

Taking Macneil's Contract Theory to New Directions

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Abstract

This paper opens a new field of theoretical discussion to connect norms, decision making and the outcomes of business relationships. Macneil (1980) developed his theory of contractual relations and showed a connection between exchange relationships in different relational contexts and norms guiding these relations. Here we are discussing Macneil's theory through strategic management research and furthering the theory to connect the norms with the outcomes of the relationships and thus, elaborating the relevance of the theory.

To summarize the key areas connected in this paper: (1) interaction structure; reflected in the norms in the relationship (2) basis of setting objectives for business relationships (3) outcomes of the relationship – the extent of future orientation and the business possibilities that the cooperation will open. As a result, we suggest a new reflection on the dimensions which affect the emergence of norms. Finally, our paper outlines three dimensions as central in the development of norms guiding exchanges in relationships; (1) interests (objectives) (2) power (3) the company's interaction culture.

Keywords: Macneil, norms, objectives, decision making, strategy, outcomes.

Introduction

Coherence in behaviour developing relationships and carrying out exchanges with a partner is a challenging task. All companies make decisions in different exchange contexts and perform exchanges at different levels of organization. To define the acceptable and unacceptable ways of interacting with external companies is facilitated through established constellations of norms and shared views of their application.

This paper makes a contribution to develop a framework to be used in analysing norms that guide decision making within business relations. The framework serves to intermediate between the theoretical construct of norms guiding exchange by Macneil and real-life business situations where people make choices and decisions about business relations.

Ian Macneil's (1980) contractual exchange theory, discussed more in detail below, presents three sets of norms which guide exchange: common contractual norms, relational norms and discrete norms. Macneil distinguishes two particular types of exchange (discrete and relational) where equivalent constellations of norms are intensified, while the common contractual norms remain relevant. The difference is in the intensity and content of certain norms (see Macneil 1980 and 1983). The theory suggests that the choice of the applied set of norms, relational or discrete, is determined through defining equivalent relational or discrete exchange contexts, and that relationships and individual transactions within them are managed along a consistent set of norms. Yet, the dynamic nature of a relationship, the various interests a company has for a business partner and the various contexts in which decisions are made enables us to doubt that norms in reality may not be and function so consistently. Perfect consistency seems not even desirable - as what Mintzberg et al. (2009) suggests, creativity is fed by inconsistencies.

The research often encounters criticism that, most of the studies focus on a selected set of relational norms, while the discrete norms – and also the common contractual norms are disregarded. Macneil (2003) himself points also out that his theory has been applied in too narrow a way – the researchers have studied sets of norms, which over-emphasize the harmony between the parties. (ibid.). This way the complexity of real life situations has been flattened to applying fairly a coherent set of relational norms.

Our paper questions the way of approaching Macneil's norms in an exceedingly coherent way and thus producing a unified view of reality. Most importantly, the expectation of applying the *either relational or discrete norms throughout a relationship* and on the other hand, the *application of a narrow set of relational norms* are questioned. To sum up the discussion, it is claimed here that striving to develop an environment of relationships which cultivate an innovative, yet efficient set of relationships necessitates the application of the diverse view of norms provided by the whole of Macneil's theory.

Applying relational norms in the relationship produces relational outcomes, but also affects outcomes gained from the relationship. Most studies have focused on increasing our knowledge of the effects of these norms to the relationship itself such as the levels of trust and opportunism within. Questions in focus have been such as, what is the effect of the norms on the relationship quality (Jap, 2001), or to perceptions of partner's unfairness (Kaufman and Stern 1988), how do the norms prohibit opportunistic behaviours between partners (Heide and John, 1992) or their effect to conflicts (Dant and Schul, 1992) in the relationship. Focus on relational outcomes is natural as the norms have a purpose of creating structure for interactions. However, as norms create power for one or several parties to control behaviours (Coleman 1990) which are of interest to them, norms may have a connection to all interests that parties attach to the cooperation, including the objectives and outcomes of the relationship.

There are only few studies which focus on the connection between relational exchanges, norms and performance-related outcomes. To name few such studies, Noordewier, John and Nevin (1990) showed that relational governance improved customer's purchasing performance under conditions of high uncertainty (see also Cannon, Achrol and Gundlach 2000 for similar results). Ulaga (2003) showed a relation between the relational nature of exchanges and a number of outcomes such as product quality, product costs and process costs. Furthermore, a study by Fink, Edelman and Hatten (2006) suggests that the performance benefits from relational exchanges differ when the exchange environment is certain vs. uncertain.

Two studies (Kaufmann 1987 and Ivens 2006) distinguished a group of norms which they called 'value claiming' and another which they called 'value creating'. Kaufmann (1987) studied five particular norms and interpreted three of them, solidarity, role integrity and flexibility, as 'value creating' norms while he interpreted the two remaining norms, 'creation and limitation of power' and 'harmonisation of conflict', as value claiming norms. Ivens (2006) performed a factor analysis with a wider number of norms – a range consisting of most common contractual norms in Macneil's theory. He interpreted a factor with seven norms (solidarity, long-term orientation, information behaviour, flexibility, role integrity, planning behaviour, and mutuality) as implying value creation. The second factor, interpreted as value claiming consisted of four factors (monitoring behaviour, conflict resolution and power use).

Even if there can be found studies showing a connection between performance-related outcomes of the relationship and the applied norms, knowledge of this relation remains very scant and would deserve more attention. A more detailed discussion on the topic would be well-come.

In this paper we shall first discuss the basic principles of Macneil's theory. Then discussing literature on decision making and strategy we will show a connection between relational and discrete norms and outcomes at different levels of decision-making. The discussion ends in a suggestion to develop further the basis of defining norms to be applied in various decision-making situations within a relationship i.e. we suggest rethinking the continuum between relational and discrete exchanges. Eventually, we propose three factors to be developed both theoretically and empirically to reveal the multiplex connections between various contractual norms, objectives and outcomes from the cooperation.

Norms guiding exchanges – view on Macneil's contractual exchange theory

Macneil's (1980) relational contract theory (in marketing studies often referred to as the theory of relational exchange) is a major and frequently applied theoretical approach to studying and explaining behaviors in the context of diverse interests (see Macneil 1980, 4; 2000, 876). Macneil's theory distinguishes a wide range of particular behavioral expectations and norms, which develop at a level that has permitted their application in quantitative studies (see Spriggs, 1996; 157).

Macneil (1980, 1983, 2000) suggested a set of ten norms called common contractual norms, which are to function in all exchanges. These norms were: role integrity, mutuality, implementation of planning, effectuation of consent, flexibility, contractual solidarity, the linking norms: restitution, reliance, and expectation of interests, creation and restraint of power, propriety of means and harmonization of social matrix.

He (ibid.) suggests a distinction between relational and discrete exchange contexts, and equivalent two sets of norms; discrete and relational norms (Figure 1). The two exchange contexts at the two extremes of a continuum acknowledge in particular (1) the extent of *predictability of the future reliability and availability of reliable knowledge* and (2) *the extent of interests being shared* the (3) nature of actors as *self-interest maximizing* or *taking into*

consideration the interests of the partner. The latter two, the mutuality of interests and the nature of norms contains a view of actors either as atomistic or highly interconnected.

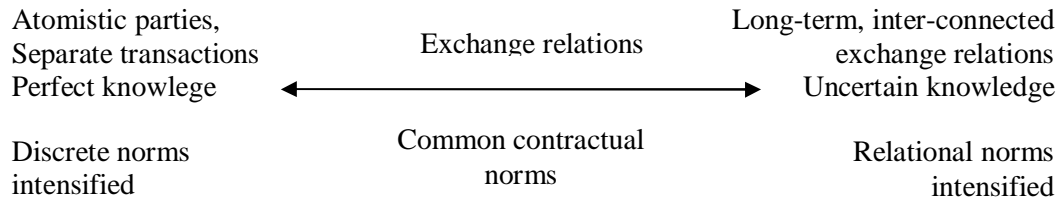


Figure 1: Exchange relations and equivalent norms adapted from Macneil (1980)

In discrete exchange situations, parties seek to maximize their self-interests. Here the parties are presumed atomistic and capable of making perfect plans for the future. **Discrete norms** serve to guide parties in agreed-upon exchanges. These norms emphasize planning, consent, monitoring and keeping promises in order to suppress opportunism (e.g. Macneil 1980). Pure discrete exchanges are highly analytical constructs with no real life equivalents (Macneil 2000). Accordingly, they have gained little attention in research.

In relational exchange situations, parties have important mutual interests. This gives rise to **relational norms**. Relationism defines cooperation in which parties voluntarily refrain from self-centered behavior. Relational norms serve the main purpose of maintaining a relationship and to ‘curtail behavior promoting individual parties’ goal orientation’ (Rokkan, Heide, Wathne 2003, 212). This type of situation has close real life equivalents and naturally lends itself to analysis and research. Long-term collaborative relationships emphasize the mutuality of interests and the pursuit of continuity almost by definition. Thus, studies of long-term relationships and collaboration understandably underline commitment and trust (Morgan and Hunt, 1994) and relational norms such as flexibility, information exchange, and solidarity (Heide and John 1992). However, exchange relationships in which parties’ interests are perfectly complementary seem ideal and rare.

Both of the two norm categories imply behaviors that contribute to the performance of the exchange relationship as a unit (see Table I). They, however, do not replace common contractual norms, but modify the ways these norms are applied. As discussed above, they two polar set of norms are based on different basic assumptions and function through different mechanisms. They reply to the particular discrete and relational exchange conditions. Accordingly, the theory suggests a choice between them, while common contractual norms still remain relevant. However, the two particular sets of norms are modifications and intensifications of the original common contractual norms.

Most empirical studies provide a view on applying a set of norms in a fairly consistent way in a relationship - a small set of relational norms. Few studies have provided a view that a consistent application of norms needs to be challenged. Blois (2002) discussed both individual and shared interests in his qualitative study, and suggested that discrete norms, along with the relational norms, are relevant in exchange relationships. Tuusjärvi (2000) cast doubt on whether strong reliance on the relational norms can eventually contribute to both relationship continuity and dissolution (see also Kiesler, Collins, and Miller 1969, 88-91, Tuusjärvi and Blois 2003), and Macneil himself notes that “short-term discreteness is sometimes beneficial to long-term relational patterns” (Macneil 1983, 364-366).

We question whether the polar way of explaining the emergence of norms is adequate and believe that a more detailed understanding of the basis of emergence of norms is needed to make researchers analytically better equipped in real-life business situations.

Managerial Decision Making

In the literature on strategic management, decision-making may be distinguished as tactical, strategic and visionary (Holstius and Malaska 2004). This distinction is widely accepted by business practitioners and also of interest to our discussion of relational norms. Apart from the smallest companies, these types of decisions may be made at different levels of an organization, with the exception of visionary decisions, which are made at the highest organizational levels. We begin by discussing these three approaches to decision-making and continue with a comparison between them and Macneil's (1980, 1983) notions concerning relational and discrete exchanges.

Holstius and Malaska (2004, 49-50) connect the three, *tactical, strategic and visionary*, categories of managerial decisions, with the uncertainty and objectives of the decision-making situation. They (ibid.) first define *tactical decisions*, where parties make short term decisions and are assumed to have knowledge of aspects of importance and where success is controlled on a short-term basis. In *strategic decisions*, the parties are acknowledged to act in an unpredictable environment and based on uncertain knowledge, where alternative scenarios can be developed. When situations change, parties make adaptations and reallocations of resources. In the last one of the three, level of *visionary decisions*, future is acknowledged to include discontinuities. Here the parties are to obtain new skills, maintain excellence and create novel options to name some of the objectives. (ibid.).

These different strategies of decision-making are claimed to produce different outcomes and are considered to be simultaneously available; "tactics is to react in the best possible way to the situation at hand. Tactics is aimed at achieving immediate results: getting orders, satisfying customers, making money, and creating cash flow." (Holstius and Malaska 2004, 50, see also school of design and planning by Mintzberg et al 2009). Through strategic decision-making "... manager's prepare the company for changes; they look for new constellations, for better ways to reallocate resources and to position the company in the market" (Holstius and Malaska 2004). The third, "visionary management is always proactive. It strives to define new business areas for the company and it comprises creation of new capabilities and organizational competence, and acquisition of new know-how and skills. The visionary management process ends up with a clear vision to renew strategic options and position the company in the new markets." (ibid.)

Another distinction of relevance is that of decisions taking place at the various hierarchical levels in an organization: Decisions are made at the corporate level, business-level and operational level - in small firms these may all be carried out by one person but in larger companies by separate persons. Relationships develop and function in each of these three levels. While the decisions at corporate level are considered to concern developing visions and business strategy, the decisions at the operational level focus on questions of efficiency and effectiveness of operations and implementing strategic decisions. In an ideal situation, the operational level succeeds to function along and support the company strategies. Due to power distribution and differences in interests and applied measures, we believe that the tactical decision-making may dominate at the lowest levels of hierarchy. (see e.g. Johnson, Scholes and Whittington 2006). Arising from the different decision-making contexts at these different levels, the established norms may also differ. We may therefore claim that the same norms may not be active at the all levels of organization.

As a conclusion, we suggest that norms which are active and intensified and guide a relationship may not be consistent throughout the particular relationship. The norms to be applied in one

relationship by different decision makers, at different organizational levels, and different contexts may be in conflict with each other.

Contrasting Macneil's Norms with Approaches to Decision Making

Contrasting Macneil's (1980) distinction of relational and discrete exchanges and equivalent norms with the levels and strategies of managerial decisions provides a fruitful field of discussion.

When comparing Macneil's (1980) norm theory with the theoretical notions of strategic management above, we can notice that the discrete norms, presentation and effectuating consent, rely upon the same assumptions and develop a similar scene for actions than the schools of design and planning by Mintzberg (2009) or the tactical decision making of Holstius and Malaska (2004). Accordingly, we suggest that discrete exchanges (similar to the tactical approach) is likely to lead to benefits that are predictable – yet, less likely to develop new ways of doing business.

On the other hand, the view created by the relational norms and assumptions they are based upon, relies on similar assumptions as the strategic management and visionary management – and equivalent decision making of Holstius and Malaska (*ibid.*) or e.g. learning school by Mintzberg et al. (2009). Accordingly, we believe that these norms provide better basis for learning results and outcomes which produce new insights for doing business (Espedal 2008).

Holstius and Malaska (2004) note that these three variants of decisions (tactical, strategic and visionary) are simultaneously available decision making strategies; The companies can choose to make simultaneously tactical, strategic and visionary decisions. (*ibid.*) The idea of a relationship being guided consistently along either discrete or relational constellation of norms seems ideal and difficult to realize as the decision making contexts vary along the interests, expected outcomes and the power available for the decision-makers.

Whether the simultaneous application of conflicting norms can be accomplished and how to apply them successfully in one particular relationship is a question to be asked. It has, however, been claimed in some research already that both relational and discrete norms are applied within one relationship (Blois 2002, Tuusjärvi 2003). Also Macneil claimed that discrete norms are profitable for relational exchange at times (Macneil 1983). On the other hand, it is at least as challenging to arrive at applying a set of norms consistently throughout the organization and exchange contexts.

The dimensions behind norm constellations

The theory's explanation of the development of norms along a continuum from relational to discrete constructs these two as opposing and directs the decision maker to apply only one of them in a relationship. The acknowledgement of conflicting norms being simultaneously active and intensified at different levels of managerial decisions or functioning in the same exchange relationships forces us to rethink the two-dimensional continuum as an explanation for the activation and intensification of relevant norms. It is worthwhile to revisit the proposed dimensions.

We suggest that to explain the activation and intensification of norms that guide actions in a relationship needs a more complex set of factors than a continuum suggested in the theory.

Based on the discussion above, such factors could be

- 1) *interests* (objectives),
- (2) *power* and
- (3) the *companies' interaction culture*.

All are closely connected to Macneil's (1980) original two-dimensional framework. Topics relevant in these tentative dimensions are briefly outlined here below.

Power of the company / decision-makers

Power is a central factor discussed in Macneil's theory. Macneil (1980) notes that in exchange situations, a promise is made and at the same time unilateral power is given to the partner or a third party. This power may arise from sources external to the relationship such as legal constraints, but also from the internal sources such as normative power creation. Exchange of power is inherent in the norm theory. Although companies are unwilling to give up power (Ring and Van de Ven 1994), developing norms means giving up power by definition (Coleman 1990). Discussion of power is connected with the topic of asymmetry in power relations (e.g. Gundlach and Cadotte 1994) which make the acceptance of norms more difficult. Furthermore, power relevant to the development and maintenance of norms depends on the power that the actors hold in their own organizations.

Interests connected to the relationship and to the exchange

For norms to develop, there needs to be *demand* for norms. This demand arises from the actor's strength of interests to control certain behaviors. Thus, partnering companies interests provide a basis for the emergence of norms.

Interests consist of the company's (1) own interests and (2) interests of the other. These two may be distinct from each other, but they may also be overlapping; shared or in conflict. Due to the importance of mutuality of interests – extent (3) of shared interests are acknowledged as an important basis for developing relational norms (Macneil 1980). Fourth (4) category of interests arises from the environment (Håkansson and Johansson 1993) i.e. from actors external to the relationship. (Tuusjärvi 1999 and 2003).

Macneil's theory emphasizes the meaning of mutually shared interests to the choice of norms (Macneil 1980). In the theory the shared interests mean interests shared with the exchange partner(s). However, when we think of the organization as consisting of different decision-making levels, the coherence of interests within one's own organization becomes relevant as well. Interests at the operational level where operational contracts are effectuated need not be the same as at the level of visionary planning where the relationships may be managed as a whole for numerous reasons such as short-term vs. long-term perspective, measurement issues, personal interests to name few.

Interaction culture

Majesci (1990) notes that "norms are rules that are culturally specific. They are cognitively and socially constructed on the basis of precedent. " He notes further, that "the existence and degree of existence of norms is determined by and is a function of the social setting at a given time" (ibid., 275) Each company has a corporate culture, which affects its relations and interaction with other actors. As modern business relations are embedded in more or less relational contexts, we may suggest that organizational approach to environment directs the organizations structuring of cooperation. The level of relationship capability varies between companies and therefore also availability of different kinds of relationships. Some companies strong in relationship capabilities may have the choice of a wider range of relationships, while others favor one particular interaction mode in their relationships. The typical or preferred mode(s) of interaction is(are) reflected in the dimension of 'interaction culture'. As the scheme here is about relationships, consent of both companies needs to exist for a certain mode of interaction to be effective (see e.g. Spekman and Salmond 1992).

Availability of Knowledge

Our scheme does not propose a particular dimension for reliability and availability of knowledge, which was a central element in Macneil's continuum. *Knowledge* is seen here primarily as a *resource* and as affecting the *power of actors*. However, this scheme contains the acknowledgement that all *knowledge* is imperfect. This imperfect knowledge is inherent in all these three dimensions – imperfect knowledge of power, of one's own and the other's interests as well as of interaction cultures.

Conclusions and contribution of the paper

Drawing from the above discussion on decision-making and strategic management (Holstius and Malaska 2004, and Mintzberg et al. 2009) together with Macneil's (1980, 1983) relational exchange theory, we suggest that all three sets (discrete, relational and common) of Macneil's (1980) norms are present and simultaneously available for the management of a relationship. In this tentative paper, we suggested three groups of forces affecting the activation and intensification of norms

- (1) interests (objectives) connected to the exchanges
(the extent of shared interests in particular),
- (2) power of the companies and their representatives
(the importance of power and its bilateral and unilateral nature as most important, while an important source of power is that of availability of knowledge)
- (3) the companies interaction culture reflected in its relational tendencies

We expect that the future development of suggestions in this paper will have a number of theoretical and practical contributions:

Firstly and most importantly, the framework reveals the meaning to reflect the coherence in the application of relational norms throughout the levels of decision-making.

Secondly, the framework corroborates the already earlier mentioned need to find a consensus between partners in the management of business relationship.

Furthermore, we believe that it provides a fruitful platform to reflect one's own and partner's approach and visions concerning the relationship.

Finally, the idea provides a more dynamic view of operating in a relationship than the framework consisting of discrete and relational contexts defining the choice of norms.

The integration of both the literature on norms and marketing strategy appears as a fruitful path to follow. It is a beginning for a discussion to provide the relational norm theory more validity both theoretically and practically. This field warrants considerable further research.

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