The role of fairness in modelling business relationships

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Many researches focus on identifying and understanding the key drivers and dynamics of the company-client relationships. In this study we will present relationship models from the literature built on fairness as a relationship quality dimension when describing company contacts with partners. We will look at the fairness definitions used by each mode, besides evaluating what other relationship quality constructs are used. The objective of the paper is to review the literature on fairness in the business relationship modeling context in order to identify how fairness was determined and measured in previous studies. This will allow us to develop an in-depth understanding of previous empirical studies that can be utilized in our future research as we plan to examine fairness in business to business context in Central Europe.

Keywords: fairness, intercompany relations, relationship marketing, relationship quality

1. Introduction

By the 80's, it became evident for researchers and practitioners, that the growth of a business entity does not purely dependent on the amount of revenue generated, but also influenced by other elements, such as customer satisfaction. In parallel, the customer focused strategy and execution turns to be the key business deliverable (*Kohli–Jaworski* 1990, Vieira 2008). The scientific research focus moved from a functionally defined, transaction oriented approach toward different relationship interpretations. Instead of selling products, today companies offer service bundles to their customers which are motivated by putting the customer expectation in the center of the value interpretation (*Vargo–Lusch* 2004).

Dwyer, *Schurr* and *Oh* (1987) claimed that the relationship continuity was to be examined in depth instead of the discrete exchange between seller and buyer. When looking at the chain of supply, there are a number of clients and customers beside the final consumer. As a result, relationships are distinguished in their characteristics depending on the type of partners participating, namely we differenciate Business to Consumer (B2C), and Business to Business (B2B). When looking at dynamics of the B2B relationships, the last 20 years of business research has a lot to share as an insight. The first step of the conceptualization was the definition and differentiation of the discrete and relationship exchange (*Macneil* 1978).

The concept of the relationship quality, based on the literature, is one of the results of the relationship marketing theories and empirical researches (*Dwyer* et al 1987, *Crosby* et al 1990, *Rauyruen* et al 2005). There are many relationship quality interpretations within relationship marketing, which model the relationships in a different way in order to determine the main objective of what relationship is considered to be good versus bad. The challenge whether the concept of relationship quality can be formalized as a discipline is a dispute among researches in business studies. Furthermore, there are different approaches to modeling that relationship dimensions are attributed to shaping relationship perception and evaluation (*Holmund* 2008, *Naude–Buttle* 2000). Fairness is considered to be one of the relationship dimensions interpreted as an independent variable in most models.

Specific fairness research in the B2B context is strongly based on the research field of organizational justice which provides a solid background with an intensive three decades of conceptualization and empirical testing. As a result, three types of justice and fairness are differentiated: distributive, procedural and interpersonal; some models incorporate all 3 branches in an integrative fashion (*Greenberg* 1990, *Greenberg–Cropanzano* 2001, *Folger–Bies* 1989, *Tyler–Lind* 1992).

The basis of distributive justice has been established by *Adams* (1965). His performance driven equity theory was inspired by *Homans*' (1961) original piece of work. In the equity theory, the company employee perceives fairness based on comparing the received outputs such as compensation in relation to the invested inputs, or efforts. The employee partly reflects on themselves when comparing the received compensations to the invested efforts; in case of dissatisfaction there will be an adjustment process of either working less or requesting a higher salary. Based on the equity theory the perception of fairness is compared to either a reference individual or a group (*Adams* 1965). In this other aspect, the employee compares their output/input ration to others' output/input ratio, which will influence the fairness perception and adjusts their performance or expectations on the individual's side (*Greenberg* 1990). When there is equality between the output/input ratio of the individual and the reference person or group, the employee will consider their company evaluation to be fair. The current working definition of the equity theory on the field of social psychology is the following: "it is a theory of social interactions, in which individuals try to achieve a perceived balance of the ratio of outputs and inputs in a relationship" (*Hewstone* et al 2003. p. 488.).

The business entities today create and manage relationships far beyond their company boundaries. When interpreting fairness in a B2B or B2C context, we must acknowledge, that the conceptualization work of organizational justice represents the base. B2B relationships are strongly, but only partly driven by written contracts which explicitly and legally determine the cooperation principles and expectations between the involved parties. However, a contract might not assure a full protection from opportunistic behavior without trust (*Hámori* 1998). This is the sensitive area where fairness has a role in shaping the interaction and the relationship among parties based on a mutual cooperation.

As we are going to see, research supports the fact that fairness has a direct influence on trust, satisfaction and loyalty in both B2B and B2C relationships. However, it might have different dynamics in different industries, power relations or cultural environment. In our study, we present 5 models which have fairness as an embedded construct. In all models, fairness is considered to be a norm when describing the dynamics of the relationship quality. The aim of this summary is to present the learnings on modeling fairness based on the literature overview, in order to establish a future research program on fairness in Central European context.

2. Models treating fairness as a relationship dimension

The three most commonly used constructs when describing relationship quality are trust, satisfaction and commitment (*Morgan–Hunt* 1994, *Gruen* 1995). Fairness is a further relationship dimension which impacts trust, satisfaction and loyalty in B2B and B2C relationships, as well. In this chapter we describe the following 5 models in which the fairness dimension is considered in company relations:

1. Interorganizational exchange behavior in marketing channels (*Frazier* 1983).
2. Evaluation of relationship quality in business relationships (*Järvelin* 2001).
3. Culturally different inequity perception in interorganizational relationships (*Sheer* et al 2003).
4. Antecedents and consequences of consumer trust in the context of service recovery (*Santos–Fernandes* 2008).
5. Fairness–trust–loyalty relationship under varying conditions of supplier–buyer interdependence (*Jambulingam* et al 2011).

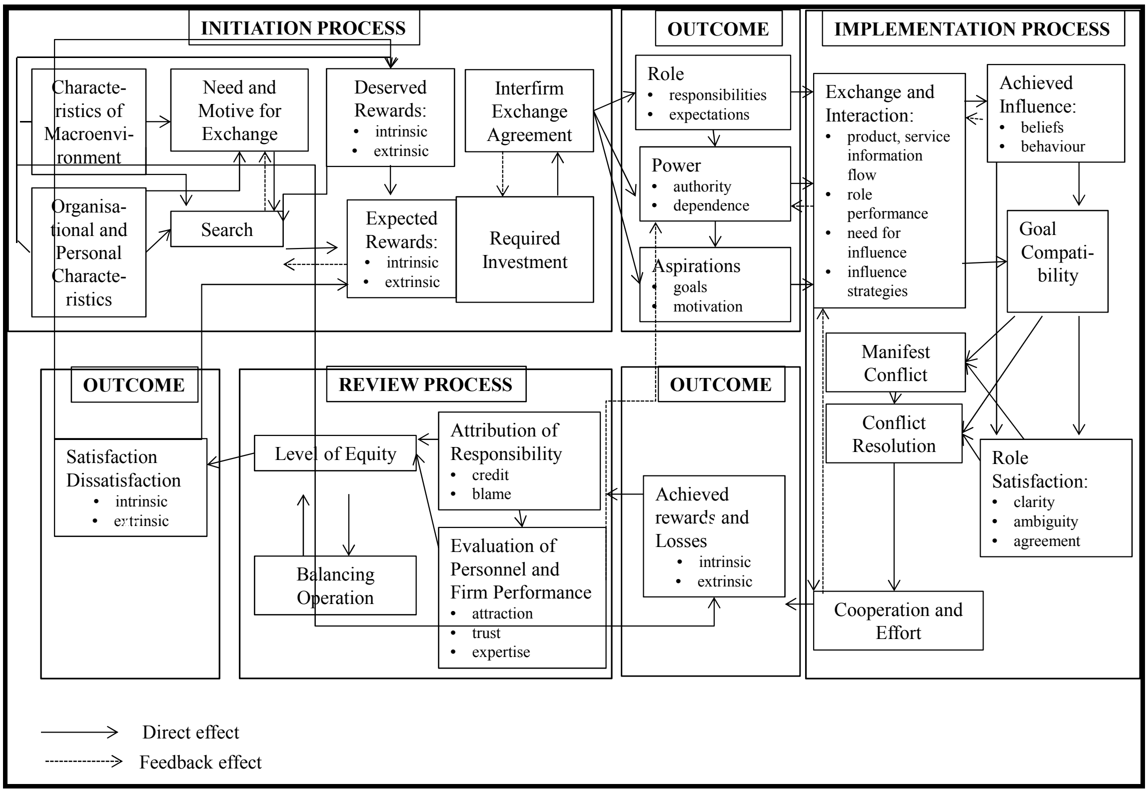
2.1. Interorganizational exchange behavior in marketing channels

Frazier (1983) is considered to be among the first ones who builds the fairness attribute into his model interpreting interorganizational exchanges. He splits the process into three phases: initiation, implementation and review process. Each phase represents a specific process with particular outcomes on which the next process builds (Figure 1).

In the initiation phase, the entity determines and calibrates the external macro environment and the internal organizational and personal characteristics. In the next stage, the need and the motive for exchange is determined to enable the partner search. Before an exchange and the required investments are formalized, deserved and expected rewards are specified from the intrinsic and extrinsic point of views.

There are three outputs of the initiation process: determining the responsibilities and expectations for each role; clarifying the power distribution in terms of authority and dependence; and establishing aspirations in terms of goals and motivation aspects. Frazier puts the exchange and interaction to the second, implementation process phase, during which we experience and influence the level and depth of cooperation, invested efforts, influencing needs and strategies and their impact on goal compatibility. These encounters are inevitably fueled by conflicts.

Figure 1. Framework: interorganizational exchange behavior in barketing channels



Source: Frazier (1983, p. 69.)

The conflict resolution process will influence the quality attribute of the cooperation and the quantity of the need for invested efforts. The outputs of the second process are the achieved rewards or losses on the intrinsic and extrinsic level.

The review process assesses responsibilities and then evaluats the performance on the firm and the individual level. The equity evaluation is the next stage of the process followed by the balancing operations, if required. The outputs of the third process are formalized in the intrinsic and extrinsic satisfaction levels, which also impacts and determines the potential of future exchanges (*Frazier* 1983).

The model refers to equity (as fairness) in two different phases of the process. Firstly, in the initiation process the expected and deserved outcomes are determined, which projects the way of sharing the results and outcomes of the exchange between the partners. Secondly, dependent on the partnership history, the interfirm exchange agreement can differ significantly. In the review process, the achieved results and performance is evaluated, in which the level of equity is specifically reviewed. The equity directly influences and determines the level of satisfaction experienced during the exchange transaction (*Frazier* 1983).

Frazier created the above illustrated model as a conceptual framework to drive the process to create a research agenda on the subject. The model describes the operational mechanism of the exchange episodes and indicates the connecting points between the partners. The equity evaluation is a part of the initiation and the review processes. Frazier does not interpret either the relationship quality as a concept, or any relationship dimensions, which is understandable based on the date of creation. However, Frazier was considered later as a focal reference point in studies on relationship management (*Järvelin* 2001, *Kumar* et al 1995a, *Scheer* et al 2003). He influenced the research direction of the proceeding decades, during which a major shift was experienced moving from interaction toward the relationship and network driven partnership development.

2.2. Evaluation of relationship quality in business relationships

Anne-Mari *Järvelin* (2001) dealt with the evaluation process of relationship quality in the context of B2B relationships in her thesis. Her approach partly builds on the process orientation of Frazier's model, and partly on the basic principles of the IMP school[1]. Along the evaluation process on the individual level, she further introduces other three levels: department, company and intercompany. The primary element is the individual level episode evaluation. Each participating company has employees, who have individual, independent perception of a transaction which is also influenced by the other company employee's perception. Based on the experience collected during a serial of episodes, the individual forms their relationship quality perception. In an organization, the sum of all individual perceptions provides the organizational point of view, which eventually shapes relationship quality perception on the interorganizational level (*Järvelin* 2001). Parties, beyond the directly interacting individuals, also share the quality perception of the relationship, which allows the creation of a link to society and the external environment. The author declares that the relationship quality is applicable for a dyadic relationship, in which each side develops a perception and an evaluation process either jointly or alternatively separately.

Järvelin examines the process from both the seller and the buyer side. She differentiates experience collection stage on episode level and later on the relationship level quality perception development. The main evaluation process includes a step in which there is a comparison to the previously set standards which can be followed by a correction process to modify objectives, if necessary.

The main evaluation process starts when an episode begins (Figure 2), during which a partner collects experiences in order to be able to evaluate the actual episode based on the preset standards.

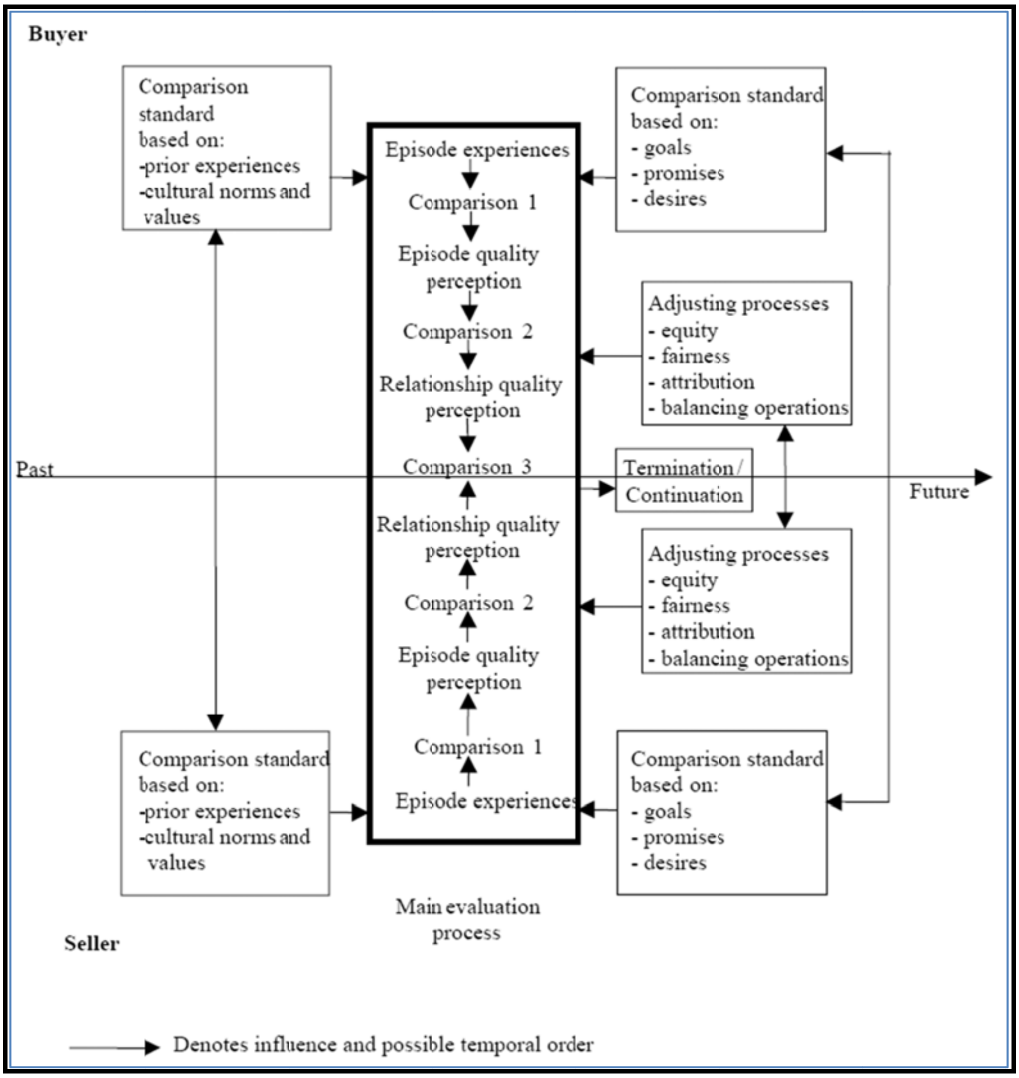
The comparison standards include previous experience, company objectives, company commitments, cultural norms and values. The outcome of the first evaluation process is the

[1] Researchers of the IMP Group (Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group) focus on the different levels of interaction and relationship dynamics looking at them from each partisipants point of view on the personal and business level as well. From the methodology point of view, they examine specific cases and case studies evaluating practical, real life examples. Håkan Håkansson, Ivan Snehota and David Ford are among the lead researcher of the IMP group.

perception and the evaluation of the episode quality. If it reflects a gap between results and standards, it can be modified by an adjusting process.

The episode quality evaluation is followed by a second comparison, which refers to the episode quality impact on the relationship quality as a whole or can suggest a review of the comparison standards. There are also adjusting processes on this level, which can influence the main evaluation processes. The third level of evaluation might be necessary in case there is a negative evaluation of the relationship without a successful adjustment. Eventually, the impacted partner might decide to continue or terminate the relationship.

Figure 2. Relationship quality evaluation framework



Source: Järvelin (2001, p. 58.)

We have to examine closer the so called adjusting processes, which are broken down to four subprocesses by *Järvelin* (2001):

1. equity: comparing the partners' output/input ratio;
2. fairness: one partner's perception of their own output/input ratio;
3. attribution: determining who is responsible, when the evaluation results in a major gap;
4. balancing operations: a mutual effort by both sides in case of a major evaluation gap.

Järvelin develops output dimensions such as technical, social, economic and ultimate ones to the overall evaluation process based on the literature.

The definition of equity and fairness in the adjustment process roots back to Adams' equity theory. Järvelin emphasises, that different schools of researchers have alternative ways of linking the equity and fairness evaluation to the main evaluation process. In the North American service marketing interpretation, in which the focus is on the customer satisfaction and service quality measures, equity and fairness are part of the main evaluation processes. When applied to the B2C environment specifically by schools focusing on the distribution channel evaluation, the equity interpretation represents a specific stage of the main evaluation process, as we saw it in Frazier's model.

Järvelin tests her model in a case study example. She does not evaluate it in a broader empirical research, which she considers neither necessary nor an expected task. Using case studies for model verification is a typical methodology used by the IMP Group. It can be considered as an acceptable approach, that the case study results and findings provide and a specific result and an outcome for the examined relationship. Therefore, it is a tool to evaluate relations by itself. The model scope does not intend to give an insight to the way of process dynamics or an answer the questions such as what relationship quality dimensions are present and how they interact and influence the relationship.

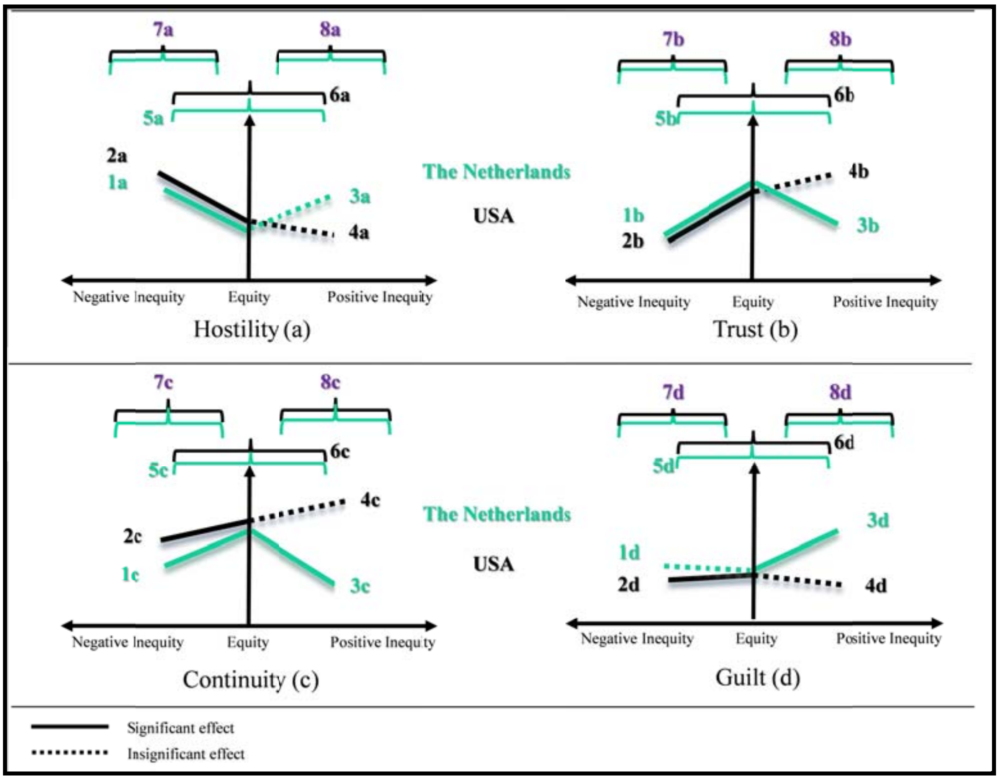
2.3. Culturally different inequity perception in interorganizational relationships

Lisa Scheer, Nirmalya Kumar and Jan-Benedict Steenkamp as a research team played a significant role in investigating fairness and equity. In 2003, they empirically tested Adams' equity theory in interorganization relationships, having taken into account cultural differences, as well. Their interpretation is influenced by the North American service marketing schools which investigate dyadic relationships strongly looking at the buyer's and the customer's point of views. They argue whether fairness and equity are equally important for organizations, especially in case of positive inequity. They examined relationships of car dealers with supplier evaluating the relationship quality from the dealer's point of view (*Scheer* et al 2003). The empirical research was fielded in the USA and the Netherlands. The cultural differences were captured by using Hofstede's cultural dimensions and measures, which supported the hypothesis development processes, as well. The equity interpretation was along with the part of Adams' equity theory, which refers to the comparison of one's output/input ration versus another when applying it to business entities. If there is an imbalance of the ratios, there will be either a positive or a negative inequity, depending on which party is in an advantageous or in a disadvantages position[2]. Four relationship dimensions were chosen as dependent variable of the study based on their literature review (Figure 3).

The hostility quality dimension (*Kahneman* et al 1986) represented the frustrated emotions such as resentment toward the supplier. Besides, key dimensions such as trust, continuity and guilt were also separate, dependent variables. When choosing these dimensions, Scheer and her colleagues used social psychological studies such as *Hatfield*, *Utne* and *Traupmann*'s work (1979) on equity perception of married couples and its impact of other emotions including guilt, as well.

[2] Spline regression was used as a statistical method for the analysis, in which inequity was an independent variable graphically displayed on the "x" axsis. The "0" point was representing the eqal ratios of the two parties as the point of equity (*Hurley* et al 2006, *Scheer* et al 2003).

Figure 3. Effects of negative and positive inequity



Source: Scheer et al (2003, p. 67.)

The study has 8x4 hypotheses, out of which 1, and 3 focuses on the Netherlands, while 2 and 4 on the USA. The result interpretation differentiates "a", "b", "c", and "d" components for each country, referring to the 4 relationship quality dimensions. 1 and 2 specifically focuses on negative, while 3 and 4 on positive inequities. Hypothesis 5 and 6 compares the differences of positive and negative inequity cases in each country. Hypothesis 7 compares the negative inequities in the two countries, while number 8 focuses on the positive inequity perception comparison for each dependent variable.

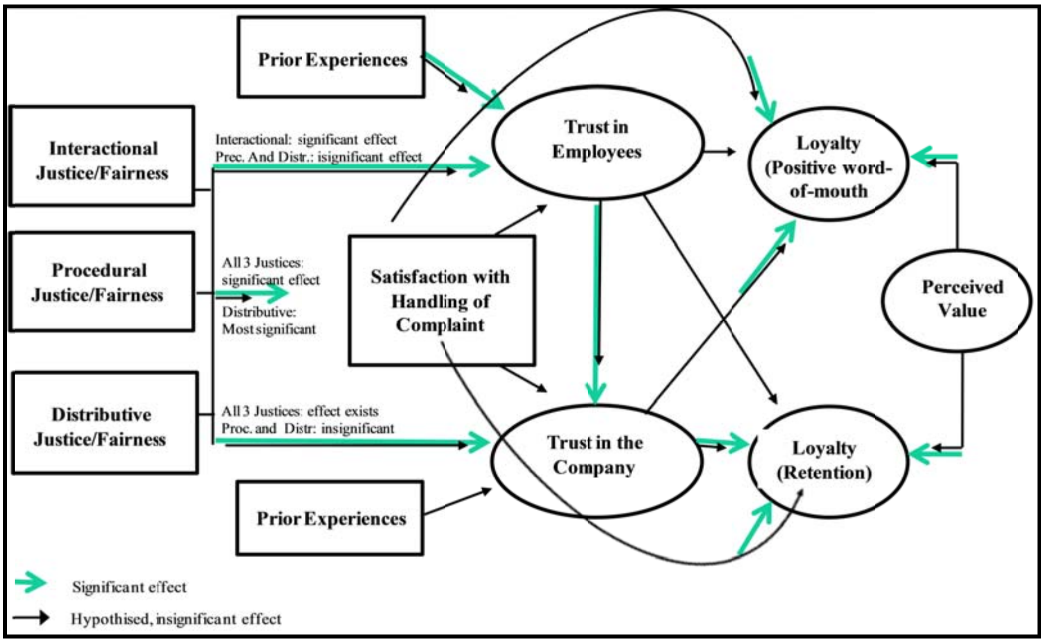
The results of the study conclude, that in both countries in case of negative inequity, buyers respond in a similar way in all examined quality dimension, which is well represented in Figure 3. When looking at the left side of each graphs, both countries show a similar pattern when responding to increasing negative inequity. However, in the case of positive inequity, there is a significant difference, as Dutch dealers responded in a completely different way compared to the US dealers in each dimension. The outcome is puzzling, but they reveal that cultural differences can influence whose inequities are perceived and responded to, and it raises the need for a future global study.

2.4. Antecedents and consequences of consumer trust in the context of service recovery

This model focuses on the B2C relationships in the service industry, examining the antecedents and consequences of customer trust. The Brazilian authors reached out to individuals who experience a service complaint incident and go through a complaint handling process 12 months prior to the study either with a bank or an airline company. After the complaint handling process, the model captures the impact of distributive, procedural and interpersonal justice on trust, and eventually also loyalty (Figure 4). In their terminology they used definitions from the organizational justice field applying them to B2C relations. In their interpretation fairness is considered to be a synonym of justice.

Distribution fairness builds on the second part of equity definition os *Adams*' (1965) work, in which there is an output/input comparison among the parties taking part in the interaction. Procedural fairness is defined as "policies and procedures used by companies during complaint processes and includes six sub-dimensions: flexibility, accessibility, process control, decision control, response speed and acceptance of responsibility" (*Santos–Fernandes* 2008, p. 228.). Interactional fairness is represented by the company employee's communication and treatment toward the consumer during the complaint handling process. This is specifically captured by how the consumer perceives the employee's "courtesy, honesty, offering explanations, empathy, endeavor, and offering apologies" (*Santos–Fernandes* 2008, p. 228.).

Figure 4. Theoretical model of the antecedents and consequences of consumer trust in the context of service recovery



Sources: Santos–Fernandes (2008, p. 231.)

The study examines the direct impact of fairness components on three main areas: satisfaction, trust in the employee and trust in the company. The article states, that the satisfaction with the complaint handling process is significantly influenced by all the three fairness items, out of which the distribution component is the dominant one. Based on that it is clear, that the most important goal from the consumer's point of view is obviously to get the complaint resolved. When determining trust in the employee, only the interaction fairness plays a significant role; the other two components have insignificant effects. When evaluating trust in the company, the effect of all three components is measurable, however, interactional trust has a significant impact. The authors draw the conclusion, that interactional fairness has a major role in building trust; however that is not the only component to focus on.

It is not a clearly indicatedin the hypothesis whether satisfaction has a mediator role between the fairness components and the trust variables. Although, all three fairness components have a significant effect on satisfaction, it does not show significant impact on trust, either for the company or for the employee. In the alternative model, satisfaction is taken out of the model, which results in being able to show a significant direct effect between the fairness components and the trust components.

From the trust-loyalty analysis point of view, the two main components are the positive world-of-mouth and retention as key dependent variables of loyalty. Satisfaction has a secondary, but significant role in impacting both components of loyalty. Further on, it becomes, that primary driver of loyalty impact is the trust to company variable.

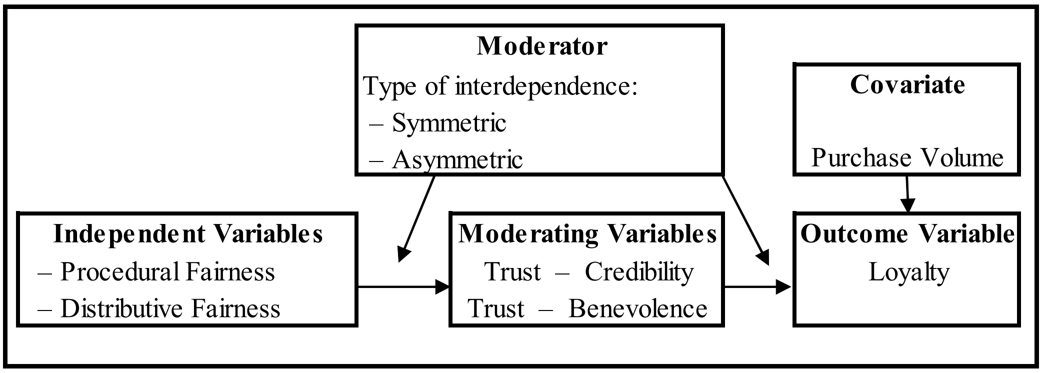
The authors are able to demonstrate a parallel impact. On the one hand, success of the complaint handling process, which is measured through satisfaction is influenced by all the tree components; there is a need for a balancing act among the three items when designing the process to make sure to put the priorities toward the component On the other hand, the fairness components have an impact which points much further than satisfaction, as both trust and loyalty are influenced by them.

This model works with a set of specific characteristics of the specific industry and specific consumers chosen. We cannot apply these learning immediately for all B2C or B2B relations. However, it opens a new way of interpreting these relationship contents and dynamics, which were embraced by *Jambulingam*, *Kathuria* and *Nevin* (2011) in their studies applying them for B2B relations.

2.5. Fairness–trust–loyalty relationship under varying conditions of supplier–buyer interdependence

Jambulingam, *Kathuria* and *Nevin*'s (2011) fairness norm is an independent variable in their model. They study the conditions in which trust impacts loyalty on the long run in a buyer-seller relationship. Other research has indicated that there is a strong relationship between fairness and loyalty without studying the role of trust as a mediator between them (*Hetesi–Vilmányi* 2011). Jambulingam and his colleagues' base assumption is that fairness through a number of forms impacts loyalty significantly. The authors consider that trust has a mediating between role fairness and loyalty, if fairness impacts loyalty significantly and directly in the base model. While in the alternate model with trust as a mediator fairness looses the significant effect to loyalty, but has a significant influence on trust and trust supports a significant impact on loyalty. In such a case trust takes over the fairness impact as a mediator to loyalty (Figure 5).

Figure 5. The moderated-mediation model of hypothesized relationships



Source: Jambulingam et al (2011, p. 41.)

In this study, fairness is categorized into two forms. Distributive fairness is stated from the buyer's point of view considering the perception of business result and outcomes from the relationship building in *Kumar*, *Scheer* and *Steenkamp*'s (1995a) fairness definition assumes that the company compares the actual outcomes with the deserved outcomes when determining the perception of distributive fairness. The procedural fairness component is the perception of the processes and policies determining the relationship between the two parties. Trust also has two components: credibility and benevolence. The model was tested in pharmaceutical channels, where the buyers were the retail units, while the sellers were the wholesalers. The model considers the relationship dependence as a moderating factor which can be symmetric, asymmetric, and the no interdependence as a separate case.

Symmetric is a cooperation in which the seller and the buyer depend on each other equally, which is a base condition for the long-term, stable, trust driven relationship (*Kumar* et al 1995b).

In an asymmetric relationship, one partner of the dyad depends on the other in a greater extent. Therefore, the dominant partner can have a large influence on the use and control of resources versus the other party which can influence the relationship strategy, the negotiation dynamics and each transaction between the partners. The weaker chain of the dyad could be concerned about the dominant parties' opportunist behavior, which can undermine the distributional and procedural fairness components resulting in obstacles to build trust with the increase of the asymmetry (*Kumar* et al 1995b). The model distinguishes the buyer versus the seller dominated cases.

The third type of dependency is the case when there is no perceived relationship dependency between the partners, which can occur during a spot transaction or at an early stage of a buyer-seller relationship. In such a case neither partner perceives a relation dependency and the cooperation itself is not a necessity of the transaction. Moreover, competitive relationship can describe such a case, as well (*Molm* et al 2006).

In the model based on the available data, three out of four dependencies were tested leaving out the buyer dominated case (Figure 5).

In case of symmetric relations, the authors find that both component of fairness have a significant impact on loyalty. When trust as a moderator is built into the model, the role of the fairness components becomes insignificant while the role of the trust components starts to effect loyalty significantly. This is the only case in which trust is confirmed to be a mediator between fairness and loyalty (Table 1).

When analyzing the asymmetric relationship dominated by the seller, the procedural fairness has a significant effect to loyalty, whether or not trust is a part of the model. In this case, the mediator role of trust cannot be confirmed.

In the third group of cases, when no interdependence exists, we can find similarities to the symmetric relations in a way that both components of fairness has a significant effect on loyalty assuming that trust is not in the model. When trust is included, the two fairness components still maintain their effects on loyalty. Out of the trust components, credibility effects loyalty significantly, however, in a moderat way compared to the fairness components. The authors conclude, in the case of interdependence does not exist between the partners, there is no influencing role of trust on loyalty.

Table 1. Fairness, trust and loyalty in case of different relationship dependencies

	Symmetric Dependence	Asymmetric dependence dominated by the seller	No perceived Interdependence	Asymmetric dependence dominated by the buyer
1) Significant direct effect of fairness on loyalty.				
Distributive Component	significant	not significant	significant	not measured
Procedural Component	significant	significant	significant	not measured
2) Insignificant direct or decreasing significance effect of fairness on loyalty, when trust is included in the model.				
Distributive Component	not significant	not significant	significant	not measured
Procedural Component	not significant	decreasing significance	significant	not measured
3) Significant direct effect of trust on loyalty, when trust is included in the model.				
Trust - credibility	significant	not significant	not significant	not measured
Trust - benevolence	significant	not significant	not significant	not measured
The mediator role of trust is	supported	not supported	not supported	

Source: Jambulingam et al (2011)

The research findings support the idea that in asymmetric relations loyalty is significantly affected by fairness, not by trust. When the wholesaler is the dominant player in the dyad, trust can be low or unperceived, while through procedural fairness level of loyalty can be built or influenced.

When interdependency is not perceived in the relationship, both distributive and procedural fairness influenced loyalty; trust has a secondary role along the credibility dimension.

In the study, the interactional component of fairness is missing, which is also stated by the authors. It is important especially as we saw that through the example in the previous model in B2C relations.

3. Summary and conclusion

Within the borders of an organization, fairness is not only a key factor for the employees' well-being, but also a consideration among the employees from the distributional, procedural and interactional point of view. When looking at interorganizational relationship, we experience that the relationship marketing is gaining foot in getting an insight on how companies interact and deal with each other on the short and long run in B2B and B2C context. In this study we reviewed models which built in fairness as an independent variable while describing the dynamics of the relationship.

Considering fairness, one of the key findings is that models describing B2B and B2C relationships, relate back to the theoretical roots of organizational fairness. We discovered that during describing fairness, studies relate to Adams' original equity theory. We can also point out that the 3 key forms of fairness such as distributive, procedural and interactional are used partially in the examined studies.

There are a number of key considerations to highlight. One is that the level of dependence between the partners will alter the importance of trust in the relationship. In asymmetric relations or in the case of no interdependence, trust has a lesser role of influencing long term relationship, while the importance of fairness element increases.

Secondly, we can recognize that loyalty as a dependent variable is considered to be one of the important relationship quality dimensions, which is strongly influenced by fairness.

Thirdly, we see that intercultural elements can influence how equity/fairness is perceived. Therefore, the cultural element can have a strong influence in B2B relationships on determining what is fair and what is not fair from each partner's point of view.

Therefore, we conclude that there is a research gap in considering fairness, dependence and loyalty variables together and examine them in different cultural environment in order to add to the B2B relationship research in the near future.

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