

**Perceiving the underlying equity and dynamics in the business
relationship : What is the role of emotions?
A qualitative exploratory study**

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Researches in Interorganisational Marketing have been mostly interested in the conditions governing the creation of the buyer-supplier relationship and on the benefits one could gain from that knowledge, disregarding the way they work, they grow, develop and most importantly the behaviours and attitudes of the trade partners. The models explaining the development of said relationship (Dwyer, Schurr et OH 1987, Hakansson 1982, Wilson et Mummalaneni 1986, Ring et Van de Ven 1994) and the studies on the key factors of success (Morgan et Hunt 1994, Mohr et Speakman 1994), although they are scarce, help underline that the maintaining of the relation depends of the relation itself, of its environment but of the partners too, which shows the existence of interpersonal relations within the interorganisational relations but also the importance of the social linking between the individuals responsible for the relation. Moreover, the study of some of these models but also of works relating to the behaviours of the partners all evoke another notion seldom studied : equity.

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Keywords : equity, emotions, business relationship

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Introduction

The buyer-supplier relationships are evolving, « From a static and transactional state, they are changing radically to assume a dynamic and relational stance » (X. Lepers 2003). We are therefore witnessing the shift from the transactional trade to the relational trade. In this perspective, the relation is apprehended over the long term rather than as a succession of isolated transactions.

The buyer-supplier relationships have been the subject of a great many studies, most of them treating of the circumstances in which they can be considered and of the benefits one could get from them. Studies about how those relations work and on the key factors determining their successes are fewer (Ford, 1982 ; Hakansson, 1982 ; Dwyer, Schurr et Oh, 1987 ; Morgan et Hunt, 1994). However, those works give prominence to the fact that the maintaining of the relation depends on the relation itself, of its environment but also of the partners, this underlines the presence of interpersonal relations within interorganisational relations but also the importance of the social linking between the individuals responsible for the relation.

A way of thinking, crystalized around Morgan et Hunt (1994), studies the key factors of success of interorganisational relations and underlines the importance of trust and engagement. For its authors, only those two variables will directly govern the functioning of the relation. Those authors explain the engagement by evoking the expected benefits of the relation, the costs of the breaking off and naming shared values. Morgan et Hunt use again Moorman et al's definition. (1992), therefore « engagement in a relation is defined as the desire to maintain a valuable relation ». they consider that trust depends on the quality of communication and of the intensity with which the partners share values.

That ethical and legal foundations are shared is indispensable to trades that do work (Gunlach et Murphy 1993), they define as central to this relation, trust, equity, responsibility and engagement. They talk of equity as a factor largely recognized as essential to the mutual satisfaction of the partners. A lack of equity could lead up to acts of retaliation and reduce both satisfaction and trust within the trade. Equity would be the corner stone of the trade, mainly when the works are about the comprehension of the relations between partners of unequal power. Indeed, Dwyer, Schurr et Oh (1987) have underlined the importance of the notion of Fairness. They show that the relation between two partners can only thrive durably if the weaker has the feeling that the stronger is not using his power in an unfair manner. This point is important because situations where the distribution of power is perfectly even between the partners are scarce. The model suggested by Ring et Van de Ven (1994) allows to analyse the reasons for the emergence, the development and the dissolution of the relations. This model is articulated around three great axes, negotiation, engagement, and execution, which for the authors can be evaluated through their efficiency and their fairness. Indeed, for these authors « efficiency is the main evaluating criteria of trades economic model ». Ring et Van de Ven think that there is a criteria just as important to evaluate interorganisational relations : « fairness ». If engagements are done in an efficient and fair manner they will thrive and spread.

These authors are considering the notion of fairness without beginning to explain the way it works, therefore it seems relevant to examine this theory more deeply and try to find a potential transposition in order to better understand the dynamics and working of buyer-supplier relationships.

Review of the literature

A review of the transversal literature has been done, crossing through various disciplinary fields ranging from social psychology, Human Resources management and interorganisational management, in order to get a better view of the concept of fairness, its mechanisms and of its usefulness in unbalanced buyer-supplier relationships.

The perception of fairness

The main contributions to the formulation of the theory of Fairness are attributed to Homans (1961) and Adams (1963, 1965).

Homans (1961) is notably interested in the economical and psychological mechanisms of the behaviour of an individual when, acting in a certain manner, he is either rewarded or punished by the behaviour of the other. The existence of a proportionality between the costs and rewards of both partners creates the feeling of Fairness. A contrario, the perception of an imbalance between costs and rewards triggers a feeling of unfairness which is accompanied by an emotional reaction (Homans, 1961). Undercompensated, an individual will feel angry, overcompensated, guilty. For this author, human relations are meant as commercial trades in which each individual tries to get the most while giving out the least.

Homans (1961) is interested in the mechanisms of formation of fairness. However, he doesn't study the reactions linked to that perception. To make up for it, Adams (1963, 1965) proposes the theory of unfairness.

Adams (1963,1965), studies the circumstances from which unfairness is born and to the means by which it can be reduced or suppressed. Adams identifies the perception of unfairness when an individual perceives an imbalance between his contributions and his rewards (internal fairness) which means that the individual is comparing the rewards he gets from his relation to his contributions. To that author, the contributions seem subjective, they represent what the individual thinks he brings to the trade. The individual also compares his own ratio to that of a referent. This is called the external fairness principle. Fairness exists if an individual perceives a proportionality between his own ratio and that of his referend. Unfairness can be either positive or negative and for Adams (1965), each type of unfairness triggers different emotions. (guilt for the positive, dissatisfaction and anger for the negative). As soon as there is a perception of unfairness the individual will try to reduce it or to cancel it.

Those theories of fairness have been completed and enriched by numerous studies notably in the human resources domain because those visions are perceived as too utilitarianist giving prominence to the sole economic vision of fairness, however the feeling of fairness also depends of the trust the employee places in the system, therefore the processes used to reach the distribution are just as important as the distribution itself.

Thibault et Walker (1978) have introduced the notion of procedural justice. It concerns the processes and procedures put in place within the trade to estimate and award the advantages. Therefore the interest is to get to know the employee's perception of the wage policy fairness and of all the procedures put in place.

Bies et Moag (1986) draw the attention on the importance on the quality of the treatment of the people, and therefore on the importance of interactional justice. More recently Greenberg (1990, 1993) has subdivided interactional justice in interpersonal justice which reflects the degree of politeness, dignity and respect with which people are treated by those executing the procedures or determining the wages and an informational justice which is the circulation of information about the procedures or the spreading of the income.

The context of intra organisational relations is not completely different from the context of interorganisational relations. The relation between the employee and the organisation bears the stamp of asymetry as is usually the case in the buyer-supplier relation.

Numerous works describe the unbalanced partnerial relations as unstable relations, with a weak degree of cooperation, of trust and having to face numerous conflicts. In their article « The effects of supplier fairness on vulnerable Resellers », Kumar et al (1995) contradict those researches, and demonstrate that trust and engagement can thrive in very unbalanced relations if the « vulnerable » partner is treated fairly by the partner in power.

For them, « Fairness is an ambiguous and relatively undeveloped construct » (Kumar et al. 1995, p.54). The quality of the relation is relative to conflicts, engagement, trust, the will to invest and the will to pursue the relation. Therefore a good quality relation is as much defined by a low degree of conflict as by a high degree of trust, engagement, investment and will to pursue the relation. They

operationalize the conflicts through two constructs : the manifestation of conflicts and the affective conflicts such as anger, frustration, resentment and hostility. They propose and validate the impact of the perception of distributive and procedural justice over the quality of the relation.

Those works highlight the impact of the perception of fairness over the behaviours and attitudes of the partners, the quality of the relation but also the partners' emotions.

As a conclusion, our review of the literature about fairness allows us to underline its composing dimensions: distributive justice, procedural justice and interactional justice. However, researches in interorganisational marketing only use the distributive and procedural dimension. It shows that despite the lack of works on the subject, fairness can be considered a fundamental notion for the comprehension of the thriving of unbalanced buyer-supplier relations. Moreover, it underlines that many works omit the emotional reactions as linked to the perception of fairness, and guiding the individuals in their behaviours and attitudes as suggested by the founding theories of fairness. This observation leads us to analyse the works proposing a link between the perception of fairness and emotions in commercial relations.

Fairness and emotions in commercial relations

Even though it is commonly admitted that the final consumer will experience feelings such as anger, delight or joy during the experience of consumption, few works focus at the impact of the perception of fairness over the emotions and their influence over the behaviour of individuals (Chebat et Slusarczyk, 2005 ; Smith et Bolton, 2002).

Chebat et Slusarczyk (2005) study the mediating effect of emotions between the perception of justice and trust or the retraction in a recovery service. They have interviewed the customers of a Canadian bank having complained during the year preceding the study. They demonstrate that all the dimensions of justice have an effect over emotions. However, they insist over the fact that the lack of procedural justice significantly influences negative emotions whereas its presence has no effect over positive emotions. Moreover, according to these authors, interactional justice plays a specific role since it has an indirect effect over fidelity versus breaking up through emotions but it also influences directly both fidelity and rupture. This study highlights the mediating effect of emotions between the perception of justice and the behaviours in the services marketing field.

The results of this study demonstrate that emotions can play an important role in the researches over the perception of fairness. This avenue of research suggests that enterprises should pay more attention to emotional reactions associated to their services and their behaviour. It is important to develop it and integrate it into buyer-supplier relationships. Indeed, to the best of our knowledge, only Kumar et al. (1995,2003) integrate emotional reactions (which they name affective conflicts) in the perception of fairness. In their 2003 study, Kumar et al. examine reaction to a perception of unfairness in American and Dutch buyer-supplier relationships. They are therefore showing that a perception of negative unfairness increases hostility and lowers trust towards the partner and the will to pursue the relation.

Our research is in keeping with this avenue of research, which as we have previously underlined, has been little explored and postulates a mediation of emotions between the perception of fairness and the behaviours and attitudes of the vulnerable partner.

Aims of the research and its methodology

General aims of the research

The aim of our research is to understand the effects of the perception of fairness over the unbalanced buyer-supplier relationship dynamics. Our research is therefore based around the following questions :

- What is the impact of the perception of fairness over the behaviours and attitudes of the vulnerable partner ?

- Are the three dimensions of fairness present during the evaluation of the relation by the vulnerable partner ?
- What is the role of emotions in such a context ? Are they mediating variables ?

In order to answer those questions and because of the scarcity of empirical studies over the subject, we choose to put in place an exploratory qualitative study.

Aims of the exploratory qualitative study

Our exploratory qualitative study is based around three groups of aims. A first group is related to the perception of fairness in the context of stock breeding. The second group is related to emotions, and the third is centred on behaviours and attitudes.

- Aims linked to the perception of fairness.

The review of the literature let us highlight the evolution of the concept of fairness and of the three dimensions composing it. So firstly, the exploratory qualitative study will allow us to explore, in the words of the interviewees, the presence of the notion of fairness and of the dimensions composing it, that is to say the distributive, procedural and interactional dimensions. In fact, researches in interorganisational marketing merely concentrate on the distributive and procedural dimensions of fairness.

This exploratory qualitative study should allow us to evaluate in the field the relevance of the introduction of the perception of fairness in the study of interorganisational relationships.

- Aims linked to emotions

The review of the literature about fairness in social psychology but also in organisation allowed us to underline the central role of emotions in the perception of fairness and more importantly over the following behaviours. However, the scarcity of empirical studies relative to emotions will not allow us to qualify the feelings in interorganisational relations. Our exploratory qualitative study will allow us to identify in the interviewees' words the emotions when the actors are faced with an unfair situation or a fair situation. Therefore we will be able to check if emotions really are mediating variables in a professional situation. We will thus examine the existence of a link between the perception of justice and the emotions which are the base idea of our research.

- Aims linked to behaviours and attitudes

If the link between the perception of fairness and the behaviours and attitudes of the partners have been the subject of many empirical studies in the organisational field, or service marketing field, they are scarce in the interorganisational marketing field. And that is with little to no consideration of the mediating effect of emotions. It therefore intends to better make an inventory of the various behaviours following the perception of fairness. In fact, the review of the literature allowed us to list some behaviours and attitudes. One should nevertheless verify their relevancy and their presence in the chosen context, and try to identify more, through an exploratory qualitative study, if the study permits.

Methodology and data collection

We chose to have our exploratory qualitative study in the particular field of stock breeding and notably of sheep, goat and horned cattle breeding. To collect the data, we chose to have semi-directive interviews based on an interview guide previously validated by interviews with experts. The semi-directive interviews allow us to collect informations, perceptions, feelings and opinions related to a given subject. Additionally, they also grant some leeway to the interviewee while giving the interviewer the possibility to steer the conversation back on the research's themes.

We have interviewed twelve farmers finding themselves in an unbalanced partnership.

Validity

Those interviews have been held face-to-face, at the breeders’ and they lasted from 50 min to 2h. The interviews have been tape-recorded after the interviewees consent. Those interviews have allowed to collect a dense and rich set of data. During the interviews, the degree of directiveness has been low and the breeders have quite often illustrated their discourse with information-packed anecdotes. Their transcription has been done right after the interviews.

The analysis was started by a floating reading. Then, many consecutive readings drew to the dividing of the corpus in theme and sub-theme and we confronted those to the aims of our exploratory study. The majority of the themes has been identified beforehand from the interview grid, however new categories have emerged afterwards. Then, the interviews have been entrusted to another person (coder or judge) in order to check the reliability and the validity of the coding.

The dividing of the corpus in theme and sub-theme comes from a complex and subjective judgment. Cohen (1960) suggests that the coders’ agreement could be linked to a true synchronism but that agreement can also be linked to luck. Therefore, in order to determine the degree of agreement between the coders we calculated Cohen’s Kappa. The coding done by two coders is displayed in a contingency chart, the results are correct since Cohen’s Kappa is 0,794.

We have also lead a frequencial analysis of the content in order to validate the relevancy of the introducing of the notions of fairness and emotions in buyer-supplier relationships. The following chart displays the results of the frequencial analysis of the content of the main themes. We have also applied this analysis over the whole set of sub-themes.

<u>THEME</u>	<u>FREQUENCY</u>	<u>PERCENTAGE</u>
The relationship	281	26,24
Distributive justice	175	16,33
Procedural justice	177	16,53
Interactional justice	131	12,23
Emotions	133	12,42
Behaviours and attitudes	174	16,25

Results of the exploratory qualitative study

After verifying the validity of the dividing in theme and sub theme of the corpus, we ran an analysis of the themes of the content. That analysis allowed us to bring parts of the answers to our research questions.

First of all, it appears through our study that all three dimensions of fairness show up in the interviewees’ words. We have been able to identify clearly the distributive, procedural and interactional dimensions. Then, the exploratory study allowed us to qualify the emotions existing in the buyer-supplier relations. We have identified one positive emotion : pride, and two negative emotions : disgust and anger.

The first results of our exploratory study show the relevancy of the introduction of the notion of fairness in unbalanced partnerships but also and specifically in the presence of emotions.

The anecdotes told by the breeders were information-packed, thus allowing us to link the perception of fairness, emotions and the following behaviours and attitudes. The behaviours and attitudes listed when the breeders perceive a situation either fair or unfair and they are driven by their emotions are : the will to invest, consented sacrifices, constructive objections, the intention to get a new partner, the intention to have retaliation, and the intention of breaking up.

Those conclusions allow us to better understand the mechanism of the perception of fairness and its impact over the buyer-supplier relationship dynamics, but it also highlights the central role of emotions.

Conclusion

Our research aimed at contributing to the comprehension of unbalanced buyer-supplier relationships. It made use of the vulnerable partner's point of view in order to understand what drives them to act positively or negatively towards their buyer. In order to do so, we have analysed a notion named but rarely studied in interorganisational marketing : fairness.

The concept of fairness is scarcely studied in general marketing and more specifically in interorganisational marketing. Our work therefore proposes a review of literature over the perception of fairness through various domains such as social psychology, human resources management and interorganisational marketing. This state of the art we tried to make as transversal and comprehensive as possible allowed us to transpose these works to interorganisational marketing, bringing forth the multidimensionality of the perception of fairness. Another important addition to our research is the introduction of emotions in the perception of fairness, but also in interorganisational marketing. Thus, we have studied the impact of the perception of fairness over emotions but also the impact of the perception of fairness and of emotions over the behaviours and attitudes of the vulnerable partner. This work completes and brings arguments to the funding theories of fairness which integrate emotions in the perception of fairness. At last, we axe ourselves over the managerials contributions of our study. We chose as a context unbalanced relationships. In these relations, the « stronger » partner has the power to coerce his supplier on many points such as prices, margins, promotions, quantities... Our research demonstrates that the perception of fairness and the following emotions have to be taken in consideration for the development of the relation to be stable and the goals be reached in an effective and efficient manner. Our research also shows that the vulnerable partners are sensitive to the perception of fairness, hence to the negative emotions it triggers.

This exploratory qualitative study will be completed by a quantitative study.

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