

# **Hand-in-Glove? Business relationships the Morrissey way**

**Martin Hingley**

Department of Business Management and Marketing,  
Harper Adams University College,  
Newport,  
Shropshire TF10 8NB,  
United Kingdom.  
[mhingley@harper-adams.ac.uk](mailto:mhingley@harper-adams.ac.uk)

**Sheena Leek**

Birmingham Business School,  
University of Birmingham

## **Abstract**

This paper uses the novel approach of drawing on song lyrics which concern interpersonal relationships and applies these to a business-to-business relationship context. Highlighted are findings from recent case investigations into business relationships where the 'human factor' is particularly important in maintaining business interaction. Interpretation is made by utilising the song lyrics of the prolific English singer, Morrissey as a template for interpersonal relationship structures that can be applied to business relationships. The findings show that concepts key to business relationships (the need to enter relationships, power and dependency, relationship break-up) are not always in the realms of corporate rational thinking. Alternatively, business decisions owe much to the less rational and more emotional world of interpersonal relations. This has been catalogued by Morrissey for over twenty years, and his output of over 200 songs has been analysed in order to provide context to the environment of business exchange.

**Keywords:** Business interpersonal relationships, Human factor, Power, Morrissey

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## Introduction

In order to understand the nature of business relationships, practitioners, analysts and academic theorists have drawn heavily on the context and literature of social exchange theory; with useful origins to be found in literature on social psychology and the study of human interpersonal relations. Much has been written about how personal relationships develop and subsequent authors have placed this into a context of business interaction and development. Hinde (1979), for example, in a study of personal relationships believes that dyadic relationships can never be fully understood in isolation from their social context. Thibaut and Kelly (1959) view the process of human bonding as a continuum of sampling, bargaining, commitment and institutionalisation. Further, Hinde (1979) sees that the participants in relationships change with time through natural processes of growth, development and decay, and these views pre-empt business-to-business exchange being described in terms of interaction and progression. An often used analogy, for example, of business relationship forming is that of marriage (Harker 2002; Tynan 1997).

Subsequently, social exchange literature has been used as a basis for business relationships and context for business exchange in evolving frameworks. The human and social context has emerged in studies of customer relationships (Bagozzi 1975) and in business-to-business relationships, where social factors are seen as a requirement for success (Pole and Haskell, 2002; Sheth and Sharma 1997). Halinen and Salmi (2001) in investigating the importance of personal relations in the development of business relationships believe, however, that the significance of this has been ignored, stating that personal relations should be at the heart of business contacts. The 'human factor' inherent in interpersonal relationships should, therefore, be a central plank of relational exchange in dyadic and wider business-to-business networks. This is neatly illustrated by Blois (1998) who contends that it is people that make decisions and not organisations, and in a similar vein Cahill (1998), states that relationships are conducted between people and not, as is so often described, with products. The people factor is very much evident in empirical studies conducted which investigate its influence on business relationships. This is evidenced, for example, in the work of Hingley (2001) and White (2000) concerning relationships between food industry suppliers and their powerful retail customers in which the 'good' terms of their ongoing interaction is a determining factor in relationship success. These studies also illustrate that the nature of the personality (particularly of buyers) and suppliers' reaction to that personality is similarly important.

The majority of studies concern the understanding and application of human relationships and social theory to a business relationship context, however, there has been further treatment of issues concerning issues of power and business relationships (for example, in Cox 2004; Hingley 2005; Kumar 1996; Kumar et al 1998). Less is written about what the result of such evolution of power imbalance actually means to practitioners, and how this may affect future action.

## Research Methodology

The purpose of this study is to investigate the 'human factor' inherent in business relationships and its impact on the key phases of business relationships:

- Relationship Attraction and Initiation
- Relationship Development
- Relationship Dissolution

This paper draws on existing literature sources relating to these principal phases in order to identify the impact of the human factor with the process. Specifically, findings from prior studies of business-to-business, buyer-seller relationships in the agri-food and food retailing channels are utilised (Hingley, 2001; 2005, Gedeon, 2006, White 2000). These food industry relationship studies provide useful context in that they are typified by the importance of people in regular and ongoing exchange, and are conducted in an environment of fierce retailer-driven channel rationalisation which exposes issues of power and dependency. There is a further, novel approach to the study of this process in this paper. The prolific songwriter Morrissey is renowned for his heartfelt and emotional treatise on personal and

human relationships, which is expressed in a poetic style. He has a back-catalogue of published songs, with the highly successful 1980's English group, *The Smiths* and as a solo artist to this present day. What is particularly attractive to chroniclers of human emotions and interactions is the depth and breadth of the material covered. Morrissey is by no means unique in his lyrical treatment of the subject, but his body of work is large and consistent in the treatment of pertinent themes that warrant investigation and justify interpretation in a wider context.

The approach was to conduct historical/ archival research as a form of case study method (Yin 2003). Full transcripts of song lyrics (of over 200 songs) are available (from internet sources) and these were systematically analysed. These were interpreted through content analysis, utilising a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text (Weber 1985) and by identifying coherent and important examples, themes and patterns in the data (Patton 2002; Sayre 2001). At the least this material acts as a 'soundtrack' to pertinent issues of human attitudes regarding interpersonal circumstances. Further, it has then been used to signpost issues concerning the nature of under-explored facets of human relationships, and exposes evolving typologies which facilitate relationship templates; and these are subsequently applied to the context of business interaction.

Preliminary investigation identifies some specific and consistent threads concerning relationships in the work of Morrissey and The Smiths that may have resonance with business relationships. Issues covered in the body of work spanning over twenty years concern matters of:

- The need for relationships
- Exclusive relationships
- The impact of power balance on relationship participants
- Relationship insecurity
- Relationship superficiality
- The lengths that parties will go to sustain relationships

These themes have not necessarily all been applied previously to a business relationship context. It is anticipated that outcomes may form the basis for application of a new perspective which can provide a necessary interpretation to complement the existing body of work in this area, which has tended to focus on relationship progression as an inevitable and desirable process. The study of the nature of human relationships from the Morrissey perspective explores the viewpoint that relationships perpetuate, but are not in all cases positive, progressive, or mutually satisfying. There is a good deal of scope for the understanding of reasons behind the continued existence of 'negative' and even 'sick' relationships. The *italicised lyrics* form a basis of sub-structure to the areas of business interpersonal relationships to which they are applied (*and the song titles are attributed in brackets and italicised*).

In the song *On the streets I ran*, Morrissey highlights the fact that he has used frailties of the human condition/ relationships as the basis of his art; in that he has 'Turned sickness into (un) popular song'. In echo of this, the paper endeavours to use the song lyrics as means of identifying and focusing on some of the under-explored human attitudes inherent in business relationships ('sick' or otherwise).

## **Relationship Attraction and Initiation**

***"I'm human and I need to be loved, just like everybody else does" (How soon is now?)***

***"All I ask of you is one thing that you'll never do. Would you put your arms around me?" (Tomorrow)***

A pervasive theme of Morrissey's lyrics is unrequited love. He has an intense desire to be in a relationship and the intensity of this desire is expressed in many songs and lyrics, such as that encapsulated in the lyric from the song *How soon is now* (above). In business the initiation of relationships is an area which has not come under sufficient scrutiny. In order for a relationship to be initiated one of the parties must be "attracted" to another party. A significant amount of research has gone into determining what criteria buyers use to determine the 'attractiveness' of a supplier. For example, Lehmann and O'Shaughnessy (1982) carried out a study of purchasing agents in 45 companies and they identified 17 attributes, which were used to evaluate suppliers. These attributes related to price, ordering convenience, service, supplier technical capabilities and product operating

characteristics etc. Supplier reputation and personal relationships i.e. the intangible aspects of the relationship were also deemed to be important factors. In assessing potential customer relationships suppliers will ask a number of questions such as what is the value or potential of the relationship, where in the company's portfolio will they be, what is the network position of the company (Ford et al 2002)? The supplier will also consider the customer's reputation and the processual aspects of the relationship. Organisations may be more able to assess the concrete abilities of companies e.g. production capability, credit worthiness prior to approaching them than the intangible relationship aspects.

A gap in this rather practical approach, whereby suppliers' attributes and service capabilities are the determining factors of attraction, does not take into account significant market structural realignment in modern business practice. Migration of channel power downstream in most business markets, including the food industry, is such that it is often in the hands of near-market superpowers (retailers and distributors); and places the decision making process of channel selection firmly in the hands of buyers. Added to this, a pervasive theme of rationalisation of supply bases by such buyers intensifies the competitiveness amongst suppliers for access to reduced market opportunities, and more market significant buyers; hence an increasing need for suppliers to be wanted (Bourlakis 2001; Hingley 2001; 2005). This too is can be a source of anxiety for them.

***“You should never go to them. Let them come to you.” (I don't owe you anything)***

Holmen, Roos, Kallevag, von Raesfeld, de Boer and Pedersen (2005) identified eleven ways in which relationships may begin. These were classified as either active or reactive methods. Active methods are ones which the company initiates e.g. the customer may initiate contact with a supplier. Reactive methods are ones where the company does not initiate contact e.g. a customer may wait for suppliers to approach it. Although it is unlikely that any company will be totally active or totally reactive in terms of initiating relationships, it would be interesting to determine whether certain types of companies are more inclined to be active than reactive. For example it might be expected that suppliers are more active than reactive. In the food industry, buyer led rationalisation and retailer market power has determined that the expectation is that suppliers will initiate (new supplier) contact and that retailers need only wait. However, the drive to secure 'exclusive' supply has meant that retailers' have been keen to secure and 'ring-fence' the best suppliers in each product category (Hingley 2001).

Holmen et al (2005) also stated that relationships were initiated either by direct contact or through a network. With the network mediated approach it is clear that the person or company introducing one company to another knows both parties personally. Social relationships have been found to be important in the initiation of relationships (Ruokolainen 2005; Tesar and Moini 2005; Dibben and Harris 2001; Godar and O'Connor 2001; Halinen and Salmi 2001). Dibben and Harris (2001) found relationships formed from pre-existing social relationships were more likely to be developed and renewed than those arising out of the need for exchange.

***“I just want to be seen ...oh...in the back of your car.” (You've got everything now)***

Business competition has to be understood from the perspective of networks. Hingley (2005) identifies competition in UK agri-food as, for example between *the supply network led by Tesco versus that of J. Sainsbury, versus that of Asda*. Profitability therefore relies on the competitive success of one network against another and therefore, for a supplier of unbranded fresh foods being part of the branded retailer network is a source of kudos. There is the benefit of association with a big company (and its supply network). In the song *You've got everything now*, Morrissey identifies the need of some to be identified with success. In food industry relationships, being part of a particular supermarket supply network was often also the key to further 'referral' business and therefore the seal of buyer approval (Hingley 2005).

## Relationship Development

***“Hand in glove. The sun shines out of our behinds.  
No, it's not like any other love. This one is different - because it's us.” (Hand in glove)***

***“Hand in glove  
We can go wherever we please  
And everything depends upon  
How near you stand to me.” (Hand in glove)***

There is a general business trend for dominant channel members to practice discrimination in the type(s) of relationships that they have with different suppliers. For example, favoured partners may be tied-in to *exclusive* agreements, whilst others are kept on a more transactional footing. There are many examples of business-to-business relationships, where buyer organisations practice tiering or classification of suppliers, in order to give higher proportions of business to *preferred* ‘partners’ (Dorsch *et al* 1998; Christopher and Jüttner 2000). This has given rise to Key Account Management (KAM), where there is an emphasis on those relationships in an organisation’s portfolio that are most significant to their business (Harden 2004). This reflects the process described in Dorsch *et al* (1998) as the stratification of vendors by buyers (for example, as best, good or poor). This inevitably leads to supply channel rationalisation, such that buyers may focus on fewer, but exclusive suppliers to their businesses, facilitated by ‘close to the customer’ and ‘partnership’ ideals. In order to succeed these type of relationships require large degrees of ongoing communication and interaction between exchange partners and are often typified by a hothouse environment in order to add joint value through exclusive products and services (Hingley 2001; 2005; White 2000).

***“I won't share you, no.” (I won't share you)***

***“There never need be longing in your eyes  
As long as the hand that rocks the cradle is mine.” (The hand that rocks the cradle is mine)***

However, in the food industry there is a trend for powerful buyers to hold best supplier’s close and ideally won’t let them trade with other competitors (Hingley 2001), which means that such exclusivity arrangements can perpetuate a feeling of paranoia, driving buyers to continually reassert their supply chain authority, regularly stressing who it is that is driving the system, and that suppliers will continue to benefit and prosper so long (and only if) as buyer driven exclusivity remains (Hingley 2001; Gedeon 2006).

***You've got everything now (You've got everything now)***

The downside of exclusivity and reduced supply base arrangements (for suppliers) are in the limitations derived from the poor negotiating position of being tied-in to relationships with much more powerful organisations (Hingley 2001; Gedeon 2006). This may create an anxiety to please amongst suppliers, for whom sales opportunities are reduced by the prevalence in business of the buyer-driven ‘reduced source’ model. Such changes in the business relationship landscape have precipitated a more competitive business era in which “We cannot cling to the old dreams anymore” (*Still III*) and perhaps a more unforgiving business age.

***“I crack the whip  
And you skip”. (Handsome devil)***

Antecedence with respect to the role of power in relationships can be found in Thibaut and Kelly (1959) who explore the area of conflict and the issue of both coercive and constructive conflict in personal relationships. The balance between power and dependency is termed *power asymmetry* (Anderson and Weitz 1992; Newman *et al* 2004). Cox (2004) contends, however, that power in business relationships is not a simplistic view of balance or imbalance leading to ‘win-win’ parity or ‘win-lose’ inequity, rather that power is demonstrated as a range of conditions inherent in business exchange. Levels of power are determined by the relative utility and relative scarcity of resources exchanged between the parties. Hence, there are degrees of power in the different circumstances of exchange, and this can change in a flux between parties, even within an ongoing relationship. A

business organisation's response to the influence of power should therefore be appropriate to particular and changing circumstance (Cox 2004). It is therefore interesting to identify perceptions of businesses to of changes in power status. Morrissey, in *You've got everything now* considers (from the perspective of others who have known him through the power transition from ordinary man to famous singer) how it is to have no power, then all the power:

*"Back at the old, grey school, I would win and you would lose."  
"You've got everything now" (You've got everything now)*

Business relationships are not static, things can change over time. Power symmetry is not a natural state in supply channels and networks, and that organisations desire imbalance in order to gain the upper hand in exchange relationships. The balance of power may, therefore, alternate between exchange parties, as it is natural for each party to try to secure maximum gain for themselves. Many business relationships there is an acceptance of power asymmetry and an overwhelming feeling of *supplier pragmatism* about this state of being.

***"Within an hour the power  
Could totally destroy me  
(or, it could save my life)." (Hairdresser on fire)***

Kumar (1996) contends that the vast majority of manufacturer-retailer relationships are imbalanced. This is an accurate description of the state of power in supply channels, where one party (increasingly the buyer/ retailer) holds sway. A more extreme view is that relationships are inherently unstable, and are in danger of becoming *fief-like*, when suppliers are tied-in to powerful, dominant partners (Blois 1997). This situation can bring tremendous, exclusivity derived rewards, and/ or potential disaster to suppliers. Johnsen and Ford (2002) and Anderson and Weitz (1992) cite the dangers of such asymmetrical relationships, where the power of the dominant, less committed and more opportunistic party disadvantages the weaker party. Kumar *et al* (1998) too, warn that powerful channel members can enforce punitive capabilities and actions (in response to the errors or failings of a partner), in which they can inflict negative consequences. This is seen in the food industry cases where for example, suppliers may try to break 'exclusivity' agreements and supply a retailer's competitor in order to gain extra business. This kind of action is often met with swift punitive action (Gedeon 2006; Hingley 2001). The ability and the capability of a partner to reciprocate punitive action, depends upon the balance of power and dependency. A forerunner to this can be found in the study of interpersonal relations by Thibaut and Kelly (1959), where both reward and coercive power are rooted in sanctions established in order to extract compliance.

Power asymmetry is, therefore, normally perceived to be a negative state (Newman *et al* 2004). Business relationship literature particularly that relating to conditions of interaction seems to be most concerned with ideal conditions for exchange, balance and even fairness. A further alternative view with regard to power is to be found in Cox *et al* (2001), who contend that presence of power imbalance does not mean that it is always explicitly exercised. This is clearly not always the case, as weaker partners do enter these relationships and tolerate power imbalance. Weaker parties in asymmetric relationships have a certain degree of tolerance to imbalance of power and they are not necessarily unstable or short lasting (Blundel and Hingley 2001; Narayandras and Rangan 2004).

Relationships are seldom fair, in the division of power or reward, nor are all parties equally active in commitment to them (Gummeson 1996; Kumar 1996). It is not, therefore, surprising that benefits are, or seem to be, unequally shared; but this does not mean that such power imbalanced exchanges are not workable or enduring. Business relationships can be aligned even in circumstances of inequality, or where there are tensions resulting from power imbalance (Cox 2004). Cox (2004) further contends that mutuality of outcomes (with respect to profitability) are not commensurate with the nature of business relationships, believing that 'win-win' outcomes are not an absolute but a variable concept; such that there are *degrees of winning*, in respect of the division of rewards. Situations, relationships are not perceived by all parties to the relationship in the same way. One person's perspective of a relationship may be very different to someone else's. This may be due to any number of factors on their own or interacting.

***“Vivid and in your prime  
You will leave me behind.” (These things take time)***

***“I’d leap in front of a flying bullet for you.” (What difference does it make?)***

In discussion of an interpersonal relationship, Morrissey feels that this person’s qualities will naturally take them away from him, they’re too good to stay with him, or they don’t realise how good they are and as soon as they do they will go. Morrissey feels he isn’t good enough for them:

***“But I can’t believe you’d ever care”. (These things take time)***

A consequence of power asymmetry in business relationships is insecurity, whereby weaker partners may feel that they are not good enough to be a relationship, or may be supplanted by an organisation with a better business proposition. Powerful buying organisations may benefit from this supplier insecurity in order to retain power. Weaker parties, conscious of the ‘coldness’ of the environment in which business exchange operates outside of prevailing ‘exclusivity’ arrangements, are eager to please their larger ‘partner’ customers in provision of high levels of service and initiative taking, and sometimes this may go beyond customer expectations as suppliers know that in order to retain business the pressure is on to almost over-achieve. Further, lack of esteem by suppliers, who don’t know their worth may lead to further anxiety. In food industry relations both Gedeon (2006) and Hingley (2001; 2005) chronicle an almost desperate need for food suppliers to please their important customers.

In the seminal work by Morgan and Hunt (1994) business relationships are determined in the following way:

*“In healthy relationships partners acquiesce because of commitment to relationships rather than through the exercising of power as in sick relationships. Long run relationships are associated with the absence of coercive power and presence of trust and commitment”.*

However, it is not always realistic to regard power imbalanced relationships as ‘sick’. Studies identify varying degrees and fluctuations in trust, commitment and uses of power that do not necessarily impact upon the longevity and continuity of relationships. Relationships in business exchange are not always (and in practice unlikely) to be mutual in inputs and outputs, but this does not prevent relational exchange. There is a high degree of tolerance of weaker partners with respect to displays of power and in the acceptance of the inequity of outputs (resultant mutuality); power imbalance can be regarded as a ‘normal’ state of affairs (Batt 2004).

Power is understood by some commentators to be as constructive and coercive and co-operative and competitive at the same time within dyadic relationships (Thibaut and Kelly 1959; Kumar 1996). Kumar (1996) identifies four types of power in business interactions:

1. dependence
2. punitive capability
3. non-coercive influence strategies
4. punitive actions

Kumar considers only punitive actions to constitute the antithesis of trust in relationships. Food industry case analysis in Gedeon (2006) and Hingley (2001; 2005) reveals attitudes in line with Kumar’s view concerning the presence of power factors 1-3, and agree that such power imbalance under this definition is no barrier to entry or to relationship longevity. Whilst Kumar (1996) considers that only the fourth dimension of power, *punitive actions* precludes business relationship, interestingly, both Hingley and Gedeon indicate that even punitive action by powerful food industry buyers does not prevent suppliers from wanting (perhaps needing) to continue to engage.

***“Why do I give valuable time to people who don’t care if I live or die?” (Heaven knows I’m miserable now)***

***“Why do I smile at people who I’d much rather kick in the eye.” (Heaven knows I’m miserable now)***

Another unexplored area of power and dependence is the issue of superficial compliance of weaker parties. For example, how much of a veneer of social niceties is there in business exchange, how bad do things have to get before this is stripped back? Weaker suppliers (as seen in the case studies both Gedeon and Hingley) will ‘bend over backwards’ to comply, but privately they may think otherwise. On one level in certain circumstances, businesses do have to perform tasks that don’t please them. Alternatively it could be that in some relationships where individuals and their organisations have no power they have to do things for people/ companies who don’t care about them or their organisation, but may have to because they are so crucial to the future success of business. In the supply-base rationalised food industry this is a particularly pertinent issue.

***“I stole and I lied and why? Because you asked me to.” (What difference does it make?)***

We have already identified that with reduced supply base and ‘preferred’ access to key customer accounts, supplier organisations are very keen to retain business. But do they want retain a relationship with another company so desperately they would do anything to achieve it? How far would organisations and would this even push at the bounds of legality? The food industry is a heavily regulated and has buyer led checks and controls in place that make the market highly ‘traceable’. Cases in Gedeon (2006) illustrate how strict retailers are at enforcing (or having network intermediaries enforce on their behalf) quality and product/ ingredient traceability systems for food. In one study, a case supplier organisation is put out of business when found to be in serious breach of food chain safety measures.

## **Relationship Dissolution**

Research into the dissolution of relationships has tended to focus on the reasons for wishing to withdraw (Bitner et al 1990, Keaveney 1995, Colgate and Hedge 2001, Wendelin 2002, Ulaga 2003), modeling the course of relationship dissolution (Ping and Dwyer 1992; Halinen and Tahtinen 2002) and on the strategies used by companies to disengage themselves (Alajoutsijarvi, Moller and Tahtinen 2000, Halinen and Tahtinen 2002). There are various strategies for exiting a relationship. The can be divided into two broad categories, direct communication: informing the company that the relationship is ending, and indirect communication: where the desire to exit the relationship is not explicitly stated. The strategies used within these categories may also be divided into two categories, they may be self oriented i.e. the company is concerned with itself at the other party’s cost and other oriented i.e. the company wants to avoid hurting the other party. A direct, self oriented strategy would entail the company telling the other party directly the relationship is over with no opportunity for discussion whereas a direct other oriented strategy, the revocable exit, entails the company telling the other party but being open to discussing the reasons. An indirect, self oriented strategy – cost escalation – entails the company creating a negative atmosphere by increasing the price if it’s the supplier or demanding extra services if it is the customer. An indirect, other orientation - pseudo de-escalation – entails the company informing the party they are reducing the amount of investment in the relationship (Alajoutsijarvi et al 2000). The exit strategy a company chooses to use may depend on a number of factors such as the length of the relationship, the atmosphere of the relationship i.e. the degree of trust, commitment, cooperation, power, dependence. In a long term relationship the company may choose a revocable exit. It may let the other party know it wants to end the relationship but keep the lines of communication open so they can discuss problems and potentially maintain the relationship. In a short term relationship the company may just inform the other party the relationship is over without the opportunity to discuss it. The degree of power a company has could influence the exit strategy it uses. A powerful company may take a direct, self oriented approach and inform the other party the relationship is over whereas a less powerful company may take a pseudo de-escalation approach. It is important for the company to be aware of these potential signs and to identify what is causing the other party to want to end the relationship.

***“For we have been through hell and high tide I think I can rely on you.***



***So what difference does it make? It makes none.” (What difference does it make?)***

In power imbalanced relationships, the decision to break-up can be enforced by the powerful party. In the food industry, notably this has been as a result of the deliberate policy of supply base rationalisation, particularly in fresh food commodity areas, where supply numbers are reduced to those usually larger and more efficient suppliers (Hingley 2001; 2005, White 2000). Of particular note in the case studies in Gedeon (2006), is that the decision by supermarkets to de-list suppliers can be brutal and happen regardless of past ‘good’ business exchange relations. The decision often takes place from a perspective of a purely economic context. The past and what has gone before on does not count for anything. Companies may have gone through a lot together but there may come a time in the search for better profit or improved differentiation that it does not count, and buyers’ select and obtain a better supplier. All the trust, commitment etc that has been built up on does not count. However, suppliers in these cases also noted that *negative* experiences with individual buyer organisation personnel did have a part to play in their demise (Gedeon 2006).

***“I know it's over - still I cling  
I don't know where else I can go” (I know its over)***

***“Yes, I walk around- somehow.  
But you have killed me.” (You have killed me)***

Even in the face of inevitable loss of contract to supply, some organisations still desperately hang on to faint hope of reprieve. This is once again evident in the food industry supplier-retailer dissolution cases in Gedeon (2006). Time and again, de-listed suppliers will fight the inevitable and seek to be let back into the network, even though they have been clearly ‘frozen-out’ by powerful retail buyers. This reflects the extremely difficult situation food industry suppliers find themselves in when faced with rationalisation and where there are few options for future supply in a market held by few, powerful customers.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The objective of this paper is to conduct a novel approach, through the analysis of the treatment of interpersonal relationships in lyric form to provide a canvass for the identification of business relationship issues. These issues concern a well-trodden area (for example, power-dependency), but highlight some new or perhaps overlooked aspects relating to the ‘human dimension’ inherent in business exchange. In supply-base rationalised markets such a food, the desire for relationships is intense. The critical factor behind this seems to be the growing lack of opportunities in mature markets for alternative, ongoing sales outlets other than those offered by networks/ consumer markets controlled by a powerful few retail or distributive outlets. In the food industry, ‘exclusivity’ arrangements offer at the outset what appears to be guaranteed and ongoing market access, but this also constitutes a ‘golden handcuff’. Suppliers to markets like the food industry are generally pragmatic about issues of supply chain power and the fact that its balance is held by their important retail customers. In this context, suppliers are accepting of expressions of power by their customers (and of course have no choice but to be so). However, interestingly, even punitive action does not prevent suppliers in this sector from wishing to continue the relationship; in fact suppliers are often unable to accept the final reality of severed business relationships and will still be seeking a future window of opportunity to get back with a customer. Suppliers in imbalanced relationships (like food) are often insecure, lack esteem and appear to compensate by over-serving their customers. This may indeed be expressed on a superficial basis, but then also the true meaning of retailer initiated ‘close to the customer’ and ‘partnership’ schemes may also be equally superficial. Food industry cases like that undertaken by Gedeon (2006) show that past ‘good’ business relationships count for little when the necessity of cost driven rationalisation is driving, and with rationalisation the good goes out with the bad.

This paper highlights that human and interpersonal responses to business exchange issues, particularly those relating to power-dependency are not always rational and predictable; and that the unpredictable nature of human emotion often holds sway in supposedly rational business environments. Future research should concern whether food industry relationships, with their concentrated, mature and hyper-competitive structures are typical of dyadic business relationships,

and whether participants in other business-business exchange contacts act in similar ways. Areas for investigation in other business contexts should, therefore, focus on:

- The perceived need for relationship forming
- The nature of exclusivity arrangements
- The significance of network and channel rationalisation of relationship forming
- The impact of punitive actions on business partners
- The significance of quality of past relationships on future retention
- The lengths to which people/ organisations will go to maintain relationships

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