

## A NORDIC PERSPECTIVE ON RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS

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### Abstract

In the late 1990s, a group of Nordic researchers interested in relationship dissolution met to discuss the idea of a joint workshop. The aim of the paper is to give a voice to the multiple perspectives on relationship dynamics being used within this specific group and to present these to a larger audience. This article is the outcome of a novel process of collaborative writing and draws together the particular insights of a diverse writing team, which followed a specific process that was designed to gather a range of ideas pertaining to relationships and their dynamics. Four main complementary elements that capture the essentials of NoRD research are: approaches to core subject relationship dynamics, empirical anchoring, study relevance, and research group features. The features of NoRD research are related to each of the elements. The NoRD workshops and research presented at these events can be summarised as curious and rigorous research of managerially relevant issues related to relationship dynamics. The diversity of interests and research designs are what distinguish the group and its research. The multiplicity of NoRD research could inspire other researchers, especially those with an interest in relationship and network dynamics.

**Paper type:** Work-in-progress

**Track:** Relationship Dynamics

**Keywords:** Relationship dynamics, NoRD perspective, marketing theory, processual, change

## Prologue

A question frequently posed at NoRD workshops is, ‘What do we *really* mean when we use the terms ‘relationships’ and ‘dynamics’ and when we combine these words to form ‘relationship dynamics?’’

### PURPOSE OF THE PAPER AND RELEVANT LITERATURE

In the late 1990s, a group of Nordic researchers interested in relationship dissolution met to discuss the idea of a joint workshop. The first bi-annual international workshop, called the NoRD Nordic Workshop on Relationship Dissolution, was arranged in 2000. After a few workshops had taken place, the theme was broadened to relationship dynamics, since the focus of dissolution was felt to restrict our investigations. The aim of this article is to capture, in essence, the NoRD perspective, or perspectives, on relationship dynamics.<sup>1</sup> The work therefore draws upon the collective publications of the group including a published working paper (Havila, Holmlund-Rytkönen, Strandvik, and Tähtinen, 2001), an editorial published in a special issue on relationship ending in the *Journal of Marketing Management* (Tähtinen and Havila, 2004), papers presented at a special session at the IMP 2011 Conference, as well as the individual publications of the attendants of the workshop series, 13 of which have been presented at various NoRD workshops. NoRD conference papers have also been published in journals (*e.g.*, Halinen, Medlin, and Törnroos, 2012; Ryan, Tähtinen, Vanharanta, and Mainela, 2012).

However, this is not an ordinary literature review. The aim is not to present a systematic analysis of studies associated with the Nordic perspective on relationship dynamics or compare them to those with other perspectives. Some literature reviews and analyses made by NoRD researchers have been published (Halinen and Tähtinen, 2002; Tähtinen and Halinen, 2002; Tähtinen and Havila, 2004) and others are currently being revised. The aim is instead in this paper to give a voice to the multiple perspectives on relationship dynamics being used within this specific group and to present these to a larger audience. This multiplicity could inspire other researchers, especially those with an interest in relationship and network dynamics. We feel it is important to reflect on this, not with the aim of conflating the concept of dynamics, but to acknowledge the diversity.

### *Research method*

This article is the outcome of a novel process of collaborative writing and draws together the particular insights of a diverse writing team, which followed a specific process that was designed to gather a range of ideas pertaining to relationships and their dynamics. An open call went out to a selected group of past NoRD participants to collaborate on this paper; the finalized writing team was comprised of 11 researchers representing many universities in Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Ireland, and they are all listed as coauthors of this paper. A lead author was also identified who would have the main theorising task of integrating ideas across the group. The results were circulated among the authors, and the final manuscript was revised based on their

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on NoRD and links to lists of presented papers, see: <http://www.taloustieteet oulu.fi/index.php?815>

written comments before submission. Each author who agreed to take part was asked to adhere to the following instructions:

- 1) Find a time in your calendar that you can ‘hide away’ for (approximately) 40 minutes. Ensure no distractions (including self-initiated!).
- 2) Write your response to the following question, taking no longer than 10 minutes. Allow yourself to ‘just write’; don’t worry about polishing it, etc.
  - a. When you think/write about relationship dynamics, what do you mean by dynamics?
- 3) Then answer the next question (again giving yourself 10 minutes maximum writing time).
  - a. An empirical example of this view of dynamics would be....
    - \* Here you can elaborate on a research project that incorporates/uses/deploys this view in some way.
- 4) Answer the last question (again taking 10 minutes).
  - a. I would say that this view of dynamics is different from....
    - \* Here, if you feel you can, it would be good to compare yourself to another view on dynamics that you are aware of.
- 5) At the end of this ‘free writing’ period, you can read through your text and tidy it up, maybe even adding some references.
- 6) Then you are ready to submit your text.

All the coauthors (including the lead author) submitted their responses as Word files via email to the lead author. The data consisted of 35 pages, and the length of the individual answers varied from 1 page to 6 pages. The material was supplemented with abstract-level information from presented NoRD papers (see Appendix 1 for a list of these papers). Thereafter, the lead author analysed the data inductively by forming main areas of emphasis and exemplifying the diversity of perspectives from submitted responses. The findings of the analysis are described in the following section.

#### AREAS OF EMPHASIS IN THE NORDIC PERSPECTIVE ON RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS

The different theoretical and methodological backgrounds of the NoRD scholars were reflected in their responses, which covered a wide range of different issues on relationship dynamics. The left-hand side column in Figure 1 summarises the Nordic research perspectives on relationship dynamics with four main complementary elements that capture the essentials of NoRD research: approaches to core subject relationship dynamics, empirical anchoring, study relevance, and research group features. Different issues listed under each area further reveal the diversity of different author perspectives. The right-hand side column relates NoRD research to each element. The first three elements were formed from main themes in the submitted material and the research group feature element was added since it captures distinctive characteristic of the group.

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>Main elements</b>  |   |
| <b>Approaches to core subject, relationship dynamics</b>  | <b>In NoRD perspective:</b>   |
| <p><i>Content</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inherent &amp; turbulence</li> <li>• Incidents &amp; events, crisis</li> <li>• Process &amp; outcome</li> <li>• Change &amp; stability</li> <li>• Tension</li> <li>• Volatility &amp; predictability</li> <li>• Visible &amp; hidden</li> <li>• Core: resources or activities or actors or emotions or cognition (perception) or combination of these</li> </ul> <p><i>Framing</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time scope</li> <li>• Unit/level of analysis</li> <li>• Boundaries to external context and embeddedness</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Different approaches with main types such as variance, change as process, change &amp; stability</li> <li>• Different dynamics core content types</li> <li>• Tendency to take neutral stance ie dynamics not automatically positive or negative</li> <li>• Tendency to favor more complex or combine approaches</li> <li>• Tendency to favor longer-term approaches</li> <li>• Variety in unit/levels of analysis varies, eg from a single episode or actor or relationship to a net of interlinked actors, relationships</li> <li>• Tendency to consider different types and levels of contextuality</li> </ul> |
| <b>Empirical anchoring</b>  |   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empirical setting breadth</li> <li>• Method multiplicity</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research with different core, eg resources, activities, actor, emotion, cognitions or combination of these</li> <li>• Research with different relationship perspectives mix, eg customer, product, service, relationship supplier, system, network, global approach, sector-specific</li> <li>• Manifold roles of empirical insights are accredited</li> <li>• Different methods and data types are used and acknowledged</li> <li>• Method development is encouraged</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Study relevance</b>  |   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theoretical contribution and inspiration striving</li> <li>• Methodological contribution ambition</li> <li>• Managerial relevance and implications</li> <li>• Non-business stakeholder relevance and implications</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Critical reviews and analysis of underlying assumptions and theoretical foundations are comparatively many</li> <li>• Vocabulary sensitivity is stressed</li> <li>• Problematizing in focus but not solely</li> <li>• Conceptual development in focus but not solely</li> <li>• Research ideas and findings opening up new research avenues are especially appreciated</li> <li>• Not relevance for merely companies but also a great number of other stakeholders is considered</li> </ul>  |

| <b>Research group features</b>  |  |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theoretical background diversity</li> <li>• Shared values among researchers</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Original initiative from Nordic countries-based researchers with shared focused interest in revealing dynamics in different relationship settings</li> <li>• Open group small-scale (30-40 persons) bi-annual workshop meetings with the aims of promoting and conducting inspirational high-quality relationship dynamics research</li> <li>• Researchers with different theoretical backgrounds connect</li> <li>• Shared view that heterogeneity is fruitful and inspiring</li> <li>• Long-term sustained interest in relationship dynamics with aspiration to research and share ideas with in-group members and others as well as produce high-quality publications</li> </ul> |

### *Approaches to core subject relationship dynamics*

There is extensive consensus in the Nordic perspective that research rests on the question of what the relationship 'is' and that there 'is' no relationship. It therefore makes no sense to directly ask about relationships—relationship is a theoretical concept for analytical purposes, as is dynamics. The Nordic perspective has an exceptionally broad view of what counts as relationship dynamics. One of the approaches to dynamics is seeing it as inherent, the continuous emergence and evolution of relationships *and* business networks. Dynamics on a macro-level, such as scrutinizing how business logics develop over time, is one extremist view. Others attach the concept of dynamics to instances of turbulence in relationships, such as minor but repetitive issues (*i.e.*, a critical incident; see Keveany, 1995), or associate dynamics with main events or a crisis, such as a factory closing down or a company merger. Triggers, force, and reasons of change with different loci were mentioned in the author responses, inside either a counterpart or their relationship or outside them in their setting. NoRD research does explore specific times/phases in relationships, such as an initiation or ending, but it is far from delimited to these. Many researchers are furthermore critical toward a preconfigured trajectory of the so-called life-cycle view of relationships.

Defining dynamics in terms of a process or an outcome of such a process is a classic approach. The processes under study may relate to social practices, economic exchange, resources and their integration, or the management of actor relationships and/or networks, such as the development of new services, integrating suppliers, sharing customer knowledge, the development of customer relationships, orchestrating companies to cocreate service innovations, etc. The process view could be applied at a micro-level within a selected relationship phase or at a macro-level as connected to a surrounding network setting. Instead of focusing on substantives such as elements, factors, dimensions, mediators, moderators, etc., when describing structures, an observation made was that more focus needs to be placed on developing verbs capturing processes or change.

Tension was mentioned by a few authors and was used as a key word in two respects: To define dynamics as tension in a relationship, such as the processes emerging out of deliberate intentions to create or resist a change, or to see dynamics as arising out of the tension between two 'opposing forces'; *i.e.*, stability (or structure) versus change view (cf. the dialectic approach by Van de Ven and Poole, 2005), such as the efforts going into maintaining stability in the face of forces of change (cf. the constructivist and deterministic approaches by Van de Ven and Poole, 1995). Some claim that relationship dynamics should involve both sides of a stability-change paradox, while some focus on the change element.

Volatility, predictability, and visibility raise many issues when relationship dynamics as a phenomenon is problematized. For example, what about a series of changes versus a single instance of dynamics? What about expected versus sudden changes, and the non-happening of things? Changes in intensity were raised in the various author responses, including the opposite of a volatile relationship as a form of dynamism. Relationships can exist without really going anywhere, such as freewheeling relationships with no interactive dynamic, no growth, and no generation of new value, where there is no more for the parties to get out of the relationship. Other questions raised were, When does a change qualify as a change? How can dynamics be 'seen' in empirical studies? And what kind of so-called hidden aspects of dynamics are there and what are the implications if they are disregarded? In fact, some authors mentioned that the dynamics do not rest with ideas of 'change over time,' but rather with how differences are manifested, negotiated, or reproduced in a relationship (in the personal interaction or 'systematised' in a sponsorship proposal, etc.). All in all, many issues were raised that questioned current relationship dynamics studies and that opened up new research ideas.

Much emphasis is consequently put on framing the research topic and its boundaries, which entails taking a stance, for analytical purposes, on how to distinguish and treat the research topic. The time setting was also considered as a part of how the various authors' approaches to dynamics were selected. Typically, extensive emphasis is put on boundaries of the relationship dynamic core topic and its embeddedness; determining the unit and level of analysis, such as an individual, decision-making unit (*e.g.*, a family), group, interaction, project, product, contract, technology, relationship, triad, delineated net, selected business network, different network levels, society, international setting (cf. Bizzi and Langley, 2012); and the core of relationship dynamics, such as resource, activity, actor, emotion, or cognition types.

What adds to the challenge is the embedded nature of relationships; that is, relationships are broadly viewed as emergent entities operating within an open system (similar to the Interaction and Network perspective; see Håkansson and Snehota, 1990; Easton, 1992). There can be different kinds of embeddedness: temporal, spatial, cultural, organisational/structural, and institutional; this is especially important for those focusing on business-to-business relationships and networks even if many consumer studies also seem to embrace the idea of considering a broader context than the customer or the relationship.

### *Empirical anchoring*

All research approaches are encouraged; thus, no approach, method, or data type is considered superior to others—the value of the empirical method and data is instead based on how well they

match the research topic and support the proposed purpose. Diversity in empirical settings and product types is common and include not only company settings but also, for example, the non-profit sector, such as the health and university sectors.

Methods vary; hence, longitudinal data from extensive case studies, along with structural equation model-based studies, are found. The former type dominates this area of research and can involve following events and activities continuously (*e.g.*, participatory research) and collecting data in several selected moment of phases. Thus, collecting and analysing data retrospectively, through narrative interviews, for example, and in real time, such as through observations, combines the past and present and also looks towards the future. Secondary data, such as meeting minutes and e-mails, are also useful for obtaining rich, detailed descriptions using the logic of causality. Often, dyadic data are collected from both counterparts in a relationships, and as many individuals as possible participate. Many studies are long term and benefit from other sub-studies with complementing topics within larger research projects. Pre-understanding of the researchers within the empirical setting is often important. Sensitivity to the data and the informant's situation is needed, as many issues are subtle and complex.

Method multiplicity and development are also encouraged, and oftentimes, methods, (*e.g.*, a theme-based approach or a critical incident technique) are borrowed from other disciplines. Data quality is often debated, and quality rather than quantity of data is usually considered to be essential. One reason for this is the special demand on longitudinal data that links to the fundamental emphasis on innovativeness and theory-generation rather than theory-conformation or testing.

### *Study Relevance*

The Nordic perspective embraces all kinds of studies with different ontological and epistemological views and thus is not restricted to any single theoretical foundation, method, or empirical setting. Papers with original research ideas or original data are especially encouraged, and they—together with conceptual development studies—dominate the bulk of the NoRD research. The choice and meaning of the terms are highlighted as are sensitivity to vocabulary.

Theorizing (*i.e.*, concept and model development) is essential for many although not all of the authors. In addition, the authors presented and later published many novel conceptualisations, such as relationship-ending competence (Havila, Medlin, and Salmi, 2013), relationship fading (Akerlund, 2005), relationship stress (Holmlund-Rytkönen and Strandvik, 2005), customer needing (Strandvik, Holmlund, and Edvardsson, 2012), relationship feature effect on ending (Tähtinen, Blois, Mittilä, 2007), and relationship adaption (Holma, 2010).

Relevance is broadly interpreted in this context and contains an emphasis on identifying a research gap in one or a combination of research streams, offering truly novel theoretical knowledge that inspires other researchers, and selecting research topics that are relevant for managers and other stakeholders and can offer them new and useful information and suggestions. Even though several, but not all, studies aim to be of managerial importance, many researchers acknowledge that the challenge is how to turn a contextually embedded description of a process into managerially interesting results.

### *Research group features*

One of the original triggers of the Nordic researchers to form the group and start organising the workshops was the observation that relationship dissolution had not been sufficiently recognised as a research gap in relationship management research and was highly managerially relevant. These observations still hold true today, more than 15 years later. Many of the authors stated that they were aware of different ways of approaching dynamics from other disciplines, such as the IMP approach, the strategy literature, and methodological and scientific reasoning. For many, the explicit ambition was to break free from these approaches while simultaneously building on them to formulate relevant research.

### THE NORD PERSPECTIVE COMPARED TO OTHERS

It is typical in relationship dynamic studies to explore triggers and sources of change and dynamics. This, however, does not apply to the Nordic perspective, which, in contrast, predominantly discusses more fundamental research issues, seeks boundaries, and explores diversity. For example, what does it mean and what new insights arise from, for example, using or switching between viewing dynamics from different perspectives and not only change or process; contrasting dynamics with stability and volatility, respectively; and switching between different time perspective and scopes of relationship dynamics? These are questions that are used to stimulate different and novel research questions and topics. There are also many who develop fuzzier and more complex models and question the sequential phase models that are typical of relationship dynamics research, indicating a life cycle with rather predictably changing levels of various relationship elements.

The NoRD view is different from the variance theoretical view on social phenomena and their dynamics, where the variance between independent and dependent variables is measured (Van de Ven and Engleman, 2004). It is also clearly different from the input/output-driven studies of factors that influence the process or that emerge as a result of the process, leaving the process itself as a 'black box.' The NoRD view is not interested in the change in specific factors, per se, but rather in the process of changing (see the process views of Van de Ven, 1992). The embeddedness is often emphasised as highly important for understanding and as being different from standard writings in, for example, the area of strategy, where agency is given a key role and the influence of other actors and the context is downplayed. This view is applicable to several epistemological views (critical realism and social constructivism, for example) but is mostly in line with social constructivism.

Theorising about different approaches to dynamics and alternative ways of studying dynamics is a key feature of the Nordic perspective. This means that the aim of formulations includes answering 'When,' 'Who,' 'How,' and 'Where,' in addition to 'Why' and, comparatively less often, 'To what extent' and 'What is the effect of,' as in variance theoretical and input/output-driven studies. Inspiration and input from other disciplines are commonly used to envision and discuss different ways of revealing dynamics in a multifaceted business setting.

An important question that arises out of the complex view of relationships (as emergent entities) is what enables the relationship to cohere in the face of such multiplicity. Important here is not only, perhaps, how managers iron out problems arising out of turbulence (internally or externally



generated), but also how they manage to keep the many disparate elements of a relationship ‘together’ in their everyday interactions. The broader relationship dynamics topic is obviously more studied than the dissolution, but both still offer ample research ideas and possibilities.

### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This has been the first analysis of NoRD research. The purpose of this group is to advance knowledge about a significant broad research area by problematizing, exploring, and theorizing relevant issues, which is very much in line with what MacInnis (2011) discusses in her article on conceptual thinking in marketing research. Many see relationships as complex emerging entities that ‘become’ over time and, as such, are intertwined with the dynamics concept. The various authors of this paper share an openness to different methods, represent different theoretical backgrounds, and combine these to formulate and explore facets of dynamics in different relationship settings. Addressing relevant issues and contributing with theoretically or practitioner-relevant new insights (cf. the insightful discussion on the need to recognise managerially relevant issues and how to develop managerially relevant knowledge by Jaworski, 2011). The fundamental aim from the start has been to have paper presentations that stimulate fruitful and thought-provoking discussions that refine and further the authors’ and the active audience’s research.

The NoRD workshops and research presented at these events can be summarised as curious and rigorous research of managerially relevant issues related to relationship dynamics. The diversity of interests and research designs are what distinguish the group and its research. Researchers may join and leave as they see fit—it is a shared interest in the complex and fascinating phenomenon of relationship dynamics that keeps the group together.

The authors want to express their gratitude to all participants and our inspiring discussions at the seven biannual NoRD workshops (the Nordic Workshop of Relationship Dynamics, formerly the Nordic Workshop of Relationship Dissolution) that have taken place since 2000.

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