

## Business-To-Business Interpersonal Relationships: The Role Of Professional Distance

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### Abstract

Drawing upon the logic of cognitive dissonance theory and the theory of reasoned action, we model dysfunctional behaviour in interpersonal B2B relationships as a mediated consequence of relational tensions. Based on construal level theory, this mediated effect is, in turn, moderated by professional distance. Our conceptualisation contributes to the literature as despite recognising the existence of relational tensions in interpersonal B2B relationships, there is little known about the intricacies underlying them and the manner in which they influence dysfunctional behaviours.

Keywords: relational tensions, business-to-business, professional distance, interpersonal

### Introduction

Business-to-business (B2B) relationships operate on two levels (Noordewier, John and Nevin, 1990; Tellefsen, 2002): the interorganisational relationship between the buying and selling firms (firm-to-firm), and the interpersonal relationship between the two firms' representatives (individual-to-individual). The latter is the primary conduit through which firms communicate, negotiate, and influence each other. The actions and decisions of these individuals determine the strength and structure of the relationship between the two firms (Tellefsen, 2002). As Jüttner and Wehrli (1995:230) suggest: "the focal points for facilitating and maintaining relationships are the psychological and social factors of the individual actors". Put simply, "organisations do not make decisions – people do" (Blois, 1997, p. 370).

The importance of these individual-to-individual relationships is highlighted by several authors (e.g. Price and Arnould, 1999; Coulter and Ligas, 2004; Haytko, 2004), who identify that personal ties can have both positive and negative effects on firm-level outcomes. For example, interpersonal relationships can facilitate problem solving and help overcome barriers to communication (Metcalf, Frear and Krishnan, 1992), provide social satisfaction (Geyskens and Steenkamp, 2000), and increase trust and commitment to a partnership (Wilson and Mummalaeni, 1986). However, these ties may also provide a partner with the opportunity to take advantage of emotional attachments by making unreasonable demands (Beatty *et al.*, 1996; Håkansson and Snehota, 1998). Thus, friendships in B2B contexts can induce relational tensions between economic (or instrumental) and friendship (or expressive) norms (Price and Arnould, 1999; Swan *et al.*, 2001). They provoke ties of obligation (Duck, 1998; Ford *et al.*, 1998), which can lead a firm representative to identify more closely with the interests of a customer than those of his employer (Ford *et al.*, 1998). This, in turn, can lead to tendencies towards dysfunctional behaviour, which may have possible implications at the firm-level. For example, if the emotional involvement (or feeling of friendship) of one actor is not fully reciprocated by the other, opportunities for unethical behaviour can evolve (Brass, Butterfield and Skaggs, 1998). Indeed, emotional bonding transcends economic exchange (Sheth and Parvatiyar 1995).

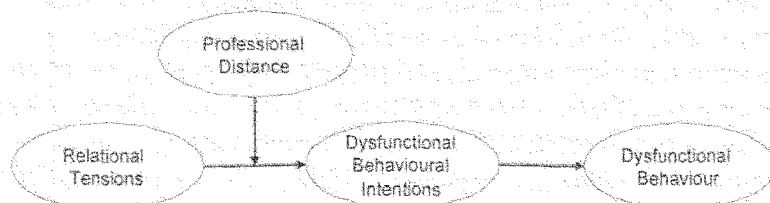
While the existence of these relational tensions is recognised, there is little known about the intricacies underlying them and the manner in which they affect unwarranted behaviour. As a consequence, organisational-level strategies are put in place to minimise the development of personal ties between individuals (Lovett, Harrison and Virick, 1997; Bendapudi and Leone, 2001 and 2002). These include staff rotation, working in teams and providing multiple staff

contacts (Bendapudi and Leone, 2002). In restricting the development of interpersonal relationships the benefits that they can afford are significantly diminished. Therefore, it is important to comprehend the way in which individuals handle these tensions in order to reduce their possible influence on dysfunctional behaviour, while maintaining the interpersonal relationship and the benefits it may offer. In this paper we advance our understanding of these processes by developing a conceptual framework that accounts for both the personal and commercial nature of B2B interpersonal relationships and their potential impact on dysfunctional behaviour.

### A Conceptual Model of B2B Interpersonal Relationships and Professional Distance

According to our conceptualisation firm representatives may have different or contradictory cognitions about the personal and commercial dimensions within their B2B interpersonal relationships. Drawing upon the logic of cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), a firm representative may experience tension (dissonance) when his/her cognitions regarding the personal and commercial dimensions of an interpersonal relationship with a business partner are psychologically inconsistent (Myers, 2005). This, in turn, provides justification for the existence of relational tensions regarding personal and commercial attitudes in the relationship. Consequently, a firm representative might have difficulties separating these cognitions and associated attitudes as they are embedded within a similar context, i.e. the firm-level business partnership. Further, according to the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980; Madden, Ellen, and Ajzen, 1992) these attitudes may cause dysfunctional behavioural intentions, which, in turn, may lead to behaviours that are inappropriate from either the business or personal perspective. Representatives may differ in the extent to which these relational tensions affect their dysfunctional behavioural intentions. Such differences may be reflected in their ability to tolerate such relational tensions or put strategies in place that distance themselves professionally from the personal relationship. The logic underlying this argument is based on construal level theory (Trope and Liberman, 2003). We label this ability *professional distance*. Figure 1 illustrates the structure of our framework, and Table 1 provides construct definitions. According to this framework, the effect of relational tensions on dysfunctional behaviour is mediated through dysfunctional behavioural intentions. The effect of relational tensions on dysfunctional behavioural intentions is, in turn, moderated by professional distance.

**Figure 1: B2B Interpersonal Relationships and Professional Distance**



**Table 1: Construct Definitions**

Construct	Definition
Relational Tensions	Dissonance between the cognitions held by a firm's representative regarding the commercial and personal dimensions of his/her B2B interpersonal relationship.
Dysfunctional Behavioural Intentions	Tendencies towards actions that may jeopardise the commercial interests of the firm.
Dysfunctional Behaviour	Actions that may jeopardise the commercial interests of the firm.
Professional Distance	An individual's ability to psychologically separate the commercial and personal cognitions within a B2B interpersonal relationship.

The following sections explore the nature of interpersonal B2B relationships and offer a conceptualisation of the relational tensions that occur within them. In addition, we explain the role of 'professional distance' in clarifying the effect of relational tensions on dysfunctional behavioural tendencies and actions.

### The Multiplex Nature of Interpersonal B2B Relationships

Many terms are routinely used interchangeably to describe interpersonal individual-to-individual and firm-to-firm B2B relationships. They are referred to as social bonds (Wilson, 1995; Perry, Cavaye and Coote, 2002), actor bonds (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995), friendships (e.g. Haytko, 2004), closeness (Nelson, 1998; Guenzi and Pelloni 2004; Ferguson, Pauline and Bergeron, 2005), liking (Conway and Swift, 2000; Nicholson, Compeau and Sethi, 2001), personal commitment (Tellefsen and Thomas, 2005) and interpersonal trust (Doney and Cannon 1997; Tellefsen and Thomas, 2005). Although these concepts are used synonymously, there is little consensus regarding their conceptual underpinnings and meanings. For example, social bonds are described as "the degree of mutual personal friendship and liking shared by the buyer and seller" (Wilson, 1995, p. 339), but also as the concepts of trust and commitment (Perry, Cavaye and Coote, 2002).

Swan and co-authors (2001), Coulter and Ligas (2004) and Haytko (2004) suggest that interpersonal relationships fall on a continuum from 'strictly business' to 'friendship'. In contrast to their view that business relationships and friendships are at opposite ends of the same construct, we argue that both friendship and business relationships can co-exist. We therefore propose that interpersonal relationships comprise both commercial (the individual-to-individual business relationship) and personal (the individual-to-individual 'friendship') dimensions. These are driven by four main elements: *similarity* (Lichtenthal and Tellefsen, 2001; Nicholson, Compeau and Sethi 2001); *liking* (Nicholson, Compeau and Sethi, 2001); *interpersonal trust* (McAllister, 1995; Johnson and Grayson 2005); and *interpersonal commitment* (Tellefsen and Thomas, 2005). These four elements are observable within both the commercial and personal dimensions of B2B interpersonal relationships.

"Similarity breeds connection" and is described as homophily, the principle that contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook, 2001, p. 451). Similarity takes two forms: similarity of *business* values (within the commercial dimension), and similarity of *personal* values (within the personal dimension). Both types of similarity have been found to positively influence liking (Lichtenthal and Tellefsen, 2001; Nicholson, Compeau and Sethi 2001; Byrne 1971).

Liking is an emotional connection that one feels for another that can be viewed as fondness or affection (Nicholson, Compeau and Sethi, 2001) and has positive influences on interpersonal trust (Nicholson, Compeau and Sethi 2001). B2B exchange relationships "[depend] upon the interaction of managers in the separate organisations and the "chemistry" which exists between purchasing and sales/marketing staff" (Blois 1997: 370). Firm representatives may experience *personal liking*, resulting from a feeling of personal similarity, and *professional liking*, which is influenced by perceptions of business similarity. It is important to note that *likability* has also been identified as a trust building process (e.g. Swan, Trawick and Silva 1985; Doney and Cannon 1997), and an important influence on personal commitment (Tellefsen and Thomas, 2005).

Described as the "binding force in most productive buyer-seller relationships" (Hawes, Mast and Swan, 1989, p. 1), evaluations of trustworthiness at the firm level may be separated from those of a firm's representative (Doney and Cannon 1997). The latter, interpersonal trust,

refers to "the extent of a boundary-spanning agent's trust in her counterpart in the partner organisation" (Zaheer, McEvily and Perrone, 1998), and comprises both affective and cognitive components (McAllister, 1995; Johnson and Grayson, 2005). Within the personal dimension, affective trust is characterised by emotional bonds between individuals, in which one party is trusted because they exhibit genuine concern and care for the welfare of another person (Lewis and Weigert, 1985). Within the commercial dimension, cognitive trust is a confidence or willingness to rely on a person's competence and reliability (Johnson and Grayson, 2005), and is based on knowledge built up as a result of past experiences. Interpersonal trust influences interpersonal commitment (Tellefsen and Thomas, 2005).

Without commitment, 'the most common dependent variable used in buyer-seller relationship studies' (Wilson, 1995, p. 37), no relationship is believed to exist (O'Malley, 2003, p. 132). A sense of commitment develops between a buyer and a seller that is different from the commitment they feel towards their firm (Hansen, Sandvik and Selnes, 2003; Tellefsen and Thomas, 2005). Affective commitment is derived from liking and positive feelings for a relationship partner (Hansen, Sandvik and Selnes, 2003), reflecting the personal dimension. Calculative commitment arises as a result of perceived switching costs or lack of better alternatives (Gundlach, Achrol and Mentzer, 1995), which may be relevant to the commercial dimension of interpersonal B2B relationships.

Our conceptualisation reflects the notion of multiplex relationships, discussed in social network literature (Brass, Butterfield and Skaggs, 1998). Multiplexity refers to the degree to which two actors are linked by more than one type of relationship (e.g. friend and business associate) (Burt, 1983). Each of these relationships can be characterised by specific goals, values, beliefs and interaction styles (Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate, 2000). We argue that, in multiplex business relationships, the relational tensions that exist between commercial and personal (or instrumental and expressive) goals arise from the difficulty in separating these 'relationships' from one another. The difficulty lies in 'switching cognitive gears' (Louis and Sutton, 1991, p. 55), or disengaging psychologically from one identity (business associate), and reengaging in a dissimilar identity ('friend') (Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate, 2000). Although the management of 'dual' or 'multiple' relationships is explored within the fields of professional psychology and nursing (e.g. Younggren and Gottlieb, 1994; Schank and Skovholt, 1997), such a phenomenon has not yet been addressed in the context of B2B relationships.

### **Dysfunctional Behavioural Intentions and Actions**

Relational tensions, arising as a result of dissonance between the commercial and personal dimensions of an interpersonal relationship, can lead a firm representative to identify more closely with the interests of a customer or business partner than those of his employer (Ford *et al.*, 1998). Indeed, extant literature highlights a number of dysfunctional consequences that occur as a result of interpersonal relationships (see Granovetter, 1985; Håkansson and Snehota, 1998; Grayson and Ambler, 1999). Relational tensions relate to the dissonance experienced by a representative regarding commercial and personal attitudes formed within the interpersonal B2B relationship. According to the theory of reasoned action, it is these attitudes underlying relational tensions that lead to behavioural intentions. A firm representative may act upon these intentions and behave accordingly. Affectively committed partners show a stronger intention to maintain a relationship than those who feel more calculatively committed (Wetzels, De Ruyter and van Birgelen, 1998). Such intentions can jeopardise the commercial interests of the organisation, as representatives may continue a relationship as a result of affective commitment, when, in fact, there may be other

commercially more viable exchange partners available to the firm. Recognising the potential for dysfunctional behaviour, firm representatives may professionally distance themselves to reduce the effect of relational tensions on dysfunctional behavioural tendencies.

### **The Role of Professional Distance**

Based on construal level theory (Trope and Liberman, 2003), the distancing required is influenced by the perceived type, valence and magnitude of outcomes associated with the relational tensions. Further, personal and commercial elements of the relationship may differ (Trope and Liberman, 2003). This affect-dependent argument implies that personal outcomes are weighted less than commercial outcomes. In the context of B2B interpersonal relationships, application of construal level theory would mean that a firm representative may be inclined to place more importance on the commercial dimension of the interpersonal relationship, than on that of the personal dimension. Therefore, it is proposed that a firm representative may decide to distance commercial and personal cognitions resulting in professional intentions that do not jeopardise the commercial goals of the organisation.

Professional distance is an individual's ability to psychologically separate the commercial and personal cognitions within a B2B interpersonal relationship. This ability is manifested in the capability to reduce the influence of relational tensions on intentions towards dysfunctional behaviour, while facilitating the maintenance of the interpersonal relationship, which can result in firm-level benefits for both parties. This process might include similar strategies to those adopted to reduce cognitive dissonance; changing attitudes, adding cognitions, altering the importance of the discrepancy, and reducing perceived choice (Franzoi, 2006). For example, as a result of relational tensions experienced between economic (the commercial role) and social (the personal role) norms, a firm representative might deliberately reduce disclosure of personal information, for fear of conflict between 'two personalities' (Swan *et al.* 2001, p. 35).

### **Conclusions and Directions for Future Research**

Drawing upon cognitive dissonance theory and the theory of reasoned action, this paper suggests a framework in which dysfunctional behavioural intentions in interpersonal B2B relationships are modelled as consequences of relational tensions. In line with construal level theory, we also suggest that this effect is moderated by professional distance. In addition, we have gained some empirical support for our proposed framework, utilising 20 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with managers from a range of industries. This qualitative research explores the concepts of relational tensions, dysfunctional behavioural intentions and actions, and the moderating role of professional distance, in the context of B2B interpersonal relationships from both buyer and seller perspectives. We envisage that the results of the qualitative work will provide the basis for two quantitative studies. Study 1 will involve the development of a core survey instrument comprising formative and reflective multi-item scales. Consequent data collection and analysis will empirically test the framework. Study 2 will utilise Discrete Choice Modelling to examine the nature of the proposed framework and its embodied effects, whereby probabilities of dysfunctional behaviour are estimated. These two studies will provide a stronger foundation for generalising our findings.

This paper contributes to the marketing literature as, notwithstanding the knowledge regarding the existence of relational tensions in interpersonal B2B relationships, there is a paucity of research which offers explanations regarding the intricacies that underlie them, and the manner in which they may influence dysfunctional behaviours. We believe our paper represents an additional step forward in our understanding of B2B interpersonal relationships.

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