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Journal of Business Research 59 (2006) 573 – 581
JOURNAL OF BUSINESS RESEARCH

# An extension of the marriage metaphor in buyer–seller relationships: An exploration of individual level process dynamics

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Received 17 February 2005; accepted 20 October 2005

**Abstract**

The marriage metaphor has been used to make substantial contributions to our understanding of buyer–seller relationships. However, there has been increasing recognition that transfer from the marriage metaphor to buyer–seller relationships has not been fully explored. There is a need to explore buyer–seller relationships at a more micro, individual level that allows for greater consideration of relational/communication elements. This paper extends existing perspectives by integrating conceptual and empirical work from the interpersonal relationship literature. Specifically, the role of individual partner expectations, communication behavior, and appraisal processes in problem solving are delineated. Qualitative field interviews from participants representing multiple functional areas across both sides of business dyads are utilized as a means of examining the viability of the conceptual transfer from interpersonal to buyer–seller relationships. The work holds implications for future research and management of relational problem solving in buyer–seller partnerships.
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*Keywords:* Buyer–seller relationships; Buyer–seller problem solving; Buyer–seller appraisal processes; Dyadic communication

## 1. Introduction

Throughout the past two decades, the marriage metaphor has been increasingly accepted within the marketing domain as representing an important platform from which to explore business relationships (cf., Dwyer et al., 1987). Indeed, the resultant relationship marketing orientation has been recognized as a genuine paradigm shift for the discipline (cf., Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Sheth and Paratiyar, 1995).

Examples of how relationship marketing has contributed to the evolution of marketing theory and research include: the recognition of distinctive phases through which relationships develop and change; the importance of mutuality, trust, information sharing, and commitment in relationships; and that through cooperative relationships, uncertainty can be reduced, resources can be pooled and costs divided, and problem solving can be more efficacious in the creation of value (cf., Dwyer et al., 1987; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Wilson, 1995).

While the marriage metaphor has been used to make substantial contributions to our understanding of buyer–seller relationships (cf., Dwyer et al., 1987; Morgan and Hunt, 1994), there has been increasing recognition that transfer from the marriage metaphor to buyer–seller relationships has not been fully explored (Hunt and Menon, 1995; Tynan, 1997; O'Malley and Tynan, 1999). To this point, notable weaknesses in the buyer–seller relationship literature appear to be related to the need to examine buyer–seller relationships at a more micro, individual level that allows for greater consideration of social/relational elements.

While there has long been recognition that business relationships ultimately progress through individuals interacting over time (cf., Hakansson, 1982), buyer–seller models have tended to focus on more macro, firm level factors and processes that by implication could be extended to interacting individuals but have not been explicitly linked to individual dyadic interaction.

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0148-2963/$ - see front matter © 2005 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.jbusres.2005.10.007

As an example of this macro focus, Anderson and Narus (1990) state that "In our experience, firms typically have only a coarse understanding of how the outcomes they are providing to partner firms compare with these two standards (i.e., outcomes compared to expectations and alternatives). Hence each firm needs to gain and periodically update its understanding of its partner firm's requirements or expectations and the alternative outcomes competitors are offering" (p. 56). In fact, Dwyer et al. (1987) recognize that their process model of relationship phases is broad in orientation and subject to more fine grained (i.e., individual level) conceptual refinement.

Wilson (1995) recognizes the need for work examining relationships that is sensitive to the experience of partners as relationships move through interacting people. Alajoutsijarvi et al. (2001) also note the scarcity of work tied to essential aspects of individual level interaction. Indeed, Haytko (2004) most recently observed that it is difficult for relationship participants to think in terms of interfirm relationships without thinking of interpersonal relationships as their day-to-day experience involves working closely with *individuals*.

In addition to the need to examine buyer–seller relationships at a more micro, individual level, there also exists a need to address social/emotional elements in buyer–seller relationships. Value creation in buyer–seller relationships is dependent upon both *economic/technical* and *social/relational* elements (cf., Wilson, 1995). The economic/technical elements are related to costs, volume, and technical know-how. The relational elements are related to communication processes, emotions, and trust. Despite some recognition that important relationship outcomes (i.e., satisfaction, commitment, and value creation processes) are tied to both economic/technical *and* social/relational elements, recent literature has noted the limited attention social/relational elements have actually received in research and practice.

For example, Walter et al. (2001) note that the inclusion of non-economic or "soft functions" would offer a richer understanding of value creation in buyer–seller relationships. Hutt et al. (2000) observe that a failure to nurture interpersonal connections often has negative consequences for alliances. Alajoutsijarvi et al. (2001) specifically highlight the need for detailed examinations of patterns of interpersonal communication. Further, Bromberger and Hoover (2003) posit that the management of interpersonal relationships is the most tenuous aspect of supply chain management and the one that is least understood: "Despite years of process breakthroughs and elegant technology solutions, an agile, adaptive supply chain remains an elusive goal. Maybe it's the people who are getting in the way" (p. 64).

Clearly, there is a need to explore buyer–seller relationships at a more micro, individual level that allows for a closer consideration of social/relational elements. Addressing these areas is important in order to develop a more complete understanding of the role of individual level dyadic interaction in buyer–seller relationship success or failure. As is becoming increasingly clear, it is interpersonal connections that serve as the "glue" that binds firms in relationships (Hutt and Stafford, 2000; Haytko, 2004). The purpose of this paper is to present a perspective that adds depth to current thinking about buyer–seller relationships by exploring a "theoretical trail" we believe to be particularly relevant — the marriage metaphor.

We address these underdeveloped areas through an integration of theoretical and empirical work in the interpersonal relationship and business literature. Specifically, we propose a framework that further develops and clarifies dyadic interaction between individuals in buyer–seller relationships by focusing on expectations, communication behavior and appraisal processes. The proposed framework is then examined through a qualitative lens by employing field interviews with informants representing different functional areas across both sides of the relationship dyad.

## 2. Relevant interpersonal relationship literature

In the marital relationship literature, problem solving behaviors have long been a target of interventions aimed at addressing marital conflict (Weiss, 1984). Further, Bradbury and Karney (1993) found that the quality of partner problem solving accounts for significant variability in their relationship satisfaction. Beyond behaviors, cognitive processes have also been found to play important roles in marital relations. For instance, Jacobson (1984) describes how cognitive processes can contribute to continued marital distress even following successful behavior change.

Bennun (1986) delineates two classes of expectations that have implications for understanding outcomes associated with dyadic interpersonal interactions. One set of expectations relates to behaviors that contribute to the achievement of outcomes (i.e., the expectation that a partner will behave in a cooperative, collaborative manner). The second set of expectancies relates more to the outcomes themselves. As Bennun notes, these classes of expectations hold implications for interventions aimed at improving relationships. Partners may enhance interaction by not only altering expectations related to desired outcomes but also by altering expectations relating to *how* they interact.

In a related area, Ben-Yoav and Pruitt (1984) found that negotiation efficacy was dependent on both expectations related to cooperative future interaction (ECFI) and accountability concerns. Conditions of high accountability (i.e., related to tangible outcomes) and low ECFI (i.e., expectations tied to cooperative behavior in the future) tended to produce contentious behavior which reduced joint benefit in partner negotiation. In contrast, conditions of high accountability and high ECFI contributed to increased joint negotiation benefit. Implications of these findings are parallel to those of Bennun in highlighting the importance of how expectations related to partners' interactions impact problem solving effectiveness.

In addition to expectations, partners' evaluations of their interactions have also been found to affect the development of their interpersonal relationship (Bradbury and Fincham, 1991; Johnson and Bradbury, 2000). McNulty and Karney (2002) examined relationships among specific expectations, appraisals of discreet interactions, and global satisfaction with the marital relationship. Specifically, of relevance to the present paper,

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