



Technical note

Theorizing through metaphorical transfer in OM/SCM research: Divorce as a metaphor for strategic buyer–supplier relationship dissolution



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ABSTRACT

Operations Management and Supply Chain Management (OM/SCM), as a discipline, can benefit from proper theorizing to address persistent urgings for better and new theories. This paper hopes to inspire more theorizing engagements through the formal process of metaphorical transfer. Metaphorical transfer transforms casually-invoked metaphors in everyday language into theory-constitutive metaphors. This transformation process first mandates theorizing to ensure equivalence between the domain of the metaphor and that of a target phenomenon or research problem of interest. Second, theorizing during metaphorical transfer occurs when abstracted insights intended to govern both the metaphor and target phenomenon materialize. Finally, metaphorical transfer supports borrowing of theories from outside of OM/SCM for testing within OM/SCM by safeguarding against common mistakes. This paper demonstrates metaphorical transfer via the example of divorce and strategic buyer–supplier relationship dissolution and concludes by highlighting other metaphors that may be invoked for a number of exemplary supply chain relationship phenomena.

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1. Introduction

Operations Management and Supply Chain Management (OM/SCM), as a discipline, has often been chided for being atheoretical and for its neglect and inadequate attention to building theories (Flynn et al., 1990; Schmenner and Swink, 1998).⁴ On the one hand, OM/SCM researchers have responded to this criticism by borrowing theories from other disciplines to build and/or test propositions about OM/SCM phenomena (Amundson, 1998;

Carter, 2011; Rungtusanatham and Anderson, 1996). Special issues of disciplinary journals have been dedicated to encouraging greater incorporation of theories from other disciplines (e.g., Ketchen and Hult, 2007). Articles have similarly been published to draw attention to specific theories and their utility for OM/SCM research (e.g., Amundson, 1998; Grover and Malhotra, 2003).

On the other hand, the OM/SCM discipline has responded to this criticism by calling for more *theorizing* efforts aimed at producing better and new theories (Carter, 2011; Flynn et al., 1990; Melnyk and Handfield, 1998; Schmenner and Swink, 1998; Schroeder, 2008). Theorizing is a conscious thought process that attempts to explain observations, an “ideational trial and error” process to make sense of a phenomenon of interest (Weick, 1989: 518). The intent of theorizing is to produce full-blown theories through “activities like abstracting, generalizing, relating, selecting, explaining, synthesizing, and idealizing” (Weick, 1995: 389). These activities can be informed by simulation methods to make emergent theories more logically precise and comprehensive (Davis et al., 2007); by paradox resolution methods that spatially or temporally separate opposing explanations about a phenomenon or that introduce new

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⁴ While we refer to OM/SCM as a single discipline, we recognize that there are divergent opinions as to whether OM and SCM represent the same discipline or whether OM subsumes SCM or vice versa.

concepts to synthesize and resolve explanatory tensions about a phenomenon (Poole and Van de Ven, 1989); and by metaphorical thinking to frame and understand a phenomenon of interest (Morgan, 1980, 2006; Weick, 1989).

Our paper introduces *metaphorical transfer*, a structured mechanism for theorizing, in the OMS/SCM discipline. Divorce as a metaphor for strategic buyer–supplier relationship dissolution serves as an example to facilitate this introduction because divorce is often invoked in referring to the termination of strategic buyer–supplier relationships (e.g., Levitt, 1983). Our intent is to inspire more theorizing of OMS/SCM phenomena through the invocation of theory-constitutive metaphors and to ensure the proper borrowing and testing of theories from outside OM/SCM. Section 2 provides a brief discussion of what metaphorical transfer entails and how it aids theorizing. Section 3 illustrates the steps of metaphorical transfer as applied to the divorce metaphor for strategic buyer–supplier relationship dissolution. We chose this example because divorce is often casually invoked when referring to the termination of strategic buyer–supplier relationships (e.g., Levitt, 1983). Section 4 concludes by highlighting other metaphors that may be invoked to promote theorizing of other exemplary supply chain relationship phenomena.

2. Metaphorical transfer as a theorizing mechanism

“Relationship management between buyers and sellers is much like that between husbands and wives. . . [The] sale merely consummates the courtship, at which point the marriage begins. The quality of the marriage determines whether there will be continued or expanded business, or troubles and divorce.”

(Levitt, 1983: 111)

A metaphor is “a linguistic utterance in which the combination of words is literally deviant in the sense that terms that have originally or conventionally been employed in relation to a different concept or domain are applied and connected to a target term or concept” (Cornelissen et al., 2005: 1549). Labeling two business partners in a strategic buyer–supplier relationship as spouses in a marriage and relationship termination as divorce (Levitt, 1983) is an example of the casual use of metaphors. However, casually-invoked metaphors only assume a literary

role whose utterance is rarely intended to facilitate theorizing. Casually-invoked metaphors familiarize the uninformed about a phenomenon of interest that is less known (e.g., the dissolution of a strategic buyer–supplier relationship) in terms of a source phenomenon that is more familiar (i.e., a divorce) (Morgan, 2006).

2.1. From literary to theory-constitutive metaphors

For casually-invoked metaphors to support theorizing in scientific endeavors, they have to become theory-constitutive (Boyd, 1993). A theory-constitutive metaphor “serves to generate an image for studying a [phenomenon]. . . [that] can provide the basis for detailed scientific research based upon attempts to discover the extent to which features of the metaphor are found in the subject of inquiry” (Morgan, 1980: 611). To transform a literary metaphor into one that is theory-constitutive, a formal process of metaphorical transfer (Hunt and Menon, 1995) or metaphorical reasoning (Van den Bulte, 1994) must be undertaken. Metaphorical transfer is deliberate in transferring and translating information between the domain of the source phenomenon (i.e., the metaphor) and the domain of the phenomenon of interest (i.e., target) at various levels of abstractions. This deliberate effort strives “to reduce [cognitive and emotive] tensions [from asserting that two phenomena are existentially identical] through seeking similarities between the two domains” (Hunt and Menon, 1995: 83).

Fig. 1 shows that a metaphorical transfer formally demonstrates conceptual similarity or equivalence between the metaphor and target at three hierarchical levels: *ontology*, *analogy*, and *identity* (Tsoukas, 1991; Garud and Kotha, 1994). The lowest level, ontology, demonstrates logical correspondence between the constituent elements of the metaphor and target. The constituent elements of a phenomenon connote the “whats” in a theory of the phenomenon (Whetten, 1989). The middle level of analogy demonstrates correspondence between relationships among constituent elements of the metaphor and relationships among constituent elements of the target. At the level of analogy, the “hows” and “whys” of the interrelationships among the “whats” (elements) of the metaphor are verified as being equivalent to those of the target. Demonstrating equivalences at the ontological and analogical levels ensures that the goal of accuracy for building theory (cf., Ketchen and Hult, 2011) is achievable within the respective phenomenon and between

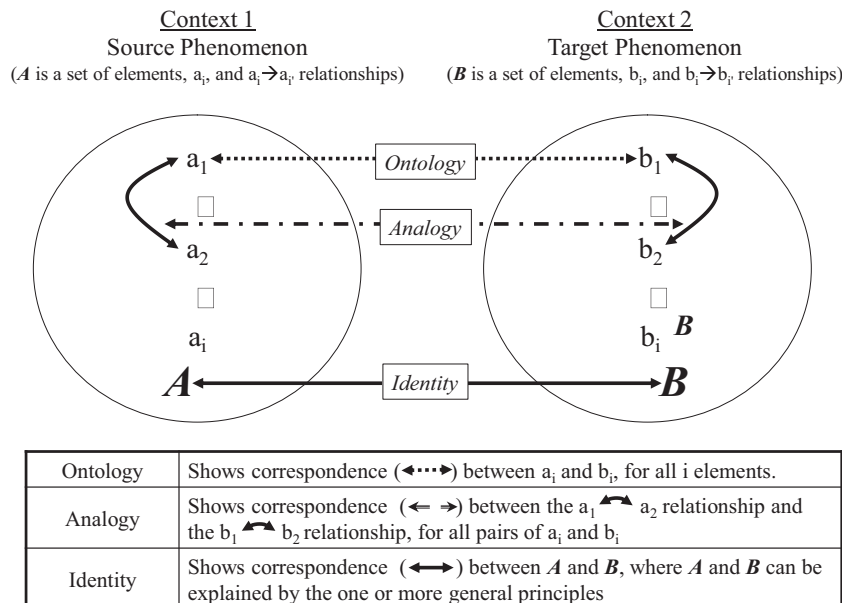


Fig. 1. Metaphorical transfer: equivalence at the levels of ontology, analogy, and identity.

the metaphor and target. Ontological and analogical equivalences then motivate the emergence of more general principles that aptly explain aspects of both the metaphor and the target at the highest and most challenging level of identity. The identity-level principles are generalizable insights (cf., [Ketchen and Hult, 2011](#)) that provide the theoretical rationale for what, how, and why the metaphor and the target are identical ([Garud and Kotha, 1994](#)).

Two important points about metaphorical transfer deserve clarification. First, metaphorical transfer does not have to be a strictly hierarchical movement up the ladder of abstraction from ontology to analogy to identity ([Tsoukas, 1991](#)). [Garud and Kotha \(1994\)](#), for example, invoked the human brain as a metaphor for flexible production systems and demonstrated equivalence at the level of ontology, and then the level of identity, before proceeding to establish equivalence at the level of analogy. Second, metaphorical transfer is not intended to demonstrate exhaustiveness at any level. Instead, at each level of theoretical juxtaposition, “the initial metaphorical insight [at a lower level of abstraction] is progressively refined through a set of homomorphic transformations. . . many-to-one transformations that retain only key facets that link the source and target, while discarding irrelevant facets” ([Garud and Kotha, 1994](#): 674). As such, the aspiration at the ontological level is not to identify all constituent elements that are equivalent between the metaphor and the target, but rather only those deemed to be key facets. Similarly, the aspiration at the analogical level is to map relationships among constituent elements of the metaphor to those of the target, as opposed to all possible relationships. Finally, the aspiration at the identity level is to generate principles that subsume equivalences at the levels of analogy and ontology, as opposed to all possible principles.

2.2. The theorizing roles of metaphorical transfer

Metaphorical transfer engages directly in theorizing when transforming a casual metaphor for a target into a metaphor that is theory-constitutive. The very act of establishing ontological and analogical equivalences between the metaphor and target performs the activities that [Weick \(1995\)](#) identifies as theorizing in order to frame explanations about the target in the scientific knowledge (i.e., lexicon, concepts, and theories) of the metaphor ([Morgan, 1980](#); [Van den Bulte, 1994](#)). Theorizing is also needed to draw out abstracted insights applicable to both the metaphor and target to

establish equivalence at the level of identity ([Morgan, 1980](#); [Van den Bulte, 1994](#)).

Once completed, metaphorical transfer supports theorizing by facilitating the *proper* borrowing of theories about the metaphor for testing in the context of the target. Efforts to theorize about OM/SCM phenomena via the lens of theories from other disciplines are already common ([Amundson, 1998](#); [Carter, 2011](#)) but, these efforts have not always been problem-free (cf., [Rungtusanatham and Anderson, 1996](#)). Metaphorical transfer minimizes problems with such efforts and safeguards against two common mistakes. One mistake is ignoring differences in levels of analysis across phenomena ([Whetten et al., 2009](#)). A second mistake is under-exploring contextual differences across phenomena ([Whetten et al., 2009](#)). Metaphorical transfer ensures proper importation of theories from one discipline to aid theorizing of a phenomenon in another discipline.

3. Divorce as a metaphor for strategic buyer–supplier relationship dissolution

The dissolution of a strategic buyer–supplier relationship is often casually equated to divorce between marital partners ([Guillet de Monthoux, 1975](#); [Perrien et al., 1995](#); [Vaaland, 2004](#); [Vaaland and Purchase, 2005](#)). This casual utterance intuitively makes sense but, at the same time, has been criticized for ignoring the obvious, namely that the two phenomena actually exist at different levels of analysis ([O'Malley et al., 2008](#)). The remedy is to use the formal process of metaphorical transfer to transform divorce into a theory-constitutive metaphor for strategic buyer–supplier relationship dissolution.

3.1. Equating divorce to strategic buyer–supplier relationship dissolution

3.1.1. Equivalence at the level of ontology

[Fig. 2](#) summarizes the ontological elements of divorce, those of strategic buyer–supplier relationship dissolution, and the one-to-one mapping between the two sets.

Divorce. This legal and emotional act of dissolving a marital relationship contract releases marital partners from their commitment to each other and alters their legal obligations and privileges ([Bernard, 1970](#)). Divorce mandates division and reallocation of

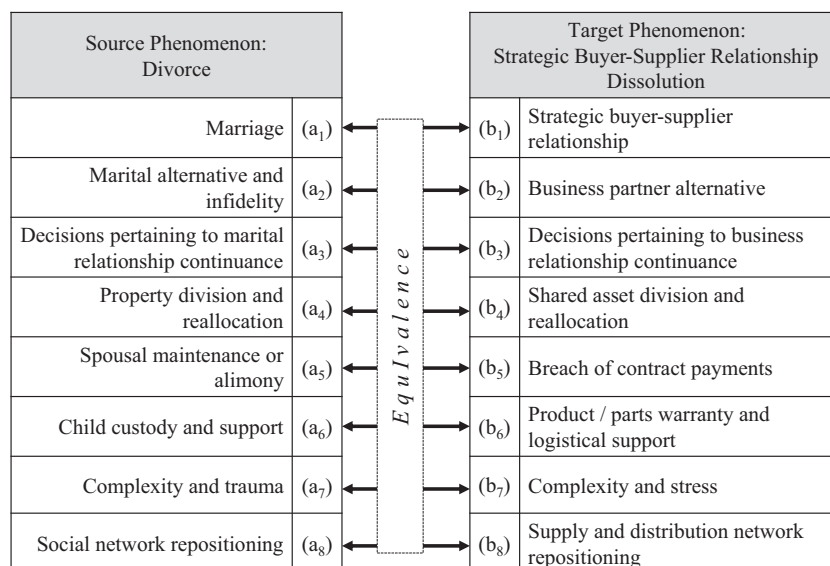


Fig. 2. Equivalence at the level of ontology: divorce and strategic buyer–supplier relationship dissolution.

jointly-owned property accumulated during the marriage, as well as household income in the form of alimony. With children, divorce necessitates agreement as to their legal custody and to the frequency and monetary amount of child support (Morgan, 1996 and Supplement 2001).

Divorce often requires a repositioning of one or both marital partners within the previously-shared social network that then ends in a “community divorce” (Sprecher et al., 2006). One party in the divorce may deliberately distance himself or herself from individuals who, prior to the marriage, had a friendship with the other in the divorce (Sprecher et al., 2006). Similarly, other individuals in the previously-shared network may deliberately distance themselves from one of the divorcees (Bernard, 1970).

Strategic buyer–supplier relationship dissolution. The dissolution of a strategic buyer–supplier relationship, likewise, terminates a previously-established, long-term legal relationship between two business entities (Stoltman and Morgan, 2002; Mayer and Teece, 2008). This termination releases the buyer and supplier from their legal commitments once current obligations are fulfilled (Macneil, 1978), and is often complex and stressful (Giller and Matear, 2001; Stoltman and Morgan, 2002). In terminating the strategic relationship, the buyer and supplier agree to the “division or custody of relationship-specific assets” from joint investments (Stoltman and Morgan, 2002: 67). When the dissolution arises from one entity breaching contract terms, the injured entity may also ask for compensation to recoup its investments in relationship-specific assets (Marsh, 2001). Following disposition, the supplier must honor obligations to fulfill existing work orders and to maintain availability of spare units as contracted; the buyer, in return, has to continue to make payments for work performed or items received. Failure to uphold these obligations can lead to financial penalties (Mayer and Teece, 2008).

The dissolution of a strategic buyer–supplier relationship restructures the supply network; the supplier has to find a replacement buyer and vice versa (Harrison, 2004; Pressey and Qiu, 2007). Sometimes the supply network is altered before existing obligations expire because other entities in the network may intentionally distance themselves from either the supplier or buyer. Consider, for example, a strategic buyer–supplier relationship being dissolved due to product failure and the associated liability. Other entities in the supply network may alter their relationships with the buyer and/or the supplier out of fear that they may receive defective items (Eisenberg, 2000) or that their reputation may be tarnished by association (Wilson, 2001). When one party is terminated by another, other entities in the supply network may distance themselves from the terminated party out of the fear that they may be similarly terminated in the near future (Tähtinen and Vaaland, 2006; Vaaland et al., 2004).

3.1.2. Equivalence at the level of analogy

The relevant relationships among the ontological elements of divorce total 247; those of strategic buyer–supplier relationship dissolution similarly number 247.⁵ To establish equivalence at the level of analogy between the 247 relationships of divorce and those of strategic buyer–supplier relationship dissolution is impractical. Importantly, as argued by Garud and Kotha (1994), lower-level relationships among ontological elements can be subsumed by

⁵ Given a set of E distinct elements, a subset of r elements can be selected, with $r \leq E$ and with each selected subset being a combination. Suppose $E = 3$ elements of A, B, and C and $r = 2$, then there are three possible combinations that can be selected – i.e., AB, AC, and BC. Given a set of E elements, the number of r -combinations that can be formed without repetition, or C_r^E , is given by $\frac{E!}{r!(E-r)!}$. Hence, $C_2^3 = 28$ combinations of two elements, $C_3^8 = 56$, $C_4^8 = 70$, $C_5^8 = 56$, $C_6^8 = 28$, $C_7^8 = 8$, and $C_8^8 = 1$. The total sums to 247 relationships among two elements, three elements, four elements, five elements, six elements, seven elements, and eight elements.

carefully-chosen higher-level categorizations. For our purpose, *material*, *psyche*, and *social network* are appropriate higher-level categorizations that represent contributions to current understanding about divorce from economics (e.g., Becker, 1973; Becker et al., 1977), psychology (e.g., Amato and Keith, 1991), and sociology (e.g., Furstenberg, 1990), respectively. Analogical equivalence between divorce and strategic buyer–supplier relationship dissolution is established by demonstrating correspondences with respect to these three aspects.

The material aspect. The material aspect subsumes ontological elements and their inter-relationships that relate to financial and nonfinancial assets. Divorce results in a loss of existing economic resources because properties and household income, as part of relationship termination, are now divided. For individuals, post-divorce, to maintain the same standard of living as when married, they have to earn an average of 31% more (Sorensen, 1992). Divorce discontinues future gains associated with the efficient division of labor in marriage (Sayer, 2006). Divorce also necessitates a material provision to children for an extended period of time.

Strategic buyer–supplier relationship dissolution, likewise, imposes negative material consequences for both the buyer and supplier. Terminating a strategic buyer–supplier relationship reallocates jointly-owned assets and mandates appropriate compensation for the loss associated with such division (Marsh, 2001). Once dissolved, neither entity has access to financial benefits previously generated from being in a strategic relationship with each other. Both the buyer and supplier, post-dissolution, are also deprived of opportunities to participate in each other’s business activities for economic gains. For example, the buyer stops partaking in the development of the supplier’s proprietary technologies, and the supplier loses access to training and other types of financial and non-financial aid from the buyer.

The psyche aspect. The psyche aspect subsumes relationships among ontological elements that represent emotional and psychological effects. Stressful events can cause spouses to experience sadness, frustration, and loss of trust, and to contemplate divorce. Infidelity is an example of a stressful event, and is a leading cause of divorce (Previti and Amato, 2004). Increased levels of stress also results from the very act of divorcing as spouses deal with other aspects (economic and social network) of separation (Tashiro et al., 2006).

In a strategic buyer–supplier relationship, poor management of interactions between the entities often results in stress. Stress, in turn, introduces instability into the relationship and may trigger its eventual dissolution (Holmlund-Rytönen and Strandvik, 2005; Vaaland, 2004). For example, unsatisfactory performance by an incumbent strategic supplier creates stress for the buyer and prompts the buyer to consider alternative supply sources (Farrell and Gallini, 1988). When the buyer acts to add a competing supply source, this elevates stress for the incumbent strategic supplier, destabilizing and pushing the strategic relationship toward termination (Gadde and Mattsson, 1987).

The social network aspect. The social network aspect subsumes relationships among ontological elements that represent dissolution-associated changes to social networks. A social network may prompt individuals to marry because of support and encouragement from close friends and family. Once married, marital partners initially navigate between their separate social networks but eventually fuse them into a new, single network (Sprecher et al., 2006). This fusion of social networks provides marital partners with social resources to which they otherwise have limited access. A marriage may also dissolve, with the breakup encouraged by friends and family or as opportunities to form new relationships with alternatives in the combined social network are identified. Following divorce, the fused social network becomes disjointed as the terminating parties distance themselves from other individuals

in the previously-fused social network or vice versa (Sprecher et al., 2006).

Similarly, in a strategic buyer–supplier relationship, access to the supply (i.e., social) network of the other entity may be an incentive for entering the relationship. For example, when a keiretsu supplier establishes a strategic relationship with Toyota, it can exchange knowledge with other Toyota suppliers (Dyer, 1996). A strategic supplier, working with a buyer to develop new products, can showcase its capabilities to other customers of the buyer that then lead to other business opportunities (Narayandas and Rangan, 2004; Ro et al., 2008). Alternatively, the supply network may open up opportunities for the buyer to identify more capable replacements for the incumbent supplier or for the supplier to identify more attractive customers to sell to than the incumbent buyer. The availability of these attractive alternatives increases the risk of relationship termination.

3.1.3. Equivalence at the level of identity

Equivalence at the level of identity generates principles describing, explaining, or predicting relationships in both the metaphor and target. While novelty is a desired virtue of these principles, the requirement is that these statements aptly apply to both phenomena. In the case of divorce as a theory-constitutive metaphor of strategic buyer–supplier relationship dissolution, at least five principles are identifiable.

Principle 1 (*The cost–benefit principle*). For any given strategic relationship, when the costs incurred by the parties to maintain the strategic relationship outweigh the benefits from its maintenance, the strategic relationship is more likely to be dissolved.

A strategic relationship bestows benefits that include economic gains and access to economic resources through expanded social networks but also incurs costs that include invested time and resources, as well as the opportunity cost of not having the resources for other usage (Good and Evans, 2001) and the reduced autonomy from having to accommodate the relationship partner (Levinger, 1979; Hakansson and Snehota, 1998). When realized benefits outweigh incurred costs, the motivation for both parties to stay in the relationship is high.

When a viable alternative exists for one party, the opportunity cost to stay with the existing relationship increases for the party with the viable alternative. In order for the party with the viable alternative to actually switch, the opportunity cost of not getting into a new strategic relationship plus the opportunity cost to stay in the current strategic relationship must outweigh the benefit of not switching. Otherwise, the viable alternative is not attractive enough to motivate the party with this option to consider this opportunity. The literature pertaining to interpersonal relationships (Levinger, 1965) finds that incumbent relationships are more likely to be dissolved when viable and attractive alternatives become available; this finding is also reported in the literature pertaining to inter-firm relationships (Wagner and Friedl, 2007).

When a party considers terminating a relationship, it weighs the benefits from termination against the costs of termination. Dissolving a strategic relationship may generate psychological benefits (e.g., relief from the stress of continuing a relationship) (Tashiro et al., 2006), social benefits (e.g., distancing oneself from the poor reputation of the other party) (Helm, 2004), and/or material benefits (e.g., liberating resources tied to an unprofitable strategic relationship) (Helm et al., 2006; Pressey and Qiu, 2007). The costs of dissolving a strategic relationship may include the loss of current and future economic gains, partial or complete loss of control over existing assets, and non-recoverable investments (Williamson, 1985). Often, dissolving a strategic relationship has to be litigated as well. When the costs to dissolve outweigh the benefits from dissolving, the status quo is likely to be preserved, as

observed with *unsatisfying but stable relationships* in the context of buyer–supplier relationships in the German automotive industry (Backhaus and Buschken, 1999) or with *stable unhappy marriages* in the context of interpersonal relationships (Heaton and Albrecht, 1991).

Principle 2 (*The fairness-satisfaction principle*). For any given strategic relationship, the party who believes it is being unfairly treated becomes dissatisfied and is more likely to then initiate dissolution of the strategic relationship.

For both parties in a strategic relationship to perceive it as fair, either both parties invest and receive similar amounts of benefits or the party investing more receives proportionally larger benefits (Guerrero et al., 2001; Kumar et al., 1995). Perceived fairness is especially important in strategic relationships since the timing and size of investments by one party often differ from those of the other party (Konovsky, 2000; Dyer et al., 2008). While parties in a strategic relationship often accept short-term imbalances, carrying these balances over the long run motivates the disadvantaged party to decrease its inputs into maintaining the relationship (Griffith et al., 2006). In marriages, women often initiate divorce when their accrued investments exceed their overall gains or when their investments outpace those of their partner (Braver et al., 1993; Amato and Irving, 2006). In mutually profitable strategic buyer–supplier relationships, a buyer (or supplier) who believes it has unfairly received a smaller share of benefits is likely to reduce its commitment to the strategic relationship (Ravald and Gronroos, 1996; Kumar, 1996; Roolaht, 2004).

Imbalances in benefit distribution that are perceived to be unfair result in dissatisfaction with the strategic relationship (Alwin, 1987). Decreasing satisfaction from imbalances (i.e., unfairness) is reported for both interpersonal (e.g., Molm, 1991) and inter-firm relationships (e.g., Griffith et al., 2006; Kumar et al., 1995; Yilmaz et al., 2004). The advantaged party (e.g., financial, power, etc.) also experiences declining satisfaction due to a sense of guilt (Bantham et al., 2003; Cate et al., 1988). Note that a high level of satisfaction is critical to the continuity of a strategic relationship, as it creates a positive halo to buffer the strategic relationship from actions taken by either party that negatively impact the relationship (Hibbard et al., 2001; Kalmijn, 1999).

Principle 3 (*The co-generation principle*). For any given strategic relationship, when the parties involved do not engage in opportunities to produce a joint outcome, the strategic relationship is more likely to be dissolved.

Marriage is not a necessary condition for biological reproduction but children of wedlock is often preferred for reasons of property or religious ideology (Levins and Lewontin, 2003). The abilities to have children and to provide adequate support for a family are important factors in selecting marital partners (Cohen, 1987). As such, marriages without children are more likely to end in divorce (Becker, 1973; Buckle et al., 1996; Popenoe, 1996; Zeifman and Hazan, 1997).

Strategic buyer–supplier relationships are frequently formed to co-generate value and co-produce products (Wikstrom, 1996; Wilkinson, 2008). Thus, when selecting suppliers with whom to build strategic relationships, buyers consider such criteria as product development capabilities and provision of after-sales support (Ellram, 1990; Levitt, 1983). Hence, strategic buyer–supplier relationships in which the two parties do not engage in activities that co-generate value have a higher risk of being terminated.

Principle 4 (*The least-interest principle*). For any given strategic relationship, the party that is least dependent on the strategic relationship is most likely to initiate dissolution.

When two parties form a strategic union, they gain access to one another's resources and opportunities and, as a consequence, become mutually dependent. The effort that one party expends to continue a strategic relationship is proportional to its level of dependence on the other party and vice versa (Emerson, 1962). The party that is more dependent is likely to put greater effort into the relationship. A party's dependence on the strategic relationship is, in turn, a function of the availability of attractive alternatives (Dwyer et al., 1987). Additionally, when one party controls more resources than its counterpart, the two parties have asymmetric dependence, with the party controlling more resources having more relative power, influence, and options (Adamsons and Pasley, 2006). This party is less dependent on the counterpart and more likely to initiate relationship dissolution.

In traditional marriages, wage earners are often male (i.e., fathers) while homemakers are often females (i.e., mothers) (Furstenberg, 1990). Fathers, as wage earners, typically control more financial resources than mothers, who have greater control over intangible resources, such as access to children (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 1995). With a traditional marriage, the mother appears to be more dependent on the father with respect to financial resources while the father appears to be more dependent on the mother with respect to intangible resources (e.g., access to children). However, since the mother often receives primary custody of children in a divorce (Furstenberg, 1990) and, with this, child support (above and beyond alimony), she retains her greater control over access to children when divorce occurs (Braver et al., 2006), without loss of access to financial resources. The father in a divorce has reduced access to children, as well as reduced control over financial resources that have to be transferred to the mother. As such, between mothers and fathers, the former is more likely to initiate divorce (Amato and Irving, 2006).

Asymmetric dependence between buyers and suppliers, likewise, jeopardizes relationship stability (Toni and Nassimbeni, 1995; Zirpoli and Caputo, 2002). Unlike marriages, identifying the party who is least-interested in continuing the strategic relationship tends to be less straightforward and may be context-specific. A buyer, for example, is more likely to terminate a supplier in a close but adversarial relationship (Mudambi and Helper, 1998). Conversely, a buyer is less likely to initiate relationship dissolution with a strategic supplier from whom a unique component is sourced since substitute supply sources may not be readily available (Bensaou and Anderson, 1999). In general, the party in a strategic buyer–supplier relationship with the least to lose is more likely to instigate relationship termination.

Principle 5 (*The separation-division principle*). *When a given strategic relationship is dissolved, the parties have to separate their materialistic, psychological, and social network unions and to then reallocate ownership of common assets and negotiate accountability for jointly-produced outcomes.*

The formation of a strategic relationship facilitates a union of material assets, psychological support, and social network access; its dissolution triggers their separation and mandates the distribution of jointly-owned assets and jointly-produced outcomes. For a marriage, such distribution has to ensure equitable distribution (American Law Institute, 2002). For a strategic buyer–supplier relationship, specific assets have to be divided in a fair manner, breach of contract payments have to be agreed to, and product and parts liability reimbursements have to be settled in accordance with contract laws (Frier and White, 2008).

The division of jointly-owned assets and jointly-produced outcomes does not always proceed smoothly. Judicial oversight often becomes necessary due to the difficulty in classifying joint versus non-joint assets and the indivisible properties of certain types of joint assets. Occupational licenses and educational degrees earned

during marriage, for example, may be considered to be joint properties that are not divisible (Dallon, 2001). Likewise, in a strategic buyer–supplier relationship, a jointly-produced product is a joint asset whose intellectual property and copyright are not divisible.

A successful division of jointly-owned assets and jointly-produced outcomes does not connote that interactions desist between the parties in a dissolved relationship. Former spouses may have to interact to fulfill child custody obligations. Similarly, buyers and suppliers may have to interact until jointly-owned technology has been divided or disposed of or until product warranties are no longer binding.

3.2. Post-metaphorical transfer: implications and discussion

Making divorce a theory-constitutive metaphor for strategic buyer–supplier relationship dissolution promotes theorizing about the latter in terms of the former. This theorizing searches for and frames the similarities between strategic buyer–supplier relationship and divorce at the conceptual levels of ontology and analogy. This theorizing also arrives at identity-level principles akin to theoretical propositions that are amenable to empirical testing. Once complete, the metaphor transfer opens up scientific insights from divorce and their implications that can be lead to further theorizing regarding strategic buyer–supplier relationship dissolution. We highlight several of these opportunities in the paragraphs to follow.

One interesting focus from illustrating a metaphorical transfer of divorce for strategic buyer–supplier relationship dissolution concerns joint investments and whether or not they are good indicators of relationship stability. For example, when a buyer involves a strategic supplier in joint product development, does this involvement engender a more stable vertical business relationship? The divorce literature, as it relates to joint investments in the form of children, offers various perspectives. One perspective, the theory of the value of children, claims that the decision to have children is contingent on marital stability (Friedman et al., 1994). Buyers and their strategic suppliers, as such, would not engage in joint investments unless their relationship is already strong and stable. Another perspective, one that takes an evolutionary lens, argues that marriages without children are more likely to end in divorce (Buss, 2003) but that marriages with children reduce the divorce rate but only up to the third child (Heaton, 1990). As such, strategic buyer–supplier relationships that do not evolve into joint investments would be more vulnerable to termination. Moreover, increasing the number of joint investments between a buyer and its strategic supplier would strengthen the relationship only up to a point, beyond which the benefits of working together face diminishing marginal returns. The implications of these perspectives from the divorce literature for joint investments (e.g., co-produced products) in strategic buyer–supplier relationships merit further theorizing and empirical research.

Another interesting focus concerns the effect of exclusivity (or lack of) on the outcomes and stability of vertical business relationships that are strategic in nature. When a buyer decides to add a second supplier for a component that it currently sources from a strategic supplier, what impact does this action have on the buyer, the strategic supplier, and the strategic relationship? Comparing monogamy (i.e., one husband, one wife) to polygyny (i.e., one husband, multiple wives), the divorce literature finds that, on average, the husband in the latter scenario incurs increasingly higher costs for each wife he marries (Friedman, 1990). If this divorce insight is applicable, then a buyer pursuing dual or multiple sourcing for the same component would have to offer better terms to each added supplier after the initial strategic supplier. This implication runs counter to conventional wisdom that dual sourcing benefits the buyer and draws attention to at least two thought-provoking

questions worthy of further theorizing and empirical research (i.e., how and why a buyer is better or worse off by adding a second supplier and whether the second supplier should and does receive better sourcing terms than the initial strategic supplier).

Finally, the divorce literature finds that two-wife marriages, compared to monogamous marriages, are most stable but beyond two wives the divorce rates increases (Gage-Brandon, 1992). Moreover, children raised in households with two mothers have lower intelligence scores than those raised in households with three or four mothers (Elbedour et al., 2003). By implication, would buyer–supplier–supplier triads, such as those arising from dual sourcing arrangements, be more stable than sole-sourcing arrangements? Would new products co-developed by a buyer and just two strategic suppliers be more or less likely to fail than new products co-developed by a buyer and involving more than two strategic suppliers (e.g., Boeing Dreamliner)? These questions deserve deeper theorizing and empirical scrutiny.

4. Conclusion

Metaphors are frequently invoked in everyday language for their ease of understanding. More powerfully, they can promote the development of scientific knowledge once they become theory-constitutive. Metaphorical transfer is the process for ensuring that a metaphor transcends its casual usage to aid in theorizing about a phenomenon of interest. This paper demonstrates how to theorize during and after metaphorical transfer.

To facilitate this demonstration, the paper illustrates a metaphorical transfer of divorce for strategic buyer–supplier relationship dissolution and provides a post-metaphorical transfer discussion of how insights from divorce may spur new theorizing opportunities about strategic buyer–supplier relationships and their continuance. Our intent is to inspire more theorizing of OMS/SCM phenomena through the invocation of theory-constitutive metaphors and to ensure the proper borrowing and testing of theories from outside the OM/SCM discipline. Only then can OM/SCM scholars begin to mitigate criticisms that OM/SCM research is atheoretical or pays inadequate attention to building theories (Schmenner and Swink, 1998; Flynn et al., 1990).

Metaphorical transfer can be an invaluable theorizing mechanism for generating new insights into many Supply Chain Management phenomena. For example, mating may become a theory-constitutive metaphor for theorizing about the process of vendor selection or other acts of inter-organizational cooperation (Wilkinson et al., 2005). Dancing may become a theory-constitutive metaphor for theorizing about how buyers interact with suppliers and vice versa (Wilkinson and Young, 1994; Wilkinson et al., 1998). Lastly, the human immune system may be theoretically informative as to how firms can secure their supply chains.

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