Measuring relational norms: some methodological issues

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper sets out to examine the validity of Kaufmann and Stern’s operationalisation of Macneil’s norm theory which they used when creating a set of scales to evaluate the degree of relationality in business-to-business (B2B) exchanges. The scales that Kaufmann and Stern developed to measure norms in B2B relationships have been used either directly or with limited adaptation in a large number of papers.

Design/methodology/approach – Macneil’s work was evaluated and a new set of scales developed and an experiment was carried out to determine whether or not these scales discriminated between relational and discrete exchanges more effectively than Kaufmann and Stern’s scales.

Findings – The experiment demonstrated that the new scales discriminated more effectively between relational and discrete exchanges than Kaufmann and Stern’s scales.

Research limitations/implications – The experiment would ideally have been run using experienced managers rather than students as respondents. However, the advantage of using students was that it was possible to create two groups whose members had attended an identical course on B2B relationship marketing.

Originality/value – The paper demonstrates the importance, when conducting research that uses prior studies, of critically assessing prior theorising and research. The paper questions the validity of Kaufmann and Stern’s scales. These scales have, since 1988, been the foundation of a substantial body of research into B2B relationships.

Keywords Relationship marketing, Business-to-business marketing, Measurement

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Macneil’s (1980) view that norms determine “the behavior that does occur in relations, must occur if relations are to continue, and hence ought to occur so long as their continuance is valued” (Macneil, 1980, p. 64), has strongly influenced many academics who have studied exchanges. Furthermore, although Macneil has not attempted to develop measures of norms, and describes himself as merely “a casual empiricist” (Macneil, 1985), many investigators have developed scales to assess the degree of “relationality” observed in an exchange situation.

This paper first sets out the role that norms have in creating the atmosphere within which exchanges occur and then outlines the contribution that Macneil has made to the study of norms. This is followed by a consideration of the manner in which a variety of marketing scholars have created scales to operationalise norms and goes on to describe an experiment designed to assess whether or not the approach used to create these scales provides valid measures.
Background to the study

The overall atmosphere of a relationship is a critically important factor determining the nature of the environment within which exchanges occur (Sutton-Brady, 2000, 2001; Roehrich and Spencer, 2001). Indeed the IMP Group states that “the atmosphere” is one of the four basic elements that it uses when analysing industrial marketing and purchasing situations. The IMP Group suggests that:

[T]his atmosphere can be described in terms of the power dependence relationship which exists between the companies, the state of conflict or co-operation and overall closeness or distance of the relationship as well as by the companies’ mutual expectations (IMP Group, 2002, p. 28).

The view of the IMP Group is that:

The atmosphere is built up by specific episodes of exchange as well as by the long-term process of interaction (Turnbull and Valla, 1986, p. 6).

As such the atmosphere of a relationship is independent of the formal governance structure within which a relationship exists. Indeed as Humphrey and Ashforth (2000) show the atmosphere can, over time, change even though the governance structure remains the same.

An exchange’s degree of stability is to a substantial extent determined by the atmosphere of a relationship (Roehrich et al., 2002). Much of this stability is the result of the existence of norms, which are extensions, elaborations, and qualifications of rules and which survive because they have become, following a significant amount of interaction, part of habitual behaviour (Gundlach and Achrol, 1993). The existence of norms results in “regular behavior patterns that are relatively stable and expected by a group’s members” (Bettenhausen and Murnigham, 1991, p. 21). Norms thus provide the participants in an exchange with a degree of confidence that they know what they are doing and are thus a major factor in creating the atmosphere within which an exchange occurs. As the discussion of Macneil’s norms below indicates, the norms most closely associated with relational exchanges are those that might be expected to enable trust and commitment to develop. In comparison, the norms associated with discrete exchanges are more likely to create an environment where, while ruthlessly opportunistic behaviour may not be tolerated, it must be assumed an exchange partner will give their own needs priority over those of any other party.

Macneil’s contribution

Macneil is a legal scholar who studies contract law with the intent of making “sense of reality, the reality of what people are actually doing in the real-life world of exchange” (italics in original) (Macneil, 2000, p. 879). As such Macneil is interested in all situations where contracts exist between parties and his view is that the term “contract” covers all occurrences of “the relations among parties to the process of projecting exchange into the future” (Macneil, 1980, p. 4) and this opinion is also held by other legal scholars (e.g. Macaulay, 1963). Non-lawyers also share this view and for example, Stinchcombe states:

An offer and exchange create legal obligations, whether or not a written contract is exchanged (Stinchcombe, 1990, p. 195).
Quite simply the accepted opinion in law and elsewhere is that where an exchange occurs a contract exists and it therefore follows that a contract is present in all business-to-business exchanges. It is thus not surprising that Macneil’s work has made a major contribution to marketing research especially that which has been concerned with the study of the nature of relationships within business-to-business relationships (see, for example, Jap and Ganesan, 2000; Cannon et al., 2000; Joshi and Stump, 1999; Gassenheimer et al., 1998).

Macneil initially developed nine norms but he later (Macneil, 1983) developed a tenth and changed the label applied to one of the original nine and this resulted in the following set of ten common contract norms:

1. **Role integrity.** The partners in an exchange naturally retain a desire to achieve their own goals but they do this differently in discrete exchanges than in relational exchanges. Whereas formal rules may be invoked in discrete exchanges, in relational exchanges the parties involved “seek to overcome formal rationality to achieve goals” (Macaulay, 1985, p. 468) and thus will try to avoid reference to the contract when unexpected events occur (Macaulay, 1963, pp. 60-62). Such an approach is more likely to be effective where the individuals involved believe that they are dealing with others who, from experience, can be expected to behave “properly or adequately in all circumstances” (Misztal, 1996, p. 121).

2. **Reciprocity.** A freely entered exchange will only occur when both parties expect a consequent improvement in their pre-exchange position and each party assumes it will get something back for something given. This is more apparent in a discrete exchange because it is more immediate than a relational one. Thus exchanges are not seen as necessarily being of roughly equal value. Indeed, the discharge of obligations incurred as a result of services received in the past entails obligations not specified in advance and the exact nature of the return is left to the discretion of the respondent (Blau, 1967).

3. **Implementation of planning.** Planning is involved even in discrete contracts because they can encompass commitments to be fulfilled in the future – though with exchanges that are more relational the planning element is generally likely to be larger. Furthermore, except in the case of the simplest exchange, a contract will include some elements defining how it will be implemented.

4. **Effectuation of consent.** Any exercise of choice involves the sacrifice of other opportunities. In a discrete exchange there is at least some opportunity cost while in a relational contract either party may have the ability to take actions that, while not fully determined in advance, will limit the future actions of the other party (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995).

5. **Contractual solidarity.** Macneil’s view is that “[t]he fundamental root, the base, of contract is society” (Macneil, 1980, p. 1) because no society can operate without exchange. If a society is not to break down then the greater number of its exchanges must be orderly (i.e. operate within a set of rules of behaviour which are accepted by the majority of that society) and individuals must hold a belief that most others are dependable.

6. **The linking norms: restitution, reliance, and expectation interests.** Even after agreement has been reached to undertake the exchange it may be necessary to
make adjustments to the agreement. Thus restitution might be necessary if one party gains unfairly from the exchange; reliance is needed with regard to promises made but not necessarily legally binding; and, expectation is what has been promised. Where a discrete exchange occurs then restitution, reliance, and expectation interests are served by rigorous adherence to the contract. In a more relational exchange these three issues become factors that contribute to determining the nature of any changes to the contract that are necessary in response to unforeseen circumstances.

(7) **Creation and restraint of power.** Macneil argues that by exchanging contracts we give the other party power over us not least because the contract restricts our choices. So contracts create power, yet, as he points out, modern society sets limits to the extent of this power and, as far as the law is concerned, these limits are quite narrow and in most modern societies the remedies for breach of contract are relatively restrained. Discrete exchanges are clearly defined (“discrete transactions start sharply, are short-lived and end sharply, either by clear performance or clear breach”) (Macneil, 1981, p. 1027) and time limited, therefore this power aspect is relatively insignificant. In comparison within a relational exchange, though it is tempered in its effects by the norms of reciprocity and effectuation of consent, influence of power is non-trivial.

(8) **Flexibility.** This norm to some extent runs counter to “implementation of planning” but, given that bounded rationality is ever present, then any exchange running into the future has to have the capacity to be changed or it may run into problems. Indeed, in the case of long-term contracts, it has been asserted that the formal conditions under which they can be made “renegotiation proof” are “so extreme as to have only a tenuous connection with agreements of the kind which are observed in practice” (Deakin and Wilkinson, 1998, p. 150). Indeed Whitford points out that the law provides “an array of strategic weapons in case the relation breaks down” (Whitford, 1985). By comparison, in the case of relational exchanges, flexibility tends to exist within the transaction or the negotiation of, and agreement upon, mutual obligations between potential partners – what Smitka (1994, p. 93) calls “contracting” – may well continue after a formal contract has been signed.

(9) **Harmonisation with the social matrix.** Macneil argues (1983, p. 344) that the social matrix stipulates the minimum necessary for exchange to occur and comprises: a means of communication understood by both parties; a system of order so parties make exchanges instead of stealing; a monetary system; and, a mechanism to enforce promises. Where these factors exist then there are a number of common norms that have an impact on contractual relations because they will deem that contracts contain certain features but make others unnecessary. This is illustrated when formulating transnational contracts when a “foreigner’s” demand as to what should go into a contract will often surprise us but what we would not consider necessary to include may surprise them. While, as far as relational exchanges are concerned, the need for this harmonisation is clear it might be questioned if it also applies to discrete exchanges. However, Macneil points out that discrete exchanges only exist in so
far as a society’s values permit or encourage them, so they too are inevitably entangled with the social matrix.

(10) Propriety of means. There are often several ways of achieving a given end. Those that are seen as appropriate will vary between industries and cultures. Thus, in the case of a relationship, resolving conflicts by the use of formal means will usually be seen as injurious to the relationship. However, ways of working together may develop between relationship partners that while acceptable to them, may simply not “work” in their links with any other partners that they may have.

Macneil states that these ten norms determine “the behavior that does occur in relations, must occur if relations are to continue, and hence ought to occur so long as their continuance is valued” (Macneil, 1980, p. 64).

Macneil suggests that exchanges lie, according to their relational intensity, on a spectrum ranging from discrete exchanges[2] through to relational exchanges. He states:

Some contracts, called here “contractual relations” are far more relational than others. They lie towards one end of a relational spectrum of contract behaviour, opposite from the non-relational end where the discrete transaction is found (Macneil, 1983, p. 342).

The importance that he attaches to this view is indicated by his extensive discussion of it in a paper whose purpose was stated to be “both to clarify and to extend the work I have been doing with relational contract since the mid-1960s” (Macneil, 2000, p. 877). In this paper, which only contains five sections, Macneil allocates one complete section to this matter.

Thus a fundamental, element of Macneil’s position is that the norms applicable to behaviour at the ends of the spectrum discrete/relational are not mirror images and that, depending on where an exchange falls in the range between discrete and relational, not only is greater or less emphasis given to some of the norms but they are also transformed. The analogy of viewing the common contract norms in a distorting mirror gets to the essence of his thinking, which is that the original norms remain the source of the image being received but the image is received in a distorted form. To emphasise this distorting effect Macneil introduces new terms. In the case of discrete exchanges he suggests that two of the common contract norms, “implementation of planning” and “effectuation of consent” are greatly magnified and merged into one norm that he labels: “enhancing discreteness and presentation”. By creating this term he is seeking to emphasise that an exchange can only be purely discrete if it is 100 per cent planned; 100 per cent consented to and “separated from all else between the participants at the same time and before and after” (Macneil, 1980, p. 60). In such an atmosphere while distrust may not exist there is no reason to expect exchange partners to be anything but selfish. The reason why such selfishness does not develop into pure opportunism is that, as Macneil has always stressed, the other eight common contract norms are still present even though very much diminished in importance.

With regard to those exchanges that are more relational he suggests that five norms have the greatest significance. Two of these (“role integrity” and, “proprietary of means”) are identical to two of the common contract norms. The other three (“preservation of the relation”, “harmonisation of relational conflict” and,
“supracontractual norms”) are each based on a combination of a number of the other eight common contract norms (see Figure 1). These relational norms contain within them much which would make possible the development of the trust and commitment which is stated to underpin business-to-business relationships (Morgan and Hunt, 1994).

The operationalisation of Macneil’s norms
Many studies (see Ivens and Blois, 2004, for an illustrative list) have operationalised norms. Yet not only is there no study that has developed measures of all of Macneil’s ten common contract norms, but different studies have operationalised different sub-sets of them and several do not explain why they are using a subset or how the elements of the subset were selected. Furthermore, even where writers investigate the same norms there seems to be no agreement as to how they should be operationalised. For example both Kaufmann and Stern (1988) and Kaufmann and Dant (1992) developed operationalisations of the norm of “mutuality”[3] yet, not only did Kaufmann and Stern use three statements where Kaufmann and Dant used five, but there were also considerable differences between these statements (see Table I). This is strange as obviously Kaufmann and Dant were aware of Kaufmann and Stern’s earlier study but they do not explain why they developed alternative measures.

### Figure 1
Macneil’ common contractual norms and their contributions to relation and to discrete norms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discrete Norms</th>
<th>Common Contractual Norms</th>
<th>Relational Norms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enhancing discreteness and Presentation</td>
<td>Role integrity</td>
<td>Role integrity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reciprocity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Implementation of planning</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Effectuation of consent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contractual solidarity</td>
<td>Contractual solidarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The linking norms: restitution; reliance; and expectation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Creation and restraint of power</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>Harmonization of relational conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Harmonisation with the social matrix</td>
<td>Supracontractual relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Proprietary of means</td>
<td>Proprietary of means</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** From Blois (2002)
Yet of arguably greater importance it is the case that none of these studies take account of Macneil’s insistence that, depending on where an exchange lies on the spectrum discrete/relational, the applicable norms change. They thus ignore an essential building block of Macneil’s work which is that the norms related to behaviour at the ends of the spectrum relational/discrete are not mirror images. As he states, when discussing the relational/discrete spectrum:

>Certain of them (viz. the common contract norms), however, are intensified at one end and others at the other end. In the case of relational contracts in particular, some are considerably transformed (Macneil, 2000, p. 896).

Typically studies which evaluate the role of norms in business-to-business exchanges select a number of the common contract norms; develop some statements that are considered applicable to each norm; and ask respondents to indicate the point on a Likert-type scale which best indicates their evaluation of a specific exchange relative to that statement. The approach followed is that the scales are “coded so that higher numbers consistently denoted greater levels of contractual integration” (Kaufmann and Dant, 1992, p. 174). However, such studies do not state in comparison with what the levels of contractual integration are “greater” but imply that, where respondents agree with an aggregation of the statements, the exchange is closer to the relational end of the spectrum. Where the respondents disagree then the exchange is seen to be closer to the discrete end of the spectrum. Thus such studies imply that, with regard to the applicability of norms, a discrete exchange is the mirror image of a relational exchange.

The failure to take account of this aspect of Macneil’s thinking is illustrated by Kaufmann and Stern’s (1988) paper that “represents the first known attempt to operationalise Macneil’s relational exchange norms” (Kaufmann and Stern, 1988, pp. 544-545). Indeed because of this status it has influenced many of the papers that

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) The exchange relationship our organisation had with the other party could better be described as an “arm’s length negotiation” than a cooperative effort (reverse-coded)</td>
<td>(1) Each transaction is expected to be reconciled completely and individually (reverse-coded)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) The other party was just another customer (supplier) (reverse-coded)</td>
<td>(2) Our organisation assures itself that the other party is acting as we expected by precisely monitoring the other party’s performance on a transaction-by-transaction basis (reverse coded)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) While it appeared likely that other transactions would follow, there was no specific expectation that the exchange relationship should continue beyond each transaction (reverse-coded)</td>
<td>(3) Our organisation monitors performance of each transaction separately to assure compliance with expectations (reverse-coded)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Expectations about the performance of the other party relate to our organisation’s immediate goals and even temporary fluctuations in the other’s performance level are unacceptable (reverse-coded)</td>
<td>(4) It is expected that all discrepancies in performance or payment, no matter how small, should be investigated (reverse-coded)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I. The different measures used by Kaufmann and Stern, and Kaufmann and Dant to operationalise the common contract norm “reciprocity”
have both discussed norms and included an empirical element. For example, when explaining how they developed their measures of relational norms, Kaufmann and Stern (1988) was the paper most frequently referenced in the 33 papers discussed in Ivens and Blois (2004).

While recognising that “[w]hat distinguishes between discrete and relational exchange is the way general contracting norms are manifest in the parties’ relationship” (Kaufmann and Stern, 1988, p. 535). The paper then investigates only three common contract norms asserting that these three are “the most important general contracting norms” (Kaufmann and Stern, 1988, p. 535) but provides no justification to support this assertion. The three chosen were: solidarity; role integrity; and, mutuality but this meant (see Table II) that their investigation did not contain any measures associated with Macneil’s other three relational norms namely: harmonisation of relational conflict, supracontractual relations and, proprietary of means.

The Kaufmann and Stern (1988) paper states that the measures of solidarity and mutuality are “expressed as the discrete version” (Kaufmann and Stern, 1988, p. 545) but by this it is only meant that the wording that would have been used in conjunction with a measure of a common contract norm has been “reversed”. The measures of role integrity were “written in the relational form” (Kaufmann and Stern, 1988, p. 545). Thus their paper takes no account of Macneil’s argument that, while one of the relational norms is an intensification of “role integrity”:

- “contractual solidarity” is only one of the two common contract norms that are significant contributors to the relational norm “preservation of the relation”; and
- the common contract norm “mutuality” is only one of two minor contributors to the relation norm “preservation of the relation” (see Table II).

Hence not only does the Kaufmann and Stern study deal with a subset of the common contract norms but also none of the norms chosen are associated by Macneil with the discrete norms.

Thus Kaufmann and Stern’s measure is biased because the subset it measures only includes norms that contribute to the relational side of the spectrum (see Figure 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Macneil’s relational norms and their common contract norm components</th>
<th>The common contract norms measured by Kaufmann and Stern (1988)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Role integrity (role integrity)</td>
<td>Role integrity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservation of the relation (contractual solidarity; flexibility; reciprocity; linking norms; creation and restraint of power)</td>
<td>Contractual solidarity; reciprocity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harmonisation of relational conflict (flexibility; harmonisation with social matrix)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supracontractual relations (harmonisation with social matrix)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proprietary of means (proprietary of means)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: The norms in parentheses are those common contract norms that are components of the five relational norms; the norms in italics are only minor contributors to the relational norms.

Table II.
The common contract norms selected for measurement by Kaufmann and Stern
Therefore if Kaufmann and Stern's measure is used to assess an exchange it might be expected that it would produce a higher score than if the scales used incorporated elements of the discrete norms.

The question thus arises as to whether or not it is valid to use scales that are based on only those norms which Macneil has designated as “common contract norms” to determine how “relational” an exchange is?

**An experiment**

To examine this issue a study was carried out as follows. Two one-page cases were written describing the relationship of a firm ABP with each of two suppliers RWX and NECX. The cases were written to illustrate a situation where ABP and RWX have “a relationship” and where ABP and NECX are only involved in discrete exchanges, nevertheless words such as: relationship, commitment, and trust; and their synonyms were excluded from the cases.

Two sets of scales were then created using established scale creation techniques (Judd *et al.*, 1991; Nunnally, 1978). The first (referred to hereafter as “the relational scales”) were Kaufmann and Stern’s nine scales[4] and these were made up of three scales for each of the three common contract norms that they measured with the names of the companies in the cases incorporated into them. For example, Kaufmann and Stern’s statement:

\[\text{The supply agreement between our organisation and the other party was extremely complicated being comprised of many diverse expectations about each other's behavior.}\]

Kaufmann and Stern’s statement was rewritten as:

\[\text{The supply agreement between ABP and RWX is extremely complicated being comprised of many diverse expectations about each other's behavior.}\]

Then a series of nine statements (referred to hereafter as “the discrete scales” and set out in the list below) were developed to apply to the single discrete norm that Macneil labels: “enhancing discreteness and presentation”. These discrete scales were “theory-driven operationalisations” (Kaufmann and Dant, 1992, p. 174) based on examination of the development of Macneil’s thinking, as set out both in his numerous papers dating from 1978 to 2000, and in his responses to the many criticisms of his work:

- ABP and NECX have a precise and detailed agreement as to the nature of each supply agreement.
- Supply agreements between ABP and NECX do not assume that there will be future supply agreements (reverse coded).
- Communications between ABP and NECX do not occur regularly (reverse coded).

The two cases and the two sets of scales were translated into German (and back translated for confirmation). A class of 70 students at a German university, referred to as Nuremberg, was presented with the relationship case (ABP/RWX) and used the relational scale to evaluate it and was also presented with the discrete case (ABP/NECX) and evaluated it using the discrete scale. The second class of 67 students at another German university, referred to as Ingolstadt, was presented with the
opposite combination of cases and scales as shown in the Table III. Both classes were: studying relationship marketing with the same lecturer; were at the same stage of the course when taking part in this experiment; and, were of a similar constitution with regard to age and gender.

Following Gundlach and Achrol (1993) a composite measure of relational intensity was created by taking the average of each respondent’s scores for the nine subscales. The mean and standard deviation of these averages for each sample were calculated.

The results of the two samples for ABP/RWX and for ABP/NECX were then tested against the hypotheses that:

\[ H1. \] A higher score will be obtained by evaluating the ABP/RWX case using the relational scale as compared with the score when using the discrete scale.

\[ H2. \] A lower score will be obtained by evaluating the ABP/NECX case using the discrete scale as compared with using the relational scale.

**Results**
The reliability of both scales was tested using coefficient alpha (Cronbach’s alpha) for each set of scales. With an alpha of 0.76 for the relational scale and of 0.75 for the discrete scale, both measurement instruments are above the critical threshold of 0.7 defined as acceptable for preliminary research by Nunnally (1978). Hence, both scales appear to be of acceptable quality.

Comparing the results (see Table IV) of evaluating the ABP/RWX case using the relational rather than the discrete scales gives \( t = 10.63 \) and \( F = 12.59 \) both of these values being significant at the 95 per cent level. For the ABP/NECX case the values are \( t = 2.24 \) and \( F = 2.1 \) and both of these values are also significant at the 95 per cent level. Thus both \( H1 \) and \( H2 \) can be accepted at the 95 per cent significance level.

These results indicate that a scale based on Macneil’s relational norms produces different evaluations of both a relational exchange and a discrete exchange than when a scale based on Macneil’s discrete norm is used. In particular this latter scale gives lower scores than Kaufmann and Sterri’s scales when applied to a description of a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Relational scale</th>
<th>Discrete scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABP/RWX (relationship)</td>
<td>Mean = 5.95</td>
<td>Mean = 5.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD = 0.429</td>
<td>SD = 0.307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n = 70</td>
<td>n = 67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABP/NECX (discrete exchange)</td>
<td>Mean = 1.88</td>
<td>Mean = 1.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD = 0.291</td>
<td>SD = 0.422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n = 67</td>
<td>n = 70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table III.**
The design of the experiment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Relational scale</th>
<th>Discrete scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Nuremberg</td>
<td>Mean = 5.95</td>
<td>Mean = 5.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Ingolstadt</td>
<td>SD = 0.429</td>
<td>SD = 0.307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Ingolstadt</td>
<td>n = 70</td>
<td>n = 67</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Table IV.**
The results of the experiment
relational exchange. It is also the case that the discrete scales give higher scores than Kaufmann and Stern’s scales when applied to a description of a discrete exchange. As was pointed out above, Kaufmann and Stern’s scales use measures that are based on a subset of the common norms associated only with relational exchange. These results therefore corroborate Macneil’s view that the norms applicable to a relational exchange are not the mirror image of those applicable to a discrete exchange. It is suggested that these preliminary results raise some questions about the methods that are appropriate for using measures of norms in studies of “relationalism” within the context of business interactions such as those studied by the IMP Group.

Theoretical implications
This paper by implication is criticising the work of Kaufmann and Stern. Criticising in the sense of passing “judgement upon their work with respect to its merits or faults” (Oxford English Dictionary on-line: http://dictionary.oed.com/entrance.dtl). Without doubt the merit of their work is that they were the first to seek to create measures of Macneil’s norms. Given the extent to which Macneil’s norms seem to both involve a degree of overlap and interdependency and, as he admits, “lack of clarity of expression” (Macneil, 1987, p. 272), the problems for those who have sought to develop measures of Macneil’s norms have been substantial. So Kaufmann and Stern faced a considerable challenge when being the first to attempt to operationalise these norms.

Kaufmann and Stern explicitly based their development of these norms on Macneil’s ideas stating:

We build on Macneil’s theory of relational exchange (Kaufman and Stern, 1988, p. 535).

In addition they indicated that, when preparing their paper, they had the benefit of personal conversations with Macneil. Yet while commenting that: “[w]hat distinguishes between discrete and relational exchange is the way general contracting norms are manifest in the parties’ relationship” (Kaufmann and Stern, 1988, p. 535), they then only investigated three of the several common contract norms that contribute to the relational norms. They do this without providing a justification for their selective use of ideas from what they describe as Macneil’s “theory”.

Kaufmann and Stern are not responsible for the fact that their paper has been such a major influence on others who have sought to develop norms, as each author must be responsible for his own work. However, none of the papers, reviewed in Ivens and Blois (2004) and that included empirical measures of norms which were either based on Kaufmann and Stern’s scales or actually used them, questioned the validity of Kaufmann and Stern’s study and its interpretation of Macneil’s concepts.

Managerial implications
Although the main implications of this research relate to the translation of Macneil’s relational contracting theory into measures, there are also managerial implications of this study. To date, much of the work on norms has suggested that selling companies could deliberately structure their interactions with customers along a given set of norms which would apply to relational as well as to discrete exchanges (Heide, 1994). These results however highlight that, depending upon the type of exchange that is to be managed, it is necessary to take account of different sets of dimensions.
Closely related to this point is the observation that when attempting to evaluate the atmosphere of an interaction, for example when conducting a customer management audit, the use of Kaufmann and Stern’s scales may give a biased evaluation of the degree of “relationality” that exists.

Summary
The results reported in this study suggest that, if Macneil’s concept of the relational/discrete spectrum is correct, then the appropriateness of the measures that have typically been used when assessing the relational intensity of a B2B exchange must be questioned. Indeed this paper shows that, when assessing where on the discrete/relational spectrum an exchange lies, if the scales used incorporate items which relate to the discrete norms proposed by Macneil they will discriminate more effectively between discrete exchange situations and relational exchanges.

Notes
1. In work published prior to 1983 Macneil used the label “mutuality” but after 1983 he used the label “reciprocity”.
2. More recently Macneil has referred to “as-if-discrete exchanges” (Macneil, 2000, p. 895) rather than “discrete exchanges” as he fears the latter term can allow observers to ignore the fact that he has always stressed that even discrete exchanges are embedded in relations. However given, on his own admission, his earlier lack of success at relabelling “relational exchanges” as “interwined exchanges” (Macneil, 1987, p. 276), it seems unlikely that this proposed additional change in terminology will be successful.
3. As indicated in footnote 1, in work published after 1983 Macneil replaced the label “mutuality” with “reciprocity” but Kaufmann and Stern disregarded, without explanation, this change in Macneil’s view.
4. These nine scales have also been used either directly or as a basis for norm measures in many papers published by other researchers.

References


**Further reading**


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