

No Fairness, No Trust: A Qualitative Study of Supply Chain Relationships from the Social Exchange and Equity Theory Perspective

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Abstract

Companies that are perceived to be fair are usually far more successful than those that aren't. In an age where economic conditions are challenging, it has never been more important to keep customers happy. It's generally perceived that strong buyer-supplier relationships depend on high levels of mutual trust and respect, which in turn can boost business and help a company to generate profits. This paper examines the repercussions of fairness in supply chain relationships through in-depth executive interviews. Findings show that fairness is a double edged sword with positive and negative effects on relationship development process between supply chain partners.

Keywords: Fairness, Trust, Social exchange theory, Equity theory

Introduction

As most firms are established to make profit, being in a business relationship where fairness is absent or not valued by other members can have damaging consequences for the relationship stability and longevity. In today's competitive business environment, this matter is progressively becoming a trending concern for business to business relationships within the supply chain, and also generating increasing attention from the academic literature (Griffith et al., 2006; Liu et al., 2012; Narasimhan et al., 2013). It is also a norm that by collaborating with autonomous firms, concerns arise about whether the benefits, rewards and risks of relationships are apportioned in a fair (just) and satisfactory manner (Liu et al., 2012). In supply chains today, there are cases of unfairness, opportunistic and unethical behaviours being reported by firms, especially companies with lesser bargaining power and lower capital base (Huo et al., 2016). Such behaviours which are perceived as unfair by other members in the chain can influence indicators of a strong and

sustainable relationship such as trust, commitment and satisfaction (Fernandes and Calamote, 2016). Similarly, to influence the capabilities of partners, firms need to establish a strong relationship that encompasses high levels of trust, commitment and satisfaction (McIvor, 2009). In recognition of these behaviours is the credit that supply chain relationships involve both economic and social interactions (Griffith et al., 2006). As social transactions, supply chain relationships require partners to act and perform activities in a fair and satisfactory manner to be beneficial to all (Liu et al., 2012). The perceptions of fairness have been identified to play a significant role in successful supply chain relationships (Liu et al., 2012). Several research studies have also suggested that fairness practices in dealings with supply chain partners are important in enhancing relationship performance (Choi and Wu, 2009). Studies have also shown that unfair treatment and dealings with supply chain partners can result in poor relationship performance due to potential opportunism from another partner (Anderson and Jap, 2005). While these accounts clearly prove the important role and relevance of fairness in managing supply chain relationships, extant research on fairness in this area has been incomplete and still nascent (Narasimhan *et al.*, 2013). This rather neglected research area may also be due to that fact that fairness as a concept is very complex and it can be approached from a normative angle (how should we act) and behavioural angle (how we do act). More so, fairness in the supply chain can involve navigating large power differences as well as engaging with supplier practices (Kim, 2000; Hingley, 2005b; Hingley, 2005a; Nyaga *et al.*, 2013).

Moreover, past studies have examined fairness in relation to different outcomes such as relational behaviour and long-term orientation (Griffith et al., 2006), unethical behaviours (Kaynak et al., 2015; Huo et al., 2016), performance (Liu et al., 2012; Narasimhan et al., 2013), and have omitted its consequence for relationship quality. Few studies such as Kumar *et al.* (1995) have examined the effects of fairness perceptions on relationship quality, but their study was also carried out over two decades ago, which makes the current findings obsolete. Moreover, (Kumar *et al.*, 1995) failed to consider all the dimensions of fairness (both the structural and social aspect) in their study. As a result, it is important to consider the impact of all the three dimensions of fairness on relationship development factors. This is a critical gap that needs to be filled in the literature particularly because the quality of relationship between supply chain partners determines the longevity and intentions to continue the relationship in the future.

The doctrines of fairness are central in equity theory and social exchange theory. The former embeds the notion that individual companies are more likely to commit to an existing relationship, even under uncertainty, if they believe that rewards will be commensurate with their invested efforts (Adams, 1965). The latter embeds the notion that the transacting parties in a relationship aim to interact with one and other on the basis of expectation of rewards and avoidance of punishment (Emerson, 1976). Through a socio-economic lens, this study used in-depth interviews with key informants in buyer-supplier type relationships to answer the research questions. We adopted the qualitative research methodology for three main reasons. First, due to the sensitivity of fairness as a topic, its value for supply chain relationships can be accurately discovered through the beliefs and experience of individual managers. Second, the nature of our research questions warrants the adopted methodology due to the exploratory nature of our research. Third, most studies on fairness in the supply chain domain have derived their results quantitatively, therefore necessitating rich qualitative results on the subject matter to contribute to the existing knowledge.

The rest of the article reviews the literature on fairness and the relevant areas being studied, followed by a methodology section, findings and conclusion.

Literature review

Relationship quality

The concept of relationship quality arises from theory and research in the field of relationship marketing (Dwyer et al., 1987) in which the ultimate goal is to strengthen already strong relationships and convert indifferent customers in loyal ones (Parasuraman et al., 1991). Relationship quality is concerned with the degree to which parties are engaged in an active, long-term working relationship characterized with different indicators such as trust, communication, adaptation, dependence and interdependence, commitment, and cooperation (Fynes et al., 2005). Trust is among the most frequently cited dimensions of supply chain relationships in the literature. Common to all different definitions used to conceptualize trust, there is the notion that trust constitutes the belief, attitude or expectation of a party that the relationship partner's behaviour or its outcomes will be for the trusting party's own benefit (Andaleeb, 1992). Trust has been defined as "the firm's belief that another company will perform actions that will result positive actions for the firm" (Anderson and Narus, 1990 p.45). There are different types of trust: contractual trust (expectations that promises are kept), competence trust (confidence in trading partner's competence to carry out a specific task) and goodwill trust (the sure feeling that trading partners possess a moral commitment to maintaining a trading relationship). Goodwill trust has been identified as they key to a true partnership form of relationship (Sako, 1992).

Summarizing the conceptual approaches of other scholars such as Dwyer et al., (1987) and Geyskens et al., (1996), trust is believed to have three essential components: (1) the belief that the relationship partner will show benevolence in his or her actions, (2) honesty, which means that the trusting party relies to other relationship partner being credible, (3) the belief that the relationship partner has the competence to act for the benefit of the relationship. It has been significantly recognised that to create competitiveness in today's unpredictable business market, SCM is increasingly placing emphasis on inter-organizational partnerships (Arshinder et al., 2011). By collaborating, supply chain partners can work as if they were a part of single enterprise. To ensure that firms work in close collaboration, there has to be a strong relationship between them characterised by high levels of trust between members. In this consideration, there are hidden factors within the relationship development process that pose a threat to the development of trust in such relationships between supply chain partners. Such factors include but not limited to the perception of fairness and unfairness by individual members in the chain.

Fairness in supply chain relationships

The first dimension – distributive fairness – was defined by Adams (1965) as equity, signifying its existence when a person, for his or her own situation, perceives that the ratio of outcomes to inputs are equal to the ratio of outcomes to inputs of others. In the supply chain and relationship management context, the performance outcomes in the relationship are deemed fair if investments in effort and resources compare favourably

with outcomes. The focus of distributive fairness relates to how the benefits and risks are shared between the buyer and supplier (Yilmaz et al., 2004; Griffith et al., 2006). The second fairness dimension – procedural fairness – focuses on the consistency in decision making (Loch and Wu, 2007), and derived from the idea of instrumentality (Luo, 2007), suggests that people are often concerned about fairness in the process, and will view procedures as fair if they perceive that they have control over the process (Caldeira et al., 1976). In the context of supply chain relationships, procedural fairness relates to the following activities: the consistency of the buyer’s purchasing policies, the degree to which a supplier can question and challenge a supplier’s policies, or the extent to which a buyer or supplier provides rational explanations for certain decisions affecting its interaction partner (Kumar, 1996; Yilmaz et al., 2004). Distributive fairness is concerned with people’s reaction to how resources or allocation, whereas procedural fairness focuses on people’s reactions to the procedures used for resolving disputes and allocating outcomes (Liu et al., 2012). These two dimensions represent the structural aspect of fairness as they relate to concerns of formal procedures and fair distribution (Tyler and Bies, 1990).

The third dimension of fairness – interactional fairness – anchored in the idea of social exchange (Luo, 2007), represents the social aspects of fairness relating to people’s reactions during interpersonal and social interactions (Colquitt et al., 2001). The interpersonal treatment and communication received by people during interactions are important factors in the perception of fairness (Tyler and Bies, 1990). This social dimension of fairness concentrates on the perceptions of fairness regarding interpersonal treatment, conduct during human interactions, and concerns of open-communication of information (Tyler and Bies, 1990). In the supply chain relationship context, interactional fairness refers to the actions and the degree of interpersonal sensitivity that supplier’s employees exhibit towards representatives of buyer’s (Zaefarian et al., 2016). It relates to the social glue of business relationships such as politeness, honesty, dignity, and empathy (Greenberg and Cropanzano, 1993).

The common agreement among past fairness studies is that fairness is a key factor for building and maintaining long-lasting relationships in any social exchange (Yilmaz et al., 2004). The relationship between a buyer and a supplier is not only concerned with economic transactions explicated in a contract, but also with social interactions that may influence organizational behaviours (Cousins and Menguc, 2006). From a process viewpoint (Dwyer et al., 1987), a buyer-supplier relationship can be observed as a sequence of relationship stages through which interactions happen (Liu et al., 2012). Therefore, the concept of fairness has been emphasised as a key element in buyer-supplier exchanges (Dwyer et al., 1987). Walker and Pettigrew (1984) stated that if the distribution of rewards is commensurate to the efforts expended, the exchange partners are more likely to commit to one another even when uncertainty is high. Distributive fairness also minimises the likelihood of opportunism in the relationship and stimulates effort (Luo, 2007). Johnson et al. (2002) also indicated that unfairness in allocation of efforts and distribution of rewards can lead to harmful consequences for the relationship that include lack of trust and increased conflict causing an unstable partnership. Procedural fairness on the other hand signifies unbiasedness, consistency and ethical decision making (Luo, 2007). It is important for partners to have mechanisms that address disagreements within the relationship in a manner that is fair (Narasimhan et al., 2013). Procedural fairness process can aid in providing “voice” to the stakeholders in the relationship and help in promoting superior performance (Folger, 1977). Likewise, interactional fairness promotes harmony, reduces conflict and improves collaboration in a supply chain

relationship (Luo, 2007). Overall, fairness can promote long-term orientations and positive relational behaviour, performance and can also cause tensions in exchange relationships.

Theoretical lens

‘Perception’ is a process of interpretation of sensory impressions of the environment (Coren, 2003). Perception however depends on the individuals’ attitude, motives interests, experience and the expectations. Human beings desire to be treated appropriately during day-to-day activities and impartially when a certain amount of effort is devoted to an assignment. People are motivated to maximize their own resource gains by working with others to evolve collective group-enforced rules about fair reward allocation (Tyler and Bies, 1990; Tyler, 1994). A vital contribution of social psychology to the study of the antecedents of individuals’ feelings and behaviours in groups is the demonstration that people in groups and organizations react to third-party allocations and dispute resolution decisions by evaluating their fairness, not simply their absolute or relative favourability (Tyler, 1994) p.850. The perceptions and attitudes that people hold are formed as a result of experience and socialization (Martin, 2005).

The social-exchange based resource model argues that people want to maximize the resources they obtain from social interactions, a goal they believe is facilitated by following rules of fairness dimensions. As close supply chain relationships are primarily formed to maximise the difference between purchasing costs and sales price, improve service levels and overall value, individual firms expect certain rewards from their interactions. Such expectations are also on the basis of monetary and non-monetary investments to the relationship. The social exchange theory (SET) argues that individuals or cooperate organisations interact for rewards or with the expectation of a reward from their interaction with others (Homans, 1958; Emerson, 1976). This theory underpins the logic of interactional fairness. Unlike distributive and procedural fairness, which are largely embedded in economic exchange, interactional fairness is incrementally embedded in a social exchange climate (Luo, 2007), which is not bound by any specified terms or responsibilities but the social norms prevalent in the society surrounding social relationships (Granovetter, 1985). Equity theory sheds light on the implication of fair distribution of resources and outcomes in exchange relationships and stresses the association between sharing returns and each part’s actual contribution and responsibility.

Equity is the basic norm of distributive fairness, and inequity leads not only to the dissatisfaction of a suffering party but also to other harmful consequences, such as discontinuity of on-going exchanges, jeopardy adaptation, and reduction of commitment, and consequences that that even eventually harm the relationship itself (Adams, 1965). Equity theory also indicates that individuals or parties are more likely to commit to an existing relationship, even under uncertainty, if they believe that rewards will be commensurate with their efforts (Walker and Pettigrew, 1984). Through the effect of equity, distributive fairness is a normative force that affects each participant’s motives for repeated exchanges (Luo, 2007). If participants deem they are treated unfairly as to outcome sharing, their incentives are hindered and they may even work against each other’s interests: interparty conflicts, unstable interdependence, or even relationship termination may happen (Johnston et al., 2004). Researchers also hold that inequity in gain sharing that is disproportional to a party’s contribution yields the potential hazard of opportunistic behaviour (i.e., self-interest seeking with guile) in a continuing relationship, creating a significant obstacle to confident cooperation (Williamson, 1999).

Methodology

Research design

The qualitative field research design is particularly appropriate to the study of those attitudes and behaviours better understood within their natural setting (Babbie, 2013) - here, supply chain fairness, as opposed to somewhat artificial settings of experiments and used surveys. We studied focal firms and their relationship with their supply chain partners through one of the techniques for conducting field research – qualitative interviewing.

The interviewed firms were companies in the construction industry in the UK. The industry was of particular interest for investigating supply chain fairness because: the Fairness, Inclusion and Respect (FIR) toolkit was recently introduced in the sector to promote and develop a culture of fairness within the workplace and business dealings (CITB, 2017).

Data collection and analysis

The source of data in this study was 15 interviews collected between August 2016 and July 2017. We organized face-to-face interviews with single (focal) which allowed access to the thoughts, attitudes, motivational ideas and opinions their managers on the factors that influence perceptions of fairness in the supply chain context and how collaborative activities are influenced by these perceptions. With purposive sampling, the researcher selected units (the people and organizations) that participated in this research, with direct reference to the research questions that were proposed. All respondents were all senior managers (at least to category manager level), hence responsible for all operational some wider strategic trading issues to do with a specific buyers. All the participating firms were from the north east region of England and are registered members of the North East Chamber of Commerce, a subsidiary of the British Chamber of Commerce. A standard interview guide was developed from a review of the relevant literature. The interview guide facilitated inquires relating to research.

Findings

The fairness repercussions

From the interviews conducted, findings indicate that fairness is of great significance and value for the relationship developmental process. The data revealed that when a supply chain partner perceives fairness, elements of relationship quality such as trust, commitment and satisfaction are augmented. Besides the relationship quality dimensions, this research also found that perceiving fairness would lead to decision-making to continue the existing relationship with a supply chain partner. The perception of fairness influences the future collaboration intentions of a company due to the fact that most firms want to stay competitive and make profit, hence being treated fairly adds to the overall buyer-supplier relationship experience.

From the analysis of data, the main components of the relationship affected by perceiving fairness which respondents mentioned include effort and commitment to the relationship, trust level, satisfaction, continuity, relationship value, length of the relationship, relationship termination, relationship building and sustainability, minimising conflict, reputation and image, etc. For example:

You are more inclined to go the extra mile for someone that is treating you fairly (Firm 2)

Commitment to the relationship is a vital characteristic that would encourage collaborative working and improve the level of fairness perception. When a supply chain partner believes that the relationship with their supplier or buyer is very important, it warrants concentrated efforts at upholding it, meaning that the committed party believes the relationship is worth working on to ensure it endures indefinitely (Morgan and Hunt, 1994).

Likewise, the extent to which supply chain partners perceive each other as credible and benevolent can be influenced by fairness perception as the following exemplary quote shows:

When we perceive fairness, this perception impacts on our mood to continue the relationship with more trust in the relationship we have with that supplier (Firm 5)

The long-term orientation in a buyer-supplier relationship depends on the extent to which a buyer or supplier trusts the supply chain partner (Ganesan, 1994b). Buyers and suppliers who trust one and other are expected to have higher satisfaction with the relationship and will be motivated to put more effort and invest in the relationship to ensure that it continues. It is expected that when a supply chain partners trust each other and exhibit commitment to their relationship, they will be satisfied with one and other. Both parties will have a positive measure and evaluation of the aspects of their working relationship both in economic and non-economic terms. The findings also highlight that perceiving fairness in the relationship affects the overall satisfaction with aspects of coordination of activities, decision-making participation, level of information shared, level of commitment, etc. For example:

So if there is a lot of fairness, we will bond with them and the relationship and partnership will flourish and our overall satisfaction as a firm and with the relationship is also key (Firm 10)

All these identified elements are extremely vital for a maintaining a close relationship in the competitive business environment of today. These elements are related to the identified attributes of a partnership-like relationship (Ellram and Hendrick, 1995). A buyer's interest in building or maintaining and enduring the relationship with a supplier can be influenced by the perception of fairness. Future collaboration intention is also a crucial element that could be affected positively by the perception of fairness, and adversely by the perception of unfairness. This research found that the perception of fairness impacts on relationship continuity and future collaboration intentions as the following exemplary quote illustrates:

Although we only give out a five year contract at a time, we might renew after three years which means we have offered an eight year contract eventually so fairness in the relationship also brings about that sense of continuous working and future collaboration motivation and relationship continuity (Firm 13)

The equity and social exchange theory perspective

The research findings borrow relationship theories as lenses. Social exchange theorists (e.g., Homans, 1958; Blau, 1964) and social psychology theorists (e.g., Thibaut and Kelley, 1959) amongst others offered a theoretical base for integrating social elements into exchange relationship research. These theories explain that in supply chain management today, individuals or corporate groups interact for reward or with the expectation of a reward from their interactions with others (Griffith et al., 2006). In contrast to the focus on economic outcomes by economic theory, social exchange acknowledges the that firms in exchanges relationships in a supply network evaluate the

outcomes of the collaboration against pre-conceived reward expectations (Thorelli, 1986). Such expectations comprise of economic elements and social values (Blau, 1968; Granovetter, 1985). A buyer's perception of fair benefits, fair gains or fair economic rewards from the current relationship with the supplier would inform their intention to continue the relationship in the future capturing the idea of economic fairness in sharing relational benefits. Since there is an established debate that the main purpose of buyer-supplier relationships is to generate some economic or performance outcome, the significance of fairness in long-term relationships, or in sharing the pie of economic rewards is extremely crucial (Griffith et al., 2006; Jap, 2001). Therefore, maintaining long-term relationships depends heavily on the behaviour that is signalled during an existing relationship, such as honesty, trustworthiness, loyalty, respect, communication etc.

Unfairness perceptions and relationship termination

The perceptions of unfairness can threaten the future of a working relationship. Supply chain partners that experience fairness during the relationship dealings are more likely to signal an interest in the future of the relationship (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Again, trust and fairness are like hand and glove where if one is not present, then neither is the other. The actions of a buyer in the relationship can affect how a supplier will trust them in a positive or negative form. If a buyer perceives trust and economic value to be both satisfactory in their relationship with their supplier, these positive indications should reduce a need to look for additional suppliers (Silseth, 2008), especially since close supply chain relationships provide significant benefits and advantages to its partners in today's competitive and uncertain market (Cao and Zhang, 2011). Reducing the need search for additional suppliers has implications towards perceptions of relationship continuity with existing suppliers. The following exemplary quote illustrates this point:

Once we work with organizations who we trust, we know that we can compromise and collaborate and they want the same thing that we want which is a fair outcome, we would want to continue working with them (Firm 15)

Conclusion

The findings of this research contribute to the ongoing investigations in supply chain relations by shedding light on the role of fairness. Although fairness has been recognized as a formative means for reducing relationship damage and termination, our findings identify it to be an antecedent for the constructs of collaboration. Our study ascertains that the concept of fairness is personal and interpreted according to an individual firm's peculiar situation. Thus, due to the subjective nature of fairness and dissimilarity in its interpretation by members of the supply chain, it was found to have an impact on the relationship between supply chain partners.

Overall, this research's findings stress the importance of fairness in dealings between supply chain partners particularly because the survival of firms operating in competitive environments depends on the loyalty of their customers and the long-term connections that are established between firms. Established long-term relationships between buyers and suppliers assists in avoiding adverse results. The findings in the research show that the development of relationship continuity in contrast to discontinuity or termination depends on the fair behaviour displayed by parties through elements such as respect, honesty, reward sharing etc. It was revealed that the existence of unfair behaviours and the implementation of unfair processes will push supply chain partners' away, making the maintenance of the existing relationship impossible. The findings in this research

show that perceiving fairness in supply chain relationships is an antecedent of the long-term elements of the relationship. Critical elements such as the intention to collaborate in the future, longevity of the relationship, conflict resolution, and firm reputation can be influenced positively when fairness is perceived.

Recent studies that have examined fairness in the supply chain context have wholly considered one angle; its consequence mainly for indicators of an outstanding relationship and performance. We have considered the antecedents of perceiving fairness, finding that the determinants emanate from three main levels; individual, firm, supply chain. Explicitly, we find that the experience of an individual perceiving fairness is a significant influencing factor that shapes how fairness is perceived. We also found that firm strategy, firm size and bargaining power all influence how fairness is perceived as a firm towards the partner. This finding corresponds to an initial postulation that the perception of fairness can be influenced by elements related to the firm representative (individual), firm, and the environment (supply chain) (Luo, 2007).

Accomplishing interdependent relationships with external providers that is mutually beneficial and enhances the ability of both to create value is gradually becoming a concern for many firms, particularly for firms who are members of strategic supply chain collaborations. This study also provides managerial contributions. Although beyond the organizational boundary, the values of fairness perceptions have been recently highlighted in theory and practice, this research provides new insights demonstrating that fairness is essential for building long lasting supply chain relationships that are equally valuable through key collaborative activities. Hence, the findings of this research offer managers' direction on how to manage their interactivities with their supply chain partners through the adoption of schemes that are able to effectively encourage fair practices during transactions. Our findings particularly reveal that fairness is a concept that needs to be included in trading agreements and placed at the forefront of the relationship banner.

Relationships between businesses are multi-faceted, and should comprise of key elements such as trust, commitment, satisfaction, cooperation, communication, and so on to be successful (Palmatier *et al.*, 2007). A number of research studies have divided the variables that help inter-firm relationships succeed into different elements such as relationship quality, relationship performance, relationship continuity, etc to address the multidimensionality of features in inter-firm relations.

In this research, it was found that trust between two organizations within a particular chain or otherwise can be affected by how fairness is perceived. Levels of trust will increase if a supply chain partner always perceives fair negotiations and treatment from the other party. A supply chain partner will also like to remain with a particular firm or its network because they genuinely enjoy the working relationship with them and are committed to keep it. Such positive feelings with the supply chain partner will also be a major reason why a firm will want to continue the working relationship due to their level of satisfaction in the relationship. These positive traits will also be useful for conflict reduction, minimising partner opportunism, and unethical behaviours that might harm the other party or create room for unfairness perception. All of these elements (trust, commitment, satisfaction, conflict resolution) comprise of the relationship quality between supply chain partners.

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