3. Research framework and research subjects

To being able to achieve the research objectives, stated in chapter 1.2, a theoretical framework must be developed, serving as a basis for answering the research questions, defined in chapter 2.3. This requires getting from a managerial to a theoretical perspective on the identified issues of formal performance control in BSRs. The following considerations are intended to enhance the theoretical foundation of the framework by sharpening the understanding of relevant conceptual aspects of BSRs. Moreover, it is used to clearly define the scope of the doctoral thesis. Discussions cover identification of constituent attributes of BSRs (chapter 3.1), classification of BSRs in the context of supply chains (chapter 3.2) and the performance-determining role of the view on the relationship (chapter 3.3). Also, the understanding of the term 'performance of BSRs' is sharpened (chapter 3.4). Drawing on these findings, the research framework is developed and implications are given.

3.1. Constituent attributes of buyer-supplier relationships

When discussing the constituent attributes of BSRs, the basic understanding of relational exchange can be adopted from a market-based view, generally understood and accepted. Marketing exchange theories have been a subject of research since the late 1960s (e.g. Kotler and Levy, 1969; Luck, 1969). In his review of 15 years of marketing research, Hunt (1983: 9) even came to the conclusion that exchange relationships can be considered the main focus in industrial marketing discussions. In a well-founded analysis of the requirements of current business-to-business-partnerships, Ploetner and Ehret (2006: 4) confirmed the increasing impact of BSRs on competitive advantage and stressed the need for performance-based cooperation.

According to these contributions about exchange relationships, BSRs, in their most rudimentary form, can be understood as dyadic business relationships between two separate legal entities carrying out transactions of any kind. These range from transactional, characterized by anonymous and automated purchasing processes, to collaborative relationships between highly integrated supply chain partners (Day, 2000: 25; Klein et al., 2007: 1366). Figure 5 illustrates spectrum of cooperation.
One inherent feature of such relational exchange is the ongoing nature of the relationship, meaning an exchange has already occurred and is also expected to continue in the future (Dwyer et al., 1987: 11; Odekerken-Schröder et al., 2003: 178). Often, the relational exchange is also based on contracts defining precise exchange periods. After the exchange periods, both partners (buyer and supplier) can decide whether they want to continue and develop the business relations or end the cooperation (Anderson, 1995: 347). The vital importance of a contractual basis as a pre-condition for successful relationship management has been widely accepted in the industrial marketing community (e.g. Arndt, 1979; Dwyer et al., 1987; Ganesan, 1994; Krause, 1999; Macneil, 1980; Ploetner and Ehret, 2006).

As the following discussion shows, the attributes described can be considered essential to BSRs in supply chains as well, and also need to be addressed by our framework for analysis. They will be taken as a starting point to identify first basic framework requirements. Accordingly, the following working definition for BSRs will be used:

BSRs in supply chains can be defined as mutual inter-organizational relationships between legally independent decision-making powers consisting of buyers and suppliers. The exchange must be long-term (to enable cooperative performance control activities), and, most importantly, both partners have to be able to influence the relationship’s nature and development.