

From Interaction-based Approach to Dialectical Confrontation: Some Theoretical Proposals for Understanding the Consistency of Dissentient Interorganisational Relationships

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Abstract

The main objective of this conceptual study is to describe an idea of dialectical approach for understanding the conformities of interorganisational behaviour, by employing a way of thinking in which adversarial, dissensual and consensual features in interorganisational relationships and subsequent processes are sharply contrasted. It is proposed that a network as a set of diverse relationships can be characterised by dialectical means, exposing the opposite-driving dimensions. In the research work three approaches to discuss relationships (managerial, network-based and dialectical) are presented and compared. It is assumed that dialectical approach (despite of its dualistic nature and polarising concepts) can extend the analytical scope by introducing new conceptual vocabulary and by grasping displeasing issues, which are often neglected in relationship studies. From the empirical point of view, this requires sensitive methods to face the subconscious elements of the relationships, which are influenced by interpersonal contacts. To avoid analytical narrow-mindedness, besides discussing the positive sides of a relationship (e.g. trust and commitment, open communication and mutual respect in focus), the researcher should not only consider the problems of one particular relationship (lack of communication, competition and dispersed interests) but also pay proper attention to the extreme features as well (e.g. destruction and annihilation, anger and hate, urge to revenge), which affect the way the actors truly perceive the relationships.

Keywords: Dialectical Approach, Relationships, Juxtapositions, Network-based View

Introduction

Firms and organisations as actors create and maintain (business) relationships e.g. in order to improve the conditions for higher performance. Accordingly, with network engagement the actors predominantly look for positive features; there is an emphasis on benevolent, co-operative behaviour, which means that the actors aim at mutual, rewarding goals addressing an intentional and voluntaristic view of human nature (Tikkanen 1997, p. 595). However, in a network, a single actor is faced with several harmful and negative effects as well. As regards burdens and threats, e.g. loss of control (unruliness), resource commitment, undeterminedness (misdirected actions), exclusiveness and stickiness (the firm becomes connected with a whole network of other firms through a particular relationship) are some of the most typical ones; even deleterious effects can be revealed (Holmlund 1997, p.135; Håkanson and Snehota 1997, p.17-22; Andersson et al. 1994, p. 6-11). On the other hand, synergetic performance, which is vital for the actors when they assess the rewards, can not be achieved continuously without considering the drawbacks and discontinuity as well.

From the analytical point of view, in relationship studies there seem to be a trend to address mainly the positive side of interaction in terms of discussing e.g. trust and commitment, open communication or mutual rewards. Hence, the impact of the 'other side' (revealing the real scope and intensity of deleterious forces) for relationship development is often underestimated.

Objectives and Scope

The main objective of this conceptual study is to *describe the idea of a dialectical approach for understanding the conformities of interorganisational behaviour by sharply contrasting adversarial, dissensual and consensual features in interorganisational relationships* and subsequent processes. It is proposed that a network as a set of diverse relationships can be characterised by dialectical means, exposing the opposite-driving and contrarious forces, which are actually expressions of vitality and continuity for the consistency of the relationship, though primarily they seem to disconnect a particular link leading gradually to total dissolution. It is thus assumed that a sturdy analysis of one particular phenomenon (e.g. the creation of mutual trust in a relationship between actors) requires tenacious measures for analysing the utmost opposite side of that phenomenon as well. There seems to be a dualistic and invisible balance between the extremes, despite of the obvious incongruency. The revealed contradictions are inseparable. With the help of an aggravated and sharp juxtaposition implying dualism, the researcher can gain new insights for understanding the overall nature of the relationship as well – its positive or negative dimensions, leading first to dynamical disequilibrium, and later triggering new efforts for changing the current *status quo*.

As often noted (see e.g. Berger and Luckmann 1966), reality is a social construction, which means that every actor (whether a firm, a group of people, or a single human actor) has a limited ability to comprehend the reality especially when the latent features of the relationships – which can be hostile, and devastating expressing strong arrogance, or even annihilating - are under consideration. Despite the apparent trust manifested openly between two collaborators, there is always a seed of mistrust, suspicious behaviour, and even unilateral hate as well. Because interorganisational issues are often more *interpersonal* than purely interorganisational by nature, normative discussion on the content of well-working relationships and their formal character of neutrality (even reciprocal harmony) conceals the strong influence of personal attitudes and their hidden subversive nature.

Dialectics in General

Despite of the fact that dialectics can be a rather neutral word and/or practice (originally referring to discourse, discussion even debate), the dialectic procedure addresses contradictions, conflicts and strong disharmony instead of benevolence and harmony in relationships. Particularly when examined mainly as a social phenomenon, dialectics can be summarised as follows (modified slightly from Arbnor and Bjerke 1997, p. 162):

Unity and struggle of contradictions. Contradictions condition each other and bring meaningfulness to the poles; this requires effective use of polarizing concepts.

Transition of quantitative accumulation into a new quality. By using some strong metaphors as a starting point, Arbnor and Bjerke refer to quick changes into completely new qualitative configurations.

Everything undergoes development and becomes its own contradiction. To generalise this it can be assumed e.g. that trust becomes intrinsically hate, the development in the relationship is incrementally changed into destruction (and so on). Subsequently, the conceived negation is later a basis for a next stage in relationship development.

Arbnor and Bjerke (1997) use this three-wise procedure to explain the links between the features in the above-mentioned explanation: the theoretical start requires first a struggle of contradictions, which leads – with the help of accumulation of everyday language – to a new quality (descriptive and ideal-type languages as a result), which will negate what was originally given. Finally, the development leads to its own contradiction.

Some philosophers have already increased the knowledge and power of juxtapositions: Socrates and his method of deep cross-examination or Plato's dialectic aim at achieving the highest knowledge are some of the first attempts to use the idea. Also Engels' theory of dialectic materialism and dialectic model of history is a well-known example of how to express of the logic of the dialectical processes in general: Fichte was the first to present the triad which was lately supported by Hegel. Indeed, according to Hegel there is a triadic interplay between thesis, antithesis and synthesis or as he puts it: *'the evolution of ideas occurs through a dialectical process - that is, a concept gives rise to its opposite, and as a result of this conflict, a third view, the synthesis, arises. The synthesis is at a higher level of truth than the first two views.'*

Furthermore, dialectics can be a method of reasoning that aims at understanding e.g. change and interconnections with their opposite and contradictory sides. The dualistic worldview is recognized also in the theological thinking (see e.g. Enckell 2000 for a subjective synthesis and comparison): e.g. the gnostical interpretation of the transcendental world strongly addresses the dualism and sharp difference between the 'Go(o)d' and 'bad'.

Positioning the Dialectical Approach in Studying Interorganisational Relationships

The illustration below (Fig. 1) depicts different approaches for studying interorganisational behaviour and subsequent relationships in a particular network, exposing also the idea of dialectical confrontation as a starting point in analysis; it is also assumed that organizational behaviour is influenced by the role and position of an actor in a network.

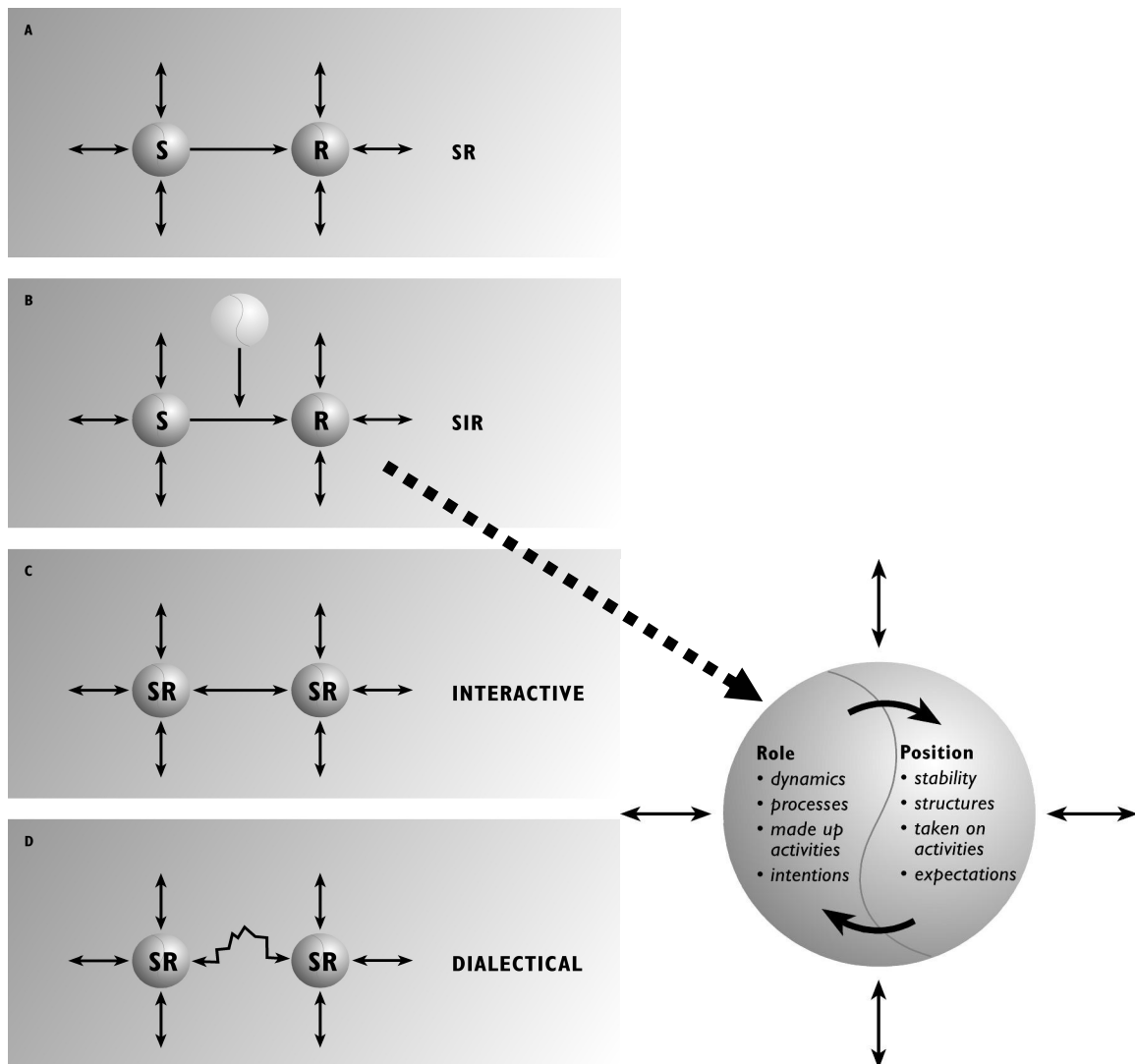


Figure 1. Different Approaches for Analysing Interorganisational Relationships with the Help of a Bi-faceted Interpretation of the Role-Position Concept

Key: *S* = stimulus type of action, *R* = response type of reaction, *I* = intervention (by third party in triadic nets in setting B)

Besides conventional, managerial stimulus-response type of explanations offering one ontological basis for deeper discussion (indicating proactive and reactive measures with (B) or without intervention (A)), the interaction-based approach (C) aims at combining several contradictory aspects in relationships, such as co-operation, competition and conflict, which can be present simultaneously.

However, the theory is based on the idea of benevolent and mutually rewarding collaboration. Hence, not just in well-established business jargon but also in scientific analysis the rhetoric is often obtrusively positive, approaching the other side faintly (e.g. lack of trust, not aggression, is the opposite for trust, lack of commitment, not extermination, is the opposite for commitment). Fierce contradiction – such as willingness for destruction – is not employed by researchers in their analysis or their conceptualisations. The major focus in pragmatical analysis is too often too narrow because the positive effects of the network engagement are so highly emphasised. Thus there seem to be a need to enhance the scope of the widely-used concepts for new areas.

As regards the dialectical explanation (D), the role and position of a single actor in a network are essential in understanding the attributes of the conflicts. Most networks are unstable e.g. in terms of power, which means that one leading player's arrogant dominance over the others might force the others for coercive adaptations, which are perceived in a deprecating or antagonistic way. The follower- type of actor (in terms of organizational responses; setting A in Fig. 1) perceives these situations negatively, and if no appropriate conflict resolution methods are evident, this will lead to an open or hidden clash later.

In the dialectical approach it is assumed that exposition of strong contradiction can be valid in the analysis, when the true content of relationships is viewed; the concept of trust cannot exist without considering hate and there can be no portrayal for concept development without considering the forces of annihilation or destruction as well. In other words, a concept which is created to describe a certain phenomenon (e.g. trust) should include its own contradiction; somehow the concept that is encapsulated by a specific wording, actually should give space to explain the opposite negation as well.

It is thus postulated that every phenomenon that is studied conceptually, should embrace its contradictions explicitly as well; without true understanding of the other side, the subject that is primarily under consideration can not be understood either. Thus strong duality can be seen as a means for discussing dialectic relations. Analytically, it is not possible to understand the true nature of a relationship without considering the '*dark side*', though this attempt requires highly sensitive methods in the empirical analysis. The major stimulus for dynamics in relationships is often included in the strong tension and dualistic balance that appears openly or is hidden in many forms and is prevalent in every network relationship.

Development of Juxtapositions in Relationships

Figure 2 explains the development of a particular relationship through time, expressing also how strongly these relationships incrementally embrace the tensions and how this finally causes extreme manifestations (original presentation by Ford et al. 1998 as a basis). Particularly at the stable stage, both harmony (and concord) and conflicts (discord) are present.

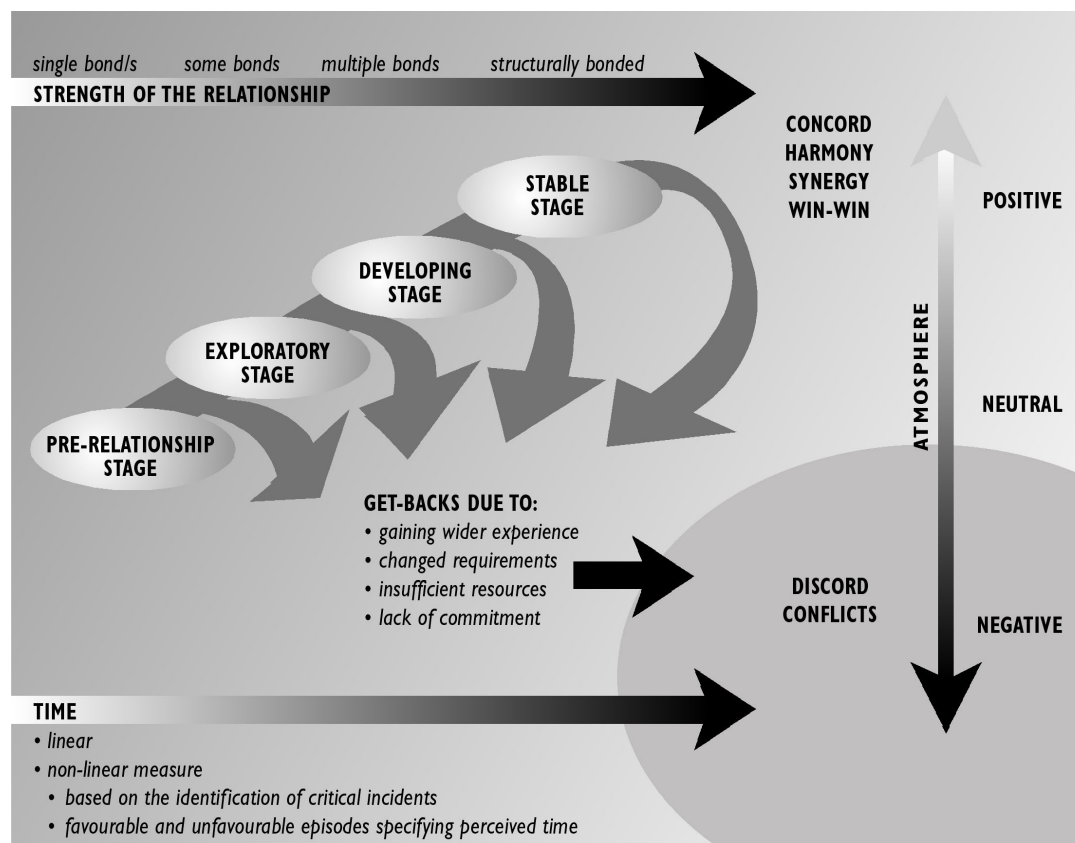


Figure 2: The Development of Tensions and Juxtapositions in Longer Relationships in Structurally Bonded Net(work)s

The depth of the relationship and its character can not be understood without considering the extremely negative dimensions of the relationship as well. In tightly bonded networks the actors are often obliged to cooperate – at least on some minor matters – though it is often very difficult to accept or tolerate the other one.

It can be postulated that in structurally bonded networks in which the actors are interdependent (one actor's decisions influence the other ones), the probability of clashes increases with time. Numerous scholars seem to stress the prevalence of positive win-win- situations in stronger relationships (ignoring the importance of clashes or underestimating their frequency). However, Castells (1996, p. 472) is quite sceptical when discussing this idea: in his view *'the losers pay for the winners'*. This implies that a zero-sum game (dominant player as a winner) is resulted under many circumstances in the networked society. Undoubtedly, this can cause hostile responses and corresponding behaviour among the actors.

The actors are obliged to deal with the dialectical processes *on various organizational levels*: the dynamics in one particular net(work) stem not only from the general, interorganisational tensions among the members of the network but appears also on dyadic (e.g. focal firm *vis-à-vis* counterpart), triadic (hostile and/or friendly intervention/s from a third party's side) or net (referring to a limited set of

actors and relationships, respectively, of an entire network) level. This is evident as the interorganisational issues are often as much *interpersonal* (communication takes place in social nets rather than in the entire network) than purely interorganisational. For Arbnor and Bjerke (1997, p. 59), describing dialectic relations under the actors' approach refers to the logic of ambiguity: relations change qualitatively in a continuous transformation. It is, thus, a necessity to make the transcendental interaction visible. However, here ambiguity does not refer to some blurred indistinctness but rather for a dualistic interpretation.

Despite of the recuperative processes prevalent in every relationship, basically all institutions (and actors generating and maintaining relationships) are inherently subject to deterioration. The attitudes towards inconvenient social systems can be explained with three basic strategies: loyalty, voice and exit (Hirschmann 1970). Acting loyally means that an actor is complying silently or cooperating without complaining (and probably the relationship hides the deep confrontations). Voice can be defined as an expression of anger with an intention to solve an actual problem (uncovering strongly extreme experiences and their impact). In very difficult dysfunctional systems, exit is often the only solution for an actor, though e.g. in deeply and structurally bonded nets with diverse tying elements, exit is neither possible nor desirable (compare to the strength of the relationship and its strong adherence in Fig. 2, making the total leave impracticable for a single actor).

Proposal for Extending the Analytical Scope through the Dialectical Approach

In figure 3, three different approaches are presented in order to distinguish the scope of different views in analysing interorganisational relationships (compare to Fig. 1 in which A and B are typically managerial approaches employing the SR-scheme, C as an interactive representation refers to the network-based approach and D is the dialectical approach).

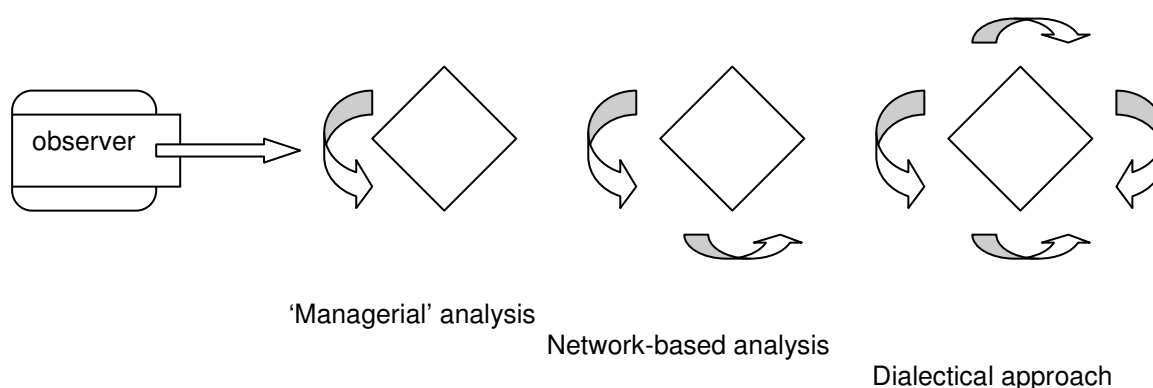


Figure 3: Analytical Scope of Three Approaches in Studying the Dimensions of Interorganisational Relationships

The managerial approach/analysis refers here to studies which aim at creating strategic models for higher performance and management of resources among business actors. The studies are characterised by a mechanistic Stimulus Response (SR)- scheme attached by an urge to trace practical strategic benefits (oversimplification and appropriate rhetoric thus required). The network-based approach provides the analysis with new mindsets (existence of simultaneous collaboration and competition). It is proposed that the dialectical approach (despite its dualistic nature and polarising concepts) can extend the analytical scope by introducing new conceptual vocabulary and by grasping displeasing issues, which are often neglected in relationship. The 'other side' contains the negations implying subsequent conceptualisation, which should be carefully considered in network analysis. Some of the extreme responses - such as willingness for revenge - often take place often on *interpersonal* level. Due to unilateral success, some other actors perceive this negatively, which can lead to extreme activities.

One of the probable paths for increasing the intensity of studies could be in the idea of deconstruction, which means that language *per se* (and its awkward nature) is not an appropriate medium to reveal the truth directly. There seems to be tendency for scholars to create binary conceptual systems (in contrast to managerial approaches uncovering and exploiting an idea of simple distinction between one basic concept and its naïve contradiction), in which one term is constituted as the privileged norm later creating hierarchies of meaning (Jary and Jary 1999). This might lead to socially institutionalised rhetoric (which is even an urge for managerially-oriented scholars). Deconstruction aims at revealing the ambivalence and incongruousness of texts, which can only be understood in relation to other ones; as Cova (1994, p. 280) puts it (when claiming that reality is actually a pure illusion): '*everything is intertextual, not causal, or predictive*'. A researcher, however, should be committed to uncovering critically the simplicity and inappropriateness of managerial rhetoric, and the logical analysis that hides as much as it reveals.

Concluding Discussion and Suggestions for Further Studies

Generally speaking, it is suggested that proper attention should be paid to discussing the 'dark side' of relationships, aiming at uncovering the real motivations for certain types of behaviour, processes to cope with conflicts and their outcome. As regards further studies, it should be analysed what the adequate means and methods for conflict resolution in the interorganisational context are especially if (and when) polarised concepts are truly tested and employed; definitely, this requires sensitive analytical methods for grasping the subconscious mind of the actors, implying e.g. manifestation of anger in relationships. Pragmatically, continuous evaluations of trust-mistrust-hate- type of juxtapositions are needed with enough attention for synthesising processes. In structurally bonded net(work)s the actors are obliged to seek for some balance in interaction, though there seems to be a tendency for disequilibrium in every relationship; the dynamics in networks actually stem from this state. Narratives, stories and answers to simple questions (in the empirical research procedure) often hide the dark mind and willingness for e.g. destruction and revenge. It thus a necessity (e.g. when conducting interviews) that the researcher should always have the ability and willingness to reflect deeply and critically the responses and analyse and interpret them correctly *a posteriori*.

The WUAWUG syndrome (What-you/U-ask-is-what-you/U-get) can be one of the obstacles for the researcher to get in-depth knowledge regarding the annoying and antagonistic – even belligerent - issues that should be considered not only on interpersonal but on interorganisational level as well. A pre-defined theoretical framework created prior to empirical analysis and containing simple, over-optimistic and smooth rhetoric might force the researcher to use limited wording, concepts and conceptual vocabulary; Gummesson (1991) discusses a *procrustean science* - an idea derived from ancient Greek mythology - which refers to misuses of theories and models for formulating the hypotheses to be tested. When such hypotheses are used as the point of departure in research '*they govern the way questions are asked and the way answers and other observations are interpreted*' (Gummesson 1991, p. 55). To avoid analytical narrow-mindedness, besides discussing the positive sides of a relationship (attributes of trust and commitment, open communication, mutual respect), the researcher should not only consider the problems of one particular relationship (lack of communication, competition and dispersed interests) but also the extreme features (e.g. destruction and annihilation, anger and hate, urge to revenge). In this attempt the dialectical approach (complementing managerial and network-based approaches) can be valuable, as this particular view strongly addresses the meaning of negations and juxtapositions in relationships.

Finally, it can be suggested that dialectical contradictions probably can not be totally solved; especially in structurally bonded networks there always exists disharmony, which should be accepted by the actors maintaining relationships and observer conducting research work. The dialectical approach can give new mindsets for in-depth analysis. It is worth questioning, whether consideration of the dialectic approach (and negations) is even a *sine qua non* in analysing properly the true content of (business) relationships.

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