Marketing Identities: Shifting Circles of Identification in Inter-organizational Relationships

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Abstract

This study explores the discursive positioning of managers involved in inter-organizational relationships (IORs) within industrial supply chains. In closely examining a series of interviews, we find a number of interpretive repertoires of boundary construction used in IOR managers' identity discourse. Our analysis of these repertoires suggests that, although the development of IORs apparently signals the emergence of 'widening circles of identification', distinction drawing and boundary setting is as much a part of managers' IOR talk as boundary transcendence. IOR managers can thus be seen as 'boundary bricoleurs' who discursively mark different self/other boundaries that varyingly position themselves, and their colleagues, competitors, customers and suppliers, as 'inside' or 'outside' the organization, the market, the relationship or their field of expertise. In this tensile positioning, they forestall closure on their identity by constantly shifting identifications, sometimes within the same stretch of talk. Oscillating between an inclusive and an exclusive 'us' and thus articulating embracing yet distinctive identities vis-à-vis other network actors enables IOR managers to navigate through their complex and dynamic inter-organizational field, maintaining multiple inter-firm relationships while at the same time preserving their own organizational and professional status within these relationships.

Keywords: boundaries, discursive positioning, identity, inter-organizational relationships, liminality, marketing

Acts of organizing tend to set boundaries within which people act out or enact their organizational selves. Some organizational actors, however, are involved in establishing and maintaining relationships across organizational boundaries, working on the notional edges of organizations. For those embedded in inter-organizational networks, their in-between or 'liminal' (Turner 1977) position presents a particular challenge for the enactment of identity (Marchington and Vincent 2004). It is not yet clear how the growth of inter-organizational relationships (IORs) thought to have taken place over the last few decades (Oliver and Ebers 1998; Raab and Kenis 2009) affects IOR managers' social identifications. The emergence of organizational networks may be seen as evidence of a historical process in which the lengthening and strengthening of the chains of interdependence between human beings (Elias 1970) expand social boundaries from, for instance, family or village to nation or class, giving

rise to ‘widening circles of identification’ (de Swaan 1995). In a similar vein, one might view the growth of IORs as instances of the breaking down of organizational boundaries and the building of more encompassing identifications prophesied in the managerialist literature (e.g. Ashkenas et al. 1995). Yet, although the emergence of a ‘network-society’ (Castells 1996) and ‘boundaryless organizations’ (Ashkenas et al. 1995) may indeed create connections between people on a larger scale, the resulting increase of boundary-spanning interactions may not automatically lead to homogenisation. It may also bring forth a heterogenising countertrend of people reasserting their identity by defining themselves as distinct from others (cf. Appadurai 1998). The research presented in this paper – an investigation of the identity talk of marketing managers involved in IORs within industrial supply chains – suggests that, taken on their own, each view is limited, although taken together each may complement the other in understanding processes of identity construction in IORs. We shall show how marketing managers constantly shift identifications in their IOR talk, alternately constructing an inclusive or exclusive ‘self’ vis-à-vis others by drawing various circles or boundaries; a process we term ‘tensile discursive positioning’.

To study the intricacies of IOR managers’ identifications in an industrial network (or ‘market network’ – Mattsson and Johanson 2006:259) context we employ a discourse analytical approach. This approach reflects the argument of Phillips and Hardy (2002: 52) that ‘we cannot understand processes of organizing unless we understand identity – and understand it from a discursive perspective because reified views of identity do not help researchers capture the fluidity of social life’. This perspective is important in analyzing social life in the ambiguous and dynamic context of IORs where actors are engaged in the construction of a ‘tellable’ marketing story which ‘narrates boundaries, relations, agency and identities...’ (Simakova and Neyland 2008: 96) and where parties build and break relationships on the basis of their conceptions of who others are and what they believe these others can contribute to their goals (Beech and Huxham 2003). More generally, our understanding of who we are is intimately connected to who we think others are (Jenkins 2004); and a focus on identity discourse helps to direct analytic attention to how organizational actors recursively make sense of themselves in relation to others (Ybema et al. 2009). Through ‘discursive positioning’ (Garcia and Hardy 2007; Hopkinson 2001), placing ourselves vis-à-vis others by drawing distinctions or by assuming resemblance and relatedness in everyday discourse, we talk our identities into being, producing a particular notion of ‘us’ or ‘me’ by comparison to ‘them’. Identity can therefore be seen as a matter of discursively enacting relationships of similarity and difference. Claims of ‘sameness’ or ‘otherness’ in relation to, for instance, colleagues, clients or competitors, position organizational members within a particular social context, hence establishing, legitimating and/or challenging relationships of power and status (Ball and Wilson 2000; Ybema et al.

2009). As Ainsworth and Hardy (2004: 155) note, after de Saussure and Derrida, linguistic binary oppositions are often utilised in identity construction to position the other as not merely different, but also less acceptable, less respectable and/or less powerful (Hall, 1997). Similarities and differences are thus articulated, contested, and negotiated as part of a political process (Kreiner, Hollensbe and Sheep 2006; Parker 1997).

Identity theory thus suggests that constructing identity is bound up with discursively erecting self-other boundaries and constructing 'alterity' (Czarniawska 1997). However, if identity is fundamentally about distinction drawing, how then do those responsible for building and maintaining relationships across formalised and socially entrenched boundaries between, for instance, buying and selling firms, position their organizational identities? On one hand, constructing a boundary-crossing, client-embracing collective identity in IORs may be important because, as Hardy, Lawrence and Grant (2005: 63) point out, this provides a rationale for addressing conflicts of interests and taking collective risks, enabling 'participants to construct themselves, the problem, and the solution as part of a collective framework'. For those managing IORs, on the other hand, drawing 'external' stakeholders into a personal or businesslike relationship (and thus into managers' daily thoughts and routines) implies an increased exposure to stakeholders' opinions and judgements. So, as managers have to build a sense of self as some sort of 'bridge' across organizational boundaries, these boundary-spanning activities may simultaneously pose a potential threat to their organizational and/or managerial identities. The network context, where there are few clear-cut guarantees of role and status, exposes managers to what Cooper and Lousada (2005) describe as 'inter-organizational vulnerability' that, according to Flores and Solomon (1998: 220), pertains in particular to people's sense of self: 'Whatever other vulnerabilities may be at stake (one's job, substantial amounts of money, the success of the business) it is the *self* that is in some danger.' Writing about the potentially subordinate position of consultants (or marketing managers for that matter) to powerful or 'strong client organizations', Alvesson and Robertson (2006) note: 'The unpredictable, relationship-dependent and fluctuating character of this kind of work can... make it difficult to accomplish and sustain a stable feeling of competence and respect.' (2006: 217). So, when social boundaries are crossed and the other is no longer at a 'safe' distance, it may become all the more important and, ironically, all the more complicated at the same time, to hold on to a distinct and secure idea of one's self through defining 'otherness'. Their boundary position in-between different firms requires IOR managers to navigate between multiple and sometimes contradictory demands, asking them to build relationships with various others across us/them-divides while simultaneously maintaining and 'marketing' their professional or organizational identities.

Due to their ambiguous or 'in-between' position, IOR managers can be said to work in a condition of institutionalised 'liminality' (Turner 1977), which entails 'existing at the

limits of existing structures' (Tempest and Starkey 2004). Those who 'dwell in liminal spaces' (Sturdy, Schwartz and Spicer 2006: 930) or who are 'drawn into extended circles of loyalty' (Garsten, 1999: 603) include consultants in their relationships with clients (Sturdy et al. 2006; 2009), professionals with competing loyalties (both organizational and occupational) (Iedema et al. 2003; Zabusky and Barley 1997), temporary workers who are neither organizational insiders nor outsiders (Garsten, 1999), and those engaged in inter-organizational networks and projects (Marchington and Vincent 2004; Tempest and Starkey 2004). These organizational actors may not encounter the temporary and voluntary liminality that occurs in leisure and at the margins and interstices of social life described by Victor Turner, but rather a permanent and mandatory liminality, occurring at the centre of their organizational lives (Hannerz 1992: 286).

Prior studies of the liminal organizational lives of 'expert' managers show how an in-between position of, for instance, the staff scientists in the European Space Agency investigated by Zabusky and Barley (1997: 395) 'required them to navigate a sea of complex relationships'. In coping with the task of leading research projects, these scientists were 'continually confronted with competing allegiances', which involved them in what Zabusky and Barley term a 'strategic' exercise of having to be 'prepared to make and remake themselves on the spot for different audiences at different moments'. The lack of any allegiance to a particular group was celebrated by the liminal scientists as a challenging yet rewarding position that allowed them to remain constantly adrift while affording them the opportunity to 'safeguard the integrity of the mission itself' (Zabusky and Barley 1997: 395). Similarly, Iedema et al. (2004:15) note how a 'doctor-manager' in a teaching hospital manages 'the incommensurable dimension' of his 'boundary position between profession and organization' by positioning himself across different discourses. It appears that a form of (expert) stability arises from a lack of attachments which is critical for providing liminal individuals with room for manoeuvre and enabling them 'to keep conflicting agendas in play across a range of settings and in front of a spectrum of players' (Iedema et al. 2003: 29).

While the discursive practices outlined in these studies pertain largely to intra-organizational contexts, it is on the identity talk of individuals charged with 'managing' inter-firm relationships that this study is focused. As IOR managers also have to position themselves *across* different discourses and divides before a heterogeneous audience, it seems likely that we will find intense 'boundary work' (Hernes and Paulsen 2003) or 'identity work' – that is, 'the ongoing mental [or, in this study, discursive] activity that an individual undertakes in constructing an understanding of self' (Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas, 2008: 14) – performed at the notional limits of organizations. Exploring these discursive practices is important to the study of IORs since it illustrates how managers construct the relationships that constitute the proximate environment of the network, while simultaneously securing their

own position within it. Language use by managers produces particular ways of understanding such trading encounters and defines appropriate patterns of social activity, thus forming the basis for action (Palmer and Dunford 1996). Studying how these forms of understanding pattern the managerial self and the network environment will develop our comprehension of IOR actors' potential modes of engagement.

So, we ask, how do IOR managers discursively position themselves and their firms vis-à-vis competitors, colleagues, customers and suppliers? As we begin to answer this question, we follow our participants' identity-constructing boundary talk by extending the notion of boundaries from those that apparently enclose organizations to those surrounding markets, relationships, and professional expertise. A detailed analysis allows us to explore the discursive practices of such boundary-spanning agents as they create, maintain, and cross the various 'mental fences' (Zerubavel, 1991) organizational members use to categorize the environment.

The study of supply chains and marketing management

In order to explore self/other boundary talk for those operating in conditions of permanent and inescapable liminality, our contextual focus in this paper is on the organizational members involved in inter-organizational partnerships that are argued to increasingly comprise contemporary supply chain management (Huemer, Becerra and Lunnan 2004; Wagner and Boutellier 2002). The 'supply chain' is the term by which the business system represented by an industrial network of IORs set up to support the buying and selling of goods has come to be known (Svensson 2003: 306). Supply chain IORs are more than merely an appropriate exemplar in which to explore boundary construction, however. As we shall now show, they represent a context where the discursive practices of marketing and purchasing managers are overdue for study, leaving underexplored how they 'manage' or make sense of the various relationships they maintain.

Scholars have long recognized the critical role played by marketing managers in establishing relationships across the notional boundary that separates those in the firm from those in the 'market' (e.g. Narver and Slater 1993; Webster 1992). As so-called 'partnership' forms of organizing and collaborating emerge within industrial networks (Marchington et al. 2005), existing perceptions of boundaries are becoming problematic for defining what is 'inside' and 'outside' the organization and for defining organizational identities. Marketing managers must also 'market' themselves in an 'internal' arena where their expertise is open to the scrutiny of senior company managers (Edwards 2000). Fortunately perhaps, thanks to the status of the broader marketing management discourse in their re-presentation of marketing practice, the 'conceptual toolkit' of the elements of strategic planning are easily available for

readers of management texts. Such textbook writing employs rhetoric that often positions marketing, and, by association, marketing managers, as a locus of order and control in a 'complex and changing world' (Hackley 2003). This 'strategic' rhetoric should therefore lend itself well to discursive attempts at identity construction by IOR managers.

While constructions of identity, such as discursive claims of 'partner' status, can position actors in relation to each other and thus, ultimately, shape inter-organizational collaborations (Maguire, Phillips and Hardy 2001), the literature on IORs – and market-based IORs in particular – is sparse on the ways in which the individual actors involved in interactions make sense of the relation, of themselves and of others. Some work has been done on identity narratives in non-trading collaborations (e.g. Beech and Huxham 2003; Phillips, Lawrence and Hardy 2000), although this work is confined to a 'non-competitive' context, largely unmediated by market mechanisms and the perceived power of the sovereign customer. Some marketing studies have taken a discursive perspective, such as Simakova and Neyland's (2008) examination of managerial 'stories' of new product development that narratively reproduce boundaries between those marketers who 'tell' and those non-marketers who 'listen', but few have engaged empirically with IOR-related managerial discourse. Exceptions occur largely within advertising agency-client relationships (e.g. Svensson 2004), and an even smaller number addressing the supply chain context (e.g. Faria and Wensley 2002). Most management theories of business relationships also leave the role of boundary-spanning individuals' sensemaking practices virtually unexplored (Osborn and Hagedoorn 1997), a view confirmed by Gronhaug, Henjesand and Koveland (1999: 179) who assert that managers' 'interpretations of events and constructions of explanations are largely overlooked in research on business relationships'. As Smith and Higgins (2000) point out, the move within marketing thought towards relational aspects (for instance in the 'relationship marketing' paradigm espoused by the likes of Morgan and Hunt (1994)), is an implicit acknowledgement of self-other identity dynamics within the supply chain and the broader market, yet the discursive practices involved in these processes are rarely identified within the marketing literature. As a result, we know little of how managers discursively make sense of their identities in inter-firm exchange relationships.

Having set the scene for our study, in the next section we explain our methodological approach and our particular 'take' on discourse analysis in order to explore the texts of managers' talk and the contexts of relationships in industrial supply chains. We then present the findings of our study, structuring this section around four interpretive repertoires that appear to be drawn upon by managers to demarcate varying levels of 'in-ness' and 'out-ness' in self and other positioning. The penultimate section of the paper offers an analysis of what seems to be 'going on' in the interview talk of managers as they struggle to make sense of their position within IORs. Finally, we conclude with some thoughts on the contribution of

our study to the understanding of discursively constructed identity boundaries in a liminal context.

Methodology and approach to analysis

In taking the discursive turn, we regard boundaries as social constructions, produced through meaningful interactions, and thus constituted by the collections of texts or discourses that exist in a particular field (Phillips, Lawrence and Hardy 2004). We set out to discover how organizational members draw on such boundaries to make sense of the identities of actors in IORs and thus form perceptions of the world(s) in which they work. This entails looking carefully at the vocabulary employed in managerial accounts of inter-firm relations. More specifically, we aim to identify how linguistic elements can be combined to construct social categories, often in the form of complex, shifting boundaries (Heracleous 2004).

The majority of the data were collected by the first author via tape-recorded field-based interviews, each lasting over an hour, with thirteen managers (see Table 1) holding some sort of responsibility for IORs, relationships that typically extended both ‘up’ and ‘downstream’ from the case firms. The cases represented five different UK firms embedded in what were described by participants as supply chains for agricultural, textile-related and automotive products (see Figure 1). Five contrasting cases were chosen for analysis, representing a variety of organizations operating within different supply chain contexts, thus enabling us to collect discursive data with considerable potential to account for the IOR themes that might be described by participants (cf. Phillips and Hardy 2002: 68). With regard to individual participants, we share the view of Alvesson and Willmott (1992) that members of management elites are often greatly over-represented in studies. Thus, a number of ‘front-line’ and middle managers were approached in addition to board-level participants (see Table 1). In each case initial access was arranged with ‘gate-keeping’ individuals who were personal contacts of the researchers. Thereafter ‘snowballing’ was used to access further participants within the five firms.

INSERT Figure 1 ABOUT HERE

INSERT Table 1 ABOUT HERE

During the interviews we worked from the same common basic schedule of questions and probes. Participants were asked open questions concerning their role and the organization that they represented; and to ‘tell us about’ the IORs in which their organization was involved. Interviewees were also encouraged to develop themes themselves through

conversational rather than directive questioning. This initial study set out to focus on claimed processes of IOR ‘management’, so no questions were asked which explicitly addressed boundary or identity issues. Nevertheless, several questions did elicit responses relevant to the study of boundary construction in relation to identity, especially during the ‘scene-setting’ part of the interview. As Alvesson and Empson (2008: 4) point out, an advantage of this was that we were ‘unable to steer the interviewee directly towards identity themes, minimizing the potential for ...imposing an awareness of identity which might otherwise be absent’.

Our analysis is founded on the notion of ‘interpretive repertoires’ (Potter and Wetherell 1987) that provide people with resources (clusters of terms, descriptions and figure of speech) that they can use to construct versions of reality. The repertoires we describe in this paper are, to an extent, researcher-researched co-constructions. They emerged from our conversations with IOR managers, our own sensitisation to central concepts in the management literature on business IORs (e.g. ‘relationship marketing’ or ‘supply chain partnerships’) as well as our analysis of participants’ IOR talk (about, say, ‘the market’ or ‘our customers’). In determining repertoires, the first author initially analysed instances of talk that seemed to stand out as particularly significant in managers’ sensemaking of IOR processes in order to establish a preliminary list of categories. To develop these categories, both researchers then analysed, coded and categorised other stretches of talk, using NVivo software. At this point in the analytical process, we found that managers’ IOR talk frequently involved invoking boundary and identity constructing language. Turning our attention to boundary-constructing repertoires, we began looking at what entities (such as ‘suppliers’ or ‘those guys’) were represented in manager’s talk, as well as the way in which accounts positioned these entities (e.g. inclusively or exclusively). We focused the analysis on linguistic use that suggested boundary construction including, in particular, the employment of metaphors like ‘on our side’, and deictic shifters like ‘us’ and ‘them’, or ‘here’ and ‘there’. Deictic words are lexemes which ‘point’ to ‘things’ in the physical-social context of the speaker (Kreidler 1998). The identification of certain nouns, pronouns, figures of speech and metaphors to construct different sets of boundaries allowed us to delineate four repertoires. These are highlighted in Table 2, along with sample textual fragments that they relate to (in addition to the data we discuss in more detail ahead). Once all the transcripts had been coded in this way, NVivo was used to conduct pattern searches, summarised in Table 2, which allowed us to move beyond a merely impressionistic view of our data.

NVivo also enabled us to revisit and explore who used each repertoire, when and with reference to what, thereby attempting to link linguistic practice to the positioning of each participant in relation to the organization, the market, the client relationship and the occupational discourse of marketing. At this stage we undertook a series of ‘expansion analyses’ of segments of talk from each repertoire. Each segment contained talk about a

single minimal topic which took a particular perspective on an actor, action or piece of information. Expansion analyses are written interpretations of segments of talk in which the analyst assumes that the meaning of the discourse is *not* necessarily self-evident (Wood and Kroger 2000). For our study, this meant looking at how identities were constructed in boundary-related talk, as well as venturing explanations as to what these discursive strategies may have been attempting to achieve. In the presentation of findings that follows, a representative selection of our expansion analyses are used to support our analytical claims. These claims are summarised near the start of the Discussion section in Table 3.

Findings and analysis of boundary constructing repertoires

We discerned four interpretive repertoires in our analysis of managers' IOR talk: those representing boundaries around (1) *organizations*; and those that can be interpreted as an expansion of circles of identification and boundary setting around (2) *markets*, and (3) *relationships* (or partnerships); as well as a key repertoire which rather seems to contract circles of identification and discursively erect boundaries, a repertoire which we have characterised as (4) *marketing management*. Marketing managers use all four repertoires to position themselves and others through erecting or erasing discursive boundaries. The repertoires are analytically distinct, but there are instances where participants draw upon more than one repertoire in a single utterance. The segments of discourse have been selected to provide a variety of illustrations of the repertoire under examination, including, in many instances, those segments of text that were actually constitutive of our initial interpretation of the data. The selection also reflects the pattern of occurrence of use of the repertoire by all relevant participants, allowing as many 'voices' to 'speak' as possible. The ubiquity of the four repertoires in managers' accounts is reinforced when we repeatedly encounter their use by different participants, functioning at different hierarchical levels, and representing different organizations. See Table 2 which shows it is only Participants 3 and 4, neither of whom are directly involved in marketing activities, who use three of the repertoires less frequently than their colleagues.

INSERT Table 2 ABOUT HERE

1. The repertoire of organizational boundaries

The *organizational boundaries* repertoire is used extensively and repeatedly by all the managers in the study, with very little variation in occurrence across sector or management hierarchy. In drawing upon this repertoire, managers find ways of presenting the 'external' in

ways that make sense to different members of the organization. This helps to differentiate the organization from ‘not-the-organization’ (Smircich and Stubbart 1985). Note the following example:

Participant – ‘I think the worst thing in production-led organizations is that they won’t accept... the message that comes in from the outside world.’

Researcher – ‘And the outside world being?’

Participant – ‘The marketplace.’

(Marketing Director, Textiles/Furniture)

Here we see the setting up of an ‘inside/outside’ dichotomy in terms of organizations and their ‘separateness’ from the marketplace. Moreover, ‘production led’ firms (‘they’) are implicitly, and negatively, contrasted with ‘market led’ firms; another level of alterity that affords the speaker some power as he does accept ‘the message’. Such use of language suggests that the speaker views him/herself and other actors as positioned largely in terms of organizational boundaries.

Within this repertoire, individual managers are often constructed as ‘being in’ or ‘going out to’ certain locations or organizations. In this next instance, the term ‘field’ is a metaphor for ‘outside-ness’ – it hints at ‘getting your hands dirty’, or ‘real’ as opposed to ‘head office’ work; and reinforces the deictic ‘out/in’ terminology employed by the manager:

‘Ideally I’d like to go out and work in the field, have some sort of interaction between the (manufacturer’s name) manufacture and, er, the (dealership name) support franchises. Sort of a field manager’s job.’

(Dealership Marketing Manager, Automobiles)

We find a large proportion of utterances position both the firm (or the self) and an other (whether organizational or individual). Yet, these boundaries are not clear-cut and unambiguous. For instance, sometimes the possessive pronoun ‘our’ (suggesting enclosure within an organizational boundary) is used even though it concerns ‘outside’ actors. A designer (‘Sue’) may be positioned emphatically (via repetition) as ‘external’, but she may still ‘belong’ to ‘us’, as shown in this co-constructed account where the participant responds to the researcher’s use of the term ‘internal’. The speaker also performs a boundary conflation from the individual ‘Sue’ to the organizational ‘agency’ in explaining the deictic ‘this’:

Participant – ‘The next job then was to sit down with Sue, with our designer, Susan Jones.’

Researcher – ‘And this is an internal person?’

Participant – ‘No, external. This is an external agency.’

(Marketing Assistant, Automobiles)

Boundaries also appear to be rather blurred when, for instance, managers position themselves close to the customer and apart from a claimed head office ‘mentality’. While acknowledging the ‘geographical’/spatial connection with fellow organizational members, they may be drawing up an organizational-internal boundary in terms of a presumed difference in mentality and avowing their preference for the ‘real’ work done ‘outside’. The speech attributed to the ‘head office’ draws upon the diectic ‘them’ and a further ‘they’ to emphasise alterity, allowing the manager to assert his own identity, claiming not to be in this group of ‘people’:

‘People who’ve been internally in our company for ten years...I mean in head office as opposed to interacting with dealers on a regular basis. They’re very [apt to think of us:] ‘That’s them and where they’re based’...Whereas I’m, although starting to fall into that geographical position, definitely not falling into it mentally.’

(District Sales Manager, Automobiles)

We thus see a considerable reliance by participants on the *organizational boundaries* repertoire to give meaning to an ‘external’ environment comprising individuals and organizations. These ‘things’ that apparently exist ‘out there’ are then attended to in manager’s discourse as they describe some of the processes that make up interactions in IORs. It is not merely a matter of inclusion of ‘us’ and an exclusion of ‘them’, however, but also a discursive device to draw particular outsiders ‘in’ and insiders ‘out’. For instance, the dichotomy between being in or out seems to resonate strongly for our participants and ‘getting out’ of head office and ‘into’ customers is highly valorised. Although the circle of identification drawn around ‘the organization’ is strongly present in managers’ discourse, it is thus often constructed to transcend the boundary rather than to enclose and capture everyone in an inside or outside position. Identities are thereby constructed via discursive boundaries that are seemingly simultaneously rigid and permeable.

2. The repertoire of market boundaries

We find an even stronger example of the blurring (and some examples of the re-drawing) of organizational boundaries, however, in the use of the *market boundaries* repertoire that often comes to represent a wider circle of identification in managers’ talk. The evocation of the market as a place (physical or metaphorical) where some sort of exchange takes place is commonplace. Although ‘the market’ is sometimes depicted as ‘the outside world’, managers more often cast themselves as playing an active role ‘in’ the market. Like all ‘market goers’ –

buyers and sellers, suppliers, dealers and customers alike – they are ‘in the same business’ that is encircled by the somewhat loose and fluid boundaries of the marketplace. Within the ‘marketplace’ metaphor, customers represent others with whom trade is possible, and indeed necessary, for the implied survival of the case firm, and competing traders are others who are all vying for the customer’s business. To specify mutual trading relationships managers tend to cast actors as ‘suppliers’, intermediate ‘customers’, and ‘end-users’, thus reinforcing the structure of the ‘supply chain’ as a mechanism for the delivery of goods from seller to ultimate buyer, and in which these actors are linked. This metaphoric construction is found in all five case firms. The imagery suggests that organizations or their representatives operating at different ‘levels’ of the marketplace are linked together as trading partners, such as in this account of an automobile district sales manager:

‘So I saw myself as...needing to go and then be the wholesaler of their concepts, strategic direction, ideas, processes, to my customers, the dealers. If they, if they put, if they carried them out, then the real end customers, for want of a better description, would buy and therefore we’d be successful.’

Here, the dealers become ‘my customers’ and part of a wider ‘we’, a deictic shift from the preceding division of ‘their’ (the manufacturer) and ‘they’ (the dealers). Although our participant is keen to signify the importance of his expertise (see the *marketing management* repertoire), which casts the dealers as customers who must ‘buy in’ to the marketing manager’s firm’s ‘ideas’, dealers are simultaneously recast as allies in selling cars to the ‘real’ market, i.e. the ‘end customers’ that must ‘buy’ goods in order for the allies (‘we’) to be ‘successful’.

While the market metaphor allows the drawing of boundaries in IOR talk, the boundaries do not keep ‘enemies’ out, given that competitors can legitimately enter new markets and usurp existing IORs. In the segment below, we see the speaker painting a picture of the animal feeds firm he works for (‘us’) faced with a choice of potential suppliers, one of which appears to be a new market entrant, making ‘a lot of noise’ (claiming to offer lower prices). The metaphoric ‘moving’ (or, in this case, not moving) refers to the speaker’s role in deciding not to switch suppliers, thus establishing his power in the marketplace and within the firm:

‘If you get new people in the marketplace and they’ve [new supplier] been making a lot of noise, then if they [existing supplier] react [i.e. match any new price]...it doesn’t really justify us moving.’
(Purchasing Manager, Animal Feeds)

In most instances, the *market boundaries* repertoire is used, not only to claim a powerful position for oneself, but also to locate power with a customer actor. Here, the speaker refers to the power exerted by collaborating downstream competitors over the case firm, thus constructing the entire network as functioning according to the discourse of the unfettered market. The deictic ‘they’ and ‘their’ set the dealers apart from the firm, and each other, yet at the same time, these organizational actors are bounded as a ‘marketing’ ‘group’ when they ‘get together’:

‘They’ve [dealers] got much wiser because they’ve been exposed to more and more sources of supply, and, and they’re under greater threat as well from all their competition... Yeah, those are, um marketing organizations, you know, groups where dealers get together, then they use their leverage.’

(Marketing Director, Textiles/Furniture)

The repertoire is sometimes drawn upon to positively position the speaker’s own organization. The following account constructs something called ‘the marketplace’, with the power-laden term ‘leaders’ suggesting that the case firm (the deictic ‘we’) faces some sort of metaphoric ‘race’ against the competition, a race that it is apparently winning. The evocation of ‘everybody’ reinforces the claim that the speaker (‘I’) is not alone in her opinion within the firm, thus constructing a collective organizational identity:

‘I think everybody’s conscious of the fact that we need not only to survive but need to still maintain the fact that we are leaders in the marketplace.’

(Admin/Quality Manager, Animal Feeds)

The meaning of the term ‘market/marketplace’ varies according to the speaker’s perceived position in the buyer-seller relationship. For managers representing the animal feeds manufacturer, for instance, the market(place) seems to comprise; at one level, farmers’ merchants; at another, farmers themselves; and at further levels, ever more spatially distant from the case firm, supermarkets and ultimate consumers, with some sort of trading relationship chaining actors in the market together. The (socially constructed) status of these different customers affects managers’ identity perceptions and (claimed) actions as they attempt to manage IORs throughout the supply chain. Discursive positionings in terms of ‘us’ and ‘them’ constantly shift depending on where market-based boundaries are drawn between, for instance, suppliers and customers, ‘leaders’ and (presumably) non-leaders, ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. Once again, therefore, we find a boundary-drawing repertoire that facilitates the simultaneous expanding and contracting of identity-forming relations.

3. The repertoire of relationship boundaries

Following on from the construction of firms as entities somehow linked by the supply chain, another important discursive concept for our managers appears to be the notion of the inter-organizational ‘relationship’ itself. The *relationship boundaries* repertoire tends to build a picture of relationships as bounded objects that ‘exist’, reifying IORs. It is drawn upon in managers’ talk in all five cases, discursively positioning various actors, going across organizational boundaries and extending the circle of identification while simultaneously drawing new boundaries that exclude those ‘outside’ the relationship. This can be seen above, for instance, in the ‘groups’ of dealers that were evoked (i.e. ‘Those are...’) in the penultimate segment of talk in the *market boundaries* section.

In the following account, the occurrence of the possessive pronoun ‘their’ suggests that close ties are established and IORs can even be ‘owned’. The speaker is explaining that whilst his head office (the deictic ‘we’) may get involved in fleet sales negotiations, they do not supply directly to corporate clients because, it seems, it is the dealers that ‘own’ the relationship with the customer, thereby affording the dealers rather more power than head office. The bounded market metaphor is also drawn upon by this speaker via the use of ‘in’:

‘We’re in the market to repeat sell so we involve the dealer from the start. It’s their relationship and their rapport.’

(District Sales Manager, Automobiles)

In a similar manner, the participant in the following account uses the apparently ‘welcoming’ metaphor of coming ‘on board’ to effectively encircle two different supplier relationships. Note, however, that the power in these relationships appears to reside firmly with the manager’s own firm in its new role as a customer not prepared to consider a sole-supply situation. This is seen in the comment, ‘we want to keep them’ wherein the ‘them/us’ dichotomy is revealed in the speaker’s positioning of his own firm as in control:

Participant – ‘For a number of years there was only one supplier of rock salt... Another supplier came on board and virtually overnight the price reduced quite considerably.’

Researcher – ‘So do you still deal with the original company?’

Participant – ‘Yeah we do, because we want to keep them on board.’

(Purchasing Manager, Animal Feeds)

Many relationships are portrayed with the customer in the metaphorical position of the captain who gets to decide who is ‘on board’, a powerful actor with whom ‘a relationship’ must be maintained and a sense of mutuality and interdependence must be established. When

the roles are reversed and their position becomes that of a supplier or intermediary who is trying to establish close relationships with customers, managers often engage in IOR talk that tells why they should be kept ‘on board’. They suggest, for instance, they are a crucial link or the ‘most valuable cog’ in the customers’ ‘linkage’ with the manufacturing firm. Here, the District Sales Manager (DSM) of an automobile manufacturer sees himself as representing the manufacturer as well as the customer. Although employed by the manufacturer, the ‘mouthpiece’ metaphor suggests an identity for the manager that positions him on the ‘side’ of the dealers:

Researcher – ‘Is the relationship they [dealers] have with you, the District Sales Manager [DSM], or with [Manufacturer Name]?’

Participant – ‘Yes is the awkward answer! [smiles] They, er, they see the DSM as the most valuable, they should and they almost always do, as the most valuable cog in, in the linkage between [Manufacturer Name] and, I mean, you are their mouthpiece.’

(District Sales Manager, Automobiles)

Note how the above speaker uses the ‘cog’ metaphor to evoke some sort of supply chain ‘machine’ that comprises certain parts (i.e. actors) that must fit together via relationships in order to ‘work’. Taking this notion further, a manager of a textile machinery supplier uses a ‘breaking down of sides’ metaphor to position the customer and the speaker (or his firm – the deictic ‘you’ is ambiguous) as actors that need to be on the same ‘side’ (or ‘in’ a relationship). We also see the use of the *organizational boundaries* repertoire as the machine ‘goes in’ to the client firm’s factory:

‘With these guys [machine operator end users], if you get them on your side, you build them up, the machine goes in, they hit the ground running and you have a good install.’

Overall, we find a high proportion of claims of mutually-orientated relationships that both parties are equally positioned as ‘being’ within. The repertoire erects a boundary around the IORs described, with the result that the majority of participants seem to view relationships as ‘things’ that have boundaries, boundaries that individuals and organizations must try and protect or breach as necessary. When ‘relationships’ are said to exist, it effectively constructs an ‘us’ or an ‘our side’ that transcends organizational boundaries, casts ‘others’ as (more-powerful or less-powerful) ‘partners’ and thus embraces different actors in an overarching alliance or association. We thus note once more the co-existence of discursive boundaries that can contain and/or enhance the extent to which constructions of self and others can inter-relate.

4. The repertoire of marketing management

Managers seem to construct, and have to contend with, fluctuating boundaries in the context of IORs. In particular, they must cope with (re)constructions that position atomised actors competing within markets on the one hand, and as part of supposedly close inter-firm relationships on the other. One way in which managers attempt to maintain their sense of self in these situations is via the use of a widespread repertoire we have characterised as *marketing management* that erects a boundary around certain managerial skills, the possession of which help to define the ‘expert’ marketing manager. The repertoire is used by all participants to position both the individual speaker and the speaker’s own organization, though is somewhat less common in the discourse of the Purchasing and Administration Managers of the animal feeds firm (perhaps this is to do with marketing/sales managers seeing themselves as more dependent on customer ‘whims’ and hence more vulnerable in their organizational roles than their upstream-facing colleagues). Here, for instance, an automobiles district sales manager is quite explicit in declaring his own expertise regarding ‘the marketplace’:

Participant – ‘They’re [vans] dead easy to sell to the marketplace.’

Researcher – ‘Who is the market for them?’

Participant – ‘In my view, it’s split into two. I’d like to think I was slightly educated in this.’

The same participant constructs his firm’s ‘customers’ (i.e. car dealers) as needing this expertise. He repeatedly employs the distinction-setting deictic ‘they’ to highlight their shortcomings, thus reinforcing his own identity:

‘They just want to lean on you, or run something by you. Or they’re fairly crap at something, they actually don’t know where to start, and they want you to write four-fifths of a direct mail piece for them, cos if they tried it would look terrible.’

Many of the accounts that use the *marketing management* repertoire involve statements of difference in expertise that, through discursively positioning and evaluating organizational actors, seem to have power implications. This is achieved in the following example by speaking rather patronisingly (and possessively) of ‘our farmers’ and via implied binary opposites of primitive (versus ‘advanced’), contemporary (versus ‘traditional’) and technophobia (versus ‘technology friendly’):

‘We’re more advanced than many companies in this sector, but our farmers are too traditional. Only the bigger farmers are more technology friendly.’

(Sales Manager, Animal Feeds)

A considerable amount of identity work is done using this repertoire that often positions speakers as skilled or expert actors, necessary to make IORs ‘work’, by linking attributes, such as ‘the number one position’ in the next stanza, to the pronoun ‘we’ or ‘I’, a distinction that can become conflated as the participant deictically shifts from ‘I’ to ‘us’:

‘I have a group of customers...who tend to rely on the advice I give in that they will not take any feed buying decisions before speaking to (pause) us, if you like. That’s, that’s the number one position, that’s the ultimate.’

(Marketing Manager, Animal Feeds)

Use of the *marketing management* repertoire often reveals speakers as acutely aware of marketing planning vocabulary, and of how to use it to construct a convincing account of the practitioner as a marketing ‘expert’. For example, this participant draws upon the classic example of Ford’s infamous quote and then the title of a best-selling marketing textbook:

‘You can’t specify a minimum order quantity to a dealer. It’s like, you know, Henry Ford: “You can have any colour you like as long as it’s black”. What do you do if I want it in green? What do you call it, “market led strategic change”?’

(Marketing Director, Textiles)

Managers also appear to draw upon this repertoire in order to delineate the marketing function as different (and indeed superior) to other functional departments ‘inside’ the case firm. This occurs, for example, in the discourse of a manager who had just entered a new role as ‘part of marketing’ (in his words) two months before he was interviewed. He describes the IOR manager’s role as able to handle the complexity of the marketplace via the metaphor of colour, contrasting the simplistic ‘black and white’ with the more diffuse ‘grey’, thus emphasising the negative alterity of ‘other departments’:

‘With accounting departments, and maybe some other departments, things tend to be more black and white, whereas the marketing brain works slightly differently in so much that, you know, there’s, there’s much more diffusion, there’s much more grey, rather than black and white situations.’

(Marketing Manager, Animal Feeds)

Somewhat similar to the preceding repertoire, managers also draw upon the rhetoric of relationship marketing (RM) to evoke relationships as corporate assets that can be ‘managed’. In this way they position themselves as aware of RM’s apparent importance within the contemporary strategic marketing discourse. A managing director of a textile machinery supplier implicitly draws on RM ideas when he claims to defend himself against competitors’ negative assertions by having established a ‘very special relationship’ with customers:

‘Our competition will always say to our potential customers: “Oh those guys, they’re just an agent”, and...I can sit in front of a customer and say: “We’ve got a very special relationship though”.’

In contrast to these RM-based accounts that speak of building strong ties and long-term relationships with not-so-powerless customers, earlier examples of the *marketing management* repertoire-in-use portrayed the selling actor (whether the speaker, the marketing department or the case firm) as the more powerful ‘partner’ in an IOR with a relatively passive customer. It is exactly this paradox – the rhetoric of close relationships and boundary transcendence existing in combination with boundary setting through the ascription of positive distinctiveness to the individual and organizational self – that we will turn to in the discussion and conclusion sections of the paper.

Discussion: boundary bricolage

We have demonstrated in our analysis how marketing and purchasing managers draw on a number of different boundary interpretive repertoires that help to construct identities. These repertoires position the speakers (and, often, the organization or the customers they claim to represent) and others as interconnected through relationships or shared interests or activities, and, at the same time, as somehow different from, and superior to other actors in the marketplace. Managers commonly categorise other actors ‘externally’ as customers or suppliers, and ‘internally’ as belonging to different functional departments or ‘head office’, switching comfortably in their IOR talk from casting these actors as close and distant, as ‘we’ and ‘them’, or even as ‘our’ designer who is also ‘external’. The ways in which IOR managers draw on the four repertoires and shift between inclusion and exclusion of other actors works to simultaneously expand and contract circles of identification. As these discursive moves creatively fuse ‘multiple and sometimes contradictory positions in their turns and their utterances’, our participants’ self-presentation can be seen as a matter of ‘bricolage’ (Iedema et al. 2003: 29) and IOR managers as ‘boundary bricoleurs’. The identity-constructing effects of this boundary bricolage are summarised in Table 3.

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

As noted in the opening section of this paper, constructing collective identities that transcend organizational boundaries and expand the circle of identification is thought to be typical of contemporary ‘networked’ relationships and essential to achieving effective inter-organizational cooperation. We have found a lot of boundary spanning IOR talk in our study, but our participants also draw on what we call an *organizational boundaries* repertoire to ‘conventionally’ identify themselves as representing their firm to (or in) an ‘outside’ world. As managers alternately evoke their firm and themselves as the principal network actor, ‘self’ and ‘organization’ tend to conflate in their IOR talk; for instance, where participants glide between ‘I’ and ‘we’ in a single segment of talk. As representatives, they also tend to position their firm favourably in relation to competing firms, characterising their firm as, say, a ‘market leader’. Yet, in their talk IOR managers draw on the same repertoire also to stress the supposedly strong ties that have been built ‘externally’, across organizational boundaries; i.e. ‘downstream’ with clients and customers and ‘upstream’ with suppliers. Using deictic shifters such as being ‘in’ or ‘out’ of the organization, they position themselves and their work as crossing the notional organizational boundary and working ‘outside’ the organization ‘in’ the marketplace. This results in an organizational boundary that could be characterised as being simultaneously ‘thick’ and ‘thin’.

To further strengthen the notion of transcending organizational boundaries, managers also invoke some alternative ways of talking about IORs. Utilising the *market boundaries* repertoire allows managers to draw a more inclusive circle of identification, albeit somewhat loose and porous and, perhaps, ‘thinner’ than those surrounding organizations. Although the market sometimes constitutes the organization’s outside world, IOR managers tend to see themselves and their firms as all working ‘in’ the same market or business, chained together through supplier-customer relationships. In themselves, these relationships constitute a rich reservoir for making sense of IORs as well. Drawing on a *relationship boundaries* repertoire (and something called ‘relationship marketing’ in the *marketing management* repertoire), managers claim that establishing and maintaining ‘partnerships’ are critically important for surviving in the market. These alternative repertoires thus allow managers to discursively traverse organizational boundaries and effectively widen the circle of identification.

Having said this, findings also indicate that the ‘blurring’ of boundaries seems to simultaneously prompt an inclination to re-accentuate distinctiveness vis-à-vis other stakeholders and to resurrect ‘disappearing’ boundaries, effectively constricting the circle of identification. Managers draw on the same four repertoires to throw up distinctions and divides between, for instance, competing suppliers within the same market, the more and the less powerful (as with groups of customers who get together and ‘use their leverage’), or

between being ‘the most valuable cog’ (us) and ‘just an agent’ (them). Such divisive discursive moves can also be seen when a relationship is established in IOR talk that goes across organizational boundaries, thereby extending the circle of identification. Often, IOR managers use this ‘outsideness’ to claim to be on the customer’s ‘side’, to re-emphasise the importance of their individual selves vis-à-vis the organization, and to distance themselves from those who are not working ‘in the field’, who are far away from the ‘real action’ and who suffer from a head office ‘mentality’. In this vein, drawing on the *relationship boundaries* repertoire and claiming to maintain close relations with customers can in itself be used to determine who is ‘in’ and ‘out’ of the IOR, effectively excluding competitors or colleagues from that relationship. So within each repertoire too, circles/boundaries are drawn and extended. Distinction drawing and self-enhancement are thus as much part of IOR discourse as is the building of boundary-crossing relationships and linked supply chains.

Participants’ positioning is typically self-promoting, seemingly in order to secure their status in relation to buyers, competitors and colleagues (and, arguably, us as researchers). Self-promotion in relations with internal or external actors is most often attempted through the use of the *marketing management* repertoire. Managers may feel closely related to customers, but, at the same time, they may mark and market their individual and organizational selves within this relationship as ‘professional experts’. We acknowledge the possibility that, in drawing upon the *marketing management* repertoire, speakers could be enacting a managerial role for our benefit as researchers. In this way, the subject position contained within management textbooks is reconciled with that occupied by managers. In effect, we may be witnessing intertextuality ‘in action’ as participants are subject to the ‘judgemental gaze’ of marketing strategy textbooks for internalisation (Harding 2003). Yet, the adoption of IOR talk replete with marketing jargon also helps to maintain the managerial status and power position of participants in the wake of the judgmental gaze of both internal (e.g. colleagues) and external (e.g. customers) stakeholders. The marketing management repertoire appears to erect a rather ‘thick’ boundary. Apparently, it is not only important for ‘effective interorganizational collaboration’ that participants in a relationship ‘discursively produce a collective identity for themselves’ (Hardy et al. 2005: 63). Equally important in the eyes of IOR managers is to maintain a reputation as a marketing expert within that relationship in order to build rapport and strengthen the chain of interdependence. Metaphorically speaking, it might increase the chance to be asked ‘on board’ by the supply chain ‘captain’ and reduce the risk of getting thrown overboard.

Our close scrutiny of managers’ discourse has thus revealed an intersecting range of boundary-related interpretive repertoires. As an anonymous reviewer (cited by Kreiner et al. 2006:1336) puts it, these repertoires are deployed by participants to ‘maintain, defend [and] exploit...particular subject positions in [the] relations of power’ that underpin supply chain

IORs. The use of certain deictic shifters, nouns, metaphors and grammatical constructions of commonality and alterity create a fluid worldview. Constructions of identity appear to shift, depending on the speaker's perspective and the specific operating context being described. This suggests little sense of 'closure' (either for an individual manager, or between managers) around what it means to be part of an organization, a relationship, or a marketplace. Their IOR talk indicates that managers try to 'manage' and make sense of their liminal positions through a process of 'tensile discursive positioning', continually shifting their identifications.

Conclusions

We have taken a special interest in self/other identity talk and boundary setting practices of organizational actors who work 'in-between' organizations, constantly crossing the notional boundaries of their firm. The question we have asked is how marketing managers professionally involved in building and maintaining inter-organizational relationships in an industrial supply chain context discursively position themselves and their firms vis-à-vis competitors, colleagues, customers and suppliers. The literature on inter-organizational relations offers 'virtually no discussion of the processes that characterize interpersonal relations within and between organizations' (Marchington and Vincent 2004: 1030). Our analysis of the boundary-related talk of IOR participants is of significance to those who study inter-organizational relationships as well as to scholars of identity.

As explained earlier, studies of organizational identities suggest organizational actors tend to articulate their identities through drawing boundaries between themselves and others (Ybema et al. 2009). Our account of discursive boundary crossing and distinction drawing in the talk of IOR managers shows this self-sensemaking practice in detail, revealing that identity formation in liminal situations is an inherently dynamic and ambiguous process. On the one hand, the study suggests that IOR managers draw wide circles of identification that enclose clients and suppliers in a broad and embracing 'us'. By stretching the boundaries of the organization or invoking categories such as 'relationship', 'market' or 'supply chain', managers provide a rationale for addressing conflicts of interests and continuing close collaboration by constructing boundary-transcending collective identities, a strategy purported to be important for making IORs 'work' (Hardy et al. 2005). Since managers also invoke a more narrow and exclusive 'me' or 'us' in their IOR talk, our analysis shows, on the other hand, that managers refrain from entering a boundary-less world in which basic distinctions between insider and outsider become fully blurred. So, although the development of IORs signals the emergence of widening circles of identification, distinction drawing and boundary setting are as much a part of supply chain managers' IOR talk as boundary transcendence. Refining and extending our insights into organizational actors' identity talk, our research

suggests liminal individuals do not understand themselves in terms of clear and unambiguous boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’, but instead are inclined to ‘resolve’ the ambiguities of their in-between position by alternately widening and contracting the circle of identification, constantly switching between different boundary repertoires.

Our expansion analyses of participants’ use of various interpretive repertoires have magnified the details of these discursive (re)constructions of self/other boundaries in IOR contexts. Managers draw on four boundary-constructing repertoires (i.e. those enclosing *organizations*, *markets*, *relationships* and *marketing management*) to alternately position themselves, and their colleagues, competitors, customers and suppliers, as ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ the organization, the market, the relationship or their field of expertise. Organizational boundaries are crossed in IOR managers’ identity talk that treats clients as an intrinsic part of one’s own organization, enclosing ‘our’ customers and suppliers in ‘strong’ and ‘committed’ relationships or chaining them together ‘in’ one market-place. Yet, the discursive expansion of ‘the organization’ across its own boundaries in trading partnerships represents a process that, for all its inclusiveness, also entails a differentiating and excluding momentum, privileging more narrow identifications of a bounded organization, presumed leadership in the market, and unique professional expertise. Identity boundaries are erected in IOR discourse when managers claim to possess unique resources and status as representatives of their firms as well as managerial and marketing expertise vis-à-vis client organizations, colleagues in head office or competing firms. Boundary work in IORs is thus at once inclusive *and* exclusive, actively seeking network-expansion *and* claiming to be a crucial and distinctive knot in the network, emphatically embracing ‘close customers’ while nonetheless rating oneself and one’s firm more highly than other network members. Liminal identity talk in this context positions the speaker as oscillating between ‘in’ and ‘out’, ‘same’ and ‘other’, and between an inclusive and exclusive ‘us’.

We have introduced the term ‘tensile positioning’ to explain the processes of discursive construction at work here. IOR managers constantly shift identifications and hence build relationships with customers and suppliers across organizational divides while simultaneously preserving their own status within these relationships by staking out the self against various others. Tensile positioning takes place in relation to discursive boundaries that are constructed as simultaneously permeable or ‘crossable’ (e.g. organizational and functional boundaries) and flexible or ‘stretchable’ (e.g. market or relationship) boundaries. The resultant positioning is ‘tensile’ in two senses: on the one hand, IOR managers are shifting, moulding and ‘marketing’ their identities and thus crossing and stretching boundaries on their own terms. Our participants attempt to manage the complicated and contradictory demands placed on them by continually shifting and securing their ‘selves’ and alternately crossing and setting discursive boundaries with marketplace others. The discursive construction of

bounded relationships as links in the supply chain, and the articulation of marketing management expertise, appears to offer some sense of control and relative power in managing the situation. On the other hand, managers are also being stretched in that they are “‘victims’ as well as perpetrators of discourse’ (Alvesson and Willmott 1992: 7) as they find themselves caught up in, and moulded by, the institutional processes surrounding IORs, such as when ‘the market’ gives customers power and encourages competition between suppliers. While the term ‘victim’ is perhaps too strong considering the adept manner in which our participants seem to wield the various repertoires at their disposal, the influences of market pressures, professional expectations, managerial impositions, and organizational requirements seem to constrain and coerce or ‘persuade’ IOR managers to stretch and constrict their identifications in order to meet various situational interests and institutional demands.

In their professional capacity, the everyday work of IOR managers requires them to navigate through their complex and dynamic inter-organizational field; an effort that constantly confronts them with conflicting obligations – including those to institution, market, client, and profession (cf. Zabusky and Barley 1997: 395). Thus, IOR managers are perpetually in a liminal position, continually crossing the threshold (*limen*) of myriads of organizations while identifying with none in particular and/or many at the same time. Like quicksilver, they have to be prepared to cast and recast themselves in an instant for different audiences at different times, all the while attempting to maintain multiple inter-firm relationships. IOR managers can thus be seen as boundary bricoleurs who, as Iedema et al. (2003: 29) put it, successfully ‘defer closure’ on their identity and on the discourses that realize it by positioning themselves across different boundary repertoires, effectively ‘weaving incommensurable positions together’ (Iedema et al. 2003: 15). IOR managers’ presentation of their selves is thereby arguably a skilful accomplishment, a ‘feat’ of bricolage which allows them to interact more easily with people from various organizations (Fairclough 2005). Yet, we concur with Iedema et al. (2003) in suggesting that liminal individuals do not so much follow a pre-planned, purposive strategy, but instead display a consummate sensitivity to the situational dynamics of, in our research, inter-organizational relationships, gearing up to the politics of setting and transcending boundaries within those relationships.

While Zabusky and Barley (1997) have argued that liminal actors fashion their identity with an excluding rhetoric of how they are always different from all others and do *not* belong to any group, thus presenting themselves as if each individually inhabits a relatively stable social space of ‘no man’s land’, we have shown instead how IOR managers also use their ‘betweenness’ or ‘placelessness’ (Zabusky and Barley 1997: 370) as their operating base from where they build allegiances, dynamically switching between a rhetoric of exclusion and a rhetoric of inclusion and, ultimately, managing simultaneously to ‘belong’ and to be different. IOR managers need to remain attuned to the nuances of being both an insider and an

outsider at the same time, balancing the tension between having to carry the ‘burden of otherness’ while profiting from the ‘strength of weak ties’ (cf. Sturdy et al. 2009: 11). We therefore concur with Zabusky and Barley (1997) in their argument against human resource strategies that aim to bolster liminal actors’ loyalty to their ‘parent’ organization. Equally, any moves to inculcate a strong sense of so-called client- or ‘market-orientation’ (Narver and Slater 1990) in boundary-spanning personnel may also be counter-productive. Whether IOR managers’ tensile positioning is strategic or merely highly sensitive, it is likely that the room for manoeuvre it creates for these liminal actors would be compromised by overly rigorous attempts either to integrate them into the organization or to bind them to customer relationships.

Our study has shown the value of taking a discursive approach to researching identity constructions and boundary-setting practices in industrial networks. It confirms the growing recognition that there is much to be gained by turning our analytical attention to the sensemaking practices performed by actors in boundary positions. The accounts provided by IOR managers in our study illustrate how these actors draw upon a series of interpretive repertoires to articulate their identities; identities that are founded on (re)constructions of commonality and alterity which fluctuate with the tensile positioning of selves and others afforded by discursive boundaries. By detailing the alternate crossing and setting of boundaries in marketing managers’ IOR talk, we have seen some of the discursive moves of organizational actors working in liminal contexts in action, enabling us to theorise how boundary setting and crossing plays a role in structuring the world(s) of IORs and establishes some of the network ‘realities’ into which managers act. Shedding new light on how IORs are experienced and produced by the actors involved provides a more detailed understanding of how managers in positions of liminality repeatedly draw different circles of identification, marking (or indeed ‘marketing’) themselves and others through tensile positionings.

Note

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FIGURE & TABLES

Figure 1. Supply chains of case firms

Table 1. Details of individual participants

	Participant	Case Firm (see Fig. 1)	Participant's Main Role(s)
P1	Managing Director	Manufacturer (A)	CEO, and buyer (services/goods)
P2	Marketing Manager	Manufacturer (A)	Marketing to merchants and farmers
P3	Purchasing Manager	Manufacturer (A)	Buying of raw materials
P4	Administration Manager	Manufacturer (A)	Quality audit and HRM
P5-7	3 Area Sales Managers	Manufacturer (A)	Sales to merchants and farmers
P8	Managing Director	Distributor (B)	CEO, and buyer (services/goods)
P9	Sales Executive	Distributor (B)	Sales to manufacturers
P10	Marketing Director	Manufacturer (C)	Marketing to dealers, and buyer (services/goods)
P11	Marketing Assistant	Manufacturer (D)	Marketing to dealers, and buyer (services)
P12	District Sales Manager	Manufacturer (D)	Sales, generated via dealerships
P13	Dealership Marketing Manager	Dealer (E)	Marketing to organizations and consumers

Table 2. Textual examples and occurrence of repertoires

Repertoire of boundaries around:	Illustrative textual fragments (<i>P</i> = participant – see Table 1)	Pattern of occurrence
1. Organizations	Indicated by words such as we, us, the company, in here/out there, them, they, Company Names: <i>We've got eight different suppliers out there</i> – P3 <i>Everybody [case firm employees] has got to be customer focused**</i> , whether it's internal or external – P5 <i>They [competitors] go into Ford and Ford says, 'Ah yes, we know who you are'</i> – P9 <i>We worked together* with outside consultants</i> – P10	<i>n</i> = 342 segments of talk Used by all participants fairly equally * also indicates Repertoire 3 ** also indicates Repertoire 4
2. Markets	Indicated by such words as the market(place), customers, end users, middle men, suppliers, in/out: <i>Our* customer is the farmer, the end user, and our route to market is the middleman</i> – P1 <i>We're supplying their* [manufacturer's] products to the market</i> – P8 <i>This product was brought to us [by an importer] because of our position** in the marketplace</i> – P10 <i>A lot of our output is for the dealer [customer] network</i> – P11	<i>n</i> = 165 segments of talk Used by all participants, though less often by P3 & P4 * also indicates Repertoire 1 ** also indicates Repertoire 4
3. Relationships	Indicated by such words as relationship, partnership, agreement, it, in/out: <i>Relationships at every level [in the supply chain] are vital in this business</i> – P1 <i>It was a distant relationship [with a customer], but now it's much closer</i> – P2 <i>Our philosophy is to work in partnership with our suppliers</i> – P8 <i>The discount means a fantastic buy-in, so they* [customer] won't look outside of the agreement</i> – P13	<i>n</i> = 231 segments of talk Used by all participants, though less often by P4 * also indicates Repertoire 1
4. Marketing management expertise	Indicated by words suggesting skill, knowledge, familiarity with strategy or marketing orientation: <i>We do direct mail via our database aimed at different customers*, designed to pull through business</i> – P2 <i>The merchant [customer] needs to be serviced, dealt with, explained to</i> – P4 <i>In the marketing department we play a co-ordinating role</i> – P11 <i>Keep doing all the relationship** things right and thereby they [customers] want to come back</i> – P12	<i>n</i> = 224 segments of talk Used by all participants, though less often by P3 & P4 * also indicates Repertoire 2 ** also indicates Repertoire 3

Table 3. Identity-constructing effects of boundary repertoires

Repertoire of boundaries around:	Expanding circles of identification	Contracting circles of identification	Effects of shifting boundaries and identifications
1. Organizations	<p>a. Sometimes constructs nominally ‘external’ others as ‘part of’ the case firm</p> <p>b. Contrasts ‘head office’ vs. ‘the field’, with ‘getting out’ through a permeable boundary into the latter being valorised</p>	<p>a. Constructs the case firm as a bounded entity, with ‘we’ and ‘us’ as individuals belonging ‘in here’</p> <p>b. Constructs other organizations as bounded, separate entities, with ‘them’ and ‘they’ positioned ‘out there’</p>	<p>Organizations are constructed as bounded and as enclosing individuals, but <i>simultaneously</i> reconstructed with permeable boundaries that managers can cross in order to work ‘outside’ their firm and ‘inside’ other organizations</p>
2. Markets	<p>a. Naturalises trading with any customer/supplier ‘in the market’</p> <p>b. Constructs competing ‘others’ who are free to enter the marketplace</p> <p>c. Constructs trading links with other supply chain actors in order to serve ‘customers’</p>	<p>a. Usually constructs the sovereign, distinct ‘end user’ customer as exerting power</p> <p>b. The case firm is sometimes claimed to have a position as distinct ‘market leader’</p>	<p>Markets are constructed as bounded and containing ‘targetable’ customers, but <i>simultaneously</i> reconstructed with flexible boundaries that managers can stretch in order to ensure that they and their firms work ‘in’ the marketplace</p>
3. Relationships	<p>a. Reifies supply chain links as ‘relationships’, which actors are positioned as being ‘in’</p> <p>b. Usually constructs organizations as ‘partners’, on the same ‘side’, with equal power</p>	<p>a. Constructs some relationships as ‘owned’ by the powerful case firm (typically in its role as supplier), thereby excluding competitors</p>	<p>IORs are constructed as bounded, but <i>simultaneously</i> reconstructed with flexible boundaries that managers can stretch (or defend as necessary) in order to ensure that they and their firms take part ‘in’ close relationships</p>
4. Marketing management expertise	<p>a. The ‘relationship marketing’ variant of this repertoire sometimes casts the case firm and others as mutual ‘partners’ in IORs</p>	<p>a. Constructs IORs as a ‘marketing management’ issue requiring the use of specialist marketing knowledge</p> <p>b. Usually ‘externally’ valorises an expert speaker and case firm over passive customer and supplier ‘others’</p> <p>c. ‘Internally’ valorises the ‘expert’ role of the speaker and the marketing department</p>	<p>The expertise of managers is constructed as bounded, but <i>simultaneously</i> reconstructed with permeable boundaries that managers must prevent others crossing in order to maintain their superior expertise ‘in’ marketing, both externally and internally</p>