What Constitutes A Relationship?
Towards A Conceptualisation Of Relationship Marketing's Central Construct

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Abstract

This paper employs two heuristics - the morphological box and Aristotle’s four Causae to analyse and synthesise the relationship construct. What constitutes a marketing relationship depends on the chosen perspective: From a behavioural perspective a sequence of interdependent exchange episodes constitutes a relationship. From an attitudinal perspective no relationship exists unless the partners perceive its existence. Consequently two modes of relationship marketing can be distinguished

Introduction

The concept of relationship marketing has undeniably become one of the most fashionable marketing topics of the 1990’s (e.g. Grönroos 1994; Gummesson 1997). In a sequence of international conferences and seminars, the academic world has evaluated the benefits of the relational approach for the marketing discipline. Several journals have devoted special issues on the topic creating a well-recognised forum for academic discussion. The relational approach not only enjoys popularity among marketing scientists. Also, practising marketing managers are well aware that relationships matter in the business world. Overall relationships are the central construct of contemporary marketing thinking (e.g. Wilson 1995).

How can the construct ‘relationship’ be conceptualised? Within the IMP group there is some consensus that a relationship has two main characteristics (McLoughlin & De Burca 1996, p. 1014):

1. A relationship is an interactive process, i.e. both buyers and sellers are active.
2. A relationship tends to be long term by nature

However, apart from these two characteristics the relationship remains a rather open and not thoroughly conceptualised construct. Bagozzi (1995, p. 275) points out: '‘A glaring omission in the emerging relationship marketing literature in general [...] is the neglect of efforts to conceptualize what a marketing relationship is.” Blois (1996, p. 107) suggests “that, unless a counter-intuitive definition of a relationship is used, it is impossible for firms not to have relationships” Fournier (1998, p. 343) criticises. “In a

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In pursuing this clarity, this paper raises the question: What constitutes a relationship? To derive possible answers we structure our paper in four modules: First, we discuss two heuristics that help clarify the conceptualisation of a hypothetical construct. Next, we identify thirteen attributes that describe a relationship thoroughly and free of redundancy. Then, we analyse the conceptualisation of the relationship construct in different scientific disciplines. Finally, we analyse the conceptualisation of the relationship construct in the marketing discipline and conclude that two modes of relationship marketing coexist: ‘limited’ relationship marketing versus ‘extended’ relationship marketing. Talking about relationship marketing without any reference to its mode can be misleading.

Morphology and Four Causae clarify the conceptualisation of hypothetical constructs

The relationship is a hypothetical construct that lies at the very core of marketing and many other scientific disciplines. Due to these two characteristics firstly to be a hypothetical construct and secondly to be pivotal to many disciplines the conceptualisation of a relationship can never be “correct.” It can only be expedient or not expedient (Eysenck 1980, p. 10). An expedient conceptualisation meets three prerequisites:

1. it fits to the situation in which it is to be used,
2. it explains the hypothetical construct thoroughly, and
3. it explains the hypothetical construct free of redundancy.

Morphology is a heuristic that helps to meet these three prerequisites. One of its most practicable and useful instruments is the morphological box. The morphological box was introduced by Fritz Zwicky, a Swiss Astronomer in the 1940s, and has shown its usefulness in creative problem solving, operations research and in computer sciences.

The morphological box is based on a process of negation and construction (Müller-Merbach 1976, pp. 128-129):

- First the construct has to be decomposed. The decomposition leads to a number of attributes that make up all possible ways of comprehension. To give a tangible example first, a passenger vehicle can be decomposed into "form of ground contact", "propulsion", "colour", "type of passenger seating" etc.

- In a second step of negation all possible realisations of the attributes are determined. E.g. the attribute "form of ground contact" can have the realisations "rubber tyre", "wooden wheel", "hover stream", "legs", "track" etc.
Next, the construct under investigation is reconstructed. The person that reconstructs the hypothetical construct projects himself into a tangible situation and selects for each attribute one of its realisations.

To help fulfill the second and third prerequisite, another technique is suggested: the technique of the "Four Causae". It goes back to Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), an ancient Greek philosopher. He differentiated between the Causae "Materialis", "Formalis", "Efficiens", and "Finalis".

- Causa "Materialis" describes "that out of which a thing becomes to be and which persists" (Lear 1995, p. 28),
- Causa "Formalis" describes the form as such, or "the logos of the essence", which can be observed (Lear 1995, p. 28-34),
- Causa "Efficiens" addresses the origin of the existence of a thing or construct (Müller-Merbach 1992, p. 211), and
- Causa "Finalis" addresses the purpose or reason of the existence of something or, for the sake of which something is done (Lear 1995, p. 35-38).

The Four Causae help to obtain order in the obvious disorder of Negation. Both techniques, the morphological box and the Four Causae, will be used to explore the conceptualisation of the relationship construct.

Negation: The thirteen Attributes of a Relationship

On the highest level of abstraction, a relationship can be understood as a link between two parties (see Figure 1, Popper 1979, p. 155-156). Increased meaning arises when this link is embedded into the context of a specific situation. Then the link, the connection, the bond or the connecting process obtains its own meaning and adds information to the situation of Party A and Party B.

![Figure 1: Relationships connect parties.](image)

The morphological box and the Four Causae have been applied on the relationship construct. The result is illustrated in Table 1. In the first column the Four Causae are stated. In the second column a total of thirteen attributes (indicated in SMALL CAPITALS) are assigned to the Four Causae. In the following columns possible realisations are stated for all attributes.

In the first place, the two attributes assigned to Causa Materialis are discussed. The attribute OBJECT OF TRANSFER defines the type of object that is to be transferred in a relationship between two parties. Possible objects can be physical objects, information or property rights. They can be transferred between different forms of Parties, e.g. Party...
A, a human, has a relationship with Party B, a bank as an organisation. Property Right (in form of money) as an object is transferred between A and B.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Causa Materialis</th>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Possible Realisations of an Attribute</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NATURE OF PARTY</td>
<td>Human</td>
<td>Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(A or B)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Physical object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBJECT OF</td>
<td>Physical Objects</td>
<td>Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRANSFER</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Causa Formalis</th>
<th>MULTIPLEXITY</th>
<th>DIRECTION</th>
<th>TYPE</th>
<th>TEMPORAL HORIZON</th>
<th>INTENSITY</th>
<th>PERCEPTION</th>
<th>PERSPECTIVE</th>
<th>LEVEL OF EMBEDDEDNESS</th>
<th>LEVER TO ESTABLISH THE RELATIONSHIP</th>
<th>TRIGGER TO ESTABLISH RELATIONSHIP</th>
<th>FINALIS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1:1</td>
<td>A → B</td>
<td>dynamic (transfer of objects)</td>
<td>short term</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>from A</td>
<td>elementary</td>
<td>obligation</td>
<td>Party A</td>
<td>INTENTION TO ESTABLISH THE RELATIONSHIP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1:n</td>
<td>A ← B</td>
<td>static (no transfer of objects)</td>
<td>mid term</td>
<td>mid</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>from B</td>
<td>1. Level</td>
<td>Wish of A or B</td>
<td>Party B</td>
<td>to transfer objects (also mathematical functions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n:m</td>
<td>A ↔ B</td>
<td></td>
<td>long term</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>A and B</td>
<td>from above</td>
<td>2. Level</td>
<td>Constraints, restrictions</td>
<td>Party A and B</td>
<td>to co-ordinate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Morphological Box for “Relationships”

In the second place, eight attributes assigned to Causa Formalis are stated.

- **MULTIPLEXITY** indicates how many relationships of one kind can exist between Party A and Party B.

- **DIRECTION** defines in which way the relationship is pointing.

- **TYPE** prescribes if there is something exchanged within the relationship (dynamic) or not (static). Relationships of the TYPE Dynamic are also referred to as processes and those of the TYPE static as bonds (Johanson & Mattsson 1987, p. 34-38).

- **TEMPORAL HORIZON** gives information about the duration of the relationship.

- **INTENSITY** determines the relative strength of the relationship.
• **PERCEPTION** points out whether A, B, or both perceive the existence of the relationship.

• **PERPECTIVE** defines whether the relationship is interpreted from the view of A, of B or in a "helicopter view" from above.

• **LEVEL OF EMBEDDEDNESS** describes whether the relationship is elementary and can not be decomposed into further parts. In case the relationship is not elementary the level indicates how many steps are necessary to come from the focal relationship to the appropriate elementary relationship.

In the third place, two attributes assigned to Causa Efficiens are explained.

• **LEVER** to establish the relationship formulates the causes that lead to establish the relationship. The lever can either be an obligation, e.g. an order, the wish of A or B or constrains/restrictions, like the laws of nature.

• **TRIGGER** indicates who or what is the origin of the lever. Besides A and B, nature – representing the origin of the laws of nature – and third parties, e.g. governments, are identified as possible sources to trigger relationships.

In the fourth place, the attribute assigned to Causa Finalis is discussed. It describes the intention for establishing a relationship. In Table 2 six intentions are illustrated with a graphic symbol and examples are stated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INTENTION</th>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>to build an entity</td>
<td>\text{Party } A \rightarrow \text{Party } B</td>
<td>• Table-top (A) and table-leg (B) make up a table (AB).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to describe that two or more entities belong together</td>
<td>\text{Party } A \rightarrow \text{Party } B</td>
<td>• Husband (A) and wife (B) belong together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Cats (A) and dogs (B) are animals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Dealer (A) and Customer (B) trust each other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to establish hierarchical order</td>
<td>\text{Party } A \rightarrow \text{Party } B</td>
<td>• A clerk (B) is a subordinate of his boss (A).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• The marketing unit (B) is part of the company (A).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to establish order and direction of sequence</td>
<td>\text{Party } A \rightarrow \text{Party } B</td>
<td>• A letter has to be written (Activity A) before you can send it (Activity B).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to coordinate</td>
<td>\text{Party } A \rightarrow \text{Party } B</td>
<td>• Designing a product (Activity A) and manufacturing a product (Activity B) are tightly intertwined. Their execution has to be harmonised.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to transfer objects (also mathematical functions)</td>
<td>\text{Party } A \rightarrow \text{Party } B</td>
<td>• An individual (A) deposits money (OBJECT OF TRANSFER) in a bank (B).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• ( y = x^2 ) (y, B, ( x^2 ), A)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Intentions to establish a relationship.
According to the two steps of negation, possible conceptualisations of the relationship construct have been examined in the preceding section. Thirteen attributes and their possible realisations were identified and ordered with the Four Causae. On the basis of these realisations more than 6 million possible comprehensions of a relationship can be combined. Many of these combinations are not very helpful and do not address the comprehension in the indicated scientific disciplines. But, are there combinations that really make up the comprehension in the relevant scientific disciplines? Do they cover the relationships for example in Mathematics (4.1), in Computer Sciences (4.2) or in Social Psychology (4.3)? Do they cover the possible comprehension in Relationship Marketing?

In this section (4) the first question will be answered. For each of the three scientific disciplines a characteristic example of a relationship will be discussed. It will also be decided whether the morphological box delivered the relevant attributes as well as the required realisations of the attribute to describe relationships thoroughly and free of redundancy. The second question will be answered in the same manner but more detailed in sections (5) and (6).

The four disciplines have been chosen because of two reasons. First, when it comes to their content, their premises and their evidence, they seem to be far apart from each other. Second, relationships play an extraordinary role in the way how content, premises and evidence are derived. For some disciplines not all attributes are required, but for others all attributes might be necessary to draw a precise picture of the intended comprehension of a relationship.

Mathematics

It is enticing to say that everything in mathematics is a relationship. There are mathematical functions, axioms, if-then-proofs, and sets related to each other. Every elementary algebraic operation brings two or more pieces of information into a relationship as in addition, in subtraction, in multiplication, or in division. On the one side of an equation there is the algebraic argument and on the other side there should be the correct result. Argument and result do have a relationship.

On a higher level, the same is valid for mathematical functions, e.g. the function \( y = x^2 \). In this example \( y \) and \( x^2 \) are both pieces of information. The dynamic relationship between \( y \) and \( x^2 \) has a multiplexity of 1:1 and is directed in both ways. The equal sign can be interpreted as a command to send the values from one side of the equation to the other (Müller-Merbach 1974, p. 143-144). The relationship cannot be split up and is therefore elementary. The mathematical axioms define the relationship. An individual (third party) has to establish the relationship, and the relationship ends when one or both sides are removed. The intention to establish the relationship is to exchange value (units of information) from one side of the equation to the other.

At least for these examples, the morphological box seems to deliver the relevant attributes and the required realisations to characterise relationships in mathematics.

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Computer Sciences

In two manners the construct "relationship" is of high importance in Computer Sciences. Firstly, Computer Sciences are "applied" mathematics. Mathematical equations are in the core of computer sciences, e.g. when an input value is transformed into an output value. Secondly, relationships determine the connection between elements of data, e.g. in databases, and between pieces of information, like in hypertexts (Stief & Müller-Merbach 1998 pp. 895-896). Since relationships in mathematics have been examined in the section before the emphasis in this section is on relationships in databases.

In databases relationships connect two or more database tables (Müller-Merbach 1983, p. 741). For example in address databases there are two distinct tables. Table one contents data on persons. Table two contents data on institutions. In the record of each person there is a relationship to the institution he or she works for. Both tables contain data (simplifying: information). In our case persons and institutions are related 1:n which means, a person can only work for one institution. In other applications it could be sensible to provide the possibility to relate persons to more than one institution. In this case the multiplexity would be n:m (Rumbaugh et al. 1991, p. 71; Chen 1976, pp. 18-19).

Since the relationship is stored in the records of persons and not in the records of institutions the relationship is directed statically from persons to institutions. The relationship is seen from above, is elementary and cannot be disassembled into further relationships. A relationship will be established when an individual (third party) enters the appropriate data which means, someone will have to formulate an obligation that a person and an institution belong together.

In computer sciences the attributes and their realisations seem to determine relationships thoroughly and free of redundancy.

Social Psychology

Social Psychology is an interdisciplinary science. While sociology focuses on the influence of primary groups on people's lives, psychology draws attention to their individual determinants (Steiner 1974). Relationships play a pivotal role in social psychology. "Humans are conceived within relationships, born into relationships and live their lives within relationships with others. Each individual’s dependence on other people [...] is a fundamental fact of the human condition" (Berscheid & Pepplau 1983, p. 1).

Following Max Weber (1947, pp. 118-120) social psychology conceptualises a relationship as a reciprocal interaction process between two or more persons (e.g. McCall 1970; Kelley et al 1983). A relationship is regarded as a people-centred concept, i.e. relationships exist between humans only (Hinde 1979). Relationships are characterised as dynamic, involving an exchange of physical objects, information or property rights (Hinde 1995). They are often based on the intention to build an entity: "In social relationships the basis for the probability of interaction is that the two persons view themselves as the sole members of a common collectivity e.g. a marriage"
constraining them both to interact in a more or less specific fashion” (McCall 1970, pp 5-6).

Once more the morphological box appears to include the relevant attributes and their realisations to conceptualise a social relationship.

### The Marketing Relationship

As indicated above, the marketing discipline is characterised by a lack of effort to conceptualise the relationship construct. The seemingly unproblematic construct often remains unquestioned and uninvestigated (Sheaves & Barnes 1997, p. 216). Marketing scientists rely on their implicit assumptions about the nature of a relationship. This approach is only made possible because any scientist enters the debate „with a large set of preexisting ideas, concepts, labels, implicit and explicit theories, beliefs about causes of important phenomena, and expectations about consequences of various states or events“ (Kelley et al. 1970, p. 20).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Causa</th>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Possible Realisation of an Attribute</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Materials</td>
<td>NATURE OF PARTY (A or B)</td>
<td>Human</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OBJECT OF TRANSFER</td>
<td>Physical Objects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formals</td>
<td>MULTIPLEXITY</td>
<td>1:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DIRECTION</td>
<td>A ( \rightarrow ) B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TYPE</td>
<td>dynamic (transfer of objects)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TEMPORAL HORIZON</td>
<td>short term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>INTENSITY</td>
<td>high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PERCEPTION</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PERSPECTIVE</td>
<td>from A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LEVEL OF EMBEDDEDNESS</td>
<td>elementary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficiens</td>
<td>LEVER TO ESTABLISH THE RELATIONSHIP</td>
<td>obligation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TRIGGER TO ESTABLISH RELATIONSHIP</td>
<td>Party A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finals</td>
<td>INTENTION TO ESTABLISH THE RELATIONSHIP</td>
<td>to transfer objects (also mathematical functions)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Morphological Box for the behavioural conceptualisation of a marketing relationship

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After having reviewed the relevant literature, two conceptualisations of the relationship construct can be distinguished in the marketing discipline: a behavioural and an attitudinal one.

By now, the behavioural conceptualisation of a marketing relationship prevails. It characterises a marketing relationship as an interaction process between two or more parties which is ultimately driven by economic goals (Diller 1993, p.1). Typically it includes personal contacts and a long-term perspective (Morgan & Hunt 1994; Webster 1992). In the marketing discipline, relationships are usually established to exchange objects between the parties involved. The exchange object itself can be a physical object, it can be a property right, or information. A marketing relationship is often referred to as a sequence of exchange episodes (Dwyer, Schurr & Oh 1987). Table 3 provides a morphological overview over the behavioural conceptualisation of a marketing relationship. White cells represent typical realisations. Cells with hatching represent those realisations which are typically not applicable.

Recently, the behavioural conceptualisation of a marketing relationship has come under attack for being too narrow minded. Sheaves and Barnes (1997, p. 216-217) point out: „It is conceivable that a certain interaction may by some people be termed a relationship, while others may perceive the same interaction to be merely that, an interaction, devoid of the elements or characteristics which, in their minds, would constitute a relationship. [...] It is, therefore, quite likely that firms may feel that they have a relationship with their customers when no such relationship exists in the customers’ minds.“ According to Sheaves and Barnes (1997, p. 242) „no relationship exists unless the customer believes it exists."

People often refer to themselves having close relationships with their favourite objects, e.g. their cars. Fournier (1998, p. 344) also argues for brands to serve as relationship partners: „Brands can and do serve as viable relationship partners“ Though neither physical objects, information, nor property rights can be exchanged with a brand or a car, the relationship metaphor (Alajoutsijärvi, Eriksson & Tikkanen 1998) is regularly applied by customers as well as marketing managers. The marketing relationship these people are talking about is basically of static nature. First and foremost it exists in people’s minds.

In this attitudinal contemplation, Bliemel and Eggert (1998, p. 2) define a relationship as „a state of mutual acknowledgement that at any point in time can help set the stage for exchanges and coordination to take place." An attitudinal relationship can establish a hierarchical order, describe that two or more entities belong together and it can even build a common entity. Attitudinal relationships are not necessarily long-term oriented. They can also have a limited time horizon and be of low intensity (Bliemel & Eggert 1998, p. 4). While the number of long-term oriented, intense exchange relationships is limited by nature (e.g. Milardo 1992; Fournier, Dobscha & Mick 1998), people can keep up manifold attitudinal relationships. Table 4 shows the attitudinal conceptualisation of a marketing relationship.

Both conceptualisations of a marketing relationship need not necessarily be interdependent. Customers and suppliers can engage in a sequence of exchange episodes (which constitutes a marketing relationship from a behavioural point of view) while neither of both partners perceives a relationship to exist. In-depth interviews of
customers revealed that the extent to which a subject interacts with another is not indicative of the extent to which that subject perceives an attitudinal relationship. Sheaves and Barnes (1997, p. 242) have regularly encountered situations in focus groups where a company feels that it has a relationship with its customers because it contacts them regularly and rewards them for their business, only to find that some customers treat with derision the idea that they might have a relationship with that company.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Causa</th>
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<th>Possible Realisation of an Attribute</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Materialis</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBJECT OF TRANSFER</td>
<td>Information</td>
<td>Property Rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formalis</td>
<td>MULTIPLEXITY</td>
<td>1:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIRECTION</td>
<td>A -&gt; B</td>
<td>A &lt;-&gt; B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TYPE</td>
<td>dynamic (transfer of objects)</td>
<td>static (no transfer of objects)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEMPORAL HORIZON</td>
<td>short term</td>
<td>mid term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTENSITY</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>mid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERCEPTION</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
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<tr>
<td>PERSPECTIVE</td>
<td>from A</td>
<td>from B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1. Level</td>
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<td>Party A</td>
<td>Party B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finalis</td>
<td>INTENTION TO ESTABLISH THE RELATIONSHIP</td>
<td>to transfer objects (also mathematical functions)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Morphological Box for the attitudinal conceptualisation of a marketing relationship

Consequently, two modes of relationship marketing can be distinguished on a managerial level. With reference to Mattson (1997) and his vocabulary, we term the two modes as ‘limited’ versus ‘extended’ relationship marketing:

1. Limited relationship marketing employs the behavioural conceptualisation of a marketing relationship only. Limited relationship marketing focuses on repeat purchasing/selling behaviour. It is interested in the outcomes of, rather than the reasons for, a marketing relationship (see for a similar argument: Jacoby & Kyner 1973).

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2. Extended relationship marketing combines the behavioural and the attitudinal conceptualisations of a marketing relationship. In addition to the overt purchasing and selling behaviour, it is interested in the psychological states of the relationship partners. Here, repeat purchasing and selling behaviour alone is not regarded as sufficient to constitute a marketing relationship.

If we are dealing with two different modes of relationship marketing, however, it can be misleading to talk about relationship marketing without any reference to its mode (see for a similar argument: Möller & Halinen-Kaila 1998, pp. 186). Limited and extended relationship marketing not only differ in their conceptualisations of the marketing relationship. They also come to different managerial implications on how to build and sustain a marketing relationship: Building barriers to change can be an effective marketing instrument to lock-in customers and enjoy their repeat purchases in the context of limited relationship marketing. In the context of extended relationship marketing, however, barriers to change appear problematic: They can evoke negative feelings that destroy the very basis for an attitudinal relationship from the customer’s point of view.

**Inter-Firm Relationships**

Marketing relationships are established typically between a firm and its customers. In this chapter (6) inter-firm relationships are to be discussed. With the extension into inter-firm relationships the complexity of the construct is rising tremendously. The complexity rises since many relationships on an elementary level are embedded into relationships on a higher level (LEVEL OF EMBEDDEDNESS).

For example two individuals from two different firms can have a social relationship. They probably trust each other and enjoy working together. Both individuals work e.g. in the area of R&D in each company. In this fictive example, the individuals are part of a joint R&D project. The individuals bring in their social relationship in that of the two project groups. So, the project groups establish their own social relationship. In the process of developing the product both project groups exchange information and parts of the intended output (technical concept of a new product). In order not to be inefficient and to operationalise existing governing structures the process of exchanging information and outputs needs to be coordinated.

Climbing up the stairs of the organisational ladder the project groups are embedded into R&D departments and the R&D departments are part of the firm as an entirety. The relationships of the two individuals and the relationships of the two project groups flow into the relationship of the firms. Since the firms – respectively their managers – want to decrease the risk of opportunistic behaviour they have signed a partnership agreement. The agreement regulates the legal aspects of the partnership, e.g. stating who has the right to sell products based on the joint product concept, who might sell the patent of developed product, or who might change the product (PROPERTY RIGHTS, see Demsetz 1967).

On an even higher organisational level the partnering firms might be acting as a “quasi firm” (Eccles 1981, p. 336) operating as an entirety of its own. The partnership as an entirety might initiate further partnerships with other firms or even other partnerships. This constellation refers to the “spherical networks” of Miles and Snow (1986, 1995).
This kind of inter-partnership relationships leads inevitably to a very high level of complexity. It contains many further relationships on lower levels, as it contains relationships between firms, between groups, and between individuals. But there are not only relationships within these levels but also across them, so that e.g. an individual might have a relationship to a group, to a firm or to a partnership. Further, there might be relationships between individuals and physical objects, property rights or information belonging to another individual, group, firm or partnership. The complexity of this issue is reflected in the obvious difficulty to find a general comprehension of the term “relationship” in inter-firm partnering (see examples of Zeitz 1974, p. 137, Tichy & Fombrun 1979, p. 927, Johanson & Mattson 1987, pp. 35-39, Oliver 1990, pp. 241-249, Hippe 1996, p. 28). The complexity and the contradictions arise due to the convoluted arrangement of intersecting elementary relationships.

To analyse and understand relationships in the context of inter-firm partnerships it might be helpful (1) to differentiate between relationships on different organisational levels, (2) to examine the included elementary relationships and lower level relationships which are embedded in the inter-firm relationship, and (3) to apply the morphological box for all levels of relationships. Consequently, also for complex relationships the suggested techniques (Morphological Box and Four Causae) are useful and help to improve the conceptualisation of the relationship construct.

**Conclusion**

This paper provides possible answers to the question: What constitutes a relationship? It uses the morphological method and Aristotle's Four Causae to analyse and synthesise the conceptualisation of the relationship construct in several scientific disciplines. Thirteen attributes are found to describe the relationship construct thoroughly and free of redundancy.

In the marketing discipline two perspectives of the relationship construct coexist. What constitutes a relationship depends on the chosen perspective. From a behavioural perspective a sequence of interdependent exchange episodes already constitutes a relationship. From an attitudinal perspective no relationship exists unless the partners perceive its existence. In this attitudinal contemplation, a relationship is essentially a psychological state of mutual acknowledgement.

Both perspectives are not necessarily interdependent. Therefore two modes of relationship marketing can be distinguished: In a limited mode, relationship marketing focuses on repeat purchasing/selling behaviour. In an extended mode, relationship marketing means more than having regular contact with your customers and rewarding them for their patronage. Extended relationship marketing is also about making your customers feel they have a relationship with your firm.

**References**


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