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Justice in Inter-Organizational Relationships: A Literature Review and Future Research Agenda

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Abstract

Organizational justice has made contributions to the inter-organizational literature by highlighting the effects of justice perceptions on behavioral, attitudinal, and organizational outcomes. However, research on justice perceptions remains scattered and falls short of addressing key elements of justice, and how these elements interact in an inter-organizational context. The lack of understanding calls for a comprehensive review and synthesis of extant studies. After a careful initial review of 375 papers from 1995 to 2018, this paper consolidates 79 papers on organizational justice at an inter-organizational level with respect to theoretical perspectives, methodologies, contexts, and research findings. The thematic and descriptive analyses offer deeper insights into the varying effects of different organizational justice dimensions, as well as brings forward limitations of current research including a focus on a: single side of the dyad, static view of justice, and single level of analysis. Consequently, the synthesis section, derived from the thematic analyses, draws out three fruitful key themes including: i) justice asymmetry; ii) justice dynamics; and iii) multilevel view of justice. The study positions fruitful research questions for each theme, before presenting the study's limitations and implications.

Keywords: *Inter-organizational relationships, organizational justice, literature review, research agenda, justice asymmetry, justice dynamics*

1. Introduction

Effectively managing inter-organizational relationships has long been a central topic in business and industrial marketing ([Möller & Halinen, 1999](#)), supply chain ([Griffith, Harvey, & Lusch, 2006](#); [Roehrich & Lewis, 2014](#)), strategic management ([Ariño & Ring, 2010](#)), and general management ([Kang & Jindal, 2015](#)) studies. Rapidly changing demands in dynamic markets have generated increased interdependence between firms seeking to gain access to, for instance, valuable resources, capabilities, and knowledge ([Yang, Sivadas, Kang, & Oh, 2012](#); [Zaefarian, Najafi-Tavani, Henneberg, & Naudé, 2016](#)). This environment has motivated a myriad of research studies to explore approaches to maintaining and effectively managing inter-organizational relationships (e.g. Caldwell, Roehrich, & George, 2017; Roehrich, Selviaridis, Kalra, van der Valk, & Fang, 2020). The management of these relationships has a significant effect on performance outcomes, and both academia and practice alike have become interested in attitudinal and behavioral factors that are relevant to drive relationship performance.

A stream of research examining organizations' behavior highlighted justice as a foundation of organizations' interactions because organizations seek justice when comparing the rewards and costs involved in these interactions ([Brown, Cobb, & Lusch, 2006](#); [Luo, Liu, Yang, Maksimov, & Hou, 2015](#)). Therefore, justice plays a key role in enhancing relationship performance. Partners' perceptions of justice enhance knowledge sharing, relationship investment, commitment ([Liu, Huang, Luo, & Zhao, 2012](#)), and relationship quality ([Kumar, Scheer, & Steenkamp, 1995](#)). Conversely, if neglected, injustice may foster potential opportunism ([Trada & Goyal, 2017](#)), deteriorate trust, increase the

potential of conflicts ([Narasimhan, Narayanan, & Srinivasan, 2013](#)), and ultimately spur relationship termination intentions ([Yang et al., 2012](#)).

Extant literature has initially defined organizational justice as an employee's perception of the organization's environment of justice ([Greenberg, 1990](#)). Such perception is later extended from the personal to the inter-organizational level ([Kumar et al., 1995](#)) to understand better whether all partnering organizations participate fairly and equitably in decisions that affect the ability to operate competitively ([Kumar et al., 1995](#)). More recent studies have categorized justice in inter-organizational relationships as procedural, distributive, and interactional ([Duffy, Fearn, Hornibrook, Hutchinson, & Reid, 2013](#)), emphasizing that justice is the foundation of a partnership and a key factor in the motivation for continued collaboration ([Luo et al., 2015](#)).

An expansive body of organizational behavior and psychology literature has focused on the nature of intra-firm justice with an emphasis on identifying the dimensions of justice and how they influence interactions at this level (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & NG, 2001). However, comparatively very limited research has been conducted on inter-organizational justice, and existing studies have tended to ignore the basic features of inter-organizational relationships ([Lumineau & Oliveira, 2018](#)). For instance, research focused on one side of the dyad thereby missing the opportunity to examine potential asymmetries of justice perceptions between partners in business-to-business relationships ([Liu et al., 2012](#)). Moreover, even though inter-organizational relationships are dynamic, much of the literature has tended to adopt a static approach ([Narasimhan et al., 2013](#)). The exploration of justice dynamics of how inter-organizational justice (and its dimensions) develops as a series of events that partners experience over the relationship's life-cycle is limited. Thus, prior

research efforts leave the inter-organizational justice literature largely fragmented ([Loosemore & Lim, 2015](#)), calling for a comprehensive analysis and synthesis to pave future research avenues.

In order to address these shortcomings in prior studies, we conducted a systematic literature review by consolidating existing knowledge of inter-organizational justice ([Nicholson, LaPlaca, Al-Abdin, Breese, & Khan, 2018](#)). In total, we reviewed 79 articles. We synthesized key findings, clarified current research themes, and also identified future research avenues. Thus, this study addresses the following research questions: (i) What is the current state of inter-organizational justice research?; and (ii) What are the emerging themes of interest for management research? We explore these questions in the justice literature by specifically addressing the relevant literature at the inter-organizational level. This is accomplished by developing a research agenda based on comprehensive bibliographic analyses and synthesis of published management literature over more than two decades.

This timely review of inter-organizational justice is particularly imperative for scholars interested in business-to-business and industrial markets, as well as inter-organizational relationship management. Particularly, the relevance of justice to industrial marketing is underpinned by the fit of conceptual proximity between the concept of justice and key extant industrial marketing research such as the IMP interaction approach ([Oswick, Fleming, & Hanlon, 2011](#)). For instance, the IMP approach puts a significant emphasis on relationship quality between partnering organizations and postulates that relationship quality inherently predicts the interactions in a dyad ([Håkansson & Snehota, 1989](#); [Johnsen, Miemczyk, & Howard, 2017](#)). Such interaction occurs within a relationship atmosphere, characterized by power, trust, cooperation, and conflict

(Ellram & Murfield, 2019). Similarly, inter-organizational justice serves as a critical antecedent of relationship quality that shapes relationship atmosphere in which organizations operate ([Kumar et al., 1995](#); [Woo & Ennew, 2004](#)). Inter-organizational justice and the IMP approach both emphasize the interactions between partnering organizations that drive the formation of relationship quality ([Cropanzano, Byrne, Bobocel, & Rupp, 2001](#); [Håkansson & Snehota, 1989](#)). Both organizations (e.g. buyers and suppliers) are autonomous, but interdependent, entities which actively make decisions that shape and are shaped by the relationship climate, thus impacting each other's perception of justice ([Hu & Sheu, 2005](#); [Walumbwa, Hartnell, & Oke, 2010](#)).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: after outlining the systematic review and synthesis method, we analyze the justice literature for specific patterns and trends. We then offer a synthesis of justice research, and discuss opportunities for future research. The paper concludes by drawing out implications for both theory and practice.

2. Review methodology

The paper adopted a systematic review approach to consolidate extant literature regarding organizational justice at the inter-organizational level ([Denyer & Tranfield, 2009](#); [Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003](#)). A literature review is vital in establishing key themes and relationships amongst the concepts under study, thus driving more structured future research efforts ([Burgess, Singh, & Koroglu, 2006](#)). It aims to synthesize past findings, understand how methodology supports conceptual frameworks, and bridge future studies with existing questions and concerns ([Thorpe, Holt, Macpherson, & Pittaway, 2005](#)).

Our approach embraced an explicit sequence of procedures in which a set of clearly defined searching protocols were followed to mitigate researcher's bias, and ensure procedural transparency and outcome reproducibility ([Crossan & Apaydin, 2010](#)). We established a comprehensive search and analysis framework by incorporating database search, cross-referencing between authors, and applying agreed inclusion and exclusion criteria ([Durach, Kembro, & Wieland, 2017](#)). Following [Denyer and Tranfield \(2009\)](#), we commenced with guiding review questions derived from discussions with five subject experts from business and academia as well as an initial scoping study in which seminal organizational justice papers were thoroughly studied and analyzed. This initial analysis was helpful to establish a focus for subsequent search, analysis, and synthesis stages by, for example, specifying the search period and terms as well as formulating guiding review questions. We then focused on locating, selecting, and appraising studies ([Denyer & Tranfield, 2009](#)). The domains for the search strategy included conceptual and empirical papers addressing the applications of organizational justice in inter-organizational settings. We included a range of different types of inter-organizational relationships and did not focus our study solely on one type of relationship such as buyer-supplier relationships. Consequently, our review approach was inclusive of the types of business relationships frequently discussed in the literature ([Lumineau & Oliveira, 2018](#)).

The selection and evaluation criteria applied to our systematic review were as follows:

- i. Peer-reviewed management/business journals were selected ([Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Bachrach, & Podsakoff, 2005](#)) to ensure broadly similar peer-review quality. Books, conference proceedings, and other unpublished works were excluded ([David & Han, 2004](#)).

ii. The comprehensive ISI Web of Knowledge's Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) database ([Coombes & Nicholson, 2013](#)) was adopted to examine the years from 1995 to 2018. As to the authors' best knowledge, no previous systematic review on organizational justice with a focus on the inter-organizational level has been conducted in the literature. The first paper explicitly discussing inter-organizational justice was published in 1995 ([Kumar et al., 1995](#)). This paper generated increased interest and efforts into extending the concept of organizational justice, and its role in developing inter-organizational relationships.

iii. The substantive relevance of articles was ensured by selecting "(in)justice* or (in)just*" in the title, abstract or keywords. Articles containing "(un)fairness* or (un)fair*, equity*" were also included.

iv. The relevance of articles at the inter-organizational level was ensured by selecting papers that have at least one of the following keywords in their abstracts and/or keyword list: "cooperat*, inter-firm* or interfirm*, interorganis(z)ation* or inter-organis(z)ation*, relationship* or relation*, supply chain*, buyer*, supplier*, B2B*, network*, system*". These keywords are considered important in capturing constructs in the inter-organizational level (following the study by [Delbufalo, 2012](#)).

The searching process was divided into three steps. First, incorporating the inclusion criteria mentioned above yielded 1,737 papers, of which 379 remained after filtering (e.g., management and business, peer-reviewed journals). Second, two of the authors independently read the full abstracts. For the selection of articles into the final dataset, the researchers aimed for 100% agreement. When this level of agreement was not reached during the initial

reading of abstracts, all researchers read and discussed papers in detail and made a joint decision on the inclusion/exclusion of the article into the final dataset. After consideration and discussion over several iterations of reading, the ultimate result was 79 papers. Third, since older publications are not always fully indexed in the ISI databases ([Gligor & Holcomb, 2012](#); [Van Kampen, Akkerman, & Pieter van Donk, 2012](#)), the researchers traced citations in the 79 papers to find additional references to other studies. However, no additional relevant articles were identified.

As our final steps, we analyzed, synthesized, and reported the results. In order to produce new insights, data analysis and synthesis can be seen as primary value-added results of this comprehensive literature review ([Crossan & Apaydin, 2010](#)). Analysis and synthesis of identified papers consisted of two parts: (i) examining patterns of publications over the analyzed period; and (ii) presenting fruitful future research avenues drawn from the identification of thematic management research issues.

3. Systematic review analysis

Based on our comprehensive analysis and synthesis, we draw out the changes of justice research over the last two decades with a focus on: (i) publication domain; (ii) theories; (iii) methods; and (iv) unit of analysis in extant studies. We also cover (v) the main themes in inter-organizational research by highlighting the use of different justice dimensions in extant studies, justice dimensions' interactions and their link to performance, as well as finally the prior studies' contexts.

3.1 Article classification by journal and research domain

Inter-organizational justice research has appeared in 42 journals across various domains (Table 1). Domains were selected following the Association of Business Schools (ABS) categories. Four main domains accounted for the vast majority (87%) of publications. The marketing domain accounted for 40%, Operations & Technology Management for 23%, General Management for 14%, and Strategy for 10% (A long list of journals with only one article was omitted and replaced by “others” category for practical reasons. This category include for instance International Journal of Information Management, Journal of International Management, and Journal of World Business among others)¹.

--- Please insert Table 1 about here ---

We further classified the articles into five-year time periods to illustrate the evolution over time (Table 2). This chronological analysis showed that justice has initially been considered in an industrial marketing context, and gradually been used as a key mechanism in understanding interactions across other types of inter-organizational relationships such as buyer-supplier relationships. The dominance of the marketing domain has been consistent over the years (42% from 2010-2014 compared to 4% for General management; and 42% from 2015-2018 compared to 27% for Operations and Technology Management), thus further highlighting the importance of justice in industrial marketing. Overall, although there is diversity in research domains, the set of the four most researched domains remains unchanged.

--- Please insert Table 2 about here ---

3.2 Theories applied in inter-organizational justice research

¹ The full list of journals is provided in the supplementary data file (“Data in Brief”) accompanying this paper.

With regards to adopted theories in prior studies, our analysis (Figure 1) showed a clear indication of a very narrow set of theoretical lenses. Two leading theories are adopted in existing studies: (i) Social Exchange Theory (SET) (16 articles); and (ii) Transaction Cost Economics (TCE) (6 articles). The remaining theories primarily approached justice from different perspectives; examining, for instance, environmental factors that may influence how justice is being implemented or perceived between parties (e.g. Social Capital Theory - [Kim, Lee, & Lee, 2017](#); Fairness Heuristics Theory - [Gu & Wang, 2011](#)).

--- Please insert Figure 1 about here ---

The dominance of these theories is based on the need to explain the basis behind partnering organizations' interactions, organizations' desire to mitigate opportunism and uncertainty, and ultimately the costs of governance ([Luo et al., 2015](#)). Social exchange theory outlines the context and interaction of the partners, while TCE highlights the nature of the transaction. Table 3 highlights how a justice perspective fits within these theories.

--- Please insert Table 3 about here ---

3.3 Article classification by research methodologies used

With respect to the adopted research method, our analysis depicted a predominance of empirical over conceptual papers (86% vs. 14%). The analysis of the empirical papers (68 papers) indicates that most selected articles (49) adopted a survey approach. Although the survey approach is useful for examining large population samples ([Griffith et al., 2006](#)), a more qualitative approach to the investigation of justice may further uncover the impact of the context, capture the perspectives of the dyad, and highlight differences in

perceptions ([Eisenhardt, 1989](#); [Liu et al., 2012](#)). The remaining studies adopted various methods including experiments (6), case studies (5), interviews (3), and mixed methods (5). We specifically zoomed in on the chronological distribution of methodologies with an aim to detect publication patterns. This has shown that over the years there has clearly been a dominance of a survey approach to studying justice.

3.4 Articles classification by single vs. dyadic focus

Regarding the focus of the identified papers, as Figure 2 illustrates, 63% of the studies investigating justice considered only one side of the dyad. This means that these studies considered one organization's perspective to reflect the entire relationship. Although some papers stated to have adopted a dyadic perspective, two main limitations have been identified. First, authors considered dyads, but dyads were not matched ([Jokela & Söderman, 2017](#)) thereby overlooking any potential asymmetries within a specific relationship. Notable exceptions were the studies by [Liu et al. \(2012\)](#) and [Luo \(2009\)](#). For instance, in their study on manufacturers-distributors relationships in the Chinese household appliance industry, [Liu et al. \(2012\)](#) found that mutual perceptions of justice are positively related to knowledge sharing, relationship investment, and continuous improvement. Second, prior studies did not focus on justice asymmetry per se, although researchers argued that perceptions of justice vary systematically between organizations ([Lumineau & Oliveira, 2018](#)).

--- Please insert Figure 2 about here ---

3.5 Article classification by time horizon

With respect to the consideration of time in extant studies, the descriptive analysis showed that 90% (71 out of 79 papers) of the papers were “timeless”. Extant studies have dealt with identifying factors associated with justice and the observed outcomes of justice at a particular point in the inter-organizational relationship (e.g. [Blessley, Mir, Zacharia, & Aloysius, 2018](#); [Srinivasan, Narayanan, & Narasimhan, 2018](#)), but largely neglected a dynamic view of the investigated relationships. The rest of the papers mainly used a longitudinal survey approach but did not refer to process dynamics (e.g. [Zaefarian et al. \(2016\)](#) used longitudinal data to show the impact of perceived justice and relationship quality on longitudinal sales growth trajectories), with the exception of [Soundararajan & Brammer \(2018\)](#) and [Ariño & Ring \(2010\)](#). Therefore, a more nuanced view on the impact of justice as well as changes over the relationship lifecycle is needed in future research efforts.

3.6 Main themes in inter-organizational justice research

Early scholarly attention (from 1995 to early 2000s) explored the effect of organizational justice in inter-organizational settings on a variety of performance indicators such as relationship quality, commitment, and satisfaction ([Gassenheimer, Houston, & Davis, 1998](#); [Kumar et al., 1995](#)). From the mid-2000s onwards, several studies have examined the specific dimensions of justice and how they contribute to relationship management and ultimately performance (e.g. [Griffith et al., 2006](#); [Ireland & Webb, 2007](#); [Luo, 2008](#)).

Justice in the context of inter-organizational relationships has been categorized as procedural, distributive, and interactional ([Duffy et al., 2013](#)). Procedural and distributive justice were the first dimensions that were introduced as concepts that helped to explain employees’ (or an organization’s)

perception of justice and how the perception influences performance.

Distributive justice at the inter-organizational level is the perception of how rewards, benefits, or resources are allocated based upon the amount of effort within the relationship; it helps to improve performance by decreasing opportunism ([Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001](#)). Procedural justice refers to how the partners guide their interactions through solid formalization and routinized activities designed to reduce overall risk. In contrast to the formal aspects of processes and activities developed between partners, interactional justice emphasizes the social aspects of processes, or the justice of how individuals (boundary-spanners who represent their respective organizations) are treated ([Luo, 2008](#)). Following the advances in the conceptualization of justice, a four-dimensional framework began to emerge in the mid-2000s, prompting interactional justice to be further divided into two separate dimensions outlined by informational justice and interpersonal justice ([Ellis, Reus, & Lamont, 2009](#); [Samaha, Palmatier, & Dant, 2011](#)). Whereas informational justice is the justice of information and explanation of the procedures during interactions, interpersonal justice represents the perceived justice of interpersonal behavior.

In our comprehensive analysis process, we identified different dimensions of justice which have been conceptualized in extant literature. Our findings showed that distributive and procedural justice dominated the discussion in most of the articles, with 58 and 57 papers respectively. Only 20 articles examined interactional justice. Informational and interpersonal justice were considered to a much lesser extent with seven and six publications, respectively. Most prior studies also investigated individual justice dimensions or the combination of two justice dimensions (Figure 3).

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With regards to justice dimensions and their impact on performance, our analysis (Please see 'Data in Brief' for a full dataset) revealed some interesting findings. While the majority of studies examined the individual impact of justice dimensions on inter-organizational relationships ([Luo et al., 2015](#); [Mutonyi, Beukel, & Hjortsø, 2018](#); [Srinivasan et al., 2018](#)) only four papers addressed the interactive effect of justice dimensions on impacting relationship outcomes. In other words, prior research has primarily treated justice dimensions as complementary or multiplicative in that they equally contribute to overall performance. However, it is also important to unpack how managers or organizations perceive justice when making decisions. Along these lines, some studies argued that overall justice perception represents the central causal mechanism of behavior rather than individual justice perceptions ([Ambrose & Schminke, 2003](#); [Jones & Martens, 2009](#)). This is in accordance with Uncertainty Management Theory ([Van den Bos & Lind, 2002](#)), which focuses on the impact of an overarching justice judgment rather than individual justice dimensions.

Finally, considering the context in which prior work studied justice, our analysis indicated that 82% of the papers we reviewed considered a general perspective, which refers mainly to an entity judgment, whereas only thirteen papers investigated justice during specific events such as: alliance formation, trust breach, electronic reverse auction, supplier search and selection, and supplier development process. The trend towards event perception was strongly detected in studies conducted over the last few years.

In summary, we drew out the changes of justice research over the last two decades, and offered insights into justice dimensions in extant studies,

justice dimension interactions and their link to performance, prior studies' contexts, as well as the use of theories and methods in extant studies. The following section synthesizes extant research and positions future research avenues.

4. Synthesis and emerging research themes

In order to clarify the state of the art of justice knowledge and pave the way for future research efforts, this section provides a synthesis and critical reflection on the key themes identified by the review and analyses: (i) justice asymmetry; (ii) justice dynamics in inter-organizational relationships, and (iii) multi-level justice. We also position key research questions and managerial implications (Table 4) which should function as a starting point for future research efforts.

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4.1 Justice asymmetry

Given that partnering organizations may not share similar perceptions and expectations in inter-organizational relationships ([Nyaga, Whipple, & Lynch, 2010](#)), these relationships "*undergo a continual balancing act where symmetry is not a typical state*" ([Hingley, 2001, p. 85](#)). Therefore, "*it is by no means self-evident that behavioral and perceptual elements could be directly extrapolated from one party to the dyad or should in fact be symmetric between parties*" ([Lumineau & Oliveira, 2018, p. 446](#)).

Inter-organizational justice serves as a critical antecedent of relationship quality (as drawn out by, for instance, the IMP approach), which shapes relationship atmosphere in which both partnering organizations operate ([Ellram & Murfield, 2019](#); [Kumar et al., 1995](#)). Surprisingly, our analyses and synthesis

showed that differences between how each partner perceives justice in inter-organizational relationships are rarely studied. Prior literature offers very limited insights into how justice asymmetry may be conceptualized or how it impacts exchange relationships and their performance. One notable exception is the study by [Liu et al. \(2012\)](#). The authors operationalized justice measurements using a degree-symmetry approach ([Liu et al., 2012](#)) to capture both the magnitude and the (lack of) symmetry within the dyad. They found that mutual rather than asymmetric justice perceptions lead to positive relationship outcomes.

Justice asymmetry reflects divergent justice levels between parties within a dyad. In an inter-organizational relationship, if an organization perceives that its partner does not invest as many resources, the organization's perceived distributive justice is likely to diminish, thereby creating distributive justice asymmetry ([Hornibrook, Fearne, & Lazzarin, 2009](#); [Wang, Craighead, & Li, 2014](#)). For instance, the study by [Xie, Suh, and Kwon \(2010\)](#) examined specific asset investment (SAI) asymmetry which refers to assets (tangible and intangible) that are required to support inter-organizational relationships ([Heide & John, 1988](#)). Partners may rely on distributive justice perception to judge the counterpart's SAI. [Xie et al. \(2010\)](#) found that when SAI asymmetry is perceived negatively by the party, the inter-organizational relationship may encounter conflicts that deteriorate trust and relationship continuity.

Second, procedural justice perception is associated with whether the resource allocation process is compliant with rules of consistency, bias-suppression, accuracy, correctability, representativeness, and ethicality ([Leventhal, 1980](#)). Procedural justice asymmetry occurs when one party perceives that their counterpart exhibit procedurally inappropriate behavior like

altering agreed order quantity, excluding another party in the decision-making process, or intentionally hindering transparency ([Liu et al., 2012](#)). Asymmetry in procedural justice could undermine relationship continuity by weakening the existing governance and coordination ([Luo, 2008](#)). Prior studies have argued that the weaker party in a relationship may believe that procedures are not just, leading to relationship instability (e.g. [Matopoulos, Vlachopoulou, Manthou, & Manos, 2007](#)) and exploitation from the use of coercive power by the more powerful party.

Lastly, informational injustice reflects partners' awareness of an imbalanced information sharing flow, in which information is unjustly distributed, used, and managed in the relationship ([Liu et al., 2012](#)). Although complete symmetrical information is difficult for organizations to achieve, organizations strive to reduce information asymmetry to assure the reliability and qualifications of their partnering organizations with respect to the agreed offering ([Mascarenhas, Kesavan, & Bernacchi, 2008](#)). One way to reduce information asymmetry which could reduce joint costs ([Kim & Netessine, 2013](#)) and improve operational performance ([Lawson, Tyler, & Cousins, 2008](#)) is through collaborative efforts by both parties.

In summary, we show that prior literature drew out the prevalence of justice asymmetry and its negative consequences. Accordingly, researchers are encouraged to go beyond the direct effect of justice, and develop frameworks that highlight the types and levels of justice asymmetries, how they emerge, their impact, and the moderating factors that make those asymmetries either beneficial or detrimental to the relationship. For instance, researchers could examine whether the presence of asymmetry invokes a keen awareness of possible exploitation of a particular event, or affect the relationship and its

performance in the long-term, identifying another gap in prior literature – the event-entity duality. In other words, this duality is concerned with how the actual perception of justice applied to a particular incident in the relationship influences the perception of justice in the overall relationship life-cycle.

4.2 Justice dynamics in inter-organizational relationships

4.2.1 Event – entity duality

Over a relationship's lifecycle, justice perceptions between two partnering organizations can be characterized as a dynamic process of balancing and rebalancing partner's signals ([Ambrose & Schminke, 2003](#)). These signals are typically in response to the organizations' interactions which occur on a short-term basis in reaction to a particular incident, such as delivery conflicts or errors in orders. These are incident-bounded events which are time- and situation-dependent ([Hollensbe, Khazanchi, & Masterson, 2008](#)). In contrast, these signals accumulate through single events to reflect an overall relationship characteristic such as a commitment to resolve incidents mutually or to share innovation developments. Eventually, partnering organizations tend to form a more stable justice perception, a so-called entity justice perception, through a series of interactions, which tend to persist over time and across events ([Zacks & Tversky, 2001](#))

Our literature synthesis showed that the vast majority of prior studies attempted to distill a series of exchanges encounters down to an "entity" perception. Studies captured entity justice perception but did not explicitly differentiate entity from event (e.g. [Griffith et al., 2006](#)). Building on work from the intra-organizational justice literature, event and entity justice perceptions are correlated; entity justice could reinforce or undermine event justice

perception and vice versa, thereby creating a cyclical pattern ([Jones & Skarlicki, 2013](#)). Entity justice represents a context to the assessment of event justice, and in turn event judgements modify the knowledge on which an entity perception is based. Consequently, inter-organizational justice literature has yet to incorporate this event-entity duality both theoretically and empirically. Building on prior industrial marketing work and IMP in particular, inter-organizational relationships are embedded within surrounding networks ([Håkansson & Snehota, 1989](#)) while inter-organizational justice assumes that actors (e.g. individuals, teams, or firms) are interdependent entities, in which they create justice climate and are shaped by the climate ([Hu & Sheu, 2005](#); [Walumbwa et al., 2010](#)).

Once entity justice perception is established, some events are more impactful in altering entity perception than others. Types of events could include instances of order cancellations, contractual breach, and trust violations. Interestingly, only very few inter-organizational studies have examined justice perception of an event (e.g. [Kaynak, Sert, Sert, & Akyuz, 2015](#)). Our argument is that these events exhibit various characteristics that could have an impact on forming or revising entity justice perception. A study by [De Ruyter and Bloemer \(1999\)](#) suggested that supply chain events and their outcomes could be positive or negative. The latter invariably triggers more intense reactions than the former ([Taylor, 1991](#)). Other characteristics of the event could include its directness ([Jones & Skarlicki, 2013](#); [Roberson, 2006](#)) – whether the event happens within the exchange relationship or within the network. Therefore, we argue that examining different types of events would uncover a more nuanced conceptualization of justice perceptions.

4.2.2 Justice trajectories over time

Our synthesis of extant studies showed that prior literature has recognized that organizations attach different levels of importance to different justice dimensions ([Fearne, Duffy, & Hornibrook, 2005](#); [Zaefarian et al., 2016](#)), and drew out a lack of insights with regards to temporal aspects. As exchanges recur over time (following, for instance, prior industrial marketing management research), justice and time in social exchanges are intertwined ([Fortin, Cojuharenco, Patient, & German, 2016](#)). This is important because incorporating a temporal lens illustrates justice perception dynamics. Typically, adopting an example provided by [Liu, Mitchell, Lee, Holtom, and Hinkin \(2012\)](#); if firm A's justice perception increases from 2 to 4 and firm B's justice perception decreases from 7 to 5 on a 7-point scale (average of 3 and 6 respectively), a static approach would imply that firm A's reaction would be worse than firm B's reaction. Yet, through a dynamic lens, firm's A justice perception has improved while firm B's reaction has worsen, reflecting different trajectories. Consequently, it is important to understand both absolute justice levels and justice trajectories in predicting inter-organizational relationship outcomes. Yet, the notion of trajectories is absent in the inter-organizational justice literature.

A very small number of articles in the organizational behavior literature emphasize that justice trajectories exert unique influence in predicting job attitudes ([Hausknecht, Sturman, & Roberson, 2011](#)). These studies were built on the premise that trends inform human decisions ([Johnson, Tellis, & MacInnis, 2005](#); [Kahneman & Tversky, 1972](#)). For instance, using agent-based modeling, [Park, Sturman, Vanderpool, and Chan \(2015\)](#) found that changes in justice over time impact leader-member-exchange. Similarly, [Rubenstein, Allen, and Bosco \(2019\)](#) examined the interactive effect of justice level and justice trajectories

and found that justice trajectories moderate the relationship between absolute justice levels and behavioral reciprocity.

At the inter-organizational level, research investigating other attitudinal components contributed to the understanding of justice trajectories impact. For instance, [Palmatier, Houston, Dant, and Grewal \(2013\)](#) found that commitment trends (improving or declining) is a strong predictor of future sales growth beyond the actual level of commitment. In another exemplar study, [Ta, Esper, Ford, and Garcia-Dastuge \(2018\)](#) provide evidence of the importance of trustworthiness trends on relationship continuity following a contract breach in financial supply chains.

4.3 A multilevel level view of justice

Based on our analyses, organizational justice studies suffer from a lack of multilevel analysis. That is, the literature tends to emphasize only a single level of analysis, overlooking the nested nature of organizational justice ([House, Rousseau, & Thomashunt, 1995](#)). Therefore, extant studies generally treat justice at different levels as separate intellectual silos. This is not surprising as a recent review of inter-organizational relationship literature identified a multi-level analysis as a major blind spot ([Lumineau & Oliveira, 2018](#)).

Despite rich findings at the micro and macro levels, how one level influences and is influenced by other levels of analysis (as well as their antecedents and consequences) remains unclear ([Whitman, Caleo, Carpenter, Horner, & Bernerth, 2012](#)). One exception is the study by [Poujol, Siadou-Martin, Vidal, and Pellat \(2013\)](#) which reported that the perception on the partnering organization's salesperson significantly affects distributive and procedural justice at the inter-organizational level and therefore informs overall satisfaction with

the partnering organization. The interactions between personal and organizational levels of analysis and their impact on justice perception and relationship performance are underdeveloped ([Lu, 2006](#)). In order to advance this stream of research, the concept of social contagion (and applied specifically to the justice context, justice contagion) developed by [Degoey \(2000\)](#) might prove useful for future research studies.

Justice at the inter-organizational level ultimately relies on individual boundary-spanners to facilitate social and economic exchanges and convey expectations ([Perrone, Zaheer, & McEvily, 2003](#)). They also transform their justice perceptions towards the partnering organization into recommended actions initiated by the organization ([Luo, 2008](#)). That means, boundary-spanners' perception informs how a collective entity perceives one another in relation to justice and how the collective entity reacts to incidents in a relationship. However, the majority of studies has not, for instance, sampled psychological attributes of the boundary-spanner in relation to organizational justice, in which those attributes are important antecedents to the formation and revision of organizational justice ([Cropanzano, Rupp, Mohler, & Schminke, 2001](#); [Henle, 2005](#)).

Additionally, justice at the collective level (e.g. team - Roberson, 2005) is differentially shaped and reshaped by organizational members across organizational levels of hierarchy and with different levels of authority ([Sydow & Windeler, 1998](#)). The closest attempt by [Lu \(2006\)](#) showed that the consequences of interactional justice between executive level boundary-spanners in joint ventures buffers the consequences of interactional justice between joint ventures by mitigating the negative impact of cultural differences. The study measured the consequences of organizational justice (i.e. interactional

justice) at the inter-personal and inter-organizational levels, but it did not measure possible justice differences between both levels of analysis. Future studies may seek to measure the differences between justice perception ([Chen, Bliese, & Mathieu, 2005](#)).

Overall, our synthesis points to potential contributions that the incorporation of justice can bring to industrial marketing management scholars. We believe that the concept of justice helps to alleviate the current buyer-centric or one-sided focused research perspective. A number of prior B2B studies assume that the supplier is a passive actor being managed or controlled by an active buyer (Johnsen, 2018). By capturing the dyadic perspective of inter-organizational justice, it allows us to identify justice across the dyadic and to draw out potential justice asymmetries. Moreover, in addition to marketing studies focusing on relationship quality attributes such as trust and commitment, a focus on the impact of critical events such as interfirm conflicts or supply chain disruptions on justice over time can further advance our understanding of inter-organizational relationship management. These future studies should build on the differentiation between justice perceptions into event and entity duality, providing a temporal perspective of examining dyadic perceptions regarding those immediate events and how these are dealt with ([Jones & Skarlicki, 2013](#)) and thus impacting justice perception. Moreover, organizational justice contributes to future industrial marketing studies by highlighting the effect of justice perceptions on a wide array of inter-organizational outcomes such as relationship quality ([Gu & Wang, 2011](#)), perceived opportunism ([Samaha et al., 2011](#); [Trada & Goyal, 2017](#)), and conflicts ([Yang et al., 2012](#)).

5. Limitations and further research

This study has its limitations, some of which may stimulate future research. This review deployed the ISI Web of Knowledge database which has been used in a variety of different literature reviews. While we ensured rigorous and comprehensive review and synthesis procedures, our database selection and filtering processes may have omitted relevant studies. However, we remain confident that our comprehensive review has covered a wide range of management journal articles on the topic. Furthermore, even though only peer-reviewed articles were selected in the dataset, we cannot rule out the fact that quality levels of selected articles are not the same. Future studies could improve upon these limitations by complimenting this comprehensive literature review with an assessment of reliability and validity of results by focusing on management journals of similar standing. Also, deploying a comprehensive analysis and synthesis framework for such a multi-dimensional concept of justice in inter-organizational relationships highlights some previously under-researched linkages while failing to capture others. With further operationalization, the core research avenues derived from our synthesis should form the basis for empirically testing justice in different types of inter-organizational relationships such as alliances, joint ventures, and buyer-supplier relationships, as well as across different countries and sectors.

6. Conclusions and implications

Our systematic review indicates that the use of justice at the inter-organizational level has begun to gain momentum in the management literature. Based on our comprehensive analysis and synthesis, we draw out the changes of justice research over the last two decades before offering more insights into extant research with a focus on the use of different justice dimensions in extant studies,

the interactions between different justice dimensions, and their link to performance, as well as prior studies' contexts, adopted theories, and methods. This section acted as foundation for the synthesis part which paved the way for future research avenues, focusing on justice asymmetry, event-entity duality and justice dynamics, as well as the multilevel nature of justice in inter-organizational relationships.

Our review sheds light on a number of justice-related issues for practice. First, organizations may prevent negative relational outcomes by enacting fair practices and by ensuring that their understanding of justice issues are aligned with their partner's perceptions. Not being on the same wavelength may create misunderstandings thereby leading to tensions in the relationship. Second, managers should understand justice both at the level of their individual counterpart but also the justice climate at the organization or network levels. Finally, managers need to consider trends and histories of justice encounters. In particular, managers should learn to identify event characteristics in order to decrease occurrence of destructive events, and craft appropriate resolution approaches in case they do occur. Moreover, cognizant of how their counterparts are reacting to ongoing experiences over time, managers should avoid deteriorating justice perceptions. If a partnering organization believes that it is treated unfairly, organizations should deploy resources to show that they are improving their justice behavior towards a positive trend.

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Tables

Table 1 Publications by journals

Domain	Journal	No. of papers
Marketing	Industrial Marketing Management	8
	Journal of Marketing Channels	3
	Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing	3
	Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services	2
	Journal of Marketing Research	2
	Journal of International Marketing	2
	International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management	2
	Psychology and Marketing	1
	Marketing Letters	1
	Journal of Relationship Marketing	1
	Journal of Marketing Management	1
	Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice	1
	Journal of Marketing	1
	Journal of Business to Business Marketing	1
	Journal of Academy of Marketing Science	1
	European Journal of Marketing	1
Academy of Marketing Studies Journal	1	
		32
Operations & Technology Management	Journal of Operations Management	8
	International Journal of Production Economics	2
	International Journal of Physical Distribution and Logistics Management	2
	IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management	1
	Journal of Purchasing & Supply Management	1
	Journal of Construction Engineering and Management	1
	Production and Operations Management	1
	Journal of Business Logistics	1
Journal of Supply Chain Management	1	
		18
General Management	Journal of Business Research	2
	Academy of Management Journal	2
	Journal of Business Ethics ²	2
	International Journal of Managing Projects in Business	1
	British Journal of Management	1
	Journal of Business Ethics	1
	British Journal of Management	1
		10
Strategy	Strategic Management Journal	7
	Long Range Planning	1
		8
Others²		11

² *The "others" category includes journals from different domains (e.g. sector studies, international business) where only one or two publications appeared over the review timeframe. The full list is included in the 'Data in Brief' document.

Table 2 Article classification by research domain over time

	1995-1999	2000-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2015-2018*	Total
General Management	0	2	3	2	4	11
Marketing	2	3	4	12	11	32
Operations and Technology Management	1	0	2	8	7	18
Strategy	0	2	3	3	0	8
Others	0	2	3	1	4	10
Total	3	9	15	26	26	79

**The cut-off date for our data extraction was 2018, and therefore the last time period covers 4 instead of 5 years.*

Table 3 Justice within existing theoretical frameworks

Theoretical frameworks	Theoretical implications	Example authors	Key constructs
<i>Transaction Cost Economics (TCE)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Contractual framing impacts justice perception •Justice impacts the transaction cost calculus 	Crosno, Manolis, & Dahlstrom, 2013 ; Ireland & Webb, 2007 ; Poppo & Zhou, 2014 ; Trada & Goyal, 2017 ; Zhang & Jia, 2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Opportunistic behavior •Contracts •Specific investments •Behavioral uncertainty •Environmental uncertainty
<i>Social Exchange Theory (SET)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Firms determine their behavior by comparing rewards and costs of interactions and justice play an important role in this comparison 	Griffith et al., 2006 ; Hofer, Knemeyer, & Murphy, 2012 ; Luo et al., 2015 ; Qiu, 2018 ; Srinivasan, Narayanan, & Narasimhan, 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Communication •Relationship commitment •Relationship effectiveness •Conflict •Trust
<i>Resource Dependency Theory (RDT)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Firms are dependent on multiple exchange partners for essential inputs or outputs •Justice shapes relationships in dependence situations 	Hoppner, Griffith, & Yeo, 2014 ; Qiu, 2018 ; Zaefarian et al., 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Dependence concentration •Level of dependency
<i>Social Capital Theory (SCT)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Fairness influences the accumulation of social capital 	Kim, Lee, & Lee, 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Structural social capital •Relational social capital

Table 4 Summary of main findings, potential research questions, and managerial implications

Main findings	Gaps	Potential research avenues/questions	Managerial implications
<i>Justice studied from one side of the dyad</i>	Justice asymmetry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •What are the consequences of justice asymmetries across different inter-organizational relationships (such as buyer-supplier and buyer-seller)? •What are the antecedents of justice asymmetries across different inter-organizational relationships (such as buyer-supplier and buyer-seller)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Asymmetrical perceptions of justice can lead to inappropriate behavior/relationship outcomes. •Understanding of the antecedents of justice asymmetries will help managers avoid incongruent justice perceptions with their business partners.
<i>Justice studied at one single point in time looking at either entity or event justice</i>	Justice over time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •How do changes in justice trends/trajectories impact relationship outcomes such as innovation and relationship satisfaction? •What event characteristics lead to a reassessment of entity justice perception? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Managers and organizations need to ensure that justice is improving in the business relationship by better understanding justice trends/trajectories. •Avoid the occurrence of destructive events and draft appropriate recovery measures in case they occur.
<i>Justice studied at one level of analysis</i>	Multilevel justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •How do factors from different levels impact boundary spanners' justice perceptions? • How do justice perceptions differ between the individual and organizational levels of 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Understanding how justice perceptions are translated from the boundary spanner (e.g. managers at the operational and strategic levels) to the organizational level. •Insights into how justice perceptions are

		analysis?	formed.
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FIGURES

Figure 1 Theories used in prior studies

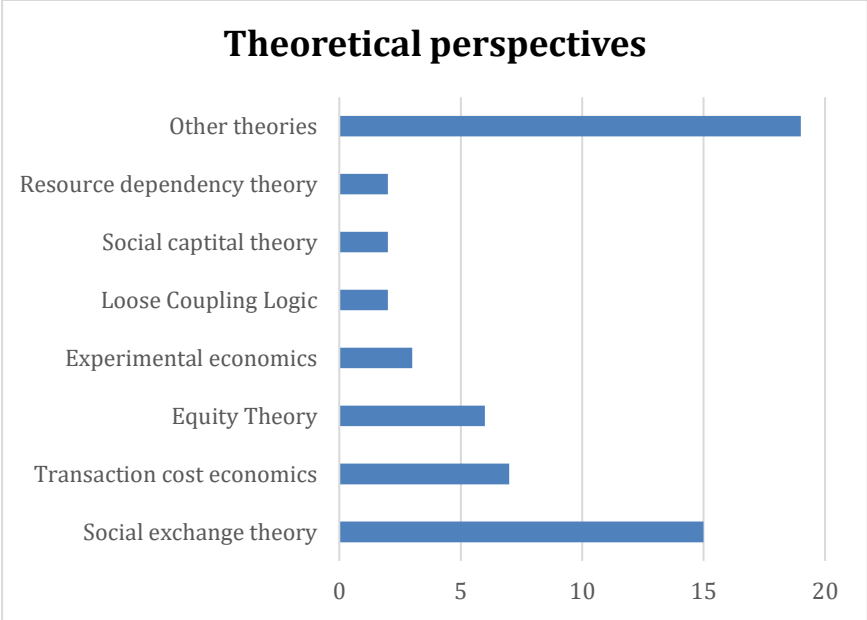


Figure 2 Articles classification by single vs. dyadic focus

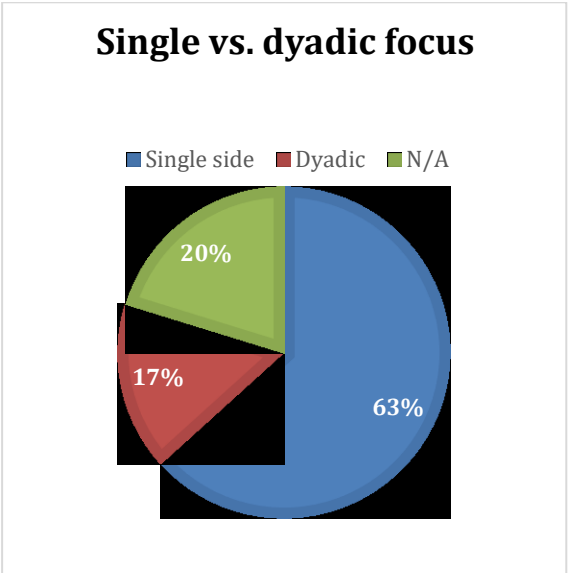


Figure 3 Justice dimensions in prior studies

