



Articles

Interpersonal Dynamics in Business Disciplines: Formulating a Hierarchy of Relational Motives

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Abstract

This article analyzes the topic of relational motives within the business disciplines and represents one attempt in responding to criticisms of a lacking framework capable of providing wider and more coherent understandings of relational typologies. By means of a review of the management and leadership literature and using a utility-by-motives clustering, six relational motives are identified and ordered hierarchically using a paired comparison methodology. The value of this approach for scholars and practitioners is explored and specific areas of further research are suggested.

Keywords: hierarchy of relationships, interpersonal relationships, management practices, relational motives, relational leadership

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A simple search in any of the business aggregate databases using search terms “interpersonal relationships AND management” or “interpersonal relationships AND leadership” demonstrates the significance of interpersonal relationships to both disciplines. Yet it can be noted that published research in these fields of study also tend to focus so narrowly on aspects of interpersonal relationships that it becomes difficult to understand the relational phenomenon as a coherent, structured body. Within the management discipline—for example—there are studies exploring the value of interpersonal relationships with respect to a manager’s influence on organizational climate (Doyle, 1996), in dealing with manager career development (Hilger, Richter, & Schäffer, 2013), addressing top managers executive training (Hunt & Baruch, 2003), multicultural working environments (Karjalainen & Soparnot, 2012), and the management of conflict (Meyer, Gemmell, & Irving, 1997). Additional examples of research topics in management and interpersonal relationships are cross-culture influences in communication management (Zhang & Huang, 2013), the relevance of interpersonal skills to customer satisfaction (Guenzi & Pelloni, 2004), themes related to performance appraisals (Manning, Pogson, & Morrison, 2009), its relevance to mentoring (Siegel, Smith, & Mosca, 2001), and in characterizing management styles (Khetarpal & Srivastava, 2000). Despite this interest in relationships, researchers have already criticized the discipline for the limited attention given to a more comprehensive and coherent understanding of relational typologies (Clydesdale, 2009). There seems to be plenty of focus on particular relational types without a discourse on the benefits and limitations within a broader context of relational dynamics.

A comparable deduction emerges from a review of the leadership literature. For instance, Zenger and Folkman (2009) observed that poor interpersonal and relational skills were a major cause of leadership failures. In a study conducted by Profiles International (2009) also on reasons for leadership failures it is noted that "...one of the findings is that poor interpersonal and communications skills are one of the most prevalent reasons." A survey of 350 U.S. organizations also concluded the most negative leadership behavior was poor interpersonal skills (Fisher & Spillane, 1991). Although most leaders would recognize relationships as crucial to the enactment of leadership, when actual styles are assessed and leadership performance measured, most leaders from a study of 2,500 managers exhibited a style in practice that was drastically more task than relational oriented (Connerley & Pedersen, 2005). The recent emphasis on emotional intelligence and servant-leadership has also highlighted the subject of interpersonal relationships as a key factor affecting leadership performance (Nuttall, 2004). Yet just as in the case of the management literature, what seems absent from the abundance of leadership research is a more coherent landscape of relational taxonomies that would situate these discoveries and observations within in a larger context (Weymes, 2002).

Despite the abundant reliance of research on interpersonal dynamics and the ensuing loss of a broader view of relational dynamics, it is possible to cluster many of these studies by their relational motives. Although it may be extremely difficult—if not impractical—to catalog every single form of interpersonal relations available in the management and leadership literature, there is value—at least as a starting point—in attempting to form clusters of relationships with similar motives, finding suitable names to characterize each cluster, and then using these clusters to compose overarching schemes as a preliminary attempt to create a relational framework to address a potential oversight.

The purpose of this study is to identify, validate and suggest a hierarchical order of interpersonal relationships in response to scholarly criticism of a limited attention given to the wider and more coherent understanding of relational typologies in the business disciplines (Clydesdale, 2009; Weymes, 2002).

Methodology for the Analysis

One way of clustering interpersonal relationships is through the use of Relational Utility theory, which in its simplest form refers to the utility of one person's efforts in the attainment of goals by means of social interactions (Nelissen, 2014). Relational Utility refers to the capacity to provide deeper levels of personal commitment in pursuit of internal rewards. When the rewards seem higher, there is a higher desirability of relational commitment. But if the rewards are minimal, then the expected reaction is one of less relational commitment. What matters from this model—and relevant to this study—are the relational motives that moderate relational utility within organizational dynamics. Although this approach of studying the motives of interpersonal relationships has been used to research communications in education Mottet, Martin, and Myers (2004), for political analysis (Thomsen, Obaidi, Sheehy-Skeffington, Kteily, & Sidanius, 2014), conflict resolution (Yang, Li, Wang, & Hendriks, 2011) and in measuring achievement (Conroy, Elliot, & Pincus, 2009), such an approach is rare when surveying the business databases.

In order to illustrate this utility-by-motives clustering, consider the use of *transactional* and *transformational* relationships discussed abundantly in the leadership literature. For leadership research, these forms of relationship imply two different motives for attaining goals by way of personal interactions. On one hand, the *transactional* relationship represents a form of leading that influences followers in the direction of established goals by clarifying role and task requirements, recognizing needs and wants, and measuring how they are satisfied (Bass & Bass,

2009). *Transactional* relationships are purely pragmatic or instrumental in nature; the emphasis on the tasks at hand and any considerations for relational activity are secondary at best. “You give me, I give you...” This relational motive is perhaps the most studied in the business setting because it is measurable, highly predictive, simple to implement, and can be achieved with minimal exposure or personal intrusion (longer interpersonal distances). On the other hand, *transformational* relationships focus on efforts to align individual desires, values and expectations with those of an organization and are directed at how a member of the organization is “changed” to agree with a “higher” set of needs set by the organization (Coman, 2008). Contrary to *transactional* motives, the *transformational* motives involve factors, which in order to be effective, demand commitments at deeper interpersonal levels. Among the most illustrative applications of *transformational* relational motives are the personal transformation expectations in relation to an organization’s desired transformation (Münner, 2007), which requires deeper levels of personal exposure, vulnerability and commitment (closer interpersonal distances). In effect, both of these relational states—*transactional* and *transformational*—suggest different motives to reach their objectives and therefore represent from the literature two distinct relational clusters. As this example suggests, the theory of relational utility provides a means to cluster interpersonal relationships and serves as a system to form models that describe higher level views of relational dynamics based upon degrees of interpersonal distances (Hess, 2003).

A further review of the literature reveals other relational clusters beyond just the *transactional* and *transformational* motives described above. A preliminary search of interpersonal relational modes available in a major business aggregate database yielded 18 distinct clusters, which were then used as search keywords to determine their frequency of use within the scholarly literature. Table 1 lists these relational modes in alphabetical order, along with their source and their frequency of use (number of hits within the database).

Table 1

Results of a Business Aggregate Database Search for Interpersonal Relational Modes

Relational types	Source	Number of hits
Adversarial	Barth (2006)	4
Alliance (Gunaxi)	Willis (2008)	8
Assurance	Murray, Holmes, & Collins (2006)	425
Codependency	McCaslin (2001)	7
Companionship	Wills (1985)	41
Cooperative	Vargas-Hernández (2009)	34
Empathy	Kaukiainen et al. (1999)	99
Esteem support	Wills (1985)	25
Identity	Sluss & Ashforth (2007)	103
Informational support	Wills (1985)	96
Laissez-faire	Skogstad et al. (2007)	81
Manipulative	Hung (2005)	57
Mutuality	Josselson (1992)	7
Nurturing	Abramowitz (2001)	154
Symbiotic	Hung (2005)	2
Transactional	Donada & Nogatchewsky (2006)	748
Transcendental	Sanders, Hopkins, & Geroy (2003)	195
Transformational	Piccolo & Colquitt (2006)	752

Note. Scholarly sources only, using the search string “(keyword) interpersonal relations at work”.

For purposes of this study—and as a reduction strategy— only relational modes with 100 hits or higher were retained. In other words, six clusters were extracted from this business database for use in the current study: Assurance, Identity, Nurturing, Transactional, Transformational and Transcendental. What follows is an analysis to further explain each of these relational motives as additional clusters leading to a hierarchical model based on the utility of interpersonal distances.

Assurance Motivated Relationships

This type of relational motive pursues a sense of security, risk regulation, and a reduction of vulnerabilities (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). Assurance relationships are intended to provide psychological, emotional and spiritual shelter or protection from intrusive, overwhelming, uncertain and confusing events. Assurance relationships create the “safe space” where the “seeds” of mutuality can grow with minimal interference from the perceived threats. These relational spaces offer the opportunity “to be with...,” to “not feel alone,” to minimize anxiety, and to be the hands that “hold and not let fall.” If *transactional* relationships are ground work to build trust, *assurance* relationships define the “playing field” of relationships that are the basis for establishing trust (Tucker, 2010). Past research sustains that assurance relational motives seem best illustrated in the wake of workforce reductions and downsizing events (Berman, 2009; Varkkey & Kumar, 2013). Other examples of assurance relationships in management include managing uncertainties during mergers (DiFonzo & Bordia, 1998), handling risks for strategic alliances (Das & Teng, 1999) and in working within diverse ethnical environments (Lake & Rothchild, 1996). In leadership, assurance relationships affect leadership effectiveness (Katz, 1977), is a form of influence to allow leading in uncertain times (Bryan & Farrell, 2009; Gillath & Hart, 2010) and serves as a moderator of leadership trust (Trong Tuan, 2012).

Relationships Motivated by Identity

A fourth relational motive worth considering for the purpose of this study is that of *identity relationships*, where the objective is to engage in relational dynamics that appeal to, employ, or influence outcomes by means of identity motives (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). The essence of this relational motive is to account for how self (personal), interpersonal and collective (teams, groups, organizations) relationships may lead to improved management and leadership processes by reaffirming identity themes (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). In the management discipline, for instance, the emphasis on mission & vision (Cunningham, Cornwell, & Coote, 2009), the sustaining of organizational culture (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) and the personal fit within an organizational culture (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991) are among the most researched topics that speak of the relevance of *identity* relationships at work. Likewise, *identity* relational motives have proven vital as a leader-follower framework for organizations (Karp & Helgø, 2009; Lührmann & Eberl, 2007) as well as for groups (Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003). Essentially, illustrative cases where *identity* relational motives are used extensively within organizations are associated with managing organizational identity by means of sustaining a congruent strategic mission and vision (Ravasi & Phillips, 2011). In addition to *transactional*, *transformational*, and *assurance* relational motives already discussed, appealing to *identity* relationships to heighten performance appears quite frequently in management and leadership research and is therefore added here as distinct relational motive.

Nurturing Motivated Relationships

Although “nurturing” does not emerge as a popular term in the management and leadership literature, relational motives that care, revitalize, encourage, support, challenge, and guide are quite abundant and yet are compatible with the definition of “nurturing”. Nurturing occurs when developing communications styles, when guiding others

to discover problems and opportunities for growth, as a way to become more approachable and within the organization, in situations that require flexibility, encouragement, and sympathy (Rakowski Reinhardt, 1991). Nurturing—in this sense—is especially crucial to Human Resources Management (HRM) as a source of competitive advantage (Lengnick-Hall & Lengnick-Hall, 2003) and a method to augment organizational performance (Mehta, 2011). The surest application of nurturing relational motives emerges from the mentoring processes (Pittenger & Heimann, 2000; Young, Cady, & Foxon, 2006). Other examples of nurturing motives occur in talent management (Borrelli, 2004; Santhoshkumar & Rajasekar, 2012), succession planning (Hewitt, 2009), in achieving high team performance (Greenwood & Gong, 2010; Russo, 2012), in fostering resilience (Wilson & Ferch, 2005) and in growing corporate entrepreneurship capability (Scheepers, Hough, & Bloom, 2008). Research has also shown that nurturing relationships sustain knowledge competence within organizations (McKenzie & van Winkelen, 2004; Ribière & Sitar, 2003), and leadership performance (Surie & Hazy, 2006). Essentially, the topic of “nurturing” seems to appear quite frequently in the scholarly literature and is recognized as another major cluster of relational motives.

Relationships Motivated by the Transcendent

From the recently evolving field of *Spirituality in the Workplace* emerges another form of interpersonal relationships affecting business research, that of *transcendental* relationships. Although there is still much debate around the specific definition of *spirituality* (Freshman, 1999), there is significant evidence in favor of understanding spirituality as a relational phenomenon (Grant, 2005). More to the point, *spirituality* is considered a “relational- ideopraxis” construct, meaning it is a dynamic interplay of relationships purposely moving individuals and communities to fulfill an ideological worldview driven by transcendence (Rojas, 2005). In fact, there are studies specifically showing that the quality of relationships with a spiritual presence is more highly related to the quality of relationships with others than to spiritual awareness or spiritual prompting alone (Hall, Brokaw, Edwards, & Pike, 1998).

Despite some concerns regarding spirituality as a viable concept for management and leadership studies, there is research that points to the value of *transcendental* relationships in the business setting. For example, in an analysis of over 140 articles, Karakas (2010) found that spirituality and transcendental relationships provide workers with enhanced well-being and quality of life, a clearer sense of purpose and meaning at work, and a sense of interconnectedness and community. Other studies show spirituality as a moderator of worker attitudes (Riasudeen & Prabavathy, 2011), a factor in leadership-commitment outcomes (Sanders, Hopkins, & Geroy, 2004), as a valuable re-envisioning tool for organizational development and leadership (Cacioppe, 2000), and as a means for coping with stress (Bell, Rajendran, & Theiler, 2012). It can be argued that if business oriented discourse has—in general—underestimated relational dynamics (Fletcher, 1998) and business practice continues with a poor record of effective use of interpersonal relations at work (Meister, 2001), then the validity of a relationally founded construct such as spirituality may very well serve as a reason to appraise and rectify these biases. Should this be the case, then *transcendental* motives are not only a cluster worthy of consideration in this analysis, but also may serve as an incentive to formulate models that describe higher level view of relational dynamics.

So far a scan of the management and leadership literature on interpersonal dynamics—and with the assistance of a utility-by-motive technique—it is possible to distinguish at least six clusters of relational motives, namely, the *transactional*, *transformational*, *assurance*, *identity*, *nurturing* and *transcendental* relationships. These clusters of relationships are used as the basis for composing a broader relational framework more suitable for business purposes. What follows is the rationale for aligning these clusters in hierarchical order as a possible taxonomy as an attempt to address the criticism by some researchers regarding the limited attention given to a wider and more coherent understanding of relational typologies (Clydesdale, 2009; Weymes, 2002).

Constructing a Hierarchy of Relational Motives

In addition to recognizing six major clusters of relational motives from canvassing the management and leadership literature, it's also possible to align these motives into a hierarchical model based upon the extent of their demand for deeper intimacies and the potential risks associated with degrees of openness that either facilitate or prevent a fuller sense of mutuality (i.e., interpersonal distance). Intimacy here refers to degrees how the “space between us” becomes a concourse for deeper connections-in-mutuality. The literature recognizes this concept as “relational distance” (Zhou, Tsang, Huang, & Zhou, 2014) and although there are multiple definitions of this concept, the relational motives presented here are more akin to what has also been defined as “social distance” (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002), therefore makes the term easily applied to dyads, small groups and organizational research.

An interplay of relational motives and relational distance becomes possible by following research published by Josselson (1992), in which she identifies eight primary ways in which we overcome the “space between individuals”. A similar approach was developed specifically for the business disciplines by Nuttall (2004). Using the *transactional* and *transformational* relationships illustrated earlier as an example— while *transactional* motives consist of simple exchanges with minimal relational utility— *transformational* motives focus on efforts to align individual desires, values and expectations and therefore impose demands at deeper interpersonal levels and have a greater effect on relational utility (Coman, 2008). The analysis of these two relational motives suggests that relational motives can be ordered hierarchically based upon their demand for deeper mutuality or social distance. In order to align these modes hierarchically using this criteria, a panel of nine experienced business executives was asked to rank each relational mode according to their perceived gradation of intimacies, from the mode that required least to the mode that required the most. As a focus group, the executives debated the relative distance for each relational mode, and after multiple iterations the resulting hierarchical model of corresponding relational distances (Hess, 2003) is illustrated in Figure 1.

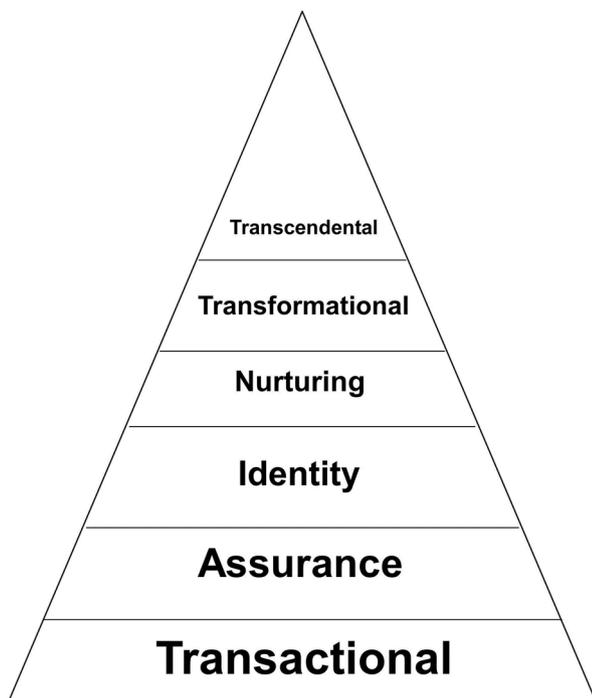


Figure 1. Hierarchy of relationship motives.

It's essential to recognize that a hierarchical structure envisioned in this model is presented more as an organic, interconnected reality rather than a linear set of relational phenomena. As already observed in the case of *transactional* and *transformational* models of leadership, a *transactional* motive may also have influence on other forms of motives. Similarly, the research on Spirit at Work shows that *transcendental* motives have an impact on a broader gamut of relationships (Grant, 2005). In other words, the model suggested here is not as a mechanical layering of mutually exclusive motives but what Joseph Kantenich calls an "organism of attachments" (Peters, 2010). This interpretation is somewhat analogous to studying parts of an organism (e.g., the human body) where major organs can be studied as independent entities but at the same time, there is an understanding that each part is a vital subset of an organic whole.

Relevance of the Relational Motives Model

The hierarchy of relationships presented above offers a more coherent understanding of relational dimensions and opens up additional prospects for the management and leadership research. For example, if relationships are so crucial to performance, then what can be said of management or leadership within an organization for which all of these relational motives are fully developed? In what ways are relational motives associated with situational leadership models? What are the relationships between these relational motives and stress management? What are practical implications of these relational motives to the fields of consulting, organizational development, and human resources management? Are there relevant subcategories of relational motives, or are there additional approaches to relational modeling that can satisfy the needs of leadership and management? To what extent are *transcendental* relational motives moderated by other relational motives? Are there further research opportunities along the hierarchy of relational motives for other business sectors, such as conflict management, quality of the work environment, recruiting, mentoring, innovation, workplace diversity, and globalization readiness? Can a valid and reliable instrument be developed to assess relational motive capacities by means of what could be called a "relational intelligence framework?" Does the relational motive model serve as a bridge to allow research from other disciplines to be more actively pursued and applied to the business disciplines? These simple suggestions point to the value of having a higher level and coherent perspective of relational dynamics.

Despite the possible appeal of this model, there are certain advantages and disadvantages to consider in its design and application. First of all, this model is just one attempt to address criticisms of a lacking relational framework capable of providing wider and more coherent understandings of relational typologies in business. A second advantage is the ease of applications within the business disciplines, already using languages, images, and research prevalent within the management and leadership literature. While some models of relational dynamics have focused on physical (Sorenson & Stuart, 2001), demographic (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001), social (Ahuja, Galletta, & Carley, 2003), or decision making latitude (Spreitzer, 1995), the model presented here adds the relational motive theme with a simpler business oriented language that connects easier with past and evolving research. As another advantage, the hierarchical model in many ways—as seen above—widens the opportunities landscape for relational research in other disciplines as well. On the other hand, the interpretive construction of this model claims for more objective approaches to validate its structure while also recognizing the possibility of other relational motives, variety of ordering schemes, and entirely different approaches. Nevertheless, the cursory review of management and leadership literature presented here provides exploratory evidence to support the construction of a hierarchical model of relational motives.

A review of the management and leadership research demonstrates the significance of interpersonal relationships to these fields of study, although researchers have criticized these disciplines for the limited attention given to a wider and more coherent understanding of relational typologies (Clydesdale, 2009; Weymes, 2002). Albeit preliminary in nature, this paper represents one attempt to respond to these criticisms and demonstrate the value of seeking overarching relational frameworks capable of filling this gap in the business literature.

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