



Differences in buyers' and suppliers' perceptions of supply chain attributes

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a model that explains why and when buyers and suppliers may differ in the ways they perceive certain relationship attributes. Understanding when buyers and suppliers will share perceptions, and when not, can help future researchers in deciding how to measure these attributes. The paper analyses survey data from 86 dyadic buyer–supplier relationships, involving 388 respondents. Our results indicate that buyers and suppliers form different perceptions of attributes that are closely related to the identity of their firms, such as supplier performance, or, of attributes about which they have different information, such as technology uncertainty. Moreover, we found that also the associations between attributes differ significantly between buyers and suppliers. Our results suggest that, for some attributes, key informants from the supplier side will deliver the most reliable information whereas, for other attributes, the buying side will deliver the most reliable data. Further, not only do buyers' and suppliers' perceptions of particular attributes differ, the way these attributes are associated with each other also seems to differ, which may have important implications for theory development in the field of supply chain management. For future research we recommend to use objective data where possible. If this is not possible use the perceptions of the best informed party or the party whose identity is least related to the construct to measure. Further, we recommend using additional research methods that result in similarity of perceptions. Finally, we suggest using ex-post statistical remedies.

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1. Introduction

Most researchers in the field of buyer–supplier relationships agree that perceptions from *both* buyers *and* suppliers should be studied in order to gain insights into their relationships. In fact, [John and Reve \(1982\)](#) already noted that measures obtained from one firm in a buyer–supplier relationship did not provide a valid assessment of dyadic relationships. Despite this, a recent review showed that nearly all surveys in the field of supply chain management relied on perceptual data from only one side of the relationship: either from an informant from the buying organisation or one from the supplying organization ([Van der Vaart and Van Donk, 2008](#)). In the current paper, we want to discuss the possible methodological drawbacks of using data from only one side and how these can be prevented.

It seems reasonable to question whether buyers and suppliers do indeed share the same perceptions of their relationships. Results from the few survey studies that have collected dyadic data on buyer–supplier relationships offer no conclusive answers. Whereas, [John and Reve \(1982\)](#) found mixed results,

indicating that perceptions were shared on some supply chain attributes but not on all, [Buchanan \(1992\)](#) and [Carter \(2000\)](#) both observed significant differences between measures obtained from the buyer and from the supplier sides of the relationship. Partner organizations thus seem to share some perceptions of certain supply chain attributes but, more often, their perceptions seem to diverge. It is important to know, if we are to use the personal views of key informants, when their perceptions differ, since perceptual differences may have significant methodological consequences.

First, perceptual differences may undermine the reliability of measurements. In general, researchers should assess the ability of key informants to provide reliable data ([John and Reve, 1982](#); [Bagozzi et al., 1991](#)). However, if the perceptions of buyers and suppliers differ, how does one decide whose perception to rely on? There is no clear evidence as to which attributes can be measured reliably with data from buyers and which attributes need data from suppliers.

Second, in addition to the uncertain reliability of measured attributes, perceptual differences might influence the way attributes are associated. For example, data from buyers showed a positive association between a buyer's relationship orientation and supplier performance in a study by [Shin et al. \(2000\)](#), whereas data from suppliers found no such relationship ([Prahinski and](#)

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Table 1
Overview of perception differences in the literature (S=supplier; B=buyer).

Paper	Attributes	Perception differences
John and Reve (1982)	Structural measures	No
	Sentiments measures	Yes
Buchanan (1992)	Store dependence	Yes (S > B)
	Symmetry of dependence	Yes (S > B)
	Futuristic orientation of partnership	Partly (S < B)
	Communication issues	No
	Competitive environment	No
Carter (2000)	Buyer activities: deceitful practices	Yes (S > B)
	Buyer activities: subtle practices	Partly (S > B)
	Supplier activities	Yes (S < B)
	Reliance on few dependable suppliers	Yes (S < B)
	Importance of quality of supplier selection	Yes (S < B)
	Clarity of customer's specifications	Yes (S > B)
	Utility of customer's supplier rating system	Yes (S < B)
	Usefulness of customer's tech. assistance	Partly (S < B)
	Appropriateness of customer education	No
	Extension of long-term contracts	Partly (S > B)
	Customer involvement with supplier's product development process	No
Barnes et al. (2007)	Legitimacy/compatibility	Partly (S > B)
	Social	Partly (S > B)
	Economic/shared values	No
Liu et al. (2009)	Learning	No
	Contract	No
	Relational norms	No
	Transactional complexity	No
	Personal leadership	No
Ambrose et al. (2010)	Performance— success	Yes (S > B)

Benton, 2004). This implies that hypotheses supported with data from buyers might not be supported if data had instead been obtained from suppliers, and vice versa. This raises questions about the validity of findings that are merely based on data from one side of the relationship.

This paper concentrates on supply chain attributes that are commonly measured through questionnaires, asking respondents their subjective views. With this paper, we want to contribute to the research methodology of supply chain management research and we do not have the intention to contribute to supply chain management theory. Nevertheless, we will use theory from social science to understand when perception differences might occur, and, consequently, which methodological problems for supply management research might follow. We aim to achieve this in at least three ways. First, we present a model which describes why buyers and suppliers may differ in the ways they perceive certain relationship attributes. Second, based on this model we hypothesize, for six different supply chain attributes, whether buyers' and suppliers' perceptions will differ and, if so, in what way. Understanding when buyers and suppliers will share perceptions, and when not, can help future researchers in deciding how to measure these attributes. Finally, we provide examples of how data obtained from buyers and suppliers may differ in the way supply chain attributes are associated with one another. In doing this, we emphasize that perceptual differences may have crucial implications for theory development in the field of supply chain management.

This paper's structure is as follows. First, we build a model, based on social capital theory, which may help in understanding when and why perceptions are likely to differ. Next, we introduce six supply chain attributes and use our model to predict whether buyers' and suppliers' perceptions will differ and, if so, how. Finally, we test a hypothesis that argues that data from buyers will show different associations between particular attributes than data from suppliers.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Perceptual differences

In line with most supply chain studies, our research focuses on strategic and moderately strategic buyer–supplier relationships (Lawson et al., 2008; Van der Vaart and Van Donk, 2008). A common approach in studying buyer–suppliers relationships is to focus on the dyad as the unit of theory and analysis (Klein et al., 2000). In this way, a researcher suggests implicitly or explicitly that for the constructs of interest, the respective experiences or perspectives of each individual organization in the relationship are sufficiently similar that the dyadic relationship per se is the appropriate focus of theory and analysis (Klein et al., 2000). In our study however, we argue that buyer–supplier relationships should not be approached as homogeneous entities. Rather, we reason that firms which make up a buyer–supplier relationship differ with respect to their perceptions of key issues in that relationship. In this view, a buyer–supplier relationship thus consists of one organization's experiences relative to its partner (Klein et al., 2000).

In Table 1, we provide an overview of studies that collected dyadic data on buyer–supplier relationships. In this table we have only included papers in which dyadic data was collected and in which perceptions of suppliers and buyers with respect to the same attribute were compared. This means that we do not include (1) papers that test relationships between attributes for buyer data and supplier data separately and do not report the actual differences in perceptions of individual attributes (Ganesan, 1994; Johnston and Kristal, 2008; Cheung et al., 2010; Nyaga et al., 2010), (2) papers that use dyadic data in one single model but do not report the differences in perceptions (Johnston et al., 2004), (3) papers that only report correlations between perceptions of buyers and suppliers (Campbell, 1997; Spekman et al., 1997), (4) papers that collected data on similar but 'mirrored'

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