Work in progress

"The development of "hybrid" forms of vertical exchange, mixing transactional and relational features: a key account's point of view".

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Abstract

For the past 10 years we have seen the purchasing department of leading and major companies restructuring their purchasing approaches and moving towards more formalised and global purchase processes. This move follows further pressure from their environment, which has become a hyper-competitive and global one. The question arises whether the Relationship Marketing paradigm which has been developing for over 20 years now, is not being turned by Key Account customers, under the influence of their purchase structures, into a «transactional/relational hybrid» relationship management paradigm.

This paper is a first step of an empirical research to define new forms of a "hybrid" relationship between key Accounts and their network of suppliers, mixing features from transactional and relational exchanges and analysed from the key Account (customer) perspective.

Why and how do they use this new form of customer–supplier relationship?

Key Words: RELATIONSHIP MARKETING, KEY ACCOUNTS, TRANSACTIONAL/RELATIONAL HYBRID EXCHANGE

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Introduction

After WWII, Transaction marketing became the basis of "modern" marketing (Kotler, 1991[1] ; Aijo, 1996[2]), aiming at winning new customers and focussing on the « transaction », with price as a major purchasing variable. Since mid nineties, relationship marketing has become the dominating marketing paradigm (Grönroos, 1994[3]) and is represented in a relationship spectrum that starts from transactional exchange to end with relational exchange (Day, 2001[4]).

On this relationship continuum, transactional and relationship exchanges are opposed: with transactional exchange, the focus is on price as the customer looks for the most competitive market price, often via competitive bids, whereas with relational exchange, the focus is on relational benefits that drive value for the customer (Ulaga, 2003[5]). Both ends of the exchange spectrum have been well studied (Dwyer, Schurr et Oh, 1987[6] ; Grönroos, 1994[7] et Peck et al., 1999[8]), but there has been little research carried out on the mixed forms of exchanges, including both transactional and relational features.

Recent marketing research focus is towards relational exchanges that emphasize the need for mutual co-operation to reach mutual benefits (Anderson et Narus, 1991[9]; Cardozo, Shipp, Roering, 1992[10] ; Dunn et Thomas, 1994[11] ; Kanter, 1994[12] ; Morgan et Hunt, 1994[13] ; Dyer et Singh, 1998[14]), but some scholars from the IMP group have argued this view might be too simplistic (Blois, 1996[15]; Naudé, 2005[16]) and relationship involvement does not only bring benefits, but also some negative aspects (Hakansson & Snehota, 1998)[17]. They also stress that Relationship Marketing applies well to the Business to Consumer dimension, where the seller is the only active party, but "get slightly more complicated" in Business to Business approach as both parties, seller and buyer, are active and the analysis of the marketing and purchasing process should not be separated (Ford, 2002[18]). Thus, (B to B) "Relationships do exist in a wide variety of forms and the agenda for researchers is to understand the nature of the relationships » (Turnbull & al., 1996[19]). The IMP approach, based on the interaction concept (Hakansson, 1982), recognize that « all inter-firm relationships simultaneously exhibit conflict and co-operation » (Turnbull et al., 1996; Ritter et Ford, 2004[20]; Gadde & Persson, 2004[21]).).

Coviello et al. (2002)[22] have led an empirical study to find out the nature of the relationship between 308 firms (US and European) and their suppliers. They found out that 1/3 of them described a type of relationship, which was neither transactional nor relational, but "transactional/relational hybrid", as customers were trying to link the benefits from both ends of the relational continuum, mixing opposite and paradoxical forms of vertical exchange. Their paper ends up suggesting other scholars should investigate when and why transactional and relational aspects of the exchange are mixed.

This is the starting point of our own research – to find out why and how those "hybrid" exchange forms, mixing transactional and relational features, are used.

This paper is structured in five parts. In the first part we explore the conceptual framework. In the second part, we explore in details our research field and questions. In the third one, we develop our empirical approach: we define our first exploratory field and our methodology. Then, we present the two most representative mixed exchange forms. In the last part, we discuss our findings, relate them to our empirical framework and define our next investigations, ending up with the limits of our first exploratory results.

Background : conceptualizing the different « hybrid » forms

If Coviello et al. and some IMP scholars (see supra) have found out some "transactional/ relational hybrid" exchange forms, neither provides the basis for an analysis of those forms.
Scholars in other and very different areas, such as sociology, strategy, TCE (transaction costs economy) and accounting, have risen the topic.
Already in 1989, Bradach & Eccles[23] had rejected the TCE continuum with two mutually exclusive poles going from market to hierarchy. They argued that price, authority and trust were three variables, two of which could be combined in different ways to define different control mechanisms.
Moreover, they "emphasize how transactions controlled by one mechanism are profoundly affected by the simultaneous use of an alternative control mechanism".
From this sentence, they hint at an interaction of two mechanisms that are not balanced, but one of them is used to have an effect on the main one.
In strategy, Bengtsson & Kock (1999[24], 2000[25]) have studied in depth coopetition within horizontal alliances in B to B networks and how firms want to combine the advantages of competition and cooperation. They define three forms of coopetition:

- ➪ When cooperation prevails
- ➪ When competition prevails
- ➪ When cooperation and competition are balanced

The choice of each form is defined by the specific resources each competitor has.
Today, most active scholars in studying hybrid combinations are those doing some research on management control of interfirm transactional relationships (Van de Meer-Koistra & Vosselman, 2000[26], 2006[27]; Hakansson & Lind, 2004[28] ; Donada & Nogatchewsky, 2006[29]) : they investigate how vertical interfirm relationships can be drawn up.
Van der Meer-Kooistra and Vosselman (2000) propose a market-based pattern, a bureaucracy-based pattern, and a trust-based to define three patterns of management modes.
The market-based and bureaucracy-based patterns find justification in the theoretical framework of TCE (transaction cost economics) and can be related to the concept of " inter-firm governance" developed by Heide (1994[30], 2003[31]), who oppose two major forms of governance (market and non-market governance), but split the non-market governance between the hierarchical and the bilateral governance.
The bilateral governance is not retained by Van der Meer-Kooistra and Vosselman (2000), who use the trust-based or social-based pattern, which would find roots in social psychology.
The bureaucracy-based pattern is a combination of the market-based and the trust-based pattern:

	Market-based pattern	Bureaucracy-based pattern	Trust-based pattern
Contact phase	Competitive bidding	Pre-selection of potential suppliers ; bidding procedures	Trust, stemming from friendship
Contract phase	No detailed contracting	Detailed and comprehensive contracting	Framework contracts: contractual trust
Execution phase	Periodical	Supervision; performance measurement	Personal consultation and coordination

Fig. 1- Based on MEER-KOOISTRA Jeltje van der, VOSSELMAN Ed G. J. (2000), *"Management control of interfirm transactional relationships : the case of industrial renovations and maintenance"* Accounting, Organizations and Society Vol. 25 pp. 51-77

Further to those three management control patterns, Van der Meer-Kooistra and Vosselman (2000) have found out some contingency factors that explain the pattern choices:

Contingency factors	Market-based pattern	Bureaucracy-based pattern	Trust-based pattern
Transaction characteristics	Low asset specificity High repetition Short to medium term contract	Medium to High asset specificity Medium to long term contract	High asset specificity Low repetition Long term contract
Transaction environment characteristics	Market price contains al the market information Social embeddedness irrelevant	Future contingencies are more or less known	Future contingencies are unknown Social embeddedness
Party characteristics	Not important	Asymmetry in bargaining power	No asymmetry in bargaining power

Fig. 2- Summarized from MEER-KOOISTRA Jeltje van der, VOSSELMAN Ed G. J. (2000), *"Management control of interfirm transactional relationships : the case of industrial renovations and maintenance"* Accounting, Organizations and Society Vol. 25 pp. 51-77

Thus, most important factors to explain the choice and efficiency of control patterns are:

- ➪ Asset specificity
- ➪ Length of contract
- ➪ Knowledge of future contingencies
- ➪ Role of social embeddedness
- ➪ Asymmetry or not in bargaining power

Further to those three patterns, Donada & Nogatchewsky (2006) study an empirical case where the market-based pattern seem to dominate, but which “ also relies, to a lesser extent, on social-based and bureaucracy-based controls. Analyzing this case enables us to go beyond the strict propositions of theoretical frameworks and discuss the complementarities of the three modes. These modes do not appear to be exclusive one from another. In the specific context of a firm in a situation of highly favourable asymmetric dependence (towards the buyer), control modes seem to overlap, forming the most complete system to encompass the goals of the various internal actors involved in interfirm transactional relationships”. In that specific case, market-based pattern is blended with bureaucracy-based pattern, and used by the buyer to assert and maintain his power over his suppliers. Trust-based pattern is used at the operational company level (plant staff) to get the supplier’s flexibility and adaptability they require.
Those observations can be linked to Hakansson and Lind (2004) research who bring out the different control mode entanglements when there is a network of firms with different actors. Their research is based on Richardson (1972)[32] typology, to study market, hierarchy and co-operation within networks of firms and define that those “three forms are not just alternatives, but are complementary to each other” as interfirm relationship coordination are often led by two or more levels of coordination.

That literature from various academic fields is going to help us to define mixed vertical exchange forms and to refine our research questions as is next to be presented.

Research field and questions

As the specificity of B to B marketing is that suppliers are facing an active customer and, in many cases, are dependent on his actions (Gadde & Persson, 2004) or his willingness to enter the relationship (Blois, 1996[33]), we have chosen to focus on the customer side.
More specifically, we are interested in studying the supplier- customer relationship from Key Accounts' point of view as Malcom Mc Donald & al. (1997)[34] describe key account management as "a natural development of customer focus and relationship marketing in business-to-business markets."
From the suppliers' point of view Key Account's programs are the operational version of relationship marketing, but they are facing more and more powerful buyers who have sometimes set up their own e-market places (as Danone, Henkel and Nestlé did with CPG Market) including electronic auction tools, and use transactional tools to manage their supplier relationships.

Our research should help to understand why and how Key Accounts mix "transactional/relational hybrid", hence paradoxical, exchange forms in their relationships with suppliers.

The first part of the question means finding out what Key Accounts are aiming at when managing their supplier relationships: If we refer to the management control literature (see supra), we may wonder if they are looking to "control" the relationship, meaning taking the necessary steps to reach the required level of relational performance. In that case they may wish to make the relationship more "efficient" and adapt the relational form to the contingency factors (Van der Meer-Kooistra and Vosselman, 2000). Further to Bradach & Eccles (1989) research, efficiency may also mean that one exchange form would be used simultaneously with another one to "correct" it, which would mean to avoid the weaknesses or disadvantages of the dominant form or to "re-enforce" the advantages of the dominant form. If we refer to Bengtsson and Kock (1999, 2000), the aim of Key Accounts may be to "optimize" that relationship: looking to benefit from the advantages of both the transactional and relational forms, as coopetition does in horizontal alliances. In that case, key Accounts would want to capture the maximum of value created (Ulaga, 2003), looking for relational benefits as well as pressure prices.

We will also investigate how Key Accounts deal with the paradox and the first level "conflict" that may arise from choosing those paradoxical mixed forms – How do they turn conflict into complementarities? How can they use trust and power at the same time?

This leads us to the question "how" do they mix vertical exchange forms:
If we apply, in marketing, the conceptual scheme defined by Perret & Josserand (2005)[35] to investigate in strategy the notion of "coopetition" in horizontal alliances, we can then deepen our research question "how" along two dimensions,

- ➪ A diachronic dimension, which implies a sequential approach: each opposite form is used in the same relationship one after the other.

➪ A synchronic dimension, which implies a partition between individuals or groups within the buying center that would each use a different exchange form.

With the diachronic dimension, by asking "how" key Accounts mix exchange forms, we should enlarge our questioning: do key Accounts mix "hybrid" exchange forms, in a punctual or a cyclical way ?
With the synchronic dimension, we should wonder if different hierarchical levels or different units (buyers/ users) within the key Account structure do not use different relational forms?

First exploratory studies

We have launched a first field study to better define those "transactional/ relational hybrid" forms of exchange from the Key Accounts buyer's point of view, but also to check whether there was a single or multiple "transactional/ relational hybrid" forms and to start analysing the paradox of mixing opposite exchange forms.

Data collection

The empirical stage of our research led us to study the relationships between a buyer and his suppliers within leading and non-competitive companies in different industries (not including the automotive industry).
We mixed industrial and services industries and specifically studied the supply relationships.
We led in-depth interviews with Purchasing Managers or Directors that were contacted through the alumni network of a Business School and were senior buyers with a solid purchase experience.
Our sample was made of ten interviews within ten companies. This was consistent with sample sizes recommended by scholars for exploratory studies (McCracken, 1988[36]).
In average, interviews last one hour to one hour and half. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed within 72 hours. We used thematic coding and a mapping of concept relationships (Miles & Hubermann, 1994, 2003[37]).

The first results allow us to define two "transactional/ relational hybrid" forms of exchange, that we hereunder illustrate with two typical company studies (one in the packaging industry and another one in industrial equipments).

In the first company, the buyer strategy is to leave his suppliers in uncertainty to minimize supplier opportunism risk and to obtain the best possible economic conditions. Thus, all supply contracts start with a bid with pre-selected suppliers (suppliers who work or have worked with the group or newcomers with good quality or innovative products and good financial health).
The result of the bid is mostly based on price (suppliers are supposed to abide by the specification book). Thus, the relationship with the supplier starts or is renewed as a result from their competitive position. No supplier can be in sole sourcing position. The buyer, to maintain pressure on suppliers and create uncertainty, keeps switching between European and local deals according to best market conditions, so that, building a long term supply strategy becomes more difficult for the supplier. The buyer never completely gets rid of a supplier and even a supplier,

who has lost a bid, will keep a small share of business. He makes sure to keep a network of suppliers among which he keeps track of market conditions and innovation level, but he regularly threatens to get rid of them (Kumar, 2005[38] would describe the buyer power as "punitive actions").

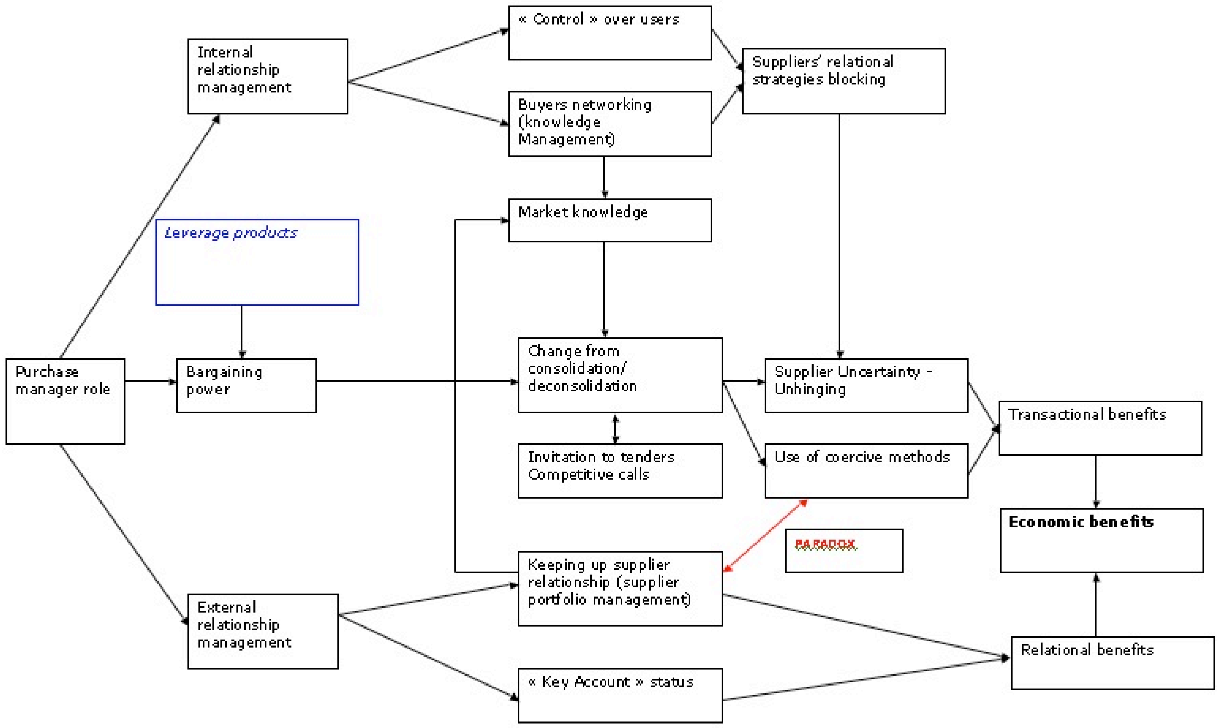

Fig. 3 - Relational mapping – Company 1

In summary, the buyer chooses a transactional approach (he is highly sensitive to prices and relationship is "bounded" by bids) but, at the same time he maintains a long term relationship with a network of suppliers.
In this company, the relational exchange is used to re-enforce the buyer's transactional strategy: the transactional exchange form prevails over the relational approach, but the relational exchange is present, only to make the transactional approach more efficient.

In the second company, the buyer pre-built a relationship which he called "excellence relationship" and which was materialised under the form of "framework contracts" signed for three years. They include all the customer expectations in terms of quality and service and how to deal with problems that may occur during a project.
It is interesting to stress there is no defined commitment for the purchaser to purchase but there is a commitment for the supplier to supply under the defined terms and conditions of the agreed contract. Those "framework contract" suppliers are part of a "closed" club of preferred suppliers. When a project occurs, the buyer launches a bid involving 2 or 3 "framework contract" suppliers and 2 or 3 challengers. If a "challenger" offers the most competitive solution, the "second

best" "framework contract" supplier are given the opportunity to align their price and are awarded the contract if they do so – otherwise, the "challenging" supplier win the project.

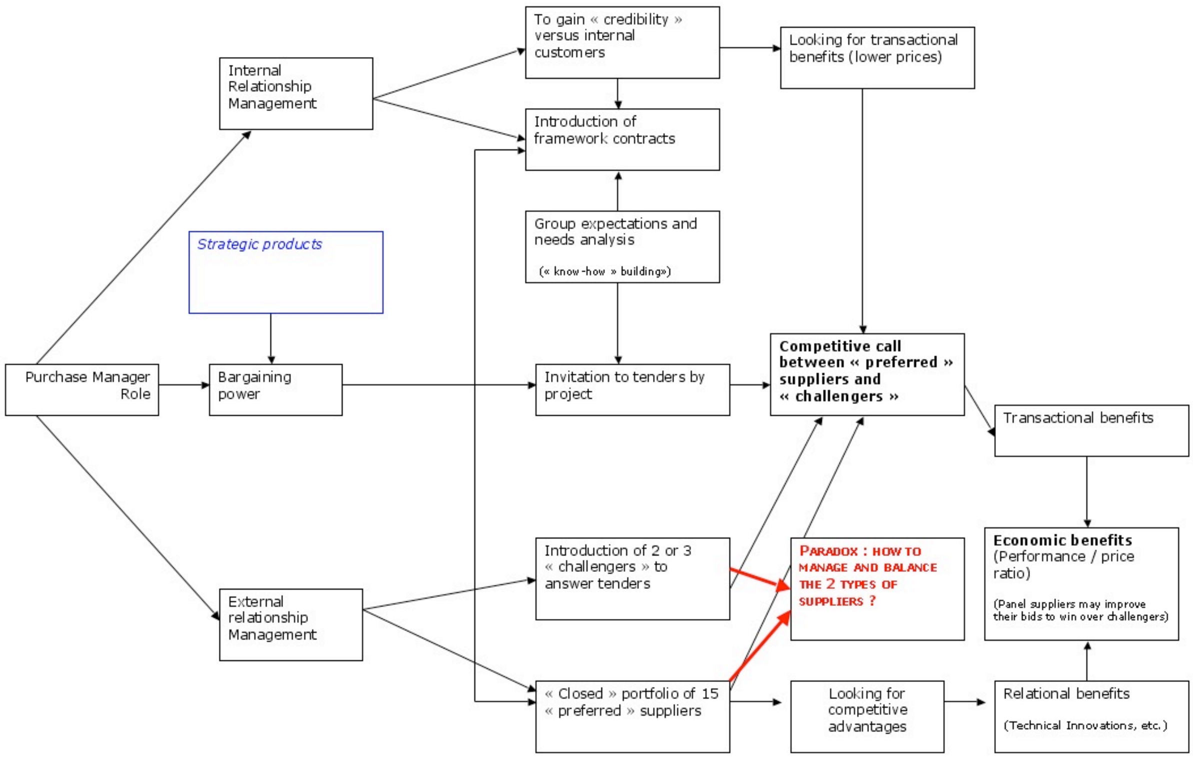

Fig. 4 - Relational mapping – company 2

In summary, we see that a relational collaborative exchange is the foundation of the relationship for a limited number of pre-selected suppliers, but each project is managed in a competitive and transactional way. Thus, we have a relational exchange form prevailing over a transactional approach. The framework contracts are not always reviewed neither up-dated, as the buyer "monitors" and "controls" the relationship with the regular use of transactional episodes. The transactional tool is used " to balance out" the partnership- like relationship and add some pressure on preferred suppliers not to take too big a share of the created value.

Findings and further investigations

Those two first sampled companies* show two hybrid exchange forms which are quite the opposite:

- ➪ A prevailing transactional exchange including relational features (company 1)
- ➪ A prevailing relational exchange including transactional features (company 2)

Those first empirical data help us to better understand Bradach & Eccles (1989) when they hint at an interaction of two mechanisms that are not balanced, but one of them is used to have an effect on the main one.

* We describe here the two most « representative » companies, which we can use as two paragons with which the other 8 companies can be grouped.

We notice in the first company that the relational approach "re-enforces" the transactional approach by giving to the buyer market information he needs to pressure prices, whereas the in the second company the transactional approach "corrects" any opportunism that could derive from the relational approach.

If we also assimilate those two hybrid relational forms to some "vertical coopetition" and compare them with the actual concept of (horizontal) coopetion (Bengtsson & Kock, 1999, 2000), we find out that only the two first forms prevail (transactional form prevailing over the relational one versus relational form prevailing over the transactional one) when each aspect dominates the opposite one, but we could not find any company where each aspect was balanced.
In the same approach, we can relate those two hybrid forms to the bureaucracy based pattern defined by Van de Meer-Koistra & Vosselman (2000), except that we must stress that we have two hybrid forms instead of one (see figure 5).
From our empirical results, the transactional form prevailing over a relational approach is more influenced by the market based pattern features whereas the relational form prevailing over a transactional approach is more influenced by the trust based pattern features.
In both forms, we are in a diachronic dimension: transactional sequences are launched as an episode in a long term relationship.

	Bureaucracy-based pattern (Van de Meer-Koistra & Vosselman, 2000)	A prevailing transactional exchange including relational features	A prevailing relational exchange including transactional features
Transaction characteristics	Medium to High asset specificity Medium to long term contract	Low to medium asset specificity High repetition Short to medium term contract	Medium to High asset specificity High repetition Long term contract
Transaction environment characteristics	Future contingencies are more or less known	Market price contains some of the market information Some future contingencies are unknown Social embeddedness low	Future contingencies are unknown Social embeddedness
Party characteristics	Asymmetry in bargaining power	Strong asymmetry in bargaining power	Asymmetry in bargaining power
Goal at mixing two relational forms		Re-enforcement of transactional aspect	Correction of relational aspect
Diachronic dimension		Cyclical : based on market prices	Cyclical: based on internal projects

Fig. 5 – The "transactional/relational hybrid" exchange

In both companies the power of the key Accounts buyer is high (both customers are leaders in their sector and represent a high potential business share for their suppliers) and they design the relationship with the supplier.

That first exploratory study has helped us to better understand the interaction between the two opposite exchange forms that are mixed and this could lead us to design a first conceptual framework as follows:

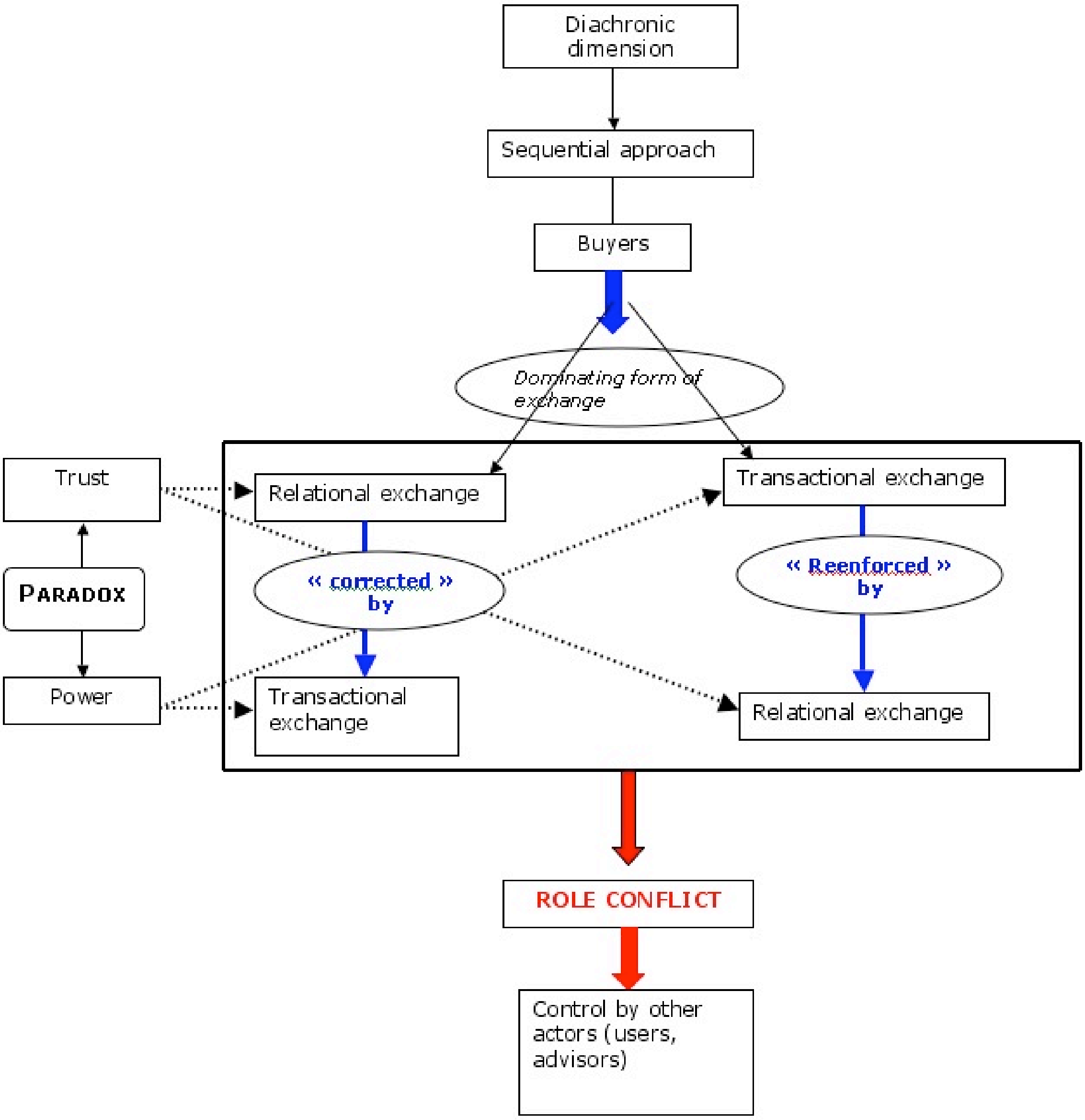

Fig. 6 – Conceptual mapping

We have thus defined two major types of "transactional/relational hybrid" exchanges with two exploratory studies, but we should yet investigate further, with enlarged case studies (Yin, 1989[39]),

- The "Role conflict" the buyer has to deal with mixing two paradoxical forms of exchange
- How do Key Accounts deal with the paradox they create?
- How do their suppliers react (do Key Accounts reach their expected efficiency level?)?

Our first exploratory study also reach the limits of being from a single purchase level and to be focused on the decision making process, whereas a complete case study will broaden our perspective.

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