



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Industrial Marketing Management



Conceptualizing inter-organizational triads

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 January 2015

Received in revised form 8 October 2015

Accepted 22 January 2016

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Triad

Dyad

Business relationships

Network

Research design

ABSTRACT

Interest in triads and triadic research settings for the study of inter-organizational issues is growing. A literature review of inter-organizational studies, claiming a use of triadic research design, shows that the terms “triad” and “triadic” have been used to describe many different types of inter-organizational phenomena. However, not all studies involving a context of three actors are actually examining triads. This paper offers a robust definition of three-actor constellations qualifying as triads. Moreover, it elaborates on different types of inter-organizational triads, based on two aspects of collectivity; cohesion and the ability to act as a single entity. The definition of inter-organizational triads and the categorization of different types of triads will hopefully encourage further studies of triads; the smallest and simplest network which offers insights, which cannot be achieved in the study of single actors or dyads.

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1. Introduction

Triads and triadic research settings have recently aroused increasing interest among researchers interested in inter-organizational phenomena. This is the case within the fields of supply chain management (e.g. McFarland, Bloodgood, & Payan, 2008; Wu & Choi, 2005), business-to-business relationships (e.g. Dubois & Fredriksson, 2008; Wu, Choi, & Rungtusanatham, 2010), and service purchasing (e.g. Raassens, Wuyts, & Geyskens, 2014). Furthermore, within the field of service research, researchers have started to see “service triads” as an important research setting (e.g. van der Valk & van Iwaarden, 2011), and as an emerging business model (e.g. Wynstra, Spring, & Schoenherr, 2015). Thus, the interest in triads covers a wide range of inter-organizational phenomena where three companies are involved.

Triads differ in a number of ways: in terms of shape, how the relations influence each other, the strength of ties, and the way the triad relates to the surroundings, that is, its ability to act as a single entity. However, not all studies of phenomena involving three organizational actors have the triad as unit of analysis. Some articles focus on company level and study a single actor out of three, that is, the unit of analysis is an actor. They do not examine the possible relations between the focal actor and the two other actors. Others focus on a single dyad, but without studying the relations linking the dyad to the third actor. The motivation for these studies can be found in the importance of the context for the actor or the dyad in focus.

If instead the motivation for a study is network phenomena, the unit of analysis needs to be the structure of direct and indirect relations between three actors. That is, the unit of analysis must be a triadic structure or in short a triad. This is so, because three companies is the minimum size of an inter-organizational network (Provan, Fish, & Sydow, 2007; Smith & Laage-Hellman, 1992). Triads offer the opportunity to study complex network phenomena in a simple format, and consequently may offer insights of scholarly and managerial interest (e.g. Anderson, Håkansson, & Johanson, 1994; Contractor, Wasserman, & Faust, 2006). In order to achieve these insights, the data-collection must include information about three actors, the two or three relations which link them, and how these relations influence each other.

In this paper we establish the conceptual arguments for separating triadic contexts and structures. This separation is grounded in the concepts of association (Simmel, 1908), and connectedness (e.g. Cook & Emerson, 1984; Yamagishi, Gillmore, & Cook, 1988) which also offer the foundation for our definition of inter-organizational triads. This definition contributes to existing research, because as far as we know existing definitions of triads are grounded in sociological studies of inter-personal relationships, in spite of the fact that inter-organizational and inter-personal relationships and structures differ along a number of dimensions. Moreover, we develop a framework for categorizing inter-organizational triads. The categorization is, besides association and connectedness, based on two more dimensions: The first is the concept of internal cohesiveness (e.g. Gross, 1956; Homans, 1961) which characterizes triads that form group-like structures. The second is the ability of some triads to act not as a system of three actors, but as a single entity vis-à-vis the environment (e.g. Cook & Emerson, 1984; Jarillo, 1988). For the scholar, the separation between context

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and structure and the categorization of different types of triads may reduce some of the confusion about what triads are, what we can learn from the study of triads, and about how to design the study of different types of three-actor constellations. This is of utmost importance if we want to use triads, which are intuitively easy to grasp, in the dissemination of knowledge about networks and in the discussion of network phenomena with practitioners.

The paper is organized as follows. First, the lack of consensus in studies of triads or triadic phenomena is demonstrated in a review of inter-organizational studies claiming a triadic research design. Then, we elaborate on what grounds we can separate triadic contexts from triads. Thereafter, we elaborate on the qualitative differences among triads based on cohesion and the ability to act as an entity. These elaborations offer the foundation for a definition of inter-organizational triads and a framework which distinguishes between four basic types of inter-organizational triads.

2. Triads in inter-organizational studies

Our paper sets off from an extensive literature review which illustrates that articles positioned as studies of inter-organizational phenomena involving three companies differ widely, which results in the lack of consensus in the conceptualization of triads. First we applied a Boolean search combining “triad” and “inter-organizational”. When applying this string in a topic search in web of science, the result is two articles. When applying the same string in a search of abstracts in Business Source Complete, the result is three articles. From our former research we knew of at least 15 articles on the subject of inter-organizational triads. We therefore decided to make a full-scale literature search using the term triad* combined with relevant business terms. Having made this search in two databases, some articles were still missing. In consequence, totally three databases, Web of Science, Business Source Premier, and Scopus, were chosen to cover as many articles as possible, because none of the databases cover all possible articles.

In the literature searches, made in January and February 2014, we included peer reviewed articles within the categories of business, management, business economics or operations research management science. The search term in all three literature searches was “triad*”. The search in Web of Science resulted in 198 articles and in Business Source Premier in 680 articles. In turn, we searched Scopus for articles not found in the two other databases. The result was 156 articles of which 70 were not included in the results from the two other searches. Thus, the final pool of articles was 948.

This pool of articles includes numerous studies of well-established domains applying the concept of the triad, such as triad versus non-triad regions, triadic experiments in the study of the influence of power-dependence and information asymmetries for negotiation behavior. In addition, the pool of articles includes studies in which the term triad is applied to describe three intra-organizational actors, or more generally to designate the interplay of three phenomena. On the basis of abstracts we selected studies including three separate companies/organizations. We ended up with 33 articles including conceptual as well as empirical studies of which several appeared in all or two of the databases (see [Appendix A](#) for a list of included articles).

2.1. Focus on a triadic context

Firstly, 13 studies are actually not examining inter-organizational triads, but what could best be described as studying a triadic context. Unless the articles actually study three actors and the relations among them, we find it difficult to categorize the entity of study as a triad. Rather, focus is on one of the actors, and the two other actors are seen through the eyes of the focal actor. One example of this type of study is [Wuyts, Stremersch, van den Bulte, and Franses \(2004\)](#) who analyze vertical marketing systems involving suppliers, intermediary vendors and buyers of complex integrated computer networks. Based on a

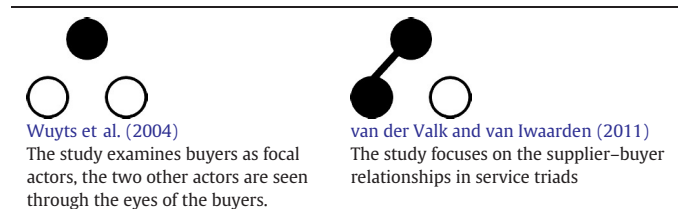
survey among 167 buyers, the authors conclude that “buyers go beyond the channel dyads they are involved in when they assess the appeal of a channel, which corroborates the value of a triadic and broader network perspective” (p. 485). Thus, the focus is on a triadic context where only the buyers are studied, and where the other two actors and their relationships to the buyer are seen through the eyes of one of the actors. Studies of triadic contexts also include articles which focus on a dyad, discussing the third actor as a part of the setting, but without examining the tie between the third actor and the dyad. An example of this type of study is [van der Valk and van Iwaarden \(2011\)](#). The study focuses on supplier–buyer relationships in the context of service triads, but without examining the ties between the end-user and the dyad. [Table 1](#) illustrates the two examples of triadic contexts: one where the unit of analysis is one of the three actors, and another where the unit of analysis is two actors forming a dyad.

2.2. Focus on triadic structures

Secondly, in the remaining articles all three actors are studied, but there are some variations among the type of triadic structures being in focus. 13 articles study sets of three linked actors forming either an open triad in which the three actors are indirectly linked to each other through one of the actors, or forming a closed triad in which all actors are directly linked to each other. Example of an open triad constituted by a set of three linked actors is the study of [McFarland et al. \(2008\)](#) who study the connection between manufacturer – dealer dyad and the dealer – customer dyad. In this study the focus is on how the upstream dyad influences the downstream dyad through the intermediary (here dealer) in the middle. Example of a closed triad constituted by a set of three linked actors is the study of [Wu et al. \(2010\)](#) who study 43 triads consisting of one buying firm and two of its competing suppliers who co-operate to meet the buying firm’s requirements. This means that these studies focus on the actual working of triadic structures shaped either as open or closed triads, such as how the three actors can be linked through resource ties, activity links and actor bonds (cf. [Håkansson & Snehota, 1995](#)). [Table 2](#) illustrates the two examples of triadic structures.

The remaining 7 articles study a specific type of closed triads with group-like characteristics. In order for a closed triad to display group-like characteristics, the actors must be involved in common coordinated activities, involving specific adapted and individualized processes in which each actor has its specific role and activities to perform. The difference between closed triads constituted by sets of three linked actors and closed triads with group-like structures is basically a matter of cohesiveness. The more the actors are closely linked, and the more they strive for a common goal, the more group-like the structure becomes. Example of an article studying group-like structures is [Dubois and Fredriksson's \(2008\)](#) case study of Volvo Cars and two of its suppliers of seats. In this triad “all relationships are interactive and characterized by interdependencies due to product and process adjustments” (p. 177). Thus, the phenomenon in focus is the group-like structure. However, it is not possible to distinguish sets of connected actors forming a closed triad and group-like triads on the basis of shape alone. The shape is the same, that is, they both look like the closed triad in [Table 2](#), but the properties of the

Table 1
Two examples of studies of triadic contexts.



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