasting perspectives provide loopholes that enable friction, tension, disagreement and dialogical re-appraisal and new understandings leading to reformed knowledge (Bakhtin, 1986).

Following these lines of thought, we looked for metaphors as an exceptional lens, allowing creativity and open thought rooted in language and personal experiences and less in formal theoretical language. Metaphors provide a lens to address a research phenomenon from an everyday perspective without some of the baggage of historical load- edness. For example, when driving a car (especially in the United States of America), there is sometimes a warning text in the rearview mirrors: "objects may be closer than they appear". In the center of the lens, objects are clear and proportional, but at the edges of lenses, objects that move (because they move, or you do) become blurry. This type of everyday (trivial) insight can be taken into a network context to elucidate an old phenomenon from a new viewpoint. Future research might apply metaphors and any of our figurative languages in general, such as simile, metonymy, synecdoche, hyperbole, or personification (see Cornelissen, 2005; Morgan, 2016; Oswick, Keenoy, & Grant, 2002), as a means for 'breaking-out'. Indeed, if researchers do not develop new ideas, for example, by keeping in mind several research lenses in parallax while studying a phenomenon, they will stay within their research community and might only seek ways to shore up their academic enterprise. If researchers can come to new ideas about the diversity and depth of the social world and its specific, happenstance and particular nature, there is an opportunity to move on to new research ideas.

### Acknowledgements

We thank the four reviewers for their invaluable insights and commentary on earlier versions of the text. In addition, we thank the IMM Associate Editor for Special Issues, Maja Arslanagic-Kaladzic, who managed the review process for this paper. Also we thank James Buchanan Smith for help in creating our Janus head in Figure 1.

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