DEFINITIONS OF BUSINESS RELATIONSHIP ENDING: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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30 June 2013

Competitive paper  
presented at the Annual IMP Conference Special track on “The complexities of relationship dynamics”, Atlanta, August-September 2013

Keywords: conceptualization, defining, business relationship ending, systematic literature review

ABSTRACT

What constitutes a business relationship ending and when do we know it has ended, if ever? This study argues for the importance of defining the ending of a business relationship and discusses the concepts involved and the definitions used when referring to the phenomenon. We base our discussion on a systematic review of articles dealing with the ending of B2B relationships. We suggest that to overcome the barriers of scientific knowledge production created by fuzzy conceptual language, researchers should be sensitive to the multiple meanings of terms, define the concepts they use clearly, and apply them in a consistent manner.

This study is part of EmoCha research project funded by the Academy of Finland.

INTRODUCTION

Business relationship ending as a phenomenon and research topic has been acknowledged since 1980 when Ford discussed the final stage of business relationships. Other early notions are the
stage of termination discussed by Rosson (1986), exit patterns by Gadde and Mattsson (1987), and the dissolution phase studied by Dwyer et al. (1987). Three observations arise from the first studies addressing relationship ending. First, research has used different terms—termination, exit and dissolution—to describe the phenomenon. Second, the studies share a process view on business relationships, and their ending, understanding ending through different stages, phases, or patterns. Third, the underlying assumption was that business-to-business relationship ending is of interest and deserving of dedicated research.

The third observation clearly holds true even today. Since the 1980s, research on business relationship ending has grown. However, perhaps because of the first observation relating to the variety of terms applied, the research field has not been able to advance as much as might have been hoped. We argue that three major barriers impede communication about the complex phenomenon and the advancement of knowledge in the discipline. The first concerns the terminology applied. Researchers have continued to use various terms to refer to the phenomenon. A review by Tähtinen and Halinen (2002) found the terms dissolution, termination, exit, switching behavior, divorce, deterioration, ending, fading, and failure being used in studies. As this study will show, the situation has not changed in ten years.

The second barrier relates to the lack of attempts at conceptual analysis that could produce definitions of the term the study addresses. Moreover, when existing studies define the terms, however vaguely, each term is not defined similarly. In other words, studies A and B both use the term business relationship termination, but define it differently. At the same time, however, study A defines termination in accordance with a third study, C, which applies the term dissolution. Hence, even the same term can be used in ways that reflect different meanings and functions, so that the same term refers to both the processes involved in firms ceasing their dyadic relationship and the outcome of the process, the ex-relationship. This lack of clarity may, in part result from the multiple perspectives that researchers have on business relationship ending. Nevertheless, when multiple terms are used without clear definitions the conceptual confusion produces a lack of clarity in the resulting models. It is difficult to summarize or integrate the knowledge derived, when we cannot establish what kinds of endings have been studied.

The third barrier to research efforts is the result of the first two; when the different terms remain undefined, it becomes very difficult to establish whether the phenomenon itself is multifaceted and therefore best approached with a variety of concepts, each referring to a distinctive type of business relationship ending. We can argue that since business relationships themselves have been classified to reflect their differences (see, e.g., Wong, Wilkinson & Young 2010), should not the endings of these different types of relationships also be classified? Such a classification would paint a more detailed picture of the phenomenon and help us better understand its variations. The other option would be that the phenomenon can be understood with a single concept. If this were the case, then we would need to aim for conceptual agreement on which concept to use and how to define it. Research in other areas of marketing (e.g., conceptualizing service quality, see Brady and Cronin 2001), business (e.g., conceptualizing corporate social responsibility, see Okoye 2009) and social and behavioral sciences in general (e.g., for conceptualizing healing, see Wendler 1996, or for conceptualizing emotions, see Izard 2010) shows that agreeing on a definition is not as simple as it sounds. Both these options require careful conceptual framing.

Because we researchers have created a situation that now hampers building on existing research to make progress, we need to address it. The situation is by no means peculiar. The
philosophical investigation of the death of humans (DeGrazia 2011) also questions what constitutes death and how can we know when it has occurred. Multiple answers exist and are proffered. This study will show that the first option, that of acknowledging multiple definitions is the way forward. Thus, this paper seeks to provide greater clarity about the concepts most often used in research on business relationship ending1.

The goal will be pursued through a systematic review of studies on relationship ending, a description of the dominant use of the concepts that underpin those studies (i.e., the definitions in the literature), a search for any conceptual agreement or overlap in their characteristics, and a description of the conceptual landscape, in other words, the semantic field. The study concludes that to speed the progress in the field and fully reflect the complexity of the empirical phenomenon, we need to be sensitive to the multiple meanings and functions applied to the terms that have been used, we also need to improve our semantic precision when defining the concepts we use, and to apply them in a consistent manner in future research.

ON THE IMPORTANCE AND CRAFT OF DEFINING

The most important lesson of doctoral studies is that one must define the main concepts of a study. Why is that so important? If research hypothesizes about some things or events, we need to know what those things or events are. We need to know what is included and what is excluded. By labeling or naming things or events, we immediately see and understand them through the assigned label. If we cannot name them, we cannot talk about them (Sartori 1984, 17). If we re-label them and change our vocabulary, we see them differently, since “language affects thought” (Starbuck 2006, 143).

However, whatever label is assigned, other researchers can still see it differently. Unless the author defines the label, in other words the term, two things happen. Firstly, the researcher does not know exactly what the study is about, and what is really being measured, although s/he may think otherwise (see also Gerring 2012, 112; MacInnis 2011). This results in the study having weak validity (MacKenzie 2003). Secondly, the readers’ find it difficult to know what was studied, or simply read the study through their own ‘lenses’, increasing the chances of confusion ensuing. The misunderstandings can be truly fundamental, since different disciplines use the same terms with different meanings (see also Gerring 2012, 114). Thus, there are two obvious reasons why defining the main concepts is of such importance; to know what we really study, and to communicate it to the readers so that they can understand it and build upon it. Only with clear language can we achieve clear thinking (Sartori 1984, 22).

Even if a term is defined, but we use the concepts as if they were words, research runs into problems. Words in common language and concepts are different animals. In common language almost no word has only one meaning and many words are synonyms, meaning, at least approximately, the same. Sartori (1984, 26-38) sees this is the core challenge for researchers working with concepts. Research needs to reduce the ambiguity caused by the use of one word (or concept) to convey different meanings and the use of several words (or concepts) to convey the same meaning. In the case of homonymy (one concept referring to many meanings), Sartorini’s (1984, 38) answer is to use more concepts, one concept for each meaning. This will bring the clarity needed. In the case of synonymy (many concepts, one meaning), the researcher should ask what is achieved by using two or more concepts if they mean the same and are

1 Following Tähtinen and Halinen (2002) we use the term ending in a neutral way; as one that does not imply anything about the nature or type of the ending.
defined the same way. Tautology is a minor fault, if avoiding it by using synonyms causes us to commit ‘a very great sin’ of ‘unsettling a semantic field’ as Sartorini (1984, 38) puts it.

The world of concepts and their definitions is not simple. Concepts and constructs are labels that seem to be used in a way already criticized; partly as synonyms and partly as the latter defining the former (see MacInnis 2011). Let us start with the dictionary definition. The Collins English Dictionary (web edition) has three definitions for a concept; i) “an idea, especially an abstract idea”, ii) “(philosophy) a general idea or notion that corresponds to some class of entities and that consists of the characteristic or essential features of the class”, and iii) “a) the conjunction of all the characteristic features of something”, “b) a theoretical construct within some theory”, “c) a directly intuited object of thought”, and “d) the meaning of a predicate”. It defines construct as “something formulated or built systematically”, and “a complex idea resulting from a synthesis of simpler ideas”, and “(psychology) a model devised on the basis of observation, designed to relate what is observed to some theoretical framework”. The dictionary definitions clearly illustrate that even the labels of concept and construct can be defined in many ways. Since it is beyond the focus of this paper to elaborate on that issue, we simply continue to use the label ‘concept’, except when directly quoting studies that use the label ‘construct’.

When using the term concept we refer at this point to the loose definition of Sartori (1984, 27), “the basic unit of thinking”. This unit includes four elements: the term, the attributes or properties, the empirical indicators, and the phenomenon that is referred to (Gerring 2012, 116). Gerring (Ibid.) argues that the formulation of a concept needs to address all the interwoven four elements; if one is changed others must also be adjusted. Hence it is not sufficient to explicate a single definition for a concept; instead various definitions are needed2.

Whatever term or word is chosen (in this case; relationship ending), we first need a definition that encapsulates the meaning of the concept. The declarative definition is often a lexical one, and its aim is to reduce or eliminate ambiguity (Sartori 1984, 29). This is essential since unambiguous concepts are the minimal standards for theory construction (Lenski 1988). Sartori’s example is that human3 refers to “a rational animal” (Ibid.).

Second, we need to address the question of referents or the objects in the real world that the concept refers to. In other words, we need to know the definitional attributes of the concept and its empirical indicators so that we can connect the concept to its referent. Thus, we need to establish and set the boundaries, determine the memberships, and decide the cut-off point, vis-à-vis marginal entities, to know what to include and exclude (Sartori 1984, 30). A denotative definition confronts these three tasks, and if we want to be more precise, a precising definition (a sub-class of denotative definition) can be crafted if a lack of clarity around the membership issue remains (Ibid.). Sartori’s example of a denotative definition is of a table; “flat surface sustained by legs” (which excludes tables that do not have legs, e.g., those fixed to a wall) and of a precising definition of a table; a flat surface sustained by 1–8 legs. The precising definition is needed if flat surfaces with more than eight legs appear, and need to be excluded from the study. Hence, the need for a precising definition may become clear during the empirical part of the study, but an empirical study should present a denotative definition.

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2 Relationship (ending) research as a field has not matured sufficiently that a formal language system-based definitions could be developed, and therefore we have limited the references to nominal and operational definitions discussed by Teas and Palan, 1997. However, Teas and Palan share the underlying notion that theoretically meaningful definitions of concepts precede valid operational definitions.

3 Sartori (1984) uses the word ‘man’ but since the text does not at this point refer to an exclusion of women, we use ‘human’.
Finally, an operational definition, the second sub-class of denotative definition, is needed. If a precising definition has been crafted, it helps in crafting the operational definition (Sartori 1984, 30). Operational definitions need to be narrow, of a type used in measuring; and hence contain properties that can be measured Sartori (1984, 31). Sartorini (Ibid.) stresses that the leap from declarative definition to an operational one would be too great, since the latter curtails much of the richness of the connotations of the concept. This becomes vivid in Sartori’s example of the operational definition of human, “the capacity of responding to and of being scaled by an IQ test” (Ibid.). Hence, operational definitions are about the properties of the object that can be empirically measured (see also Teas and Palan 1997). Moreover, it is important that the properties are defining properties, in other words, those necessary to identify the concept and its boundaries (Sartori 1984, 32-33). However, since the phenomenon cannot be reduced to its measurable properties, an operational definition cannot be the only definition a study presents and applies.

Coming back to the topic of defining business relationship ending, an example of a declarative definition could be ‘a dead exchange structure’ (if a business relationship is defined as an exchange structure) and a denotative definition might refer to the objects in the real world ‘a commercial exchange structure between at least two companies that had its origin in interactions of the companies that no longer take place and so has ceased-to-exist’. If we wanted to study buyer-seller relationships, a precision definition could be crafted labeling the companies as a buyer and a supplier company and also narrowing the interactions to actions in buying and selling of products. Operationalization of this definition could lead the researcher to measure if a company is currently buying or selling with its counterpart and when the last exchange happened, thus excluding other types of interaction that can still be ongoing and being sure that it is not just a temporary decline in intensity. An example of measurement of such an operational definition would be to look at the annual report and if, for example an advertising agency was mentioned there at year $t$, and was missing from the report at year $t+1$, the buyer-seller relationship could be noted to have ended.

The logic of the ‘chain’ from the declarative definition to its operational definition is important, since it is the only way to try to guarantee that the study measures the same phenomenon it declares. At the same time, the chain shows how important it is to first define and seize the object, and only thereafter design the measurement accordingly. For example, when measuring relationship ending only by asking a respondent if the company s/he works for has switched banks during the last two years, the respondent may not even perceive a particular relation to a bank as a relationship in the sense the researcher defines it, thus threatening the validity and reliability of the study.

**METHODOLOGY**

The goal of this review is to provide a comprehensive conceptual overview of the field. To reach that goal, we conducted an analytical review of articles dealing with the ending of business-to-business relationships that enabled us to search and evaluate the literature systematically (see Ginsberg and Venkatraman, 1985). Following the logic of the systematic review, we aim to produce a transparent and reproducible procedure to improve the quality of this review process and its outcome (Tranfield et al., 2003). Our execution process consisted of three parts: data collection, data analysis, and synthesis.
For data collection, we used a predefined selection criteria (i.e., keywords and search terms) to avoid subjectivity (see Tranfield et al. 2003). The use of three electronic databases ensured we covered a wide range of journals publishing business-to-business relationship studies. The choice was limited to peer-reviewed journals because of their impact in the field (Podsakoff et al., 2005), but also because we assumed that during the peer-review process, the most important aspects of research quality, including the definitions of major concepts, would be polished. The selected databases were ABI/Inform Complete, EBSCO Business Source Premier, and Emerald where we had full access to articles. Together the databases broadly cover the area of marketing and business literature (ABI/Inform; 88 scholarly journals that have ‘marketing’ in their titles, EBSCO; 539 publications with ‘marketing’ in the title, Emerald 22 scholarly marketing journals). We wanted to include a wide range of articles in various disciplines and thus did not select the journals based on their impact factor or other rankings lists. The fact that the three databases offered wide coverage is evident because 64 % of the articles chosen for the final analysis appeared only on one of the databases. We chose not to limit the timeframe to provide access to earlier contributions. We considered this to be important since the focus is on defining the phenomenon of interest and earlier definitions are commonly used in the studies we focus on below.

The terms were chosen based on their existing usage in a highly esteemed article on business-to-business relationships by Dwyer et al. (1987) and a review of buyer-seller relationship dissolution studies by Tähtinen and Halinen (2002). The latter covered the field quite broadly, including consumer relationships, and concluded that the terms used were the most established. The search terms used as selection criteria were combinations of ‘relationship’ and ‘dissolution’; ‘relationship’ and ‘ending’; ‘relationship’ and ‘exit’; ‘relationship’ and ‘termination’, and ‘relationship’ and ‘switching’.

The search was limited to abstracts of articles published in English in peer-reviewed academic journals (up until the end of 2011) and resulted in 1864 hits. As Table 1 shows, the term switching was found in 697 articles, exit in 399 articles, termination in 304 articles, dissolution in 266 articles, and ending in 198 articles. Some of the articles appear several times among the 1864 hits because they applied several of the search terms. For example, the article by Pressey and Qui (2007) appeared twice, with the search terms ‘ending’ and ‘dissolution’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Search terms</th>
<th>Number of hits in all three databases</th>
<th>Number of hits in articles dealing with business relationship ending</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship &amp; switching</td>
<td>697</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship &amp; exit</td>
<td>399</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship &amp; termination</td>
<td>304</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship &amp; dissolution</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship &amp; ending</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total number of hits</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,864</strong></td>
<td><strong>94 (in 84 articles)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second step was to compile a consideration set (see Tranfield et al. 2003). In doing so, we limited the articles to those that deal with business relationship endings (see third column in Table 1). Each researcher read abstracts of each article to double-check if it was appropriate to add to the consideration set. The subject matter of several of the articles was beyond the business
context (e.g., personal relationship endings), and those articles were removed from the set. In some cases, we read articles in whole or in part to evaluate if the article elaborated on relationship ending between business-to-business buyers and sellers. That stage made it possible to exclude articles that focused on end consumers, retention or service recovery evaluation, the exit of investors or venture capitalists from a company, termination of contracts and their influence on the number of terminations, and studies discussing legislation and its influence on, for example, termination clauses in franchising contracts. In addition, studies were excluded that, regardless of title and key words, focused solely on exit/switching costs or keeping business relationships alive, instead of studying their ending. In all cases we reached a joint decision on whether the article should be retained in the next stage or not. Finally, the consideration set comprised 84 articles all studying the ending of business-to-business relationships. The most common concepts that research uses to refer to the phenomenon are relationship dissolution (33 times) and relationship switching (27 times) as is shown in Table 1. Although two of the earliest articles, namely Gadde and Mattson (1987) and Rosson (1986) did not appear in the search, owing to the limited electronic access to them, we decided to include them in the sample, and consequently, the sample consist of 86 studies.

In the third step, the grouping, each researcher separately classified the articles as either conceptual (16 articles) or empirical (70 articles). In addition, these lists of articles were discussed and the categorization decision was made jointly. The fourth step was intended to discern how the studies defined business relationship ending, regardless of the terms they used. The basic search was conducted using either NVivo (and readable portable document format (PDF) files) or electronic search for the key words; ‘concept*’, ‘defin*’, and ‘refer*’, any of which can be used when explicitly defining the key concepts. In addition, to catch implicit ways of delimiting the parameters of the phenomenon we read the theoretical and empirical parts of the studies. This way we were able to find other expressions used to define, make precise or operationalize the concept.

None of the articles referred to Sartori or explicitly stated what type of definition they presented and/or applied. Therefore, the following categorization is our interpretation of the definitions applied in the studies. We used the guidelines provided by Sartori (1984, pp. 41–42; 47–50) to analyze and classify the definitions into two main groups: declarative and denotative. In addition, the two sub-classes of denotative definitions, namely the precising and operational forms are applied. However, we only separate operational definitions, to highlight the argument that no study should rely on an operational definition. Moreover, the analysis will elaborate on the problematic states of homonymy and synonymy and their presence in the research field.

**FINDINGS**

**Declarative Definitions**

Declarative definitions declare the meaning of the word; however, that meaning remains quite broad, without delimiting the phenomenon sufficiently to be used as a single type of definition in a study (see Sartori 1984, 29). Hence, one would expect to find declarative definitions in early conceptual studies, when a new phenomenon is being mapped out and its delimitation is still under investigation.

Table 2 shows the declarative definitions. Only Havila and Wilkinson (2002) offer a more precise definition, thus for the majority of studies this is the only way they define the subject
matter to the reader. As we anticipated, two studies, namely Dwyer et al. (1987) and Verbeke (1988) are from the early stage of studying business relationships, and both discuss the relationship as a process, including its ending. It is worth noting that the seminal work of Dwyer et al. (1987) uses eight different terms to discuss the ending of relationship (but not ‘ending’). Hence, when research started to pay attention to business relationships, there were no conventions. However, the term that is missing from the early conceptual work is *switching*. We may assume that since switching implies that one party in a dyad is changed to another, Dwyer et al. (1987) focused solely on the life of a dyad, without considering other actors.

Only three more recent studies refer to existing work when presenting a declarative definition. The three include both empirical and conceptual ones: Havila and Wilkinson (2002) refer to an early study by Gadde and Mattsson (1987) that focuses on gradual exit patterns in a network context; Shankarmahes et al. (2003) use a definition inspired by Dwyer et al (1987) and see ending as part of the relationship process. However, if one were to use such a wide definition in an empirical study, it would not help to distinguish the ending from the beginning of relationship, since both are integral parts of the relationship process. The declarative definition used by Zang et al. (2006) specifies the ending as relationship failure, however, there may be other less severe situations that can be characterized as relationship failures, and thus the definition remains quite general. In a similar manner, the challenge in the definitions of Verbeke (1988) is that it is hard to say if a relationship has ended when ‘parties separate’, since the definition does not explicitly state that a business relationship is the focal entity that they separate from.

**Table 2. Usage of declarative definitions in relationship ending studies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Term(s)</th>
<th>Declarative Definition</th>
<th>Type of Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dwyer et al. 1987</td>
<td>Dissolution, termination, withdrawal, disengagement, exit, break-up, uncoupling, separation //synonymy</td>
<td>A strategic marketing process</td>
<td>Conceptual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbeke 1988</td>
<td>Termination</td>
<td>Both parties separate …from each other</td>
<td>Empirical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Havila &amp; Wilkinson 2002</td>
<td>Ending, termination, withdraw //synonymy</td>
<td>Stop to trade (Gadde &amp; Mattsson 1987)</td>
<td>Empirical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shankarmahes et al. 2003</td>
<td>Dissolution, switching, termination //synonymy</td>
<td>An integral part of the relationship process (Dwyer et al 1987)</td>
<td>Conceptual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zang et al. 2006</td>
<td>Dissolution, termination, exit behavior //synonymy</td>
<td>Relationship failure</td>
<td>Empirical</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 also shows that that research is suffering from synonymy, as four studies use multiple terms when describing the phenomenon, although the definition may be connected to a single term, in this case dissolution (3 studies), termination (1 study) and ending (1 study). Hence, the other terms are applied as synonyms for the main term (i.e., the first mentioned in Table 2), not specifying the type of relationship ending in question.

Denotative and Precising Definitions of Relationship Ending in Conceptual Studies

The content of the definitions

This section discusses how the conceptual studies on relationship ending define the phenomenon. First, however, we should mention the number and relevance of the conceptual studies. The 16 conceptual studies of the total of 84 (20 %) form a relatively low proportion, and that seems to repeat the pattern that marketing researchers have reported previously (see, e.g., MacInnis 2011; Stewart and Zinkhan 2006). It is suggested that empirical papers are valued more highly than conceptual ones, meaning more are produced and published, despite conceptual thinking being the soul of our discipline. Without conceptual studies, it would be very hard to come up with new ideas that advance the discipline (see Yadav 2010). It follows that we view the conceptual papers as the most influential in the development of a research field and its theoretical tools. Hence, we stress their role in setting the ground for conceptual language, and therefore study them separately from the empirical papers.

Seven theoretical papers use denotative or precising definitions as presented in Table 3. The earliest, Halinen and Tähtinen (2002) refers to a definition of a dissolved business relationship originally presented by the same authors in an earlier conference paper about triad dissolution (Tähtinen and Halinen-Kaila, 1997), but also defines the process of ending for the first time. The more recent papers refer to definitions presented in Halinen and Tähtinen (2002) and in Havila and Wilkinson (1997, 2002) or to a definition of interpersonal relationship ending presented by Duck (1982), which also inspired the early work on business settings by Tähtinen and Halinen-Kaila (1997). Interestingly, Pick (2010) refers to the above mentioned sources, but the paper uses the term ‘termination’, instead of the original ‘dissolution’ or more general ‘ending’.

Table 3. Denotative and precising definitions of relationship ending in conceptual studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Terms</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Halinen & Tähtinen 2002 | ending, dissolution | “When all activity links are broken and no resource ties or actor bonds exist between the companies, a relationship can be considered dissolved (Tähtinen & Halinen-Kaila, 1997).

“The process of ending disconnects the former partner companies from each other by cutting the activity links, the resource ties, and actor bonds that have kept them together.” |
|                     |                       |                                                                                                                                            |
| Freeman & Browne 2004 | dissolution           | Presents several, but chooses none.                                                                                                        |
|                     | //homonymy            | Dissolution: “the permanent dismemberment of an existing relationship (Duck, 1982)”.

“a process where activity links, resource ties, and actor bonds are broken, disconnecting the former parties from each other (Tähtinen and Halinen-Kaila 1997, 560), personal bonds may be maintained between |
individuals from both companies (see Havila, 1996; Tähtinen and Halinen-Kaila, 1997)."

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Terms and Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vaaland 2004</td>
<td>divorce, dissolution, termination, breakdown //synonymy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“The term ‘business divorce’ is used to cover dissolution or termination in a business relationship where one or both parties want to leave the relationship.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellis 2006</td>
<td>termination, switching, decline, dissolution //synonymy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Termination “the removal of intermediaries from distribution channel”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zolkiewski, Naudé &amp; Waller 2008</td>
<td>ending, dissolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“ending … all activity links are broken and no resource ties or actor bonds exist between the companies” (Halinen and Tähtinen 2002, p. 166).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“For a relationship to be dissolved there must be no commitment to continuity by one party…This does not mean that personal social bonds will cease to exist between the individuals involved within the two organizations or indeed that the relationship might not reform” (Havila and Wilkinson 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pick 2010</td>
<td>termination, switching, ending //synonymy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“[…] a process where these links, ties and other bonds are broken, disconnecting the former parties from each other” (Halinen and Tähtinen 2002, p. 165). … We define relationship termination as a process of the planned and conscious ending of a relationship with a business partner by evaluating the existing relationship, decreasing current ties such as purchase frequency or contact levels and/or explicitly stating the end of the relationship (i.e., in contractual settings).”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“… (a) a change in buying behavior such as a decrease of repurchase frequency, (b) the explicitly communicated end of the relationship, and (c) the “run-out” of the treaty.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Switching: “the leaving firm buys … from other suppliers.” “Switching and termination are ‘identical’.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ferguson &amp; Johnston 2011</td>
<td>exit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“…moving from an existing supplier to one of its competitors” Blois (2008) and Hirschman (1970)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Three conceptual studies differ from the largely similar others. Firstly, Ferguson and Johnston (2011) use the term exit and apply a definition that stems from Hirschman’s (1970) seminal exit-voice-loyalty theory. Secondly, Ellis (2006) uses termination and defines it in the channel context and Vaaland (2004) constructs a precise definition for business divorce (a new term), referring to the desire of one or both parties to leave the relationship. Hence, from the conceptual studies, we can see two clear tracks, the first one having its roots in social-psychological studies on personal relationships (Duck 1982) and the second relating to Hirschman (1970).

Hence, a very limited number of conceptual studies explicitly define the phenomenon in theoretical terms. This also means that a very few sources are available to provide definitions for empirical studies.
The remainder of the studies, while not defining the phenomenon, do to some extent describe it. Three of them use the term ‘termination’ although their descriptions vary (see Table 4). Although both Wagner & Freidl (2007) and Pfeiffer (2010) employ exactly the same descriptions, the use does not seem to clearly align with their two first references. The descriptions of relationship ending presented by Miles et al. (1990), Mudambi and McDowell Mudambi (1995), and Tähtinen et al. (2007) put the onus on the reader to discern what the studies understand by relationship ending. At least, the authors of this study could not find any descriptions from these three studies.

Table 4. Other descriptions of relationship ending in conceptual studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Waller 2004</td>
<td>“The termination of advertising agencies is when agency dissatisfaction leads to the end of the relationship. This may result in the direct switching of agencies or placing their account under review …”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wagner &amp; Friedl 2007</td>
<td>Termination “… the opportunity to terminate the supplier relationship and switch to an alternative supplier that offers a lower price or better quality (Dwyer et al. 1987, Halinen &amp; Tähtinen 2002, Ping &amp; Dwyer 1992)”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pfeiffer 2010</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miles et al. (1990)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mudambi and McDowell Mudambi (1995)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tähtinen et al. (2007)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A review by Tähtinen and Halinen (2002) presented in Table 5 suggests different conceptualizations for the concepts of ending, dissolution, exit, switching and termination. The suggestion stems from their review of relationship ending studies in consumer, channel, and business relationships. At the time, the conceptual variety was large, and all the terms (as well as many others) were applied to refer to the phenomenon of relationship ending. Hence, the suggestion aimed to specify different types of relationship endings and label them differently.

Looking at the theoretical papers in this review, the suggestion of Tähtinen and Halinen (2002) has not been adopted by other researchers. There still is a wide variety of terms used when referring to relationship ending. As the tables show, divorce, termination, switching, ending, dissolution, disengagement, and exit are all used in conceptual papers. Moreover, their use is not consistent, as the following sections will show.
### Table 5. Suggestions for contents of specific terms by Tähtinen and Halinen (2002)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ending</td>
<td>“a general term, to cover all kinds of relationship breakups, in all types of relationship, no matter what the reasons for their ending are.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Termination</td>
<td>“an ending where one of the parties, or an outside actor, deliberately ends a relationship. The term thus accentuates the termination decision and the intentional actions to end the relationship.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissolution</td>
<td>“to denote the ending process irrespective of whether an ending decision has been made. Strongly connected to the relationship between two active parties and also to the role of potential third actors, via network effects.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switching</td>
<td>“the supplier or the customer is substituted for another alternative. One actor’s decisions and actions related to relationship ending as well as the actor’s formation (or strengthening) of another relationship.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exit</td>
<td>“a single channel member’s disengagement from the channel, or more generally a single actor’s disengagement from a system of relationships, for example, a value chain or business network. The implicit assumption in the use of the term is that the system continues to exist in spite of one member’s exit.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Divorce (Vaaland 2004) can be seen as a metaphor, since it clearly highlights one aspect of the phenomenon; the end of attraction, trust and commitment. Termination is assigned a variety of meanings. Pick (2010) describes termination as a “planned and conscious ending” that may take place because of “the lack of further need of a product or services.” On the other hand terminations are used to refer to an ending brought about by dissatisfaction with the supplier (Waller 2004) or quite harshly “the removal of intermediaries from distribution channel” (Ellis 2006), without a connection to specific reasons for doing so. Hence, the use of termination does not really specify the type of ending it refers to and fails to provide the reader with clear information on the empirical situation it refers to.

Switching (e.g., Waller 2004; Pfeiffer 2010; Pick 2010) is used in the context of another supplier being chosen and hence its use does correspond to the suggestion provided by Tähtinen and Halinen 2002, although none of the studies refer to that. However, the studies tend to focus more on the decision to end the relationship than to the choice of initiating a new relationship to replace the first. Hence, the view on switching seems limited and biased towards the end of a relationship leaving the initiation of the replacement in its shadow. However, the switching may be triggered by the alternative partner, and hence, the initiation of the new relationship should receive equal attention.

Ending seems to be very seldom used, although Tähtinen and Halinen (2002) suggest it as a general term. Only two studies, namely Shankarmahesh et al. (2003) and Tähtinen et al. (2007) apply the term, and even then, the first study also uses three other terms (dissolution, switching, and divorce). The studies that use dissolution seem to refer to the definition presented in Tähtinen and Halinen (2002) or Dwyer et al. (1987). Dwyer et al. (1987) actually refer to disengagement, when they state that it is ‘a poorly understood strategic marketing process’. The review of Tähtinen and Halinen (2002) is the only other study that uses disengagement, when suggesting the content of the term ‘exit’. Exit in itself stems from Hirschman (1970) and is used in Pick (2010) and Ferguson & Johnston (2011). The first study relates it to ‘active ending by a supplier’ (Pick 2010) but the latter takes a buyer’s view and talks about the change of current supplier to ‘one of its competitors’. Hence, the current use of different terms is by no means...
coherent. The same term can refer to very different situations, and therefore the reader needs to be told what kind of ending the authors are really referring to.

**The conceptual disagreements, overlaps, and agreements in definitions**

When we look at the various ways of defining or describing relationship ending, the aspects of the nature of the phenomenon emerge. There are many views on the phenomenon, which in itself suggests high levels of variety. Firstly, relationship ending is seen as total/full/complete or partial/under consideration. However, the definition of Tähtinen and Halinen-Kaila (1997) or Tähtinen and Halinen (2002) does not include partial ending, but clearly suggests that no company level ties, bonds, or links remain in place. Hence, one may ask if partial ending conveys the desired essence of the concept, or whether it could be more precisely labeled as relationship fading (see Akerlund 2004), or reduction of the intensity of the relationship, or a sleeping relationship (see Hadjikhani 1996)?

Second, relationship ending can be viewed from different perspectives: that of one of the parties (the buyer or the supplier); or both parties in the relationship; that of third actors outside the relationship; or from the view of the channel or network. Most definitions state that the two organizations involved are a buyer and a supplier and that that buyer is the initiator of the ending. However, we argue that such an assumption is too narrow to be used in a conceptualization, as suppliers might also end a relationship with unprofitable customers, for example. In spite of the majority of definitions being context-related, there are also a few exceptions. The first one is offered by Ellis (2006) and focuses on intermediaries being removed from a distribution channel. That definition does not state which party initiates the removal. The second exception category consists of two studies: Shankarmahesh, Ford & LaTour (2003) and Vaaland (2004) both refer to abstract partners. The difference is that the former defines its context as international business, and hence both importers and exporters are mentioned in the definitions. When undertaking empirical studies, the view has an impact on the research design and empirical methods, data sources, and also the methods used to gather data.

Third, relationship ending can be seen as something that happens; a process, a phase, a decision or something that has already occurred as an outcome. In other words, the phenomenon can be viewed taking time into consideration or from a static perspective. Again, the choice has a bearing on how the phenomenon is studied empirically. If a process view is adopted, the methodology should enable a longitudinal study. On the other hand, if the ending is viewed as a decision, it is often seen from the point of view of the decider, be that the buyer or the supplier.

Moreover, the ending can be planned, deliberate and conscious (Pick 2010), wanted (Vaaland 2004), or something that happens to intermediaries, as they are being ‘removed’ from the channel (Ellis 2006). However, as recent research indicates (Ryan and Tähtinen 2012), the non-initiator’s actions in relationship ending are also important. If we accept that to be the case, we should look at the issue more as a process than as a decision. A view that a decision is taken to end a relationship already rules out several types of endings, for example, when the reason for ending is related to external pressures, or when the ending is natural; the need to interact may cease and the relationship lose its purpose. Indeed, there are different views on the reasons for a relationship ending; those reasons may be internal or external to the relationship.

When viewing a relationship ending as an outcome, the discussion on the totality of the ending arises again. Several papers highlight that even if the companies in question stopped interacting, the people representing the companies may still continue to do so, as individuals or in the hope of keeping the relationship ‘energy’ (see Havila and Wilkinson 1997) alive.
Moreover, only Freeman and Browne (2004) acknowledge a definition by Duck (1982) suggesting that relationship ending would be permanent (although they do not adopt it). However, the definition refers to personal relationships, where it may be more appropriate than in the context of business relationships. Hence, we can conclude that the definitions, at least implicitly, are bound to the specific period of time. When looking at a particular relationship now, we can categorize it in a continuum of ongoing, dissolving or already dissolved. However, next year the situation may be different, the same relationship may be still ending or may have been dissolved or, on the other hand it may have been recovered or it did end, but was re-established again.

Fourth and finally, relationship ending is often viewed as negative and hence something to be avoided. However, two conceptual studies, Wagner and Friedl (2007) and Pfeiffer (2010) are very explicit in their definition and state that relationship ending and particularly switching is an opportunity for the buyer. Hence, ending can be something sought either by the buyer (Wagner and Friedl 2007) or by either or both parties (Vaaland 2006).

To sum up, the conceptual papers present only a few theoretical definitions of relationship ending, but mostly conceptualize it in relation to the context. Agreements are rare, since the definitions seem to stem from the different theoretical backgrounds of business relationships and their ending. The backgrounds relate, at least, to social and personal relationships by Duck (1982); a customer’s exit-voice-loyalty framework by Hirschman (1970); to distribution channel research by Ping & Dwyer (1992); and the ARA-model related to industrial networks by Håkansson and Johanson (1992), as well as their combinations.

Next, we turn our attention to the empirical studies and the definitions applied there.

Denotative and Precising Definitions of Relationship Ending in Empirical Studies

The content of definitions

The first definition stream arising from personal relationship ending literature continues in 11 empirical studies. The studies either define relationships as dissolved when all activity links are broken, and no resource ties and actor bonds exist between two companies, or use the definition of dissolution as a process referring to the works of Tähtinen and Halinen-Kaila (1997), Tähtinen (1999, 2001), or Halinen and Tähtinen (2002). In addition, although not referring to the aforementioned studies, Havila and Wilkinson (2002) describe what happens when ‘the trading stops’ and conclude that the activity links, resource ties and actor bonds, including economic, technical, legal and administrative bonds no longer exist. However, “social interaction among personnel and knowledge sharing could continue.” This aligns well with the understanding that was discussed in the previous chapter dealing with conceptual studies.

\[\text{Pfeiffer (2010) presents an almost identical definition to that of Wagner and Friedl (2007), only five words distinguish them from each other.}\]
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Terms</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alajoutsijärvi et al. 2000</td>
<td>dissolution, exit, switching, terminating, ending, disengagement //synonymy</td>
<td>“dissolved when all activity links are broken and no resource ties and actor bonds exist between the companies” (Tähtinen and Halinen-Kaila 1997, 560)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressey &amp; Mathews 2003</td>
<td>exit (EB), dissolution //synonymy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farrelly 2010</td>
<td>termination</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alvarez et al 2011</td>
<td>ending, termination //synonymy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giller &amp; Matear 2001</td>
<td>terminations</td>
<td>“…terminated when no activity links or resource ties exist between the parties involved in the relationship. Although personal bonds may remain, both parties perceive the relationship as ended (Tähtinen and Halinen-Kaila, 1997).”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tähtinen 2002</td>
<td>ending</td>
<td>“the process of ending disconnects the former partner companies from each other by cutting the activity links, resource ties, and actor bonds that have kept them together.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Havila &amp; Wilkinson 2002</td>
<td>ending, termination relationship aftermath //synonymy</td>
<td>“…‘relationship aftermath’…the activity links and resource ties are ‘destroyed’ when trading stops. … Actor bonds (economic, technical, legal, and administrative) (Wilson &amp; Mummalanen 1986, Hammarkvist et al. 1982) … cease to exist... However, the social bonds that develop between the people involved in the relationship do not necessarily cease once trading stops.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helm (2004)</td>
<td>dissolution, ending, disengaging, break-up, divorce, fade away //synonymy</td>
<td>Relationship dissolution is effected if “at least one partner no longer views the relationship as continuing . . . or the interdependency has otherwise critically decreased” (Tähtinen 2001, p. 46).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beloucif et al. (2006)</td>
<td>ending, termination, dissolution, exit, disengagement, breakdown, break-up //synonymy</td>
<td>“… relationship ending as a process where these links, ties, and bonds are broken, disconnecting the former parties from each other. When all activity links are broken and no resource ties or actors bonds exist between the companies, a relationship can be considered dissolved” (Halinen and Tahtinen, 2002 p.166)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helm et al. (2006)</td>
<td>dissolution, termination, ending, break-up //synonymy</td>
<td>Relationship dissolution or ending is understood as a situation where “at least one partner no longer views the relationship as continuing . . . or the interdependency has otherwise critically decreased” (Tähtinen 2001, p. 46). Dissolution is interpreted as a process where links, ties, and bonds (e.g. exchange of objects, personal relationships, contracts, bonds of trust, and commitment) are disconnected (Halinen and Tähtinen 2002). We use ending, termination, and dissolution management synonymously.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although it seems that the empirical studies explicitly defining relationship ending mostly refer to a similar definition, if not the same one, the terms used remain different and thus seem to be used synonymously. The record is seven different terms in a single study. Although for example Helm et al. (2006) explain that the terms are used synonymously, the majority of studies do not offer any explanation for the use of multiple terms. We argue that the use of multiple terms without different definitions is not the most beneficial approach if we wish to advance the discipline and, at least at some point in time, be able to distinguish different types of ending from one another to reach a more profound understanding of the phenomenon.

In some articles, the descriptions of the phenomenon reveal that ending is not seen as a clear cut issue (see also Havila and Wilkinson, 2002). For example, Olkkonen and Tuominen (2006) discuss relationship fading and base their elaboration on Åkerlund’s (2004) study that focuses on fading. Although the study by Olkkonen and Tuominen (2006) does apply the concept of ‘ending’ it actually focuses on the “process whereby the strength of the relationship is permanently or temporally weakening and declining …, but in which the outcome is not yet known (Åkerlund, 2004).” Hence, this seems to be part of the potential ending process, or a less-intensive phase in the development of a relationship.

Another group of articles focuses not on actual endings but the propensity to terminate (e.g., Hibbard, Kumar & Stern 2001), the likelihood or propensity to switch from one relationship to another (e.g., Jones, Busch & Dacin 2003; Wathne, Biong & Heide 2001; Young & Denize 1995) or the propensity to exit from a relationship (e.g., Ping 1993, 1994; Purinton, Rosen & Curran 2007). Only Ping (1993) and Purinton et al. (2007) refer to Hirschman’s (1970) Exit- Voice- Loyalty framework and define exit and exit intention as a “member’s ceasing to buy the firm’s product, or leaving the organization”. These studies seem to extend the second definitional stream that was presented earlier. Ping (1993), however, operationalizes exiting with the help of Mobley (1977) and adopts “physically leaving the relationship” and Ping later (1994) refers to that operationalization when defining an exit intention as “the intention to physically leave the relationship.” This phrase indicates that some entity (the relationship) remains although a party leaves it, and hence it refers to channel or other settings where more than two parties form the entity (the relationship, chain or network).

Operational definitions and other descriptions

As many as 56 empirical studies (80 %) describe an ending as related to the context; present only an operational definition; or otherwise operationalize it in the methods section; or do not define nor describe it at all. For example, a number of articles use the term ‘change’ (e.g., Branson & Breesch 2004, Butterworth & Houghton 1995, Chan & Ma 1990) that seems to correspond to the more commonly used term ‘switch’. The change is not defined, but operationalized in the following manner, “as a change in the identity of the client’s auditor” (Seabright, Levinthal & Fichman 1992). The contexts in these studies were bank relationships, auditor-client, and/or

| Holmlund & Hobbs (2009) | ending | Halinen and Tähtinen (2002), …“relationship ending” … as the most generic and “neutral” description... ...adopts this suggestion ... to include situations in which some form of communication might still take place after the ending of a business relationship, but in which no economic exchange of any kind continues between the two parties. |
advertising agency-client relationships, all of which are professional services and relational in nature. Moreover, it is common in both the auditor and the advertising business to keep public lists of clients and hence this data offers an on-off view of relationship ending, perhaps simplifying the issue so that the researchers do not feel a need to define the phenomenon.

Other examples of fuzzy or context-related ways of specifying the phenomenon are:

“Recently changed the extent to which they use their banks or switched to other banks in the past three years” (Lam & Burton 2005)

“First, our definition of a lending relationship is based on utilized exposures, and our credit register data include some observations where the bank reports a zero utilized exposure for a firm. For these observations, one may question whether there is actually ‘a relationship’ between the firm and the bank.” (Degryse, Masschelein & Mitchell 2011)

“Relationship end phase reflects the discontinuation or contractual conclusion of the offshore relationship.” (Heffernan & Poole 2004)

Business relationship ending is also seen as partial (Lam & Burton 2005), or as a decrease in the intensity of the relationship (e.g., Pressey & Mathews 2003), or indeed there may be also situations where the relationship may never even have existed in the first place (Degryse et al. 2011, Heffernan & Poole 2004), although its ending is being (or should be) studied. Such variety and fuzziness gives a rather strange impression of our knowledge about the phenomenon and who decides what is a relationship—a researcher or the parties to the relationship—and what do we, as researchers and the parties/managers mean by relationship ending.

**DISCUSSION**

The main aim of this paper is to examine how the different terms referring to business relationship ending are defined. The first finding was that a few articles featured an explicit definition of the concept used. It is remarkable that 56 empirical studies did not directly define the concept under study or otherwise relied on an operational definition. Hence, the field is suffering from a major problem; lack of effort in defining the concept and thus capturing the phenomenon it claims to be researching.

The second finding is that the research field is suffering from a further two problems; even when the studies do to define their concepts, synonymy is rife, and there are also cases of homonymy. Since the first problem is so widespread, we will discuss it a little more below, in order to guide the research field away from its current muddy path.

The third finding is that none of the terms seem to have an established content (i.e., a definition). Although some definitions are shared, they are labeled differently, showing synonymy. For example, dissolution is defined in Alajoutsijärvi et al. (2000) by reference to Tähtinen and Halinen-Kaila (1997). The same definition is used to define ‘termination’ in Farrelly (2010), ‘exit’ in Pressey and Matthews (2003), and ‘ending’ in Alvarez et al. (2011) (see Table 5). When looking at the empirical studies, and even the different views that the conceptual studies reflect, the variety in the phenomenon is obvious. Hence, we argue that we need to conceptualize this variety and stop using the various terms available in confusing ways. A review by Tähtinen and Halinen (2002) ten years ago suggested then that different terms be used to refer to different types of relationship endings (see Table 4) and this study shows that this suggestion is still a very valid one. In our discipline, as in any social science discipline, since it is impossible to study without using concepts (Gerring 2012), the most valuable asset we have is conceptual language, and we need to start using it more skillfully.
In addition to ending, the terms dissolution, switching, termination and exit, and a long list of alternatives are used in the texts. Such expressions include split up, departure, withdrawal, breakdown, decline, and failure, as shown in the tables. The pattern of using many terms is evident both in conceptual and in empirical studies. Even when the concept is defined, there are two ways of seeing it: as a process, taking time into consideration or as an outcome, from a static viewpoint. We argue that this distinction is meaningful and important, but the papers do not seem to discuss it or its implications explicitly. Another interesting issue is that some of the empirical studies focus on ending intentions, not actual endings. We argue that there is a difference in thinking about doing something and the actual conduct, especially in the context of a business relationship, where often more than one person is needed to either decide to act, or to act in a way that produces an outcome at a company level.

Hence, based on the discord identified in the definitions, and discussed in the paper, Figure 1 presents a suggested taxonomy of concepts that could offer a way off of the muddy road. So far, we have chosen to label the mother concept the ‘business relationship conclusion’. We admit that this could even deepen the conceptual confusion by adding yet another concept, but we argue that a new umbrella concept is necessary if we are to be able to order the concept. The figure partly reflects the current use of the concepts, but partly contradicts it, in those cases where we see that the selected characteristics of the concepts would help to clarify the field.

![Figure 1. The semantic field of business relationship conclusion](image)

Firstly, business relationship conclusion can be seen from a single actor’s point of view. An actor can be one of the parties (the buyer or the supplier) or a third actor (or actors) outside the relationship. Most definitions found in our literature review see the buyer as the initiator of the conclusion, that is, the buyer is performing actions to conclude the business relationship. However, we argue that such an assumption is too narrow to be used in a conceptualization, as suppliers might also conclude their relationships with unprofitable customers, for example.
addition, actors outside the business relationship can perform actions that influence the conclusion of the relationship. Hence, if relationship conclusion is viewed from an actor’s point of view, the non-initiator’s actions are not studied, although Ryan and Tähtinen (2012) argue against that. Moreover, the phenomenon is reduced to action, rather than to interaction or process.

The single actor’s actions seem to be one of three types: exiting, terminating, or switching. Exit refers to an actor (either buyer or seller) ‘leaving the scene’, after or without voicing concerns. Hence the focus is on one actor’s exiting action, moving from the existing relationship, or the intention or propensity to leave the relationship (see e.g., Ping 1993). Termination refers to a form of conclusion of the relationship where one actor—the terminator (of the dyad, or an outsider)—is active and deliberately concludes the relationship (see Pick 2010). In the termination form, both parties are already aware of the conclusion while it is happening, which need not be the case when one actor is exiting. The concept of switching, then, refers not only to concluding an existing relationship but also to starting a new one (see Ferguson and Johnston 2011).

Secondly, the business relationship conclusion can be seen from a relationship level, either as a process or as an outcome. In both views, the relationship is in focus, meaning that both actors are studied alongside the structures created by the interaction (for example links, ties and bonds as conceptualized in Håkansson and Johanson 1992, see Tähtinen and Halinen-Kaila 1997). The conclusion process, in turn, can be seen in two different ways, either as an ending process which means that the conclusion can be assumed to be planned, deliberate and conscious (see Pick 2010), or as a dissolution process where the closure is natural, and may occur without any decisions being made on the future of the relationship, but simple because the need for exchange ends (see Halinen and Tähtinen 2002). Both views focus on the conclusion process, which means that the process may start long before the decision to conclude is taken (if any is taken at all) and it may continue long after the parties have ceased trading with each other (see Havila and Wilkinson 2002).

From the business relationship level, a conclusion can also be seen as an outcome. When viewing the relationship conclusion as an outcome, the discussion on the totality of the conclusion comes to prominence. If the outcome is an ended business relationship, it can be assumed that both parties have participated in its ending. If the outcome is instead a dissolved business relationship, it becomes less obvious when the relationship came to be dissolved. Some of the articles (e.g., Zolkiweski et al. 2008) included in the review highlight that even if the companies in question ceased to interact, people representing the companies might continue to do so, as individuals or in the hope of keeping the relationship ‘energy’ (see Havila and Wilkinson 1997) alive. If the outcome is a terminated business relationship, it hints at a deliberate and conscious conclusion to the relationship after activating termination clauses and/or following negotiation.

Figure 1 does not really take sides in the debate over whether a business relationship can fully and permanently end. Indeed the literature records differing views, as a business relationship conclusion is also seen as something partial/under consideration, labeled as fading (Åkerlund 2004, Olkkonen and Tuominen 2006), or sleeping (see Hadjikhani 1996).

CONCLUDING REMARKS
This paper invites us to consider how much we really know about relationship ending, if we are not even sure how to define it and its variations. Currently there are two streams of definitions and a plethora of fuzzy expressions on what constitutes business relationship ending. Some definitions stress the non-existence of business level connections, while some state that ending can be partial, or an intention only. The situation is difficult, since we cannot compare or replicate empirical results unless they are based on the same subject matter, and able to measure it.

This review shows that there are so many variations of relationship ending, that a single universal definition cannot cover them all. Hence, we conclude that the research community should address the variety of endings by defining the available terminology clearly, separating concepts from each other, and using them consistently.

REFERENCES


22
Appendix 1  Reviewed studies not referred to in the text


