

An extension of the marriage metaphor in buyer–seller relationships: An exploration of individual level process dynamics

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Abstract

The marriage metaphor has been used to make substantial contributions to our understanding of buyer–seller relationships. However, there has been increasing recognition that transfer from the marriage metaphor to buyer–seller relationships has not been fully explored. There is a need to explore buyer–seller relationships at a more micro, individual level that allows for greater consideration of relational/communication elements. This paper extends existing perspectives by integrating conceptual and empirical work from the interpersonal relationship literature. Specifically, the role of individual partner expectations, communication behavior, and appraisal processes in problem solving are delineated. Qualitative field interviews from participants representing multiple functional areas across both sides of business dyads are utilized as a means of examining the viability of the conceptual transfer from interpersonal to buyer–seller relationships. The work holds implications for future research and management of relational problem solving in buyer–seller partnerships.

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1. Introduction

Throughout the past two decades, the marriage metaphor has been increasingly accepted within the marketing domain as representing an important platform from which to explore business relationships (cf., Dwyer et al., 1987). Indeed, the resultant relationship marketing orientation has been recognized as a genuine paradigm shift for the discipline (cf., Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Sheth and Paratiyar, 1995).

Examples of how relationship marketing has contributed to the evolution of marketing theory and research include: the recognition of distinctive phases through which relationships develop and change; the importance of mutuality, trust, information sharing, and commitment in relationships; and that through cooperative relationships, uncertainty can be reduced, resources can be pooled and costs divided, and

problem solving can be more efficacious in the creation of value (cf., Dwyer et al., 1987; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Wilson, 1995).

While the marriage metaphor has been used to make substantial contributions to our understanding of buyer–seller relationships (cf., Dwyer et al., 1987; Morgan and Hunt, 1994), there has been increasing recognition that transfer from the marriage metaphor to buyer–seller relationships has not been fully explored (Hunt and Menon, 1995; Tynan, 1997; O'Malley and Tynan, 1999). To this point, notable weaknesses in the buyer–seller relationship literature appear to be related to the need to examine buyer–seller relationships at a more micro, individual level that allows for greater consideration of social/relational elements.

While there has long been recognition that business relationships ultimately progress through individuals interacting over time (cf., Hakansson, 1982), buyer–seller models have tended to focus on more macro, firm level factors and processes that by implication could be extended to interacting individuals but have not been explicitly linked to individual dyadic interaction.

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As an example of this macro focus, Anderson and Narus (1990) state that “In our experience, firms typically have only a coarse understanding of how the outcomes they are providing to partner firms compare with these two standards (i.e., outcomes compared to expectations and alternatives). Hence each firm needs to gain and periodically update its understanding of its partner firm’s requirements or expectations and the alternative outcomes competitors are offering” (p. 56). In fact, Dwyer et al. (1987) recognize that their process model of relationship phases is broad in orientation and subject to more fine grained (i.e., individual level) conceptual refinement.

Wilson (1995) recognizes the need for work examining relationships that is sensitive to the experience of partners as relationships move through interacting people. Alajoutsijarvi et al. (2001) also note the scarcity of work tied to essential aspects of individual level interaction. Indeed, Haytko (2004) most recently observed that it is difficult for relationship participants to think in terms of interfirm relationships without thinking of interpersonal relationships as their day-to-day experience involves working closely with *individuals*.

In addition to the need to examine buyer–seller relationships at a more micro, individual level, there also exists a need to address social/emotional elements in buyer–seller relationships. Value creation in buyer–seller relationships is dependent upon both *economic/technical* and *social/relational* elements (cf., Wilson, 1995). The economic/technical elements are related to costs, volume, and technical know-how. The relational elements are related to communication processes, emotions, and trust. Despite some recognition that important relationship outcomes (i.e., satisfaction, commitment, and value creation processes) are tied to both economic/technical *and* social/relational elements, recent literature has noted the limited attention social/relational elements have actually received in research and practice.

For example, Walter et al. (2001) note that the inclusion of non-economic or “soft functions” would offer a richer understanding of value creation in buyer–seller relationships. Hutt et al. (2000) observe that a failure to nurture interpersonal connections often has negative consequences for alliances. Alajoutsijarvi et al. (2001) specifically highlight the need for detailed examinations of patterns of interpersonal communication. Further, Bromberger and Hoover (2003) posit that the management of interpersonal relationships is the most tenuous aspect of supply chain management and the one that is least understood: “Despite years of process breakthroughs and elegant technology solutions, an agile, adaptive supply chain remains an elusive goal. Maybe it’s the people who are getting in the way” (p. 64).

Clearly, there is a need to explore buyer–seller relationships at a more micro, individual level that allows for a closer consideration of social/relational elements. Addressing these areas is important in order to develop a more complete understanding of the role of individual level dyadic interaction in buyer–seller relationship success or failure. As is becoming increasingly clear, it is interpersonal connections that serve as the “glue” that binds firms in relationships (Hutt and Stafford, 2000; Haytko, 2004). The purpose of this paper is to present a

perspective that adds depth to current thinking about buyer–seller relationships by exploring a “theoretical trail” we believe to be particularly relevant — the marriage metaphor.

We address these underdeveloped areas through an integration of theoretical and empirical work in the interpersonal relationship and business literature. Specifically, we propose a framework that further develops and clarifies dyadic interaction between individuals in buyer–seller relationships by focusing on expectations, communication behavior and appraisal processes. The proposed framework is then examined through a qualitative lens by employing field interviews with informants representing different functional areas across both sides of the relationship dyad.

2. Relevant interpersonal relationship literature

In the marital relationship literature, problem solving behaviors have long been a target of interventions aimed at addressing marital conflict (Weiss, 1984). Further, Bradbury and Karney (1993) found that the quality of partner problem solving accounts for significant variability in their relationship satisfaction. Beyond behaviors, cognitive processes have also been found to play important roles in marital relations. For instance, Jacobson (1984) describes how cognitive processes can contribute to continued marital distress even following successful behavior change.

Bennun (1986) delineates two classes of expectations that have implications for understanding outcomes associated with dyadic interpersonal interactions. One set of expectations relates to behaviors that contribute to the achievement of outcomes (i.e., the expectation that a partner will behave in a cooperative, collaborative manner). The second set of expectations relates more to the outcomes themselves. As Bennun notes, these classes of expectations hold implications for interventions aimed at improving relationships. Partners may enhance interaction by not only altering expectations related to desired outcomes but also by altering expectations relating to *how* they interact.

In a related area, Ben-Yoav and Pruitt (1984) found that negotiation efficacy was dependent on both expectations related to cooperative future interaction (ECFI) and accountability concerns. Conditions of high accountability (i.e., related to tangible outcomes) and low ECFI (i.e., expectations tied to cooperative behavior in the future) tended to produce contentious behavior which reduced joint benefit in partner negotiation. In contrast, conditions of high accountability and high ECFI contributed to increased joint negotiation benefit. Implications of these findings are parallel to those of Bennun in highlighting the importance of how expectations related to partners’ interactions impact problem solving effectiveness.

In addition to expectations, partners’ evaluations of their interactions have also been found to affect the development of their interpersonal relationship (Bradbury and Fincham, 1991; Johnson and Bradbury, 2000). McNulty and Karney (2002) examined relationships among specific expectations, appraisals of discreet interactions, and global satisfaction with the marital relationship. Specifically, of relevance to the present paper,

they delineate how longer and shorter-term expectancies directly influence relational appraisal and how a partner's own behavior is mediated by the other partner's behavior in affecting appraisal processes. These findings imply that in order to develop a more complete understanding of partner relationship success or failure requires an understanding of how partner expectations and behaviors interact to influence evaluation of specific interactions.

3. Expectations–communication behavior-appraisal model of buyer–seller problem solving

Fig. 1 posits concepts and relationships relevant to the explication of individual level dynamics for buyer–seller problem solving episodes. Bantham et al. (2003), extend work in the buyer–seller relationship area by positing interdependent problem solving as the key “driver” of satisfaction, investments, and subsequent relationship commitment. Bantham et al. (2003) conceive of episodic problem solving as requisite through all phases of partnerships, from initial goal development, to coordinating engineering activities for the development of a part, to reworking delivery scheduling due to unforeseen quality problems.

Based on the work of Bennun (1986) and Ben-Yoav and Pruitt (1984), which highlighted the significance of both outcomes-related and interaction process-related expectations in partner interactions, we suggest that critical cognitive domains in interdependent problem solving are represented as two types of expectations (developed in real-time or derived from past experience). These expectations consist of (1) those related to business outcomes and (2) those related to communications. Thus, in our view, these expectations serve as the cognitive foundation for interdependent problem solving processes and manifest themselves as short-term communication-related expectations (e.g., what I expect this upcoming meeting to be like; how I expect to be treated; how I expect to treat the other side) as well as long-term expectations relating

to tangible business outcomes (e.g., sales volume and cost issues) in a given problem solving interaction.

This view is consistent with prior work in the marketing relationship literature that suggests that tangible/economic/marketing-related and intangible/emotional/relationship-related elements are implicated in assessments made by relational partners (cf., Dwyer et al., 1987; Wilson, 1995; Wathne et al., 2001). As portrayed in Fig. 1, these expectations loom large in not only how partners behave but also how they evaluate outcomes of a problem solving episode.

As suggested by Bantham et al. (2003) and supported by Kasouf et al. (2003) the cognitive domain (e.g., expectations) will affect communication behaviors, which, in turn, influence problem solving efficacy. Therefore, by extension, we conceive of an individual's communication expectations as influencing their own communication behavior.

Communication behaviors typically examined for their ability to enhance interpersonal interaction include: *nondefensive listening*, paying attention to what a partner is saying, not interrupting the partner; *active listening*, using eye contact when listening, accurately summarizing partner viewpoint; *disclosure*, open sharing of requirements, needs, ideas and information, direct communication of point of view; and *editing*, interacting politely, engaging in fewer negative than positive exchanges, and not overreacting to negative events (Fowers, 1988; Bussod and Jacobson, 1983).

Owing to the current work related to appraising interpersonal relationships (McNulty and Karney, 2002), one partner's communication behavior will influence the other partner's communication behavior. For example, the failure of one partner to edit negative emotions from their communication will often result in the expression of reciprocal negativity from the other partner. In another instance, the unilateral use of information disclosure can spur reciprocal disclosure from one's partner. The dyadic communication process, which we conceive as the core of problem solving, results in both relational process (i.e., communication-related) and business

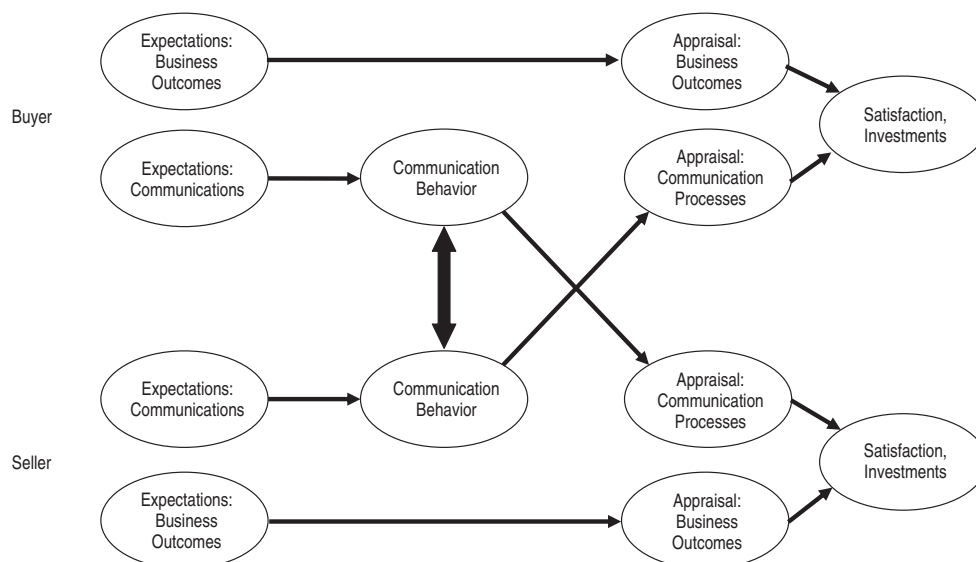


Fig. 1. Expectations–communication behavior-appraisal model of buyer–seller problem solving.

outcomes. Consistent with this view of outcomes, we propose that the appraisal of any problem solving episode is composed of an evaluation of relational process as well as business outcomes.

Based on the work of McNulty and Karney (2002), which supports the greater saliency of the partner's as opposed to one's own behavior in appraising interactions, we propose that an individual's evaluation of relational process outcomes is predominantly influenced by the other partner's communication behavior during problem solving. Alternatively, we conceive of the evaluation of business outcomes to be determined by an individual's own prior business expectations as compared to actual business outcomes.

Ultimately, both process and outcome appraisals associated with a given problem solving episode are conceived as enhancing or degrading subsequent longer-term outcomes such as satisfaction, investments, and commitment. This further clarifies the conceptual connection between problem solving episodes and factors implicated in relationship commitment. For example, satisfaction will be tied to appraisals of both business outcomes *and* communication processes. Further, positive process appraisals are likely to result in the enhancement of intangible investments such as trust and social bonding between partners. Positive appraisals related to business outcomes (i.e., successfully resolving a quality problem) may result in greater financial investment between partners in the future. Finally, the comparison level of alternatives also stands to be influenced by episodic appraisal processes. Comparison level of alternatives is tied to the quality of outcomes from the best available relationship partner (Anderson and Narus, 1990; Wilson, 1995). Given the perception of roughly equivalent business outcomes among available partners, an evaluation of the quality of relational (communication) processes among potential partners may increase the commitment to one partner because alternative partners are particularly difficult to work with in order to achieve business objectives.

4. Field interviews

Qualitative field interviews were used to examine the viability of the conceptual framework depicted in Fig. 1. Data collection and analysis employed a qualitative research methodology as described by Eisenhardt (1989), Miles and Huberman (1994), and Yin (1994). This methodology focuses on developing a deep, rich understanding of the dynamics present within settings.

Four industrial buyer–seller relationships were studied. These relational dyads consisted of three supplier firms and four customer firms (one supplier firm had a relationship with two customer firms—see Table 1 below). All relationships were specific, ongoing, non-equity, business-to-business

relationships between supplier firms (manufacturing firms in the metal processing industry) and their customers (manufacturing firms in the automotive and medical products industries). All firms were located in the United States and ranged in size from 50 employees to several thousand employees.

Interview participants representing both sides of these four specific relationships were identified in preliminary discussions with primary contacts at the supplier firms. They were selected for participation because of their ongoing involvement in the relationship and represented a variety organizational functions and job responsibilities (e.g., buyers, commodity managers, supplier managers, design engineers, quality engineers, marketing managers, and customer service specialists). Many of the 25 participants were interviewed on several occasions over an eighteen-month time span. In total, 62 interviews were conducted for the study.

Interviews were conducted on site and by telephone and typically lasted 30–45 min. They were audio taped and later transcribed. The interviewing approach was open-ended. Participants were asked to describe positive and negative factors related to working with the specific partnering firm, the nature of information use, satisfaction with the partnership, and likelihood of continuing with the relationship. This form of interviewing provided the perspectives of the participants, in the participants' own words. The data gathered from the transcriptions of the interviews were used to create a case study database that was reviewed in light of the conceptual framework displayed in Fig. 1. Two researchers independently reviewed and coded passages of text from the transcripts that they believed represented framework constructs. The researchers then compared coded passages for agreement. Instances of disagreement were resolved through subsequent review and discussion. This 'check-coding' process aided in definitional clarity and provided a good reliability check (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The starting point for this research was the identification of the need to examine buyer–seller relationships at a more micro, individual level that allows for greater consideration of social/relational elements. The following quotes, taken from key participants in manufacturer–supplier relationships, one for each side of the buyer–seller dyad, are representative of global sentiments expressed by multiple participants that highlight the potential significance of interpersonal dynamics in buyer–seller relationships.

Too often it happens part of the problem is that people don't understand relationships ...they're driving strictly for results and don't understand what the rest of it is.

People do team training and things like that but how many are really effective...Do they really understand how

Table 1
Relationships/Organizations used for interviews

Relationship A–B		Relationship C–D		Relationship E–F		Relationship E–G	
Supplier A	Buyer B	Supplier C	Buyer D	Supplier E	Buyer F	Supplier E	Buyer G

efficiently and effectively we are moving through the process.

Recall from our earlier explanation of the conceptual framework depicted in Fig. 1 that we conceive of problem solving as requisite through all phases of partnerships and that expectations related to both communications and business outcomes influence how partners behave and how they evaluate outcomes of a problem solving episode. Our field data suggest the significance of these expectations.

4.1. Expectations: business outcomes

It is not surprising that business expectations related to cost, quality, and delivery are often cited by our interview participants. Consider the following quotation from a marketing manager describing his understanding of his customer's business expectations.

They had requested pricing to be as competitive as possible and we did offer a slight price concession. They then were emphatic about quality, of course, and so there are some strategic things we have to do to preserve the relationship and the partnership. They are basically asking everything we can do to maintain costs so that they can maintain their costs and retain their market share.

The following quote from a commodity manager goes beyond the typical business expectations of cost, quality, and delivery in describing the expectation that their suppliers be multinational.

I think that they have to face the fact that they have to manufacture somewhere outside the United States, not only for cost purposes, but to support (customer) globally.

It is interesting to note that our participants' descriptions of business expectations focus on the buyers' expectations. Very rarely did the suppliers' business expectations come up in the field interviews. This is not surprising. Current research has suggested that buyers are more concerned about the tangible business outcomes and pay significantly less attention to the interpersonal/interorganizational relationships with suppliers (Yu, 2001).

4.2. Expectations: communications

Based on the work of Bennun (1986) and Ben-Yoav and Pruitt (1984) we posit that expectations related to communication processes also influence behavior and appraisal of outcomes. The following quotation from a marketing manager provides an example of this type of expectation.

A preferred customer partners with you more, works the issues with you, together. A less preferred customer just wants rock bottom price and doesn't really care about your problems. They don't want to really take the time or the understanding to work things out. You know, I think those customers tend to beat you up on price as much as possible

and, once they are finished with that, they are not afraid to switch.

The following quotes from a supplier's quality manager provide further examples of communication-process expectations. The first two quotes reflect expectations of the current relationship with a customer. The third quote describes expectations of an improved relationship.

If (customer) finds a quality problem, you know that somebody is going to be threatening you right away. If there is a problem, the threats start first thing.

This relationship requires more from us. It requires more face time, more people in our organization knowing more people from their organization.

We have got to understand them, and they have got to understand us. If we communicate and work together, we can get there; as opposed to 'my way or the highway' kind of approach.

It should be noted that expectations related to communication processes were most typically evidenced in interviews with representatives from the supplier firms. As expected, our field data suggests that buyers place more weight on business expectations relative to communication expectations and that suppliers place more weight on communication expectations relative to business expectations.

4.3. Communication behavior

Previous research has highlighted the significance of communication in establishing and maintaining interorganizational relationships (e.g., Dwyer et al., 1987; Anderson and Narus, 1990; Mohr and Spekman, 1994). These earlier perspectives related to communication have been extended through the specification of behaviors (e.g., nondefensive and active listening, self-disclosure, and editing) that influence the efficacy of relational communication in business settings (Bantham et al., 2003). This current study does not focus on the specific communication behaviors employed by the participants in their dyadic communication processes. Rather, it focuses on the appraisal of these communication processes. Recall that we propose an individual's evaluation of process (i.e., communication) outcomes is predominately influenced by the other partner's communication behavior during problem solving. The following quotations provide insight into the participants' evaluation of these communication behaviors during problem solving episodes.

4.4. Appraisal: communication processes

Consistent with our expectations, participants from the supplier firms had the most to say about their appraisal of their partner's communication behavior. Take for example, the following quote from an engineer for a supplier firm commenting on buyers' lack of self-disclosure.

Where we don't have good partnerships, they are companies that don't do well in defining exactly what it is they want; companies that are not willing to share their applications with us so that we can help them design parts.

Supplier participants provided both positive and negative appraisals of their partners' active/nondefensive listening and editing behavior. However, the negative examples significantly outnumbered the positive. The following quotations, with corresponding parenthetical information regarding the informant and context, provide examples.

I think the relationship is good now because we have a good dialogue back and forth and we are able to react to the shortcomings (supplier engineer's appraisal of communication with a specific customer).

I think we have been fortunate to have been working with (customer supplier manager); he has taken a much more objective look, saying 'Hey, it may not be your fault—let us look at ourselves too.' That took a lot of guts and leadership when it is easy to blame the vendor (supplier engineer's appraisal of communication with a specific customer's supplier manager).

I think they could have handled it a little better. My view is they went out to everybody and basically put a gun to their head, put the bullet in the chamber, and pulled the hammer back. That was so out of character compared to how they had operated in the past. And they didn't do a very good job of explaining what they were trying to do and how the program would work. So those pathetic explanations didn't end up coming until everybody was extremely upset and all sorts of communications were going back and forth between the two companies, none of which were all that positive (supplier operations manager's appraisal of communication with a specific customer).

As noted previously, buyers may pay more attention to business outcomes than communication outcomes. However, that does not imply that they place no value on communication outcomes. The following quotations, from a customer's commodity manager and director of purchasing provide examples of their appraisal of a specific supplier's communication.

I think (supplier firm) has brought a spirit of partnership, which is a much overused word in today's world. But they have been very open with us relative to sharing their cost data so we can arrive at a mutually acceptable price on the parts they are selling to us.

They jumped through hoops to get our product done and approved. They have tried to understand our needs and we have tried to understand theirs.

4.5. Appraisal: business outcomes

Our informants provide a strong sense of the importance of their evaluation of their partner's communication behavior.

However, the proposed framework also suggests that the appraisal of business outcomes is of significant importance. The following quotations provide examples of both buyers' and sellers' appraisal of business outcomes. The first two quotes represent suppliers' appraisals of the business outcomes in dealing with specific customers, while that last two represent buyers' appraisals of business outcomes with specific suppliers. Again we provide quotations with corresponding parenthetical information regarding the informant context.

I love their contribution to sales and profit. So that's a great relationship (supplier quality manager).

They are showing a lack of concern for their suppliers. Their volumes are not up to expectations. There were some long-term agreements that were based on volume. Although they never said that they guaranteed volumes, the agreements were based on where they felt their volumes were going, and they are not living up to those (supplier sales manager).

Customer service is pretty good. They respond pretty fast. Let's say I don't have a lot of quality problems. Again, my measurement criteria are cost, quality, and delivery. Their pricing is fairly reasonable. Again, no quality problems, and they deliver pretty much on time (buyer supplier manager).

The positive points are their ability to react to schedule changes and their ability to deal with quality issues that come up (buyer commodity manager).

Overall, field interview data, which includes responses from multiple informants representing various functions from both sides of the dyad over time, appears to offer initial support for concepts in the proposed framework. The interviews serve as empirical grounding for the viability of applying concepts studied in the interpersonal relationship literature to the business relationship domain.

The proposed model conceives of problem solving as requisite through all phases of successful partnerships. It is posited that critical cognitive domains in interdependent problem solving manifest themselves as shorter-term communication-related expectations as well as longer-term expectations relating to tangible business outcomes in a given problem solving interaction. We further propose that an individual's communication expectations influence their own communication behavior which, in turn, influences their partner's communication behavior. Finally, it is proposed that an individual's evaluation of communication process outcomes is predominantly influenced by their partner's communication behavior during problem solving. Alternatively, we conceive of the evaluation of business outcomes to be determined by an individual's own prior business expectations as compared to actual business outcomes. Ultimately, both communication process and business outcome appraisals associated with a given problem solving episode are conceived as enhancing or degrading subsequent long-term outcomes such as satisfaction and investments.

On the basis of the prior synthesis of the interpersonal and business literature as well as initial support from

the field interviews, we offer the following testable propositions:

P1. *Buyer-side expectations related to business outcomes will have a direct effect on buyer-side appraisal processes related to business outcomes and an indirect effect on buyer-side relationship satisfaction and investments that is mediated by business appraisal processes.*

P2. *Seller-side expectations related to business outcomes will have a direct effect on seller-side appraisal processes related to business outcomes and an indirect effect on seller-side relationship satisfaction and investments that is mediated by business appraisal processes.*

P3. *Buyer-side expectations related to communication behavior will have a direct effect on buyer-side communication behavior and an indirect effect on seller-side appraisal processes related to relationship communication processes that are mediated by buyer and seller communication behavior.*

P4. *Seller-side expectations related to communication behavior will have a direct effect on seller-side communication behavior and an indirect effect on buyer-side appraisal processes related to relationship communication processes that are mediated by buyer and seller communication behavior.*

P5. *Buyer-side appraisal processes related to relationship communication processes will have a direct effect on buyer-side relationship satisfaction and investments while seller-side appraisal processes related to relationship communication processes will have a direct effect on seller-side relationship satisfaction and investments.*

The following section will discuss the contributions of this work, its limitations, and its potential in facilitating future research.

5. Discussion

The present work contributes to the business relationship literature in several ways. While the marriage metaphor has made substantial contributions to our understanding of buyer–seller relationships, there has been increasing recognition that transfer from the marriage metaphor to buyer–seller relationships has not been fully explored. To this point, extant frameworks have not, at a more micro-level, clearly delineated how relational/communication elements impact the functioning of relationships. We have elaborated the role of expectations, communication behavior, and appraisal processes in problem solving thereby extending existing perspectives relating to the process dynamics of buyer–seller problem solving through an integration of theoretical and empirical work from the interpersonal relationship literature.

The present framework contributes to a more thorough explication of relationship process dynamics in several ways. First, expectations are seen as relating not only to outcomes, but also to the behaviors that contribute to the achievement

of those outcomes. Secondly, communication behavior is explicitly recognized as a core component of problem solving and partner communication behavior is seen as a salient influence in the relationship appraisal process. Lastly, a further clarification of the connection between the appraisal of problem solving episodes and critical longer-term satisfaction and investment in the relationship is proposed. Ultimately, such appraisals serve to stabilize or destabilize a relationship.

We recognize that the present paper is primarily conceptual in nature and clearly requires empirical examination. As a first step, we have utilized field interviews as an initial check on the viability of the proposed framework. As such we have employed a qualitative research methodology incorporating matched buyer–supplier dyads as a means of exploring problem solving process dynamics from the perspective of multiple functions over time.

The present conceptual extension contributes to research in the area in multiple ways. Given that the framework conceives of interdependent problem solving as involving an iterative process, longitudinal explorations appear particularly warranted. The proposed framework also offers specific, testable propositions for quantitative investigation. It is clear that buyers and suppliers hold different expectations—an examination of the importance and interactions of classes of expectations (business outcome and communication-related) for buyers and suppliers in different contexts would make for an interesting study. Are there conditions under which communication expectations are more or less salient? Lastly, the inclusion of other relevant variables for examination, where appropriate, could serve to add depth to the present framework. For example, how might attributional processes affect appraisal processes associated with communication and business outcomes?

Future research could also explore additional extensions of the marital metaphor. For example, rather than starting from an orientation based on a husband/wife dyadic relationship, future research might address research questions from the perspective of alternative dyadic relationships — parent/children or siblings (O'Malley and Tynan, 1999). This approach might be particularly relevant given the power asymmetry in some buyer–seller relationships. In addition, the “dark side” of the marriage metaphor could also be extended. For instance, aspects associated with distrust, betrayal, and dissolution tied to buyer–seller interaction would prove interesting and offer new insights in comparison to the alternative focus on loyalty and commitment (cf., Hakansson and Snehota, 1998).

From a practitioner standpoint, the framework has important implications. First, the significance of business outcome and communication process expectations cannot be overemphasized as a means of addressing problem solving efficacy. As noted in the interpersonal relationship literature (Bennun, 1986), an examination of the source and feasibility of expectations related to both communication and business outcomes provide relationship participants with the origins of potential areas of conflict.

Clearly, based on informant interview data, buyers place more weight on business expectations relative to communication expectations than suppliers do. When this occurs, the stage is set for more contentious interaction and less joint problem solving benefit (at least from the supplier's perspective). This observation is consistent with the experimental work related to negotiation of Ben-Yoav and Pruitt (1984). More balance in concern for communication expectations can contribute to more positive relational interaction which might produce more joint benefit in the long run.

However, as our model makes explicit, awareness of expectations is not enough to insure truly interdependent problem solving without concomitant ability to manage communication behavior. In fact, while expectations may change due to updated information or experience the possibility of behavior change may take more effort given extant ability and habit. This may in part account for the observation that even when partners address conflict at the level of business expectations, their subsequent interactions may still consist of negative behaviors (i.e., threats, blaming, etc.) as habitual ways of behaving take time to change.

Owing to the significance of communication behavior in the problem solving and appraisal processes, the ability to employ active and nondefensive listening, editing, and where appropriate, disclosure, in place of more impulsive, automatic, negative exchanges that are likely to occur even in "good" relationships during times of stressful problem solving episodes would be paramount. Partner awareness of "trigger cues" not only tied to the other partner and/or context, but also residing within a partner can help increase the ability to interrupt dysfunctional dyadic cognitions and behavior (Bennun, 1986). We echo the Bantham et al. (2003) observation that the way partners communicate in addition to the content of the communication, can either facilitate or denigrate interdependent problem solving outcomes.

In conclusion, understanding buyer–seller relationships will continue to be a significant topic within the business literature. It is our hope that this systematic examination of the way business partners evaluate their problem solving efforts will contribute to future theoretical and empirical efforts aimed at increasing understanding of working relationships among individuals in organizations.

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