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Holmlund-Rytkönen, M & Strandvik, T 1999, 'Perception Configurations in Business Relationships' *Management Decision*, vol 37, no. 9, pp. 686-696.

Readers are kindly asked to use the official publication in references.

## PERCEPTION CONFIGURATIONS IN BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS

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### ABSTRACT

There is a growing interest in relationships in the marketing literature, which has resulted in increasing attention to relational aspects of business. How the actors perceive the relationship thus emerges as a key issue. Traditionally, customer perceptions, for example, perceived service quality, satisfaction and value have played an important role in service management. However, in a business setting it is more appropriate to study both the seller's and the buyer's perceptions. This paper proposes a configuration map to depict both parties' perceptions. This map can be used to capture both the composition and the dynamics of perception configurations, and it is generically applicable to dyadic perception studies.

Key words: relationship quality, perception configuration, business relationships, configuration map, dyadic perception

## INTRODUCTION

In studies on industrial relationships and networks within the interaction approach (see Håkansson and Snehota (1995) and Ford (1997)), a great deal of interest has been directed towards activities and resources. Equal attention has not been given to perceptions, i.e. the thinking concepts and structures behind activities and resource allocations. When perceptions have been studied, a few concepts, such as satisfaction, trust and commitment have dominated (Wilson and Mummalaneni 1986; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Wilson 1995). In contrast, there are an extensive number of studies of perceptions in service management. Perceived service quality has been the main research topic in service management since the middle of the 80s (Fisk, Brown and Bitner 1993). This stream of research has been based on a static approach (see Grönroos 1993) and has focused on customers' cognitive evaluation of consumer services. Implicitly the emphasis has been on either a specific service encounter (episode) or an overall evaluation of all experienced encounters. Only recently an implicit (Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman 1996) and explicit (Grönroos 1994; Gummesson 1994; Berry 1995; Bitner 1995; Grönroos 1995; Liljander and Strandvik 1995) relationship perspective has been introduced. The evolving relationship perspective has spurred a change in interest from service quality to relationship quality. In this new stride of research, the focus is, however, still only on the customer's perceptions of relationship quality.

Holmlund (1996) has extended and adapted the perceived quality approach to a business setting. Her model integrates ingredients from the interaction approach with perceived service quality research. One important extension is the proposition that in a business setting both parties are active in the interactions and have a perception of the quality of the relationship. She defines relationship quality as 'the joint cognitive evaluation of

business interactions by significant individuals in both firms in the dyad. The evaluation encompasses a comparison with potential alternative interactions of a similar kind which represent comparison standards' (Holmlund 1996:14). Relationship quality does not refer to merely social interactions but encompasses the entire relationship seen as an offering reflecting the whole value creation system of linked production processes. Relationship quality in business relationships can be studied either from the buyer's or the seller's point of view or by combining their perceptions.

This paper takes the perceptions of both parties into account and combines them into a perception configuration. The purpose is to introduce perception configuration as a new conceptualisation, and configuration maps as tools for analysing perceptions in dyadic studies. The paper is particularly focused on perceived relationship quality in a business dyad. It should be noted that relationship quality can be seen as an antecedent to many other perception concepts, for example, value, satisfaction, trust and commitment (Storbacka, Strandvik and Grönroos 1994; Holmlund 1996). Two views on relationships have influenced the study: customer relationships within the discipline of service management and business relationships studied in the interaction approach. The paper extends the horizon of the Nordic school of relationship marketing (Grönroos 1997). When the evolution of both parties' perceptions is studied, there is a need to understand and unfold the nature of interactions between the parties. It is argued that one way to dive under the surface and understand the dynamics of the perception configuration is to consider different units of interaction, that is interaction levels, in the relationship (Holmlund 1996). Thus, the conceptualisation presented in the paper concerning perceived relationship quality may be applied on a generic level to other perception concepts as well.

The paper is structured in the following way. The first section presents studies where the dyadic perspective has been used. The review reveals that few studies apply a dyadic perspective on perceptions. The next section discusses the interaction level model as a framework for understanding the inside of a relationship. Thereafter the configuration map that represents the new tool for analysing perceptions in a dyad is introduced and described. The configuration map can be used for several purposes to depict the composition and dynamics of perception configurations. A discussion on implications for research and management concludes the paper.

#### DYADIC PERSPECTIVE

Despite that it is widely recognised and emphasised in the interaction approach that relationships are dyadic to their nature, dyadic models are sparse. A dyadic model takes corresponding perceptions from both partners in a dyad into consideration instead of only focus on one firm's view of its relation to another (Iacobucci and Zerrillo 1996: 388). Table I lists dyadic studies on buyer-seller relationships. In the table, studies are categorised into two types: one group comprises conceptual and the other empirical studies of perceptions in the dyad. Empirical studies focusing on dyadic perceptions have further been divided into two types: static and dynamic. Static studies apply a cross-sectional measurement approach, while the dynamic approach is focused on evolution and change of perceptions. Only those studies that explicitly take both parties' perceptions into account have been included. Studies where both parties are considered but not related dyadically represent a type of studies, which is not included in the list (see, for example Yorke (1988) for a quantitative and Boström (1995) for a qualitative study).

“take in Table I”

Only Brown and Swartz (1989), Liljander and Strandvik (1995), Holmlund and Kock (1995), Holmlund (1996), Holmlund (1997) deal with perceived quality. The other models can roughly be divided into three groups. The first group consists of studies that present comprehensive models of interactions in a dyad (Håkansson 1982; Möller and Wilson 1995; Miettälä and Möller 1990). The second group conceptualises the nature of relationship development (Ford 1980; Campbell 1985; Dwyer, Schurr and Oh 1987; Halinen 1994, 1995). The third group focuses on specific features of the relationship (Cadotte and Stern 1979; Wilson and Mummäläneni 1986; Sandström 1992; Anderson, Håkansson and Johanson 1994; Noteboom 1996). The empirical studies found can be characterised as either addressing relationship developing or specific features of the relationship. The former group of studies contains Ford and Rosson (1982), Cunningham and Homse (1986), Knox and White (1989), Smith (1989), Halinen (1994), Alajoutsijärvi (1995), Kotsalo-Mustonen (1986) and Filiatrault and Lapierre (1997). The latter group consists of Ganesan (1994), Tjosvold and Wong (1994), Ellram (1995), Grundlach, Achrol and Mentzer (1995), Hovi (1995), Wilkinson and Young (1995) and Goodwin and Gremler (1996).

Although some studies apply a dynamic perspective on the relationship, the approach is still in its infancy. Dynamics in relationships, that is how relationships progress, is mentioned as a particular challenging and central research topic within the IMP group (Wilson 1995; 344) A major reason for the small number of longitudinal studies is attributed to insufficient models and methods (Miettälä & Törnroos 1993).

## INTERACTION LEVELS IN A BUSINESS RELATIONSHIP

A model proposed by Holmlund (1996) represents a new view to categorise interaction levels in a business relationship. Interaction levels refer to different aggregation levels and time frames for interactions between two parties. The traditional use of two aggregation levels of interactions, i.e. short term episodes and long term processes has rather limited analytical depth when it comes to describing the content of a particular relationship or capturing differences in the structures of relationships. In Holmlund's model interactions are classified into five types which are on five different aggregation levels, namely actions, episodes, sequences, relationships and partner base. These are hierarchical levels, which range from a single individual exchange to the portfolio of relationships of one particular firm. Compared to the interaction approach, this categorisation introduces actions as a subcategory to episodes and sequences as a category on a level higher than episodes. This categorisation corresponds to the way episodes and relationships have been analysed in service management, where some researchers have recognised the need to use different aggregation levels in this regard (Storbacka 1994; Liljander and Strandvik 1995; Stauss and Weinlich 1995; Storbacka and Strandvik 1996).

The lowest level, and thus most detailed type of interaction comprises actions which are individual initiatives by the focal firms, such as a phone call or a plant visit. Actions may concern any kind of exchange elements, and thus relate to products, information, money, or social contacts. Interrelated actions can therefore in turn be grouped into an episode, and are for instance a negotiation process, or a shipment process, consisting of a number of actions. Interrelated episodes can in turn correspondingly be grouped into a sequence, which form a still larger and more extensive entity of interactions. This level may be

defined in terms of a contract, product, campaign or project. A sequence can in firms also be related to the presence of a significant human actor in either of the organisations. A sequence may then end when a particular person is replaced by another in either firm. Even if the relationship continues, the quality of the relationship may change due to the influence of one single person. This person may have an influence both on the thinking and on the actions and reactions within the own firm, which transcends to the relationship. The completion of a sequence constitutes a vulnerable period of time in a relationship, during which the parties make important evaluations. The evaluation may cause a potential termination of the relationship, since a sequence represents a time framed commitment, which is defined by the particular sequence. A relationship refers to the level of analysis that regards the whole relationship, i.e. one particular relationship between two firms. This level, thus, comprises all sequences, which in turn comprise all related episodes and actions. The partner base refers to the relationship portfolio of a particular firm.

#### Processes and outcomes of interactions

The different interaction levels can be further developed and refined into comprising a process as well as an outcome aspect (Holmlund 1996). She proposed that these two aspects represent two different domains (process and outcome) of quality perceptions. This categorisation corresponds to service quality studies, where the dimensions suggested by Grönroos (1982), that is technical and functional quality, have been regarded as the main dimensions of perceived quality. The distinction between process and outcome aspects of quality dimensions in a business setting has been emphasised by many researchers (Szmigin 1993; Halinen 1994; Hovi 1995; Kotsalo-Mustonen 1996). Different levels of analysis combined with the possibility of focusing on either process or

outcome on each level lead to several different perspectives on one particular relationship. This is illustrated in Figure 1 (process is designated P and outcome is designated O in the figure).

“take in Figure 1”

The suggested categorisation of interaction levels is not a static structural conceptualisation. It is dynamic in the sense that it captures how interactions on the lower levels are able to affect interactions on higher hierarchical levels in the relationship and vice versa.

Each smaller unit is embedded in the larger interaction context. The relationship is embedded in a network (which is not shown in the model). This does not mean only a contextual embeddedness but also a temporal embeddedness (Törnroos and Strandvik 1995). Usually analyses of perceptions of quality in relationships have not taken this into consideration. Interactions affect each other and are reflected back with a time lag, which implies, for instance, that actions represent the process in an episode. The outcome of the episode is also, however, influenced by the sequence and the whole relationship in which it takes place. The sequence and the relationship represent, on one hand, the history and, on the other hand, the expected future of the interactions on the action and the episode levels.

It is important to note that the interaction level model is a theoretical framework that should be used as a tool by the researcher. Even if the different interaction units are defined as ‘natural units’ as perceived by the actors, it does not mean that each individual

has to perceive them as units in their activities. Important is that the researcher can structure the ongoing interactions in as distinct units as possible. Each individual can simultaneously perceive the quality on many interaction levels. A person may in other words perceive the overall relationship as good even if the last two episodes have been less satisfactory and which may be due to a specific action within these episodes. Thus perceptions have a multidimensional character.

#### PERCEPTION CONFIGURATION

The combination of two parties' perceptions can be represented as a perception configuration. The perception configuration in a relationship may be illustrated in a configuration map (Figure 2). The perceptions of the buyer and the seller are depicted on the horizontal and vertical axes, respectively, in the map. For illustrative purposes, the parties' perception is categorised only as either positive (+), neutral (0) or negative (-). Nine different dyadic perception configurations may occur. The cells correspond to the different types of relationship as discussed in Liljander and Strandvik (1995).

“take in Figure 2”

The axes represent the relative experience frame of each firm. The low and high ends of the axes reflect the floor and ceiling for perceptions, and are based on the firms' experience and knowledge about alternatives. This corresponds to the discussion of comparison standards in service quality studies. The categories reflect three types of evaluation (+, 0, -), which may be related to actor behaviour. The closer to the low left-hand corner the perceptions are depicted, the closer parties are to each other. Cells A, B, E and D correspond to the buyer-seller relationship model developed by Dwyer,

Schurr and Oh (1987). The map extends the perspective beyond their model because, in addition to relationships where both parties are satisfied, it recognises relationships where one or both parties are dissatisfied with the relationship. This agrees with the current views in the interaction approach (Ford 1997:xii).

The configuration map contains cells, that is cells A, E and I, where the firms' perceptions match. The other cells, that is B, C D, F, G and H, represent situations where perceptions of the dyad differ between the parties. In contrast to previous studies that usually have assumed concordant views, the map allows conflicting views in the dyad to be revealed and described.

Another feature of the map is the possibility to describe indifference zones, where one or both parties are neutral and perceive normal and acceptable performance in the dyad. Cell E represents a dyad of mutual indifference, while cells B, D, F and H represent unilateral indifference in dyads. These cells may denote conflict situations for the firms. In studies of perceived service quality, indifference or tolerance zones have deepened the understanding of the link between perceptions and activities (Woodruff, Cadotte and Jenkins 1983; Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman 1991; Strandvik 1994). All deviations from expectations are not considered unusual, because they fall within the firms' zone of indifference and do not get their attention. As an analogy, it is possible to envision a zone of tolerance for a process, which represents a script (Solomon, Surprenant, Czespiel and Gutman 1985; Bitner, Booms and Mohr 1994) As long as the script is followed as expected, the actor does not react (negatively or positively). If deviations occur, then the actor moves from a mindlessness (zone of indifference) state into an evaluative mode.

The configuration map offers a powerful and flexible tool that can be used in both qualitative and quantitative studies on perceptions, for example, perceived relationship quality. The following sections of the paper demonstrate the potential of the configuration map. The discussion in this paper is conceptual but the configuration map could also be used to display findings from empirical studies. Although current methods to collect data could be used, there is room for development of more customised procedures. Configuration maps may clearly be relevant to not only academic research but also practical relationship management.

In the next section different application areas for the configuration map are first outlined and thereafter discussed in more detail. The configuration map can be used to analyse two parties' perceptions concerning the following issues:

- 1) to display perceptions of different types of interaction in a dyad. These interaction types reflect categories of activities, for example, product development, production and delivery.
- 2) to display and compare perceptions of interactions on different levels. Levels refer to the interaction level categorisation described previously (actions, episodes, sequences, relationship and partner base). These levels can be used, for instance, to illustrate how perceptions of particular service encounters correspond to the perception of the whole relationship.
- 3) to display different types of content of perception, for instance, technical, social and economic quality dimension. The content ranges across types and levels of interaction.
- 4) to display perceptions of interactions belonging to domains, which refer, for example, to perceived process and outcome quality.

- 5) to display perceptions on a particular interaction level over time, for example how perceived quality of a repetitive episode changes.
- 6) to compare the perceptions of several individuals with each other or over time,
- 7) to display a focal actor's perception of several dyads in its partner base.

#### Display of different types of interaction in a dyad

Figure 3 is a configuration map that depicts perceptions of interactions on different levels in a dyad. It can be used to illustrate intra-level as well as inter-level comparisons (relationship is designated R, sequence S, episode E, and action A). In the figure the different levels have legends with different shapes. An intra-level display compares perceptions on a particular interaction level. For instance, the perceived quality of several similar episodes can be compared with each other (several  $E_{as}$ ). Another option is to compare different episodes with each other, for instance, delivery episodes ( $E_a$ ) with ordering ( $E_b$ ), negotiation ( $E_c$ ) and product development ( $E_d$ ) episodes.

“take in Figure 3”

For illustrative reasons the seller's zone of indifference (category 0) has been shaded and is larger than the two other categories. This shows the situation that may arise when a measurement scale is applied to represent the perceptions. In the depicted case the seller would be quite insensitive to variation around the normal level. This kind of insensitivity is in line with observations from many studies of perceived quality. Since this may be applicable to the buyer as well, it would result in a configuration map where a great majority of interactions are considered acceptable. The perception range can either be divided into categories or be based on a measurement scale. The configuration map thus

represents a powerful and flexible tool to be used in both qualitative and quantitative studies.

#### Display and comparison of interactions on different levels

In addition to intra-level comparisons, Figure 3 allows perceptions of interactions on different levels to be compared with each other. This description may reveal the inter-relatedness and embeddedness of perceptions. For example, the figure shows that the relationship is evaluated more positively than particular actions, episodes and sequences. In such a case it would be essential to study what role different types of interaction have for how the relationship is perceived and how this changes over time. The configuration map may act as a starting point for further in-depth studies to reveal how interactions on different levels influence each other.

#### Display of different perception content

Another way of extending the analysis of quality perceptions is to depict perceptions of different quality dimensions in the same configuration map. Quality dimensions have been in the forefront in service quality research as means to describe the content of quality perceptions. In a business relationship context a more elaborate model has been proposed by Holmlund (1996), which contains both a domain (process/outcome) and a dimension (technical, social and economic) categorisation. These can in turn have several sub-categories. Figure 4 shows quality dimensions and domains in the perception map.

“take in Figure 4”

The quality dimensions denoted by T, S and E (Technical, Social, Economic dimension, respectively) are shown in the figure with different-sized rectangles. The size and shape differ and refer to different importance of the quality dimensions in the dyad. To distinguish process from outcome, the outcomes of the dimensions have been shaded in the figure. Quality domains are discussed in the next section. The width of the rectangle refers to relative importance for the buyer, and the height to that of the seller. A symmetrical rectangle indicates that both parties attach equal importance to the dimension. Such information may be based either on qualitative or quantitative information. If a quantitative measurement approach is used the exact position of the perception configuration could, for example, be specified as the lower left-hand corner of the rectangle. The usefulness of this map lies in its information density. For example Figure 4 can be interpreted in the following way. It shows that the importance of the technical dimension dominates and has the same significance for both parties. The parties have attached asymmetrical importance to the economic dimension, which the buyer assigns more importance to. The seller, in contrast, assigns more significance to the outcome of the social dimension. The economic process is clearly perceived as mutually positive, while, for example, social and economic outcome and technical process are within both parties' zones of indifference.

Because relationship quality conceptually has been defined as a disconfirmation of some comparison standard or expectations, the map could also be constructed to show gaps between comparison standards and perceptions of the realised performance. In that case each element would be depicted with two points in the configuration map: one representing the comparison standard, and the other reflecting perceived performance. Perceived quality is then shown simultaneously but still separately for each party and,

according to the traditional disconfirmation paradigm, as the difference between the comparison standard and perceived performance.

#### Display of domains on each level

Perceptions of processes may differ from those of outcomes in the dyad. This was also shown in Figure 4, compare, for example, the social process with the social outcome. Process and outcome on a certain interaction level are linked to other interaction levels, as it was described in the section where the interaction level conceptualisation was presented. This means that processes and outcomes can be compared on several different levels. The result of this comparison may reveal that the perceptions on, for example, the episode and the relationship level differ, and this may, in turn, constitute an interesting topic for further research.

#### Display of perceptions on a particular interaction level over time

The situation concerning the dyad can be displayed at a particular point in time. In Figure 5, the perception configuration at  $t_1$  is located in the upper part of the map (relationship quality is designated RQ). This indicates that the seller perceives poor relationship quality, while the buyer has a neutral perception. Over time the seller's perception changes, and finally also that of the buyer. The index  $t_1$  to  $t_4$  represent different points in time for displaying the perceptions of the parties.

“take in Figure 5”

The example in Figure 5 depicts how perceptions of a relationship develops. Perceptions of sequences, episodes and actions can be analysed in a corresponding way. Different methods can be used to collect longitudinal information. One of the most effective ways

is to use retrospective interviews (Strandvik and Liljander 1994; Holmlund 1996). When studying perceptions, the key issue is to record what actors remember and take into account rather than what actually happened. Many researchers have noted that repeated real-time data collection is resource demanding and therefore scarcely used (Halinen 1994; Anderson 1995). The configuration map enables an illustration of the dynamics of relationship quality.

The analysis of interaction could also take into consideration the dynamics of the whole system, i.e. relationship learning. This kind of analysis recognises the fact that a refocus is needed to 'seeing interrelationships rather than linear cause-effect chains, and seeing processes of change rather than snapshots' (Senge 1990:73). Senge points out that systems thinking takes into account feedback which shows how actions can reinforce or counteract or balance each other. There are certain prototypical patterns that recur again and again in systems. Systems thinking forms a rich language for describing interrelationships and patterns of change. It also simplifies by uncovering the deeper patterns lying behind specific events and details.

#### Comparisons of perceptions of several individuals with each other or over time

In a business context the organisation's quality perception consists of the perceptions of several individuals in each firm. Each individual can, moreover, have a different perception of the quality (the extreme values on both sides are designated with black dots in Figure 6). In Figure 6 the dispersion of perceptions in the dyad is framed encompassing all the individual perceptions in the dyad. The overall perceptions of both firms could be depicted in the configuration map with a single point. It is however important to recognise that any overall representation of perceived quality in an organisation contains the

problem of how to aggregate the individual perceptions. In most studies it is argued that the CEO or another significant individual represents the perception of the organisation. The configuration map in Figure 6, however, makes it possible to describe the dispersion of perceptions.

“take in Figure 6”

The same figure can also take the analysis a step further to describe the dynamics of these multiple perceptions. When relationship quality is observed at subsequent points in time ( $t_2$ ,  $t_3$ ,  $t_4$ ), both the position of the quality perception and the dispersion may be different. It is possible that the dispersion of the perceptions has changed either in a more homogeneous or a more heterogeneous direction. In Figure 6 the seller's perceptions are negative and buyer's perceptions neutral at  $t_1$ . The perception area (shaded) is large at this point in time, because perceptions within the buying organisation diverge. Over time perceptions become more homogenous and, thus, the perception configuration attains a smaller dispersion, which is shown in Figure 6 with a shrinking shaded area. This kind of analysis gives a compact, diagnostic and more comprehensive understanding of the perception configuration.

#### Display of a focal actor's perception of several dyads in its partner base.

The configuration map can also be used to analyse a focal firm's portfolio of partners, either suppliers or customers. In this case, the focus is shifted to the partner base level. Relationships with different partners can be compared at a specific point in time or tracked over time (see Figure 7). The configuration map can be constructed either by a focal firm or by an outsider.

“take in Figure 7”

In Figure 7, a focal firm's relationships with three different partners are shown in the same configuration map. The figure illustrates two possible ways of using the map. One is the comparison of several dyads with each other at a particular point in time. This is exemplified in the figure with the focal firm's relationships with partners a, b and c at  $t_3$  ( $R_{a3}$  designates the focal firm's relationship with partner a at time period 3). Another way to use the configuration map on the partner base level is for tracking the development of perceptions of a certain relationship. The figure illustrates the path from time period 1 through 2 to 3 concerning the focal firm's relationship with partner a. The configuration map on the partner base level can be used to interpret the current and future position of the focal firm in the network. It represents a tool to be used in relationship portfolio analysis (Ford, McDowell and Tomkins 1996).

## CONCLUSIONS

There are several perceptual concepts, which are considered important features of relationships, such as quality, satisfaction, value, commitment, and trust. Although it is widely recognised that perceptions of relationships should be studied from both the buyer's and the seller's point of view, there are only a limited number of such studies. The combination of two parties' perceptions in a relationship was in this paper depicted as a perception configuration and illustrated with configuration maps. Relationship quality was used as an example to describe the potential of using a perception configuration.

There are several different application areas for practice. A perception configuration represents a new pair of glasses giving a wider and deeper insight into relationships. The configuration map is a practical tool that can be gradually developed and adjusted in line with specific needs and resources. Furthermore, the configuration map enables a holistic and multi-purpose view of the whole relationship.

Compared to traditional service quality studies, the notion of a perception configuration represents a way to operationalise and study quality from a relational perspective. In service quality research, the focus has been on the customers' perspective and their perceptions of service/relationship quality. In a business setting, however, both parties are active in the interactions and have perceptions of the quality of the relationship. If relationship management is in focus, then the first step is to 'see' relationships (cf. Gummesson 1995 'Relationship marketing is marketing seen as interactions, relationships and networks.')

In order to manage relationships, one has to be able to diagnose relationships in different situations and changes in the relationship portfolio. Not only does the configuration map notion allow managers to see their business from a wider perspective, the map also allows them to see the relationships in more depth, i.e. perceptions can be studied on different interaction levels, which refer to different aggregation levels and time frames. Configuration maps can be used to display and compare perceptions on these different levels. These interaction levels represent a hierarchical system comprising a process and an outcome aspect on each level. It was shown how perceptions of these in principle can be depicted in a configuration map. Furthermore, perceptions can concern different activities and different content of interaction. An additional application area for the configuration map was the comparison of several dyads in a partner base. In business relationships, the interaction between firms

involves many individuals who may have differing perceptions. The configuration map can also depict this aspect. In addition to capturing the structure of the perception configuration at a particular point in time as described above, the paper showed how the configuration map can be used to analyse the development of perceptions in a dyad. Transferring the configuration map principle from a general to a practical level leads to issues about how data can be collected and utilised in practice.

One of the issues when conducting dyadic studies thus relates to generating empirical data of a new kind. It was proposed that both qualitative and quantitative data could be used to construct configuration maps. The dyadic approach seems particularly suitable when the number of relationships in focus is limited and, thus, the potential of obtaining detailed dyadic information better. Aside from real-time longitudinal data generation, the development of perceptions can also be monitored with retrospective interviews. The configuration map is a generic tool to study perceptions, and it could be used to analyse existing dyadic data. Customised data generating procedures would, however, most likely improve its potential. The most beneficial way to get started is to begin with qualitative data in one relationship and use the different configuration maps and together with the customer go through different issues and match the perceptions. Gradually quantitative measurement systems can be developed and additional relationships can be included. Compared to customer satisfaction measurement that commonly is used as a evaluation instrument, configuration maps are a way to obtain corresponding relationship-oriented information. In industrial markets where Key Account Management (KAM) is typical the value of configuration maps is high.

Traditionally in the industrial market, the seller has focused on selling and delivering the physical product and has seen customer service as add-ons. Lately, however, business enhancement consulting as a new operation form has emerged in many industrial firms. From a relationship-development point of view and where the whole offering is at the core, it becomes imperative to have tools such as the configuration map in order to see and manage business in line with this. In internal marketing the configuration map can be used to manage and control internal processes in a more customer-oriented way. The map is useful to demonstrate how the firm's different components and functions are positioned forming the whole relationship. The map further highlights critical aspects in the relationship that should be attended to. At the same time sudden disruption or weakening of relationships can be better diagnosed with this new tool. Persons involved in daily interactions can obtain a more systematic tool for relationship diagnosis.

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Table I: Dyadic buyer-seller studies on perceptions

Conceptual	Empirical
• Håkansson (1982) static	• Brown & Swartz (1989) static
• Campbell (1985) static	• Tjosvold & Wong (1994) static
• Liljander & Strandvik (1995) static	• Ganesan (1994) static
• Möller & Wilson (1995) static	• Hovi (1995) static
• Holmlund (1996) static	• Holmlund & Kock (1995) static
• Cadotte & Stern (1979) dynamic	• Ellram (1995) static
• Ford (1980) dynamic	• Goodwin & Gremler (1996) static
• Wilson & Mummalaneni (1986) dynamic	• Holmlund (1997) static
• Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987) static, dynamic	• Ford and Rosson (1982) dynamic
• Miettälä & Möller (1990) dynamic	• Cunningham & Homse (1986) dynamic
• Sandström (1992) dynamic	• Knox & White (1989) dynamic
• Halinen (1994) dynamic	• Smith (1989) dynamic
• Anderson, Håkansson & Johanson 1994 static	• Halinen (1994) dynamic
• Halinen (1995) dynamic	• Grundlach, Achrol & Mentzer (1995) dynamic
• Noteboom (1996) dynamic	• Wilkinson & Young (1995) dynamic
	• Alajoutsijärvi (1995) dynamic
	• Kotsalo-Mustonen (1996) dynamic
	• Filiatrault & Lapierre (1997) dynamic

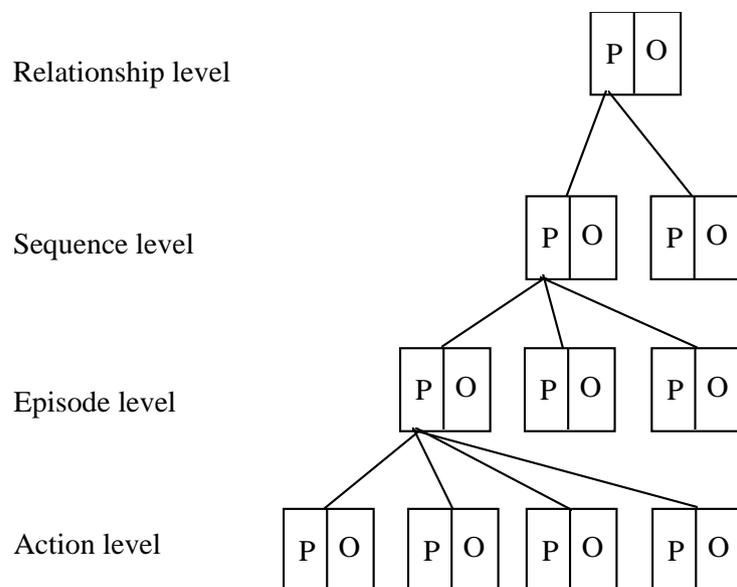


Figure 1. Processes and outcomes on different interaction levels (Holmlund 1996:53)

	-	C	F	I
Seller	0	B	E	H
	+	A	D	G
		+	0	-
		Buyer		

Figure 2. Configuration Map

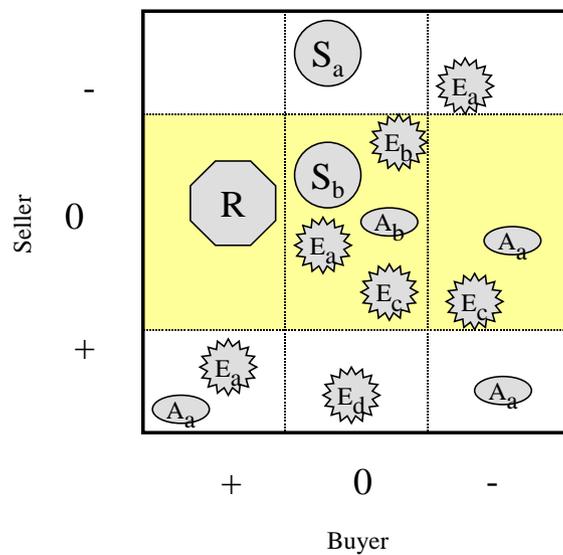


Figure 3. Different interaction levels in the configuration map

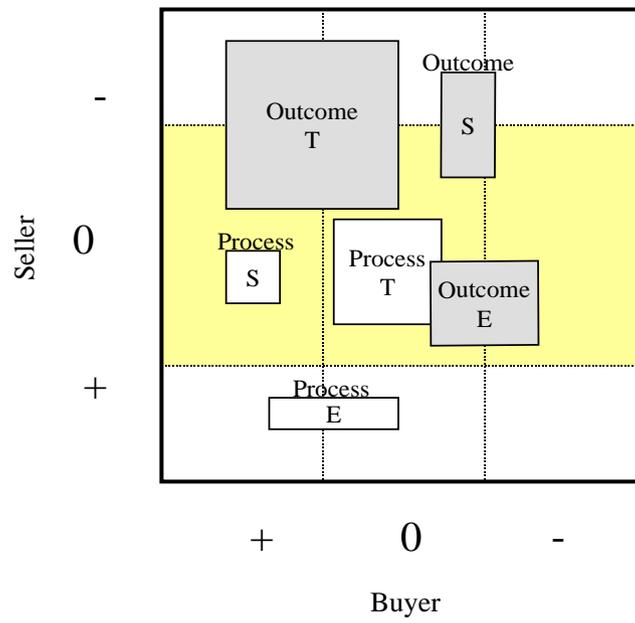


Figure 4. Quality dimensions and domains in the perception map

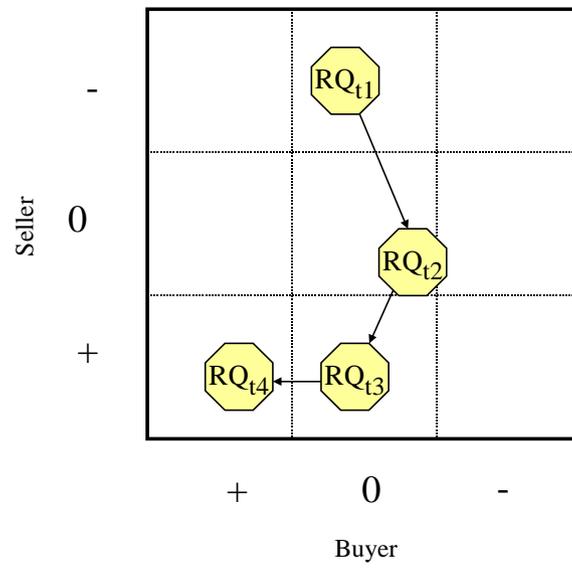


Figure 5. The development of perceptions of relationship quality

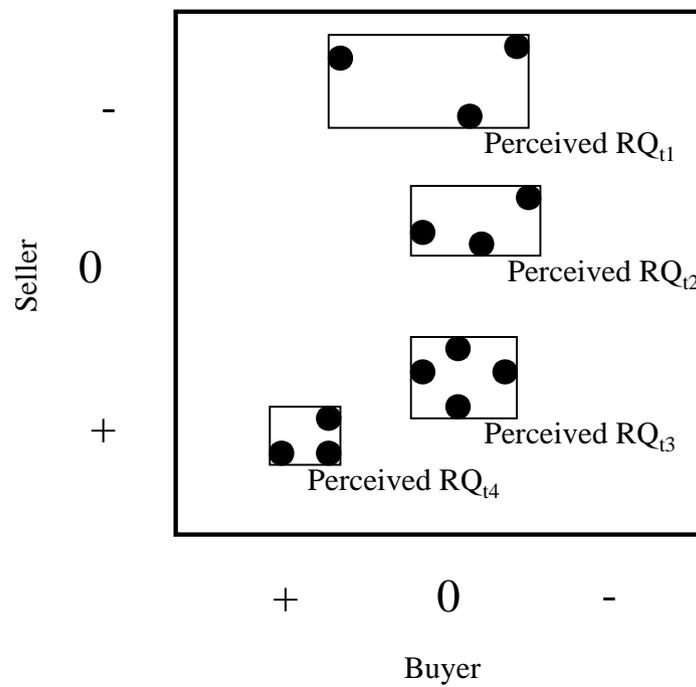


Figure 6. The dispersion of relationship quality perceptions over time

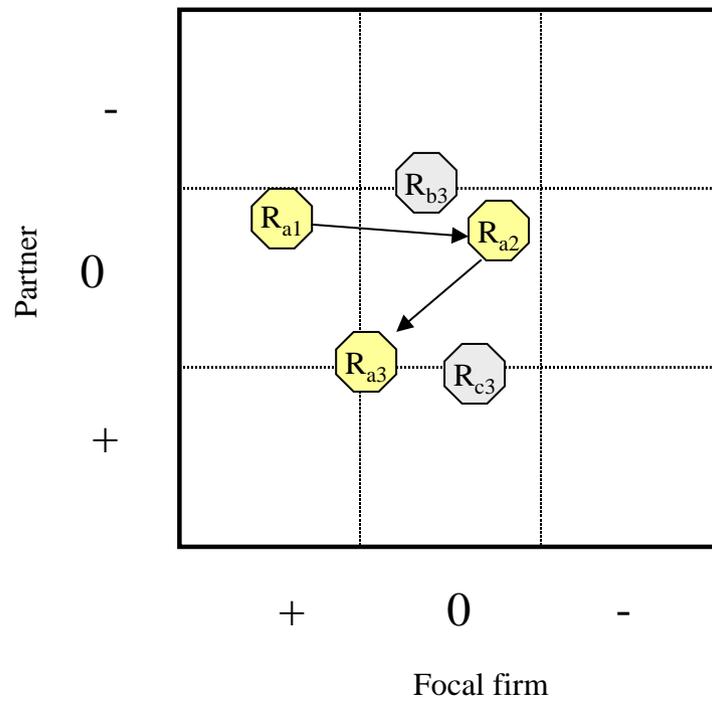


Figure 7. Perceptions of several dyads in a partner base