

# **Relationship Performance: a Relationship Level Construct**

by

Medlin, Christopher John\*

School of Commerce, University of Adelaide, AUSTRALIA 5005

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## **Abstract**

This paper discusses relationship performance, a construct that can help in examining similarity and difference of perspective by firms in a relationship. Thus, each party has an understanding of how the relationship is performing and there is no reason why these may not be different. In fact, differences of opinion on relationship performance might suggest the degree of asymmetry, thus allowing relationships to be categorised and so allow examination of different models of relationships.

That each firm has an identity based upon its position in a network and that firms have different reasons for joining relationships necessarily implies that examination of dyads is complicated. In addition, the difference in perspectives inherent in a relationship and network framework suggests measurement of relationship constructs will be difficult. For example, an empirical study of dyads by John and Reve (1982), found that partners did not report equivalently on sentiment constructs such as trust and commitment. While this result would be expected within an IMP framework, John and Reeve concluded that a theory of aggregation was required to analyse dyad data.

The paper examines the reasons for heterogeneity in relationships, and then introduces relationship performance and its strengths and constraints in examining relationships. The next section examines disparity of relationship performance across dyads using an exploratory study in the business software industry. A final section discusses directions for future research and management implications.

\* Telephone: (618) 8303 3103, Facsimile: (618) 8303 4368

\* Email: [chris.medlin@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:chris.medlin@adelaide.edu.au)

## **Introduction**

Within the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) relationship and network framework, different types of interaction explain variations in the form of business markets. Thus, three analytical levels (firms, relationships, network) interact, with the firms' actors, activities and resources and their analogues at the relationship (actor bonds, activity links, resource ties) and network (actor web, activity pattern, resource constellation) levels "conditioning" each other.

When considering the interaction between firms to create various forms of business relationships, it is apparent that variation in perspective is a necessity (Medlin 2003) and is part of variation in identity (Anderson, Håkansson et al. 1994). Thus, interaction between firms is inherently two sided, at least, and the dance metaphor is imminently applicable (Wilkinson and Young 1994).

The two-sided nature of relationships presents a problem for quantitative research, for one cannot conceive and measure a construct that encompasses both parties' views of a relationship. Thus, Anderson and Narus (1990) analyse manufacturers and distributors separately while John and Reve (1982) comment that partners did not report equivalently on sentiment constructs, such as trust and commitment, and concluded that a theory of aggregation was required to analyse dyad data. However and conversely, such a result would be expected within the IMP framework and rather than seek an answer through aggregation, one would look to the specific to explain the difference.

This paper contributes to the literature by elaborating the relationship performance construct (Holm, Eriksson et al. 1996) and suggesting a quantitative method that does not rely upon aggregation to analyse actor bonds (ie dyad level constructs). Rather actor bonds are defined as individual constructions about the dyad, used to explain cause-effect associations. The remainder of the paper is presented in the following manner. First, the sources of inherent difference of perspective across a dyad are introduced. Second, the methodological implications of this heterogeneity are considered. Third, the construct of relationship performance is introduced and its theoretical nature is elaborated. Next, disparity of relationship performance across specific dyads is examined using an exploratory study based on the business software industry. Finally, future research and management implications are considered.

## **Variation in Perspective**

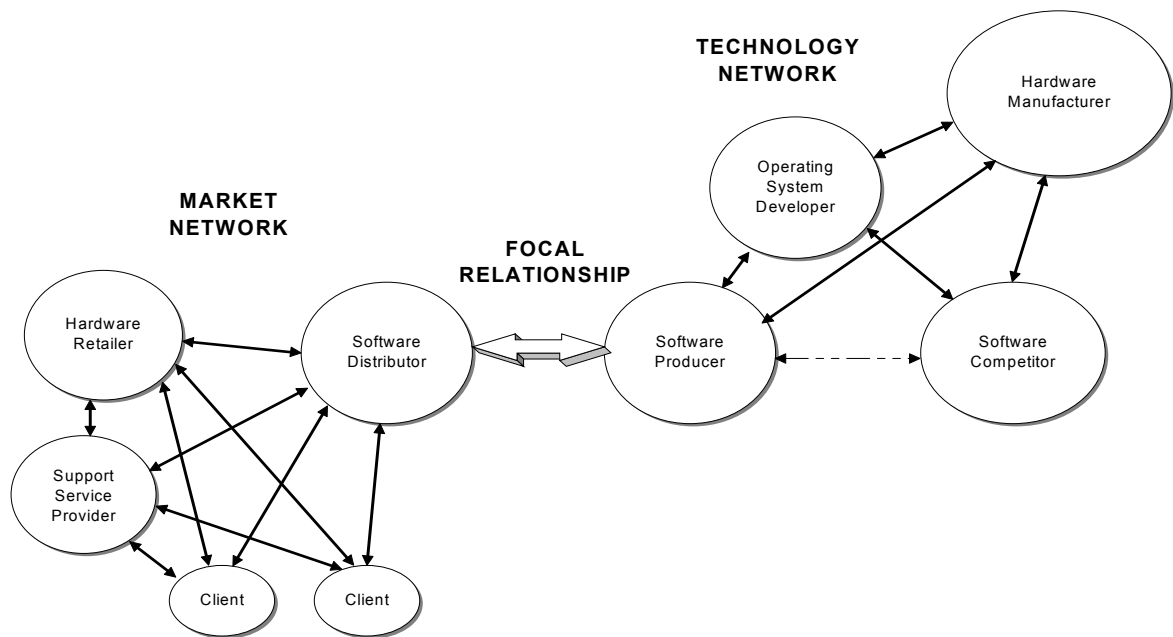
A relationship, as an entity between firms and networks, exists as a different contrivance for each party (Medlin 2003). This is a result of variation in network embeddedness for each firm (Anderson, Håkansson et al. 1994) and follows directly from firms having different reasons for joining relationships (Håkansson and Snehota 1995, Wilson 1995).

Formation of a relationship between two firms is only worthwhile, if matching differences of capability occur at the juxtaposition of two or more initial networks (see figure 1), where there are complementary differences in network identity (Medlin 2003). In this instance, the formation of a focal relationship leads to the creation of a broader network and the interaction between the focal firms moves to a new dynamic

whose ‘logic’ follows the wider network. In the new configuration, interaction is dependent upon two sets of embeddedness: the initial networks and the new broader network. However, the embeddedness is of two different types, for the first is historical and specific to one firm and the second is future oriented and specific to both firms (Medlin 2003). Thus, on the one hand difference is absolute and given the sources of heterogeneity in the firm’s initial network the difference remains continuing, while on the other hand commonality is created on the basis that difference.

An example may clarify this double embeddedness. In the software industry, when a producer and distributor see the complementarity of their resources, activities and network connections they may settle on an exclusive distribution agreement. The producer will specialise on research and develop the software to meet new hardware configurations arising from their initial network, while the distributor will follow the dictates of their initial network and seek to build market share in a geographic area by employing sales staff and setting up promotional events and activities. Both firms, however, will work towards profit from sales to final customers (ie new network provides interaction logic). Thus, common economic purpose at the broader network level, where the dyad is a unit supplying to final customers, provides the ‘logic’ for the interaction in the focal relationship.

**Figure 1. Focal relationship joining two networks**



Yet commonality of goals must remain partial, for many factors intervene and influence the business relationship, which remains forever dynamic. First, the embeddedness of a firm in its initial network means each party has slightly different intentions and expectations in the relationship, with each seeking access to a complementary resource or activity (Håkansson and Snehota 1995). Thus, each firm’s preferred interaction mode for a specific relationship will arise from previous network identity and firm history, as well as the need to coordinate the present exchange. In fact, even a long-term relationship continues to face these variations as change occurs in the firms and their other relationships (Håkansson and Snehota 1995). This means

that while firms may seek to complement each other's strategy, their initial network embeddedness will require maintenance of some relationships and so create continuing pressure for change and difference between those parties.

Second, the focal firms must deal with differences in expected goals. As goals are likely to vary, the inter-firm interaction to achieve reasonable outcomes must lead to give and take over time. These shifts in the way the firms interact will be exhibited as variations in coordination methods, which will adjust within the interaction possibility space as each firm's strategy and network embeddedness changes (Medlin 2003).

Finally, and apart from the inherent heterogeneity from the above structural factors, perceptual difference is intrinsic (cf Ottesen, Foss et al. Forthcoming) and will necessarily influence interaction between the focal firms. There are at least two classes of variation in perceptual difference. Thus, when the parties are not close, perceptual disagreement with regard to environmental factors would more likely exist and both parties would have different responses with regard to actor bonds. One would expect difference in the early stages of a relationship or in the mature phase where the partners have been moving apart. Thus, difference of perspective is most likely for "new", "static" and "inert" relationships (Ford and Rosson 1982). Also, difference of perception might occur in "troubled" relationships, but these clearly can have other causes such as environmental change.

The second possibility is incorrect perception of the other firm's actor bonds, so that different levels of closeness could occur as relationships move from market to relational coordination. Ford and Rosson (1982) would consider such relationships to be "growing", however variation on perception of the other firm's actor bonds adds the possibility of asymmetrical relationships with parties diverging on level of perceived closeness.

Each of these scenarios highlights the possibility for variation in perspective of actor bonds and also the importance of relationship closeness. Thus, 'atmosphere' is an important variable influencing the nature of interaction, especially in longer-term relationships (Håkansson 1982, Ford 1990).

Significant in the above discussion is the variation in perspective of actor bond constructs by each party to a relationship. The degree of disparity of actor bond constructs across a dyad would seem to offer a measure of the relationship closeness, with large difference representing distant relationships and small displaying closeness.

### **Methodological Implication of Heterogeneity**

To-date, and as one would expect, a considerable weight of empirical research within the IMP framework has been qualitative in nature as the explanation is sought in the specific; so reflecting the duality, inherent heterogeneity and differences of perception in relationships. In contrast, quantitative methods have been applied successfully in studies where the focus is a single firm perspective and of multiple analysis levels<sup>1</sup>. Thus, Wilson and Nielson's (2000) global cooperation construct (ie dyad level) is

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of levels of analysis and composition rules see Chan (1998, 1999), Glick (1985), and Rousseau.

operationalized as the multiplication of two firms cooperation levels as perceived by a respondent in one firm. Rarely have studies measured constructs from both parties' perspective (see figure 2), suggesting that the variety inherent in a relationship and network framework is much understated in quantitative studies.

**Figure 2: Examples of quantitative studies by level of analysis and perspective**

	<b>One firm's perspective</b>	<b>Multiple Firms</b>
<b>Multiple Level (firm and relationship)</b>	Anderson and Narus 1990 Heide and John 1992 Morgan and Hunt 1994 Gundlach 1995 Wilson and Nielson 2000	Gundlach et al 1995 Kim 2000
<b>Multiple Level (relationship and network)</b>	Holm, et al. 1996 Wilkinson and Wiley 2000	

Recently attempts have been made to quantitatively measure dyad constructs using measures from two firms (cf Gundlach, Achrol et al. 1995, Kim 2000). These studies rely on simple averaging, or aggregation, of two parties' responses as a composition rule for measuring dyad level constructs, so presuming the existence of a universally apparent and single perspective of a relationship. This view implies dyad parties may manage a relationship as though there was an amount of trust or commitment held in a joint bank account and composed of deposits by each party. While this conceptualisation may be useful for initial empirical examination of dyads, it is also evidently flawed for it presumes equivalence of perspective across the dyad. In addition, assuming universally apparent actor bonds ignores the existence of the asymmetric nature of business relationships. For example, under the universal apparent rule, firms with opposite degrees of commitment would be modelled as a relationship where interaction proceeded from an average level of commitment.

Thus, the duality inherent with an interaction perspective of business markets presents a major issue for future quantitative research, for constructs must be identified that naturally allow for the diversity of relationships that follows from duality. Possibly the most important and immediate concern is the choice of dependent variable, for this will shape the direction of research and the form of evidence. That is, examining the impact of supra-firm level constructs on how firms interact depends on the underlying assumptions about the nature of firms and our ability to measure the dyad level constructs. In this paper, the firm is defined as a collection of individual actors who work to achieve economic success.

The next section introduces 'relationship performance' and provides the theoretical bases for its consideration as a main dependent variable in dyad studies.

### **Relationship Performance**

Relationship performance is defined as the perceived economic performance of the jointly acting relationship parties, relative to expectations in that network (see appendix A for indicators). Relationship performance has been used in a number of empirical studies (Holm, Eriksson et al. 1996, Aulakh, Kotabe et al. 1997, Wilkinson and Wiley 2000, Medlin, Aurifeille et al. 2002) as the dependent variable for single firm perspective studies across multiple levels of analysis. In these studies, relationship performance displays a number of strengths and limitations. With regard

to strengths at least two can be elaborated. First, relationship performance focuses directly upon the economic results of a relationship strategy, relative to expectations and /or competition in a network. Thus, rather than relying on surrogate indicators, such as level of satisfaction or cooperation, relationship performance measures directly the economic outcome of joint activity.

This is in contrast to satisfaction and cooperation, which have generally been operationalized to measure social and economic outcomes together or separately (Geyskens, Steenkamp et al. 1999, Geyskens and Steenkamp 2000). However, even when only social indicators are used to measure these constructs their inherent dimensionality remains dual, with the economic outcome remaining important in a respondent's consideration of social satisfaction. That is, one can be socially unsatisfied with the relationship because of poor economic performance, while cooperation endures the same overtone. Thus, these constructs suffer from a lack of measurement precision and so it would seem advisable to measure more directly the purpose of economic activity, while leaving socially bound constructs as independent variables.

A further strength of relationship performance is its conceptualisation at a dyad level, so the full outcomes of a relationship strategy and interaction are acknowledged from one party's perspective. Thus, more than the self-interest, or economic goals, of one party are recognised by the construct. This is an important theoretical and methodological distinction, for it recognises the purpose of relationships as a joint outcome, so allowing examination of firm level variables on a supra-firm construct. Conversely, the impact of a supra-firm construct on firm level variables can be examined and so one may eventually examine time series of interactions between firms and a relationship (eg firms – relationship – firms – relationship etc).

The constraints inherent in the use of relationship performance follow from the heterogeneity and variation in perspective of the IMP industrial marketing framework. Of necessity, all relationship and network constructs *are unavoidably individually held, contrived and partially imposed by actors*; even though they *have been necessarily socially generated* (cf Medlin 2002a, Medlin 2002b). That is, relationship and network constructs are present situated cognitions concerning the social and structural bonds between firms, generated through and inferred from past interactions (Smith in Friedman 1960, Medlin 2002a). Specifically, structural components, such as atmosphere and closeness, are individual and social generalizations used to reduce cognitive and social complexity<sup>2</sup>, which can only ever describe probabilistic associations in the development of relationships. Namely, while a third party may generalise about the closeness of the relationship, the interaction between the two parties remains forever indeterminate (Håkansson and Snehota 1998, Medlin 2002a).

This means it is impossible to consider an aggregation of indicators, independently obtained from two sides of a relationship, which would measure a relationship or network construct of any meaning. Rather, measuring 'relationship performance' independently from the perspective of two firms with regard to their joint activity, has three components: economic performance according to each party and an imperfect

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<sup>2</sup> After Luhmann (1979) and Giddens (1979, 1984)

measure of closeness or asymmetry, as determined by the disparity between the two performance measures.

The reasons for disparity are clear when one considers the inherent duality of business relationships. It is evident that individuals within firms could only objectify relationship performance equally under certain conditions; either the firms are in a close relationship and discuss openly their joint performance or as independent firms working together they use equivalent metrics for deciding performance. While the first scenario opens the way to measuring closeness of relationship according to the disparity between the performance measures of the same relationship, the second scenario portrays its weaknesses as a measure of closeness. That is, firms in distant relationships may use similar metrics and assess performance equivalently, so appearing to have a close relationship. This scenario indicates the importance of developing causal models that can aid in distinguishing between different coordination modes, so allowing distinctions to be drawn between firms using similar metrics. For an example, see Medlin, et al. (2002) where relationship performance is modelled as mixtures of self and collective interest.

However, relationship performance remains an important dyad level construct, for humans must explain how firms work together to achieve economic outcomes, and conversely how those outcomes proceed through interaction to generate the social and economic structures required to understand and generate process. Thus, rather than being a *present* bound component of joint activity, relationship performance exists as a generalised and intended economic outcome and input to the structuring of firms, relationships and networks that is generated over time. That is, adaptive interactions between firms are planned in the present for future (cf Medlin 2002a) on the basis of achieving relationship performance and past performance leads to new structuring of future relationships. This is variation on structuration theory, for Giddens (1979, 1984) regards structuration as bound in the present only; yet in the economic sphere structure is intended and precedes present exchange. Or to say it in another way, the purpose of business interaction is a degree of control, through creation of a future structure in each present.

### **Disparity of Relationship Performance in Dyads**

In this section, disparity of relationship performance across dyads is examined using an exploratory study of business software principals and their distributor/agent firms from Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore. This specific sample was suited to examining relationship performance in two ways. First, focusing on one industry is likely to have reduced measurement error, as firms would rely on similar skills in order to perform in that given environment. Second, country borders set market boundaries, so allowing expectations, competition and market position to be easily gauged. Thus, measurement of relationship performance was enhanced by the sample being based on a specific and easily defined 'value net' (Parolini 1999, Möller and Svahn 2002).

In total, data from both sides of 36 relationships (principal/distributor or agent) was collected, representing a response rate of 24% based on the Kompas industry database. The response rate reflects past examples of dyad data collection (Heide and John 1992), with the response rate for the principals being 32%.

All responding firms completed a questionnaire that included, amongst others, the indicators of relationship performance given in appendix A. However, as the purpose is to examine disparity of relationship performance of dyads, only these twelve indicators are used (see appendix A).

The data was first analysed globally and then separate measures of relationship performance were created for each firm. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy for the global data was 0.819, with measures of sampling adequacy ranging from 0.767 to 0.865, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant (Chi-square of 1239.523 with 66 degrees of freedom). Factor analysis indicated one construct (see appendix B) explaining 68% of variance. Thus, the twelve indicators were summed to provide a measure of relationship performance for each firm (Cronbach alpha of 0.9581).

Next an analysis of relative disparity was undertaken. First, disparity of relationship performance for each dyad was calculated by the absolute difference for relationship performance across the dyad. Second, a relative measure of disparity of relationship performance across the dyad was calculated. However, as comparison with the other party, or the average of the two parties relationship performance does not provide a meaningful measure, it was necessary to consider a more general benchmark for comparison. Since the purpose is to examine the pattern of disparity for the 36 dyads the average value for relationship performance of the 72 firms was used as the benchmark. Thus, disparity is given as the absolute difference of relationship performance across the dyad, divided by the samples average value for relationship performance and calculated as a percentage. While use of the sample average for relationship performance as the denominator allows a relative measure of disparity, it is necessarily imperfect given the earlier theoretical discussion. Appendix C provides a graph of relative closeness. One can see immediately that relative disparity has a range of 0% to 104%, with a mean of 36% and standard deviation of 25%. This indicates enormous variation on degree of disparity, with most relationships displaying asymmetry. This suggests that disparity on relationship performance alone cannot explain relationship models; rather quantitative studies of relationships require other ways to separate dyad models, which together with relationship performance might explain classes of relationships. While one might be tempted to seek associations between individual firm's measures of relationship performance and the disparity across the dyad, there is no point given duality.

### **Research Implications**

Quantitative research of firm and relationship performance within a network framework offers the opportunity to more completely describe the factors leading to firm performance in a business alliance, versus relationship performance arising from that alliance, as well as examining the converse: namely the influence of relationship performance on the firm and on actor understandings of network level constructs.

However, these matters can only be considered where predictive models can be found to distinguish between forms of relationship, as measured by disparity between two firms' perspective of relationship performance, and by variation in mixture of coordination mode between self and collective interest (cf Medlin, Aurifeille et al. 2002, Medlin 2003). In other words, post hoc predictive segmentation is required for

analysis (Wedel and Kamakura 1997), where coordination models based on relationship performance are determined after data collection.

There are two groups of techniques that can provide the ability to analyse multiple models of a dyad concurrently (Wedel 1998): clusterwise regression (Wedel and Kamakura 1997) and genetic algorithms (Goldberg 1991, Aurifeille 2000, Aurifeille and Pinto 2000). These emerging analytic techniques offer the opportunity to examine simultaneously relationship performance, disparity and variation in coordination mode mixtures according to the degree of self and collective interest across two or more firms with regard to one economic activity. This means classes of relationships can be determined on an empirical basis, so leading to more precisely focused research on relationship types.

### **Management Implications**

There are two sets of management implications that can be drawn from the discussions above. The first derives from the theoretical basis, while the second rests on the more practical use of the relationship performance measure for aiding relationship ‘management’.

With regard to the theoretical basis of relationship performance and the inherent heterogeneity of relationships and networks, it is clear that management involves choosing ‘futures’ carefully and working jointly to ensure the outcome of planned/coordinated future scenarios. Further, the closeness of the relationship, the atmosphere, deserves exploration and elaboration by the parties, as it is the source of indeterminate control and the solution to unforeseen events (Håkansson and Snehota 1998). That is, discussions about willingness to trust and reactions to various hypothesised scenarios can lead to greater understanding of the requirements of each party to the relationship and so build an understanding of the future relationship.

From a more practical perspective the relationship performance measure offers a means for management to objectify and generalize the relationship outcome; thus providing a means of discussion and elaboration about the reasons for disparity in measuring relationship performance. Externalising and objectifying relationship performance in this way, especially where there is asymmetry, allows discussion to proceed and so generate higher degrees of understanding between the parties.

## Appendix A: Relationship Performance Indicators

Consider all of the costs and revenues with the focus relationship. Relative to competitors in the focus market, what has been the performance of the inter-firm relation on the following dimensions.

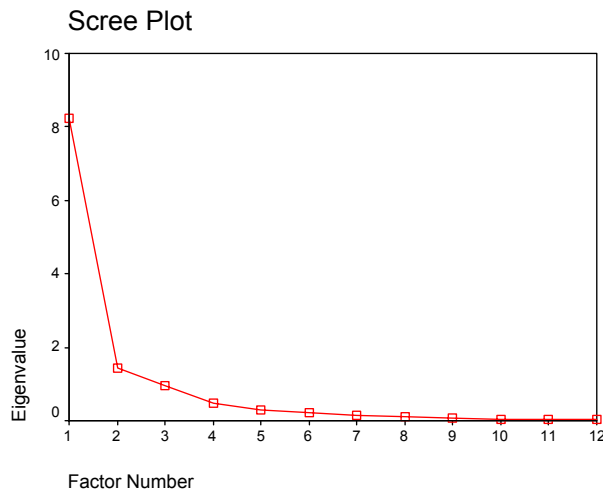
1. Overall performance \*
2. Profit
3. Sales
4. Sales growth
5. Market Share
6. Market Share growth

Consider all of the costs and revenues with the focus relationship. Relative to your firm's expectations in the focus market, what has been the performance of the inter-firm relation on the following dimensions.

1. Overall performance \*
2. Profit
3. Sales
4. Sales growth
5. Market Share
6. Market Share growth

\* All indicators are seven point scale from 'extremely strong' to 'not strong'.

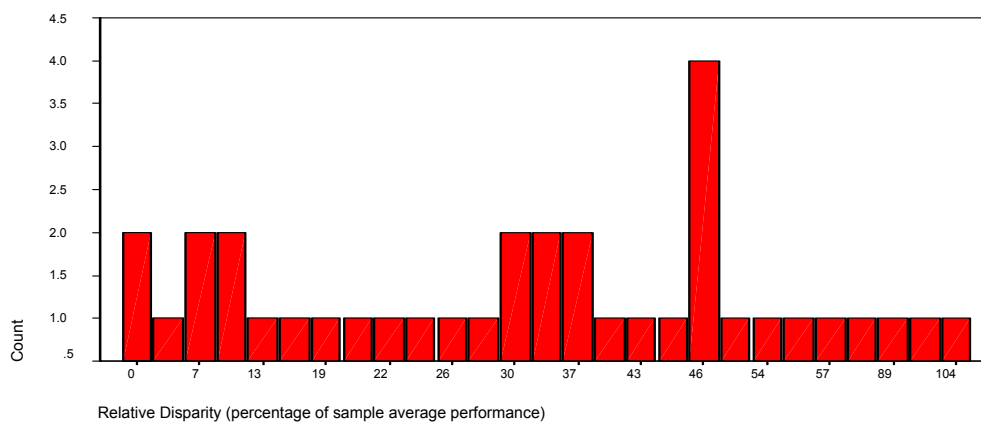
## Appendix B: Factor Analysis Results



Component	Component
Matrix	one
Qa.1	.792
Qa.2	.797
Qa.3	.822
Qa.4	.804
Qa.5	.785
Qa.6	.799
Qb.1	.812
Qb.2	.812
Qb.3	.877
Qb.4	.897
Qb.5	.858
Qb.6	.871

Principal Component Analysis  
1 components extracted

## Appendix C: Relative Disparity



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