

Individual action constructing business relationships

Tuija Mainela and Jaana Tähtinen*

University of Oulu

University of Oulu

Department of Marketing

Department of Marketing

P.O. Box 4600

P.O. Box 4600

FIN-90014 University of Oulu, Finland

FIN-90014 University of Oulu, Finland

Tel. +358 8 553 2595

Tel. +358 8 553 2586

Fax.+ 358 8 553 2906

Fax.+ 358 8 553 2906

tuija.mainela@oulu.fi

jaana.tahtinen@oulu.fi

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Abstract

According to the current view, any business relationship consists of two levels; firstly, the interpersonal level i.e. human beings as actors and secondly, the organisational level i.e. companies as organisational actors (see Håkansson, 1982). However, for research aiming to analyse the relationship development this perspective may not provide a rich enough a picture of the phenomenon. Dividing a business relationship to different levels or elements (such as technology, organizational structure, experience, and individuals) directs research attention to cross-sectional analysis instead of longitudinal, holistic analysis of relationship development as a process.

This conceptual paper argues that when studying the development and dynamics of business relationships the focus should be on the process, which, in the end, consists of individuals' actions. Companies as such consist of human beings, i.e. managers and employees. Thus, any organisational action is performed or initiated by individuals whose aims and interests shape the way they deal with other organisations. Thus, the individual action eventually generates business relationship development and should be the interest of our studies. Therefore, we present business relationships as managers' personal problems.

Introduction

It is commonly agreed that a business relationship consists of at least two active participants, i.e. companies interacting. In other words, the business relationship is seen to exist between two (or more) companies. However, companies as such consist of human beings, i.e. managers and employees in general. Any organisational action is performed or initiated by individual directors, managers, etc. (see e.g. Daft and Weick, 1984; Granovetter, 1992; Hambrick and Mason, 1984). Moreover, the individual member's aims and interests will shape the way s/he deals with other organisations (Canning and Hammer-Loyd, 2002). As Easton and Araujo (1994) note, the organizational developments are inevitably related to the behaviour of the managers over time, i.e. the individual-level actions in temporal contexts. Thus the actions of the individuals in the two or more companies eventually generate the business relationship as well as its dynamics.

The Interaction and Network Approach to business relationships has always acknowledged the individuals as a part of a business relationship (see Håkansson, 1982; Thorelli, 1986; Johanson and Mattsson, 1987; Håkansson and Snehota, 2000). In spite of this, a large part of recent business research emphasises the level of company actors. When included in the studies, the individual's behaviour is too often left in the background as the content of the business relationship (e.g. technical, social, economic) is emphasised (for a review, see Snellman, 2001). In other words, the company as an actor and its activities and resources have been emphasized (see Håkansson and Johanson, 1993) at the expense of the behaviour of the individuals representing the company and actually acting in the business relationship. Further research on the role of individuals in business relationships have been called for especially by management theorists interested in industrial organisation (e.g. Hutt and Stafford, 2000; Osborn and Hagedoorn, 1997) as well as marketing researchers (e.g. Haytko, 2004; Mainela, 2007; Nicholson, Compeau and Sethi, 2001).

The present paper aims to present an alternative behaviour-centred view to the dominating level- and element-focused ways of understanding business relationships. We rely on the basic idea

that the personal characteristics and ways of acting, even the personal chemistries of the interacting managers determine the development of a business relationship (see Ring and Van de Ven, 1994; Marschan *et al.*, 1996). Following Liljegren (1988), we look for an explanation for business relationship dynamics from managers' behaviour. The main research question of the study is: How does the individual action construct the business relationship dynamics? Examining and understanding individuals' behaviour is critical for seeing the small changes of which the business relationship dynamics are comprised.

This paper views relationships as processes constructed by individual action and examines the individual action contributing to the development of business relationships. The study is structured into four parts. Firstly, we argue that recent research on business relationships has somewhat neglected the role of individual actors shaping the business relationship. To ground the argument, a review of studies on business relationships from the 21st century is conducted. Secondly, an understanding of a business relationship as a process that acknowledges the actions by individuals is developed. Thirdly, the paper elaborates on the type of action individuals in business conduct. Finally, the paper presents business relationships as managers' personal problems and discusses the implication of such view on research and business life.

Current view of business relationships

To find out the current situation in business relationship research, we searched for peer-reviewed journal articles using the term business relationship or business-to-business relationship in their title. To ensure a wide geographical spread the following databases were used; ABI/INFORM, EBSCO Host EJS, Elsevier Science Direct, Kluwer Online and MCB University Press Journals in Emerald Library. However, since the aim was to reveal if the importance of managers, that was a strong starting point in IMP tradition, is appreciated and understood by current researchers, the period was limited to five years, 2000 – 2004. The search resulted in 55 studies (see Appendix I). However, a commentary article by Woodside (2000) was excluded, as well as papers by Hogan and

Amstrong (2001) and Ringberg and Forquer Gupta (2003) since, in spite of their title, they do not focus on business relationships. Thus, the number of studies reviewed is 52.

The finding that supports the importance of this study is that of the 52 studies, only 8 (Anderson, Havila, and Salmi, 2001; Canning and Hanmer-Lloyd, 2002; Griffith, 2002; Havila and Wilkinson, 2002; Johnson, Barksdale and Boles, 2001; Olkkonen, Tikkanen and Alajoutsijärvi, 2000; Tellefsen, 2002) elaborate on both actor levels, i.e. the interorganisational and the interpersonal level as well as their influence on each other (see Table 1). Griffith (2002) states that managers' communication competences directly influence international business relationship development at the interorganisational level. Johnson et al. (2001) concludes that a sales-person plays an important role in reducing customer defection in business relationships. Canning and Hanmer-Lloyd (2002) model the adaptation process and conclude that the managers' own behaviour and his/her perception of e.g. partner's commitment influence the adaptation process at the company level.

Tellefsen (2002) refers to Håkansson and Wootz (1979) and states that "Organizational exchange occurs simultaneously at two levels. One level involves the interorganisational relationship [...]. The second level involves the interpersonal relationship between the two firms' representatives". Tellefsen's (2002) results suggest that in building buyer commitment, the suppliers need to satisfy two kinds of needs; the ones of the buying organisations and the ones of the purchasing managers. Olkkonen et al. (2001) argue that relationships, as structures and contexts, are formed by interpersonal communication processes. Referring to Giddens (1984), they suggest that analysis of resource exchange should be complemented by analysing also the interpersonal communication patterns at various organizational levels. Havila and Wilkinson (2002) show that social bonds built up between managers in a business relationship can be transferred to new relationships with the managers. Anderson et al. (2001) demonstrated that even the reputation of the persons representing the company may play an important role in business relationships. Thus, not

only the actions of current managers, and especially the owners, but also their former actions that build their reputation may guide the course of the business relationship.

Thus, we found studies that discuss the two levels, focusing on how managers' personal interests and characteristics influence the organisational level or how their personal relationships can be imported into new business relationships. However, research still lacks a focus on the co-existence and interplay of the interorganisational and interpersonal levels, and a description of the mechanisms through which the interplay takes place.

From the remaining 44 studies, 16 takes up only the company level (e.g. Farrelly and Quester, 2003; Humphries and Wilding, 2004) and three only the individual level (Berghäll 2003, Jones, Busch and Dacin 2003, Woodside and Wilson 2000). The rest, 25 studies, at least mention the managers (e.g. Holmlund, 2004; Perry, Cavaye and Coote, 2002) in their theoretical frameworks. The divide in the empirical sections (n = 44) of the papers is more equal. Nineteen papers focus on the company level only (e.g. Hefferman, 2004; Svensson, 2004) and three on the individual level (Berghäll, 2003; Jones et al., 2003; Woodside and Wilson, 2000). Seven papers from 2001 and 2002 (e.g. Anderson, Havila, and Salmi, 2001; Tellefsen, 2002) discuss the interplay of individual and company actors, and 15 articles mention both levels (e.g. Bolton, Smith and Wagner, 2003; Tähtinen, 2002), although do not discuss their influence on each other. Some studies (e.g. Backhaus and Bauer, 2000; Claro, Hagelaar and Omta, 2003) take up both levels in the theoretical review, but the empirical analysis stays on the interorganisational level.

Table 1. Actor Levels in Recent Research

Theoretical part or theoretical papers				Empirical part			
Individual level	Company level	Individual and company levels	Interplay of individual and company level	Individual level	Company level	Individual and company levels	Interplay of individual and company level
Berghäll 2003 Jones, Busch and Dacin 2003 Woodside. and Wilson 2000	Chetty and Eriksson 2002 Cox 2004 Ehret 2004 Farrelly and Quester 2003 Hausman 2001 Havila, Johanson and Thilenius 2004 Heffernan 2004 Humphries and Wilding 2004a Leonidou, Katsikeas and Hadjimarcou 2002 Ryssel, Ritter and Gemünden 2004 Sanderson 2004 Svensson 2001 Svensson 2004 Ulaga 2003 Wilson and Nielson 2000 Zineldin 2002	Anderson, Havila, and Salmi 2001 Backhaus and Bauer 2000 Baxter and Matear 2004 Bendapudi, and Leone 2002 Bolton, Smith and Wagner 2003 Claro, Hagelaar and Omta 2003 Cunden, and van Heck 2004 de Burca, Brannick, Fynes and Glynn 2001 Duarte and Davis 2003 Eggert and Helm 2003 Freeman and Browne 2004 Holmlund 2004 Humphries and Wilding 2004b Lee, Pae and Wong 2001 Leek, Turnbull and Naude 2003 Medlin 2004 Ojasalo 2001 Perry, Cavaye and Coote 2002 Purchase and Olaru 2004 Roxenhall and Ghauri 2004 Stjernström and Bengtsson 2004 Svensson 2002 Tuominen, Rajala and Möller 2004 Tähtinen 2002 Zolkiewski and Littler 2004	Canning, and Hanmer-Lloyd 2002 Friman, Gärling, Millett, Mattsson and Johnston 2002 Griffith 2002 Havila and Wilkinson 2002 Johnson, Barksdale and Boles 2001 Olkkonen, Tikkanen. and Alajoutsijärvi 2000 Tellefsen 2002	Berghäll 2003 Jones, Bush and Dalin 2003 Woodside. and Wilson 2000	Backhaus, and Bauer 2000 Chetty, and Eriksson 2002 Claro, Hagelaar and Omta 2003 Cunden, and van Heck 2004 Eggert and Helm 2003 Farrelly, and Quester 2003 Hausman 2001 Havila, Johanson and Thilenius 2004 Heffernan 2004 Humphries and Wilding 2004a Humphries and Wilding 2004b Leek, Turnbull and Naude 2003 Leonidou, Katsikeas and Hadjimarcou 2002 Ryssel, Ritter and Gemünden 2004 Sanderson 2004 Stjernström and Bengtsson 2004 Svensson 2001 Svensson 2004 Wilson and Nielson 2000	Baxter, and Matear 2004 Bendapudi, and Leone 2002 Bolton, Smith and Wagner 2003 Canning, and Hanmer-Lloyd 2002 de Burca, Brannick, Fynes and Glynn 2001 Duarte, and Davis 2003 Lee, Pae, and Wong 2001 Perry, Cavaye and Coote 2002 Purchase and Olaru 2004 Roxenhall and Ghauri 2004 Svensson 2002 Tuominen, Rajala and Möller 2004 Tähtinen 2002 Ulaga 2003 Zolkiewski and Littler 2004	Anderson, Havila, and Salmi 2001 Canning and Hanmer-Lloyd 2002 Friman, Gärling, Millett, Mattsson and Johnston 2002 Griffith 2002 Havila and Wilkinson 2002 Johnson, Barksdale, and Boles 2001 Tellefsen 2002

As a whole, the current research seems to have stayed faithful to the early works on business relationships and networks (e.g. Ford, 1980; Håkansson, 1982) that present the two-level conceptualisation of business relationships. The actions of individual managers are seldom emphasised or they are diminished to notions of social exchange, i.e. seen related only to one dimension of business exchange (for exceptions outside the review see e.g. Liljegren, 1988; Halinen and Salmi, 2001). Thus, the central driver of business relationship development, the individual action, is seldom included in the studies of business relationship.

Why bother with individuals when studying a business relationship?

We suggest that if we analysed the individual action when studying relationship development and dynamics it would allow us to better see the nature of business relationships as dynamic processes and therefore to analyse dynamics deeply. We argue that understanding business relationship development through research efforts requires the use of a process level, a dynamic unit of analysis, and methods revealing streams of actions and interactions within specific actions and events. Conceptualising business relationships from the individual action's viewpoint and thus studying the actions of individuals, we claim, gives us four benefits. It enables us to adopt all the above mentioned three elements. Moreover, it enables us as researchers in the marketing discipline to make use of the traditions of management research. Let us now have a look at these four benefits in more detail.

Firstly, business relationships can be seen as processes. Håkansson and Snehota (1995) define a business relationship as “a mutually oriented interaction between two reciprocally committed companies”. Tähtinen (1999) defines a business relationship as “a process of repeated exchanges between a buyer and a seller company”¹. Like business relationship, individual action is by nature a

¹ The definitions mention only companies, but they are used here merely to stress the nature of relationship, not to express a statement of the nature of the actors involved.

behavioural process. It consists of “decisions and actions that actors within the firm have taken over time” (Ghoshal and Bartlett, 1994, p. 91). Thus, to analyse individual action is to analyse processes. If we would analyse company and individual actor levels or multiple elements of a relationship separately, we would view the relationship as a structural entity or in other words as outcome of the interaction process. If a structural view of relationships would be applied in studies of relationship dynamics, it allows the researcher to see what different structures have been formed as an outcome of the processes and not the actions that were changing the relationship.

Secondly, business relationships are dynamic. Many of the models and frameworks that depict relationship development (e.g. Dwyer et al., 1987; Halinen, 1987; Wilson, 1995; Wilson and Mummalaneni 1986) are processual and suggest a number of different stages or phases that a relationship may go through (once or several times) during its life. Individual action is also a dynamic concept by its nature: it describes what individual managers do and how managers act (behave) (Jemison, 1981; Noordegraaf and Stewart, 2000). To study relationship dynamics, it is natural to apply such a dynamic unit.

Thirdly, since relationships are dynamic processes, the methods of studying their dynamics should be able to capture the nature of the phenomenon as it is. Processual research is thus needed (see e.g. Easton, 1995; Halinen and Törnroos, 1995). Process models help us to understand events that happen more or less at the same time and the interconnections between them (see Pettigrew, 1992; Stake, 1995). Holmlund (2004) offers an analytical framework that helps researchers to ‘cut’ the process into smaller units by identifying “different types of relationship interaction units, labelled interaction levels”. The paper argues that when the relationship parties assess their relationship, it is naturally done in periods of time, in streams of interactions. Following this idea, we see that these streams within the relationship consist of smaller units of acts, events, and stages. The shortest unit refers to individual acts, e.g. an e-mail or a single discussion between the representatives of a buyer and a seller (see Tähtinen, 2001). Several interrelated acts form an event,

for example, several discussions, meetings, and the actual signing of a contract constitute a contract negotiation event and a stage consists of interrelated events. In other words, the relationship can be seen as consisting of multiple acts, which form the events, which form the stages, which, finally, form the relationship. We argue that managers from both companies perform the acts, events, and stages and thus, relationships. Thus, concentration on the individual behaviour over time makes it possible to trace longitudinal development processes taking place in the business relationships (see also Holmlund 2004). For example, we can study the development of commitment in the relationship by analysing individual action, and while doing this we note that some acts enhanced the development of commitment thus forming several important events developing the bond, yet other events occurring at the same time by other individuals hindered the emergence of commitment. In other words, analysing individual action enables us to study how the relationship changes, not only what its structure was then and what it is now.

Fourthly, with emphasis on individual action we can provide further insights to business relationship research by bringing in one of the core ideas of management research and organizational change (see e.g. Ghoshal and Bartlett, 1994; Poole, 1998). Paying attention to how the individuals in business relationships act in different periods of time and how differently different individuals act is especially important for being able to trace the small changes that are the basis for relationship development and dynamics. The same idea can be seen in papers arguing that whenever the research aims at studying the actions of an organisation, the mono-method single informant survey should be abandoned and multiple informants should be used (see e.g. Phillips, 1981, 1982).

If we agree with the four above mentioned reasons, researchers studying business relationship development and dynamics should gather and analyse data on the individual action that forms the relationship. Although the dependence of the firms on the resources of other actors can be seen as

the basis for business relationship development, the individual action defines what kinds of relationships are established and with whom.

Conceptualising individual action in business relationship development

Let us now concentrate on the individuals as developers of the business relationships. As Granovetter (1985 p. 490) has argued, the economic action is always embedded in personal relationships between individuals. Similarly, Håkansson and Snehota (1989, 1995 p. 10) have emphasised that business relationships are generally built up as a social exchange process, in which individuals become committed beyond the strict task content. The individuals tend to weave a web of personal relationships, which appear to be a condition for the development of interfirm relationships. Ring and Van de Ven (1994) emphasise this behavioural process when they state that “the ways in which the agents negotiate, execute and modify the terms of an IOR [...] influence motivations to continue in, or terminate, the relationship over time”. However, when studying the business relationship, we suggest that separating the personal relationships within the business relationship creates a structural view that hinders our understanding of the dynamics of business relationships. Therefore we argue that if researchers would view a business relationship as streams and periods of individual interaction as in Figure 1, the processes and the complexity of relationships would be easier to detect.

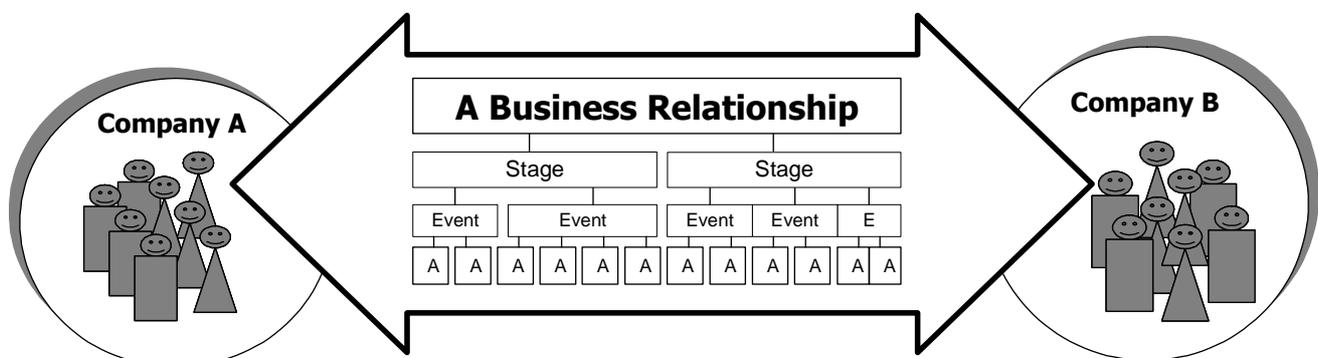


Figure 1. A business relationship analysed into interaction periods

An individual's behaviour is always affected by the organisational context but the interaction of individuals also influences the organisational context (Ghoshal and Bartlett, 1994; Perrone, Zaheer and McEvily, 2003). To emphasise this idea, management theorists (see e.g. Perrone et al., 2003) make a distinction between role taking and role making behaviours. In role-taking individuals comply with the expectations created by their organisational roles. In role-making, in turn, individuals actively enact their roles in the relationships through individual discretion. Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987) also pointed out the possible differences in the behaviour in interpersonal relationships that may be either minimal ritual-like communication governed by social norms or frequent formal and informal communication based also on psychological satisfactions. Heide and Wathne (2006) derive two prototypical roles, a businessperson and a friend, from the economic and sociological perspectives on decision logics of firms in business relationships. Business managers can, without difficulties, distinguish business friendships from other types of business relationships (e.g. Haytko, 2004; Price and Arnold, 1999). We take this notion further to build the basic idea of individuals behaving in business relationships either as organisational agents i.e. in role relationships or as 'qua persona', i.e. in personal relationships (see Coleman, 1990, pp. 531–54; Ring and Van de Ven, 1994).

The role acting is focused on the company's business activities, i.e. created by and related to the company by the person disposing of the contacts. An individual represents the organisation and behaves according to the expectations associated with her/his role in the organisational setting (Haytko, 2004; Hjorth and Johannisson, 1997) and various systems involved in the distribution of goods and services (Turnbull 1979). Therefore the relationships can be expected to be transferable to other individuals (cf. Hallén, 1992) but the individual relationships are also dissolved with the business relationship (Haytko, 2004). The actions aim at creating access to sources of resources, competence and capabilities and to managing these access channels in pursuit of competitive goals (Cunningham and Culligan, 1988). In these relationships Heide and Wathne (2006) emphasise

calculative decision logics guided by utility maximisation and Haytko (2004, p. 320) quotes them to “make you the most money”. The relationships are based on task or role hierarchies, and contract-based trust. Official contracts regulate the interaction, and managers concentrate on the formal tasks in the interaction (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995, p. 8). This kind of interaction is usually very formal and takes place on a high management level. Håkansson and Johanson (1988) have claimed that such action does not often lead to real co-operation in relationships.

The personal relationships are focused on the managers in their capacity both as businessmen and private persons (Hallen, 1992). The relationships and their use are related to them personally and are therefore not normally transferable. The relationships are likely to continue between the individuals even when the interfirm business relationship is dissolved (Havila and Wilkinson, 2002; Haytko, 2004). The manager acts on the basis of personal trust, acquaintance and liking (Hjorth and Johannisson, 1997; Nicholson, Compeau and Sethi, 2001) and cooperates as matter of principle (Heide and Wathne, 2006). Thus, interactions and exchanges are governed by social controls, like personal trust, confidence, and reciprocity and require commitment beyond strictly task-oriented content (see e.g. Larson, 1992). Decision making is guided by internalisation of norms, by self-consistency and moral imperatives making appropriateness as the underlying decision logic (Heide and Wathne, 2006). Typical of these relationships is opening one’s personal life to the other person and that they can be trusted to help in urgent matters (Haytko, 2003; Mainela, 2007). The personal characteristics and the whole personality of the manager are strongly and willingly involved in the business processes. These two prototypical types of acting and their differences are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Two Types of Individual Acting

Organisational role-acting	Personal acting
Formal interactions	Informal interactions
Actions focused on business activities	Actions beyond business activities
Contractual relationships based on impersonal trust	Personal relationships based on personal trust
Relationships transferable from person to person	Relationships not transferable
Evolutionary commitment	Initial commitment usually high
Economic and instrumental considerations	Affective and moral considerations
Calculative decision making logic	Appropriateness as a decision making logic
Hierarchical relationships	Non-hierarchical relationships

As Coleman (1990, p. 541) notes, the same person can act in different capabilities on different occasions (see also Heide and Wathne, 2006). The type of behaviour has been seen to vary along the development of the firm. All emerging ventures, i.e. ventures in their initial stages of development, are suggested to require acting in personal relationships whereas existing organisations need organisational role behaviour (Gartner, Bird and Starr, 1992; Hjorth and Johannisson, 1997; Starr and MacMillan, 1990). Personal acting has been seen important for interfirm relationship development especially when problems arise (Halinen and Salmi, 2001; Haytko, 2004; Perrone et al., 2003). Also some cultures have been seen to emphasise either type or strongly intertwine them (Björkman and Kock, 1995; Salmi and Bäckman, 1999). Empirical studies (Haytko, 2004; Mainela, 2007) have shown that a myriad of different interpersonal relationships within one business relationship exists and that managers are both able and likely to switch from one type of acting to another during a relationship.

According to Heide and Wathne (2006) the acting in either prototypical way represents a form of identity of a relationship. Therefore, at a given time, a particular identity dominates a party's approach to that relationship. The identity and the particular interaction approach are, on one hand, based on the relationship's unique interaction history. On the other hand, an actor may possess a

mental model of correct behaviour that is expected of the other party based on experiences in other relationships or on general industry observation. Over time, however, the party's actions are the decisive factors in defining the relationship identity (ibid, p. 93).

The influence of individual acting on the business relationship development is strongly related to the expectations of the counterpart. The ways in which individuals make the interpretations about each other's intention and behaviour depends on whether the person is expected and seen as acting as an organisational agent or as a person for her/his own part (see Ring and Van de Ven, 1994). The effects on the relationship may, thus, be different depending on if the manager makes promises with the mandate of her/his organisational role or as an individual person. The firm's governance strategies for business relationships can create or reinforce either type of behaviour and can produce switching in the ways of acting (Heide and Wathne, 2006). Figure 3 helps us to discuss this issue further.

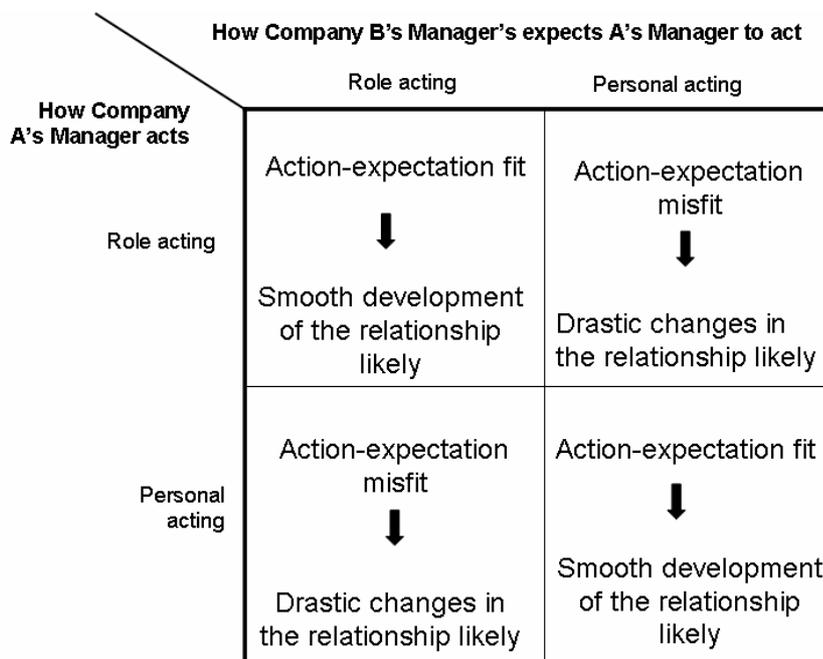


Figure 2. Individual action-expectation influences on business relationship dynamics

The consequences of the individual action to the business relationship are dependent on the expectations of the counterpart, whether the manager behaves according to or against them as illustrated in Figure 2. The logic is the same as Poole (1998) sees in organizational change when expectation creating statements made by the top management should fit the interpretation of the top management actions by the organization members. There is an action-expectation fit in interaction events where manager's expectations and actions are the same, either behaving in the organisational role as expected or as a personal agent as expected (upper right hand corner and lower left hand corner in Fig. 3). We can expect that the interaction episodes with matching behaviour are connected to a smoothly developing business relationship and increased cooperation (see Heide and Wathne, 2006). However, there are also two cases of misfits, where the expectations of the other party are not met with the counterpart's action (upper left hand corner and lower right hand corner in Fig. 3). Such misfits in the interaction process are likely to produce confusion, changes, and perhaps even conflicts in the business relationship (see also Heide and Wathne, 2006). We see these as highly important in studying and understanding the relationship dynamics.

Discussion

This research has highlighted the role of individual managers in business relationship dynamics. Managers make choices, either intentional or unintentional, on how involved they are in certain relationships. Through interacting on strictly business terms on strictly business issues and on the mandate of their official positions, the managers base the business relationship on organisational role-acting. On the other hand, a manager may get more personally involved in a business relationship based on personal liking and personal trust towards the counterpart manager. The interaction between the managers is then based on 'qua persona' acting.

Naturally, the actions of managers in business relationships are not static one-time choices. The managers may act with different counterparts and in different situations within a business

relationship either within a role or within an interpersonal relationship. It is important for the development of the business relationship that a manager is acting according to the expectations of the counterpart.

Although the interpersonal level is not totally forgotten, too many recent studies discuss business relationships emphasising the one or two levels, not the interaction as a process. This is somewhat odd, since while gathering the empirical data in studies on business relationships scholars usually ask the managers what they did in certain situations and how they solved some problems (see Ford, Håkansson and Johanson, 1986; cf. Holmlund, 2003). However, when reporting the empirical results, the data on individual action are hidden, surprisingly often and well, inside the collective, organisational behaviour and technical or economic confrontations. On the other hand, when we examine the data collection instruments, sometimes the researchers seem to ask a single manager to account for the whole organization. This creates an image that an organization is thought to have only one important decision-maker or actor, who knows what really happened and whose action determined the relationship development. However, for example Alajoutsijärvi (1996) has shown how people at different organization levels perceive the relationship differently and how its development differs at different organizational levels. To us, it seems quite daring to rely on a single informant when studying what takes place in business relationships.

This paper suggests that the researchers focusing on business relationships should pay specific attention to the individual action and its influence on the business relationship dynamics. This requires such research designs that ensure gathering of and analysing detailed and longitudinal qualitative data of actions and interpretations of individual managers on both sides of the relationship and how this individual action actually form the relationship. The definition of a business relationship is not merely an empirical question (cf. Axelsson, 1995) but also a theoretical question to be taken up in research. Consistent with the approach presented by Ring and Van de Ven (1994) we claim that the complicated and abstract social-psychological dynamics between

individual managers explains to a great extent how and why business relationships evolve. These dynamics can be detected by a researcher only through emphasising the individual action. Only this way research may produce results that are useful also from the managerial point of view.

To the managers, the present study emphasises the importance of understanding the nature of the business relationship as a process where they are sitting at the driver's seat. The organisational role-acting and personal acting are both possible and needed when managing business relationship development. What is important to notice, however, is that the expectations and interpretations of the counterpart's manager of the other manager's action are very influential in creating stability or change in the business relationship. The need to consider the other manager's expectations towards and interpretations of own individual action makes the business relationships managers' personal problems.

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