Guest Editorial:

Psychological Micro-Foundations of Business-to-Business Decision Making

Aybars Tuncdogan, King's Business School, King's College London[1]

Adam Lindgreen, Copenhagen Business School and University of Pretoria's Gordon Institute of Business Science[2]

Frans van den Bosch, Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University[3]

Henk Volberda, Amsterdam Business School, University of Amsterdam[4]

[1] Aybars Tuncdogan, Marketing Group, King's Business School, King's College London, Bush House, 30 Aldwych, London, UK. E-mail: aybars.tuncdogan@kcl.ac.uk.

[2] Adam Lindgreen, Department of Marketing, Copenhagen Business School, Solbjerg Plads 3, 2000 Frederiksberg C, Denmark and University of Pretoria's Gordon Institute of Business Science, 26 Melville Road, Illovo, Johannesburg, South Africa. E-mail: adli.marktg@cbs.dk.

[3] Frans van den Bosch, Department of Strategic Management and Entrepreneurship, Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University, Burgemeester Oudlaan 50, Rotterdam, the Netherlands. E-mail: fbosch@rsm.nl.

[4] Henk Volberda, Faculty of Business and Economics, Amsterdam Business School, University of Amsterdam, Plantage Muidergracht 12, Amsterdam, the Netherlands. E-mail: h.w.volberda@uva.nl.

1. Introduction

Growing interest in the psychological micro-foundations of marketing and management phenomena (e.g., Hadjikhani & LaPlaca, 2013; Hernaus & Černe, 2019; Hodgkinson & Healey, 2014; Powell, Lovallo & Fox, 2011; Tuncdogan, Lindgreen, van den Bosch & Volberda, 2019) has emerged for two main reasons. First, moving research toward more specific, lower levels of analysis is a natural extension of studies conducted at higher levels, offering a more fine-grained explanation of broad phenomena (Teece, 2007). Second, psychological theories explain different determinants of variance, so they complement rational/economic theories (Levinthal, 2011) and make significant contributions to studies' explanatory power. Considering the psychological micro-foundations of business-to-business (B2B) decision-making phenomena is likely to enhance understanding in this domain too.

A parallel research development is the growing interest in traits and individual difference perspectives (e.g., Antonakis, Day, & Schyns, 2012; Tuncdogan, Acar, & Stam, 2017a). These (relatively) stable variables can explain and predict behaviors and outcomes across different contexts and time periods, which makes them critical for tasks such as personnel selection. Individual differences affect both behaviors and relationships, such that emotional intelligence and personality traits, for example, can determine the success of relationships and business outcomes (Lopes, Salovey, & Straus, 2003; O'Boyle, Humphrey, Pollack, Hawver, & Story, 2011). Likewise, physiological traits relate to psychological variables, such that bodily ratios, hormones, and neurological properties affect behavior and outcomes too (Aspara & van den Bergh, 2014; Durante, Griskevicius, Cantu, & Simpson, 2014; Wong, Ormiston, & Haselhuhn, 2011). However, most of these variables have not been examined sufficiently in B2B contexts, leaving us with few insights into how they might affect supplier behavior, buyer behavior, and supplier–buyer relationships in B2B markets.

2. Objective and Process of the Special Issue

This special issue presents empirical and conceptual articles that examine how supplier behavior, buyer behavior, and their relationship can be explained in terms of (1) individual or collective psychological concepts, (2) stable psychological traits or trait-like differences, or (3) physiological traits that affect psychological variables. As the subsequent articles reveal, we consider both studies with a specific analysis level (e.g., individual, group, management team) and multi-level studies relevant for this special issue. The primary objective is to take a substantial step toward a better understanding of the psychological factors and processes that underlie B2B decision making. To achieve that objective, we undertook a carefully considered approach to issuing the call for submissions and defining the objectives and key research themes, as we detail next.

3. Content and Conceptual Structure of this Special Issue

A review of relevant previous research revealed notable themes in prior literature, as well as themes identified as requiring further research. These themes included individual and collective psychological concepts, such as:

- The effects of the individual or collective regulatory focus of the supplier, buyer, or both (e.g., regulatory fit, mismatch).
- The effects of identity-related variables (e.g., self-construal, self-efficacy) at the individual or team level.
- Values embraced by the supplier, buyer, or both (e.g., materialistic values, attitude to money, hedonistic/utilitarian values).
- Behavioral integration of the supplier team, buyer team, or both.
- Goal orientation.
- Temporal focus.
- Mood.

- Choice overload.
- Emotional contagion.

They also pertained to stable psychological traits or trait-like differences, including:

- The effects of the chronic regulatory focus or regulatory mode of the supplier, buyer, or both.
- The effects of the personality traits exhibited by key individual actor(s) on the supplier side, buyer side, or both.
- The effects of dark-triad personality traits of these key individual actors(s).
- Intelligence-related variables (e.g., cognitive, emotional, social intelligence; need for cognition).
- Composition of the B2B supplier teams, buyer teams, or both in terms of psychological differences (e.g., personality traits, regulatory focus).
- Differences in background variables, such as age, culture, or family background.
- Multi-level outcomes of the individual differences.

Finally, we found themes related to physiological traits, such as:

- Physical appearance of the supplier, buyer, or both (e.g., facial morphology, voice characteristics, height and body ratios).
- Composition of the B2B supplier teams, buyer teams, or both in terms of physiological differences (e.g., facial structure, height, gender).
- Genetic properties of the supplier, buyer, or both (e.g., DAT1 and COMT genes).
- Endocrinological properties (e.g., testosterone, cortisol, oxytocin).
- Gender and gender-related variables.
- Neurological properties (e.g., human leukocyte antigen DQB1*0602).

Noting some commonalities across these themes, we determined that this special issue would account for two key theoretical distinctions in psychology literature: whether predictors are distal or proximal and whether the distal predictors (i.e., traits) are physiological or psychological.

3.1. Distal vs. proximal differences

Research on individual differences (e.g., Antonakis et al., 2012; Tuncdogan & Ar, 2018) defines distal predictors as the traits or chronic differences of an individual actor; both IQ and the Big Five personality traits tend to remain stable for a person's adult life. Proximal predictors instead refer to less stable psychological variables that stem partially from distal traits, such as motivations, orientations, and values. Therefore, behavioral outcomes of distal traits tend to be mediated by proximal variables that link more closely to the outcome.

For example, a *promotion focus* for goal attainment stems from upstream personality variables, such as openness to experience (Gorman et al., 2012; Lanaj et al., 2012; Tuncdogan, van den Bosch, & Volberda, 2015), but it also is conceptually close to exploration (March, 1991), because a promotion focus (1) increases individual risk-taking tendencies (Hamstra, Bolderdijk, & Veldstra, 2011), and exploration as an activity requires risk taking (Voss, Sirdeshmukh, & Voss, 2008); (2) heightens attraction to novel ideas, products, and technologies (Friedman & Förster, 2001; Tuncdogan & Ar, 2018; Zhou, Wang, Song, & Wu, 2017), and exploration is an antecedent of novel ideas, products, and technologies (Rosenkopf & Nerkar, 2001); and (3) increases creativity (Zhou, Hirst, & Shipton, 2012), which aligns with an essential outcome of exploration, namely, creation (Lavie & Drori, 2012) (see also Tuncdogan et al., 2015, Table 1), Therefore, openness to experience is a distal predictor of exploration (Keller & Weibler, 2014), and promotion focus is a more proximal predictor (Mom, Tuncdogan & van den Bosch, 2019; Tuncdogan et al., 2017b). Similarly, research that leverages upper-echelon theories (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Mason, 2007) and relies on demographic data (e.g., gender, age, demographic similarity with middle management; see Abdullah, Ismail, & Nachum, 2016; Belot & Serve, 2018; Heyden, Sidhu, & Volberda, 2018) tends to focus on distal predictors, but the psychological mechanisms through which they act represent more proximal predictors.

At collective levels of analysis (e.g., team, department, organization), distal predictors generally refer to composition elements (e.g., distribution or mean level of a certain trait such as group members' abstract reasoning, oxytocin level, or gender; Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2013). In addition, several proximal variables, including regulatory focus, exist at higher levels of analysis (e.g., Faddegon, Scheepers, & Ellemers, 2008; Johnson, Smith, Wallace, Hill, & Baron, 2015).

3.2. Physiological versus psychological traits

Distal predictors can be further classified as physiological or psychological traits (Tuncdogan et al., 2017a). Several physiological traits determine decision-making tendencies, according to prior research, including people's heights (Elgar, 2016), facial width-to-height ratio (fWHR; Kamiya, Kim, & Park, 2019), voice characteristics (Mayew, Parsons, & Venkatachalam, 2013), endocrinological properties (e.g., oxytocin level; Mikolajczak, Gross, Lane, Corneille, de Timary, & Luminet, 2010), neurological properties (Laureiro-Martinez, 2019; Laureiro-Martínez, Brusoni, Canessa, & Zollo, 2015), and genetic properties (Li, Wang, Arvey, Soong, Saw, & Song, 2015). For example, a study using electroencephalogram (EEG) data achieved 92.5% accuracy in classifying leaders as transformational (Balthazard, Waldman, Thatcher, & Hannah, 2012). Another study shows that in group negotiations, the group with a higher average fWHT has an advantage (Yang, Tang, Qu, Wang, & Denson, 2018). Yet management and marketing research is still nascent in this area, with few studies of B2B contexts.

In contrast, management and marketing literature addresses multiple psychological traits, such as intelligence (Gensowski, 2018), multiple intelligences (Macnamara, 2016), emotional intelligence (Clarke & Mahadi, 2017), personality traits (Frieder, Wang, & Oh, 2018), selfregulation capacity (Liu & Yu, 2017), and dark-triad personality traits (Buyl, Boone, & Wade, 2019). Findings show that even seemingly negative personality traits, like the dark triad and narcissism, can bring potential benefits in organizational settings (Reina, Zhang, & Peterson, 2014). Another research stream examines physiological trait-based origins of psychological traits; genes likely influence the emergence of neuroticism for example (Aluja, Balada, Blanco, Fibla, & Blanch, 2019). Psychological traits stem partially or fully from physiological traits; that is, the effects of physiological traits are partially or fully mediated by their effects on psychological traits.

With these distinctions, we establish the core conceptual structure of this special issue as in Figure 1. Yet the articles on this issue are not limited to individual differences or the variables that stem from them (i.e., the *nature* of decision making); they also account for external factors (i.e., the *nurture* aspect). In this sense, three external factors are highly relevant to B2B decisions: the organizational environment, interorganizational relational aspects, and market characteristics.

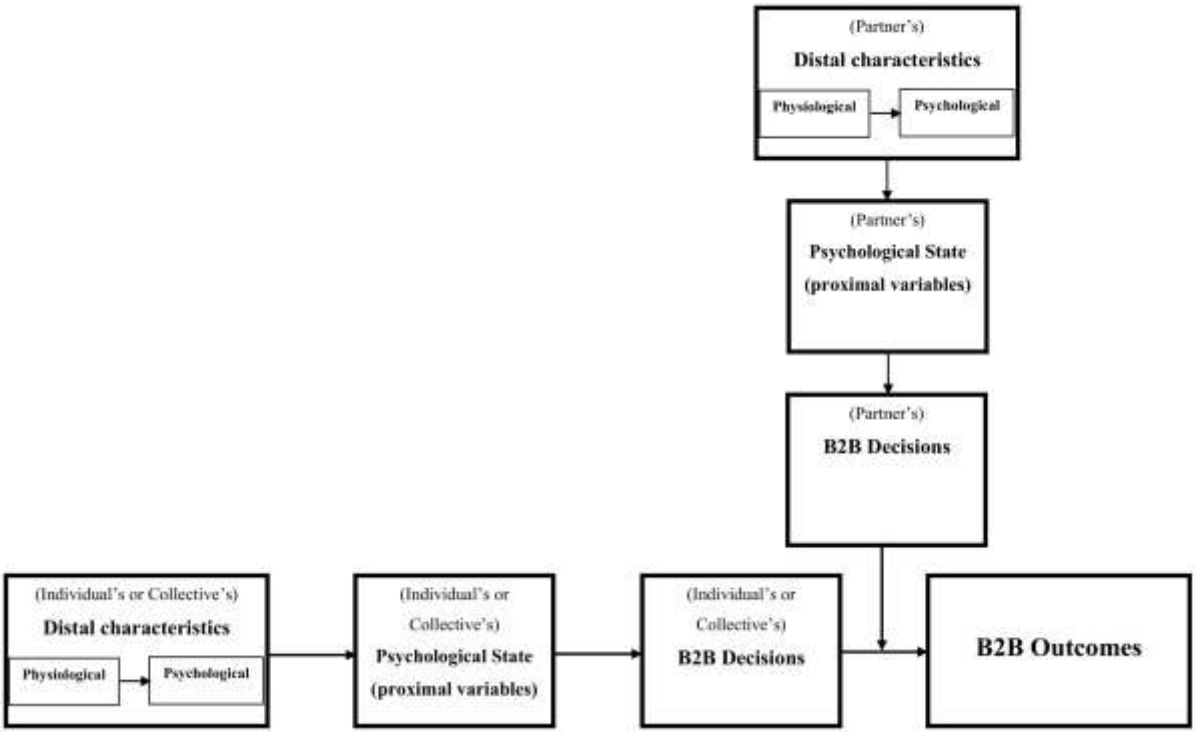

Fig. 1. Core conceptual model for this special issue.

3.3. Organizational environments

The immediate environment of the decision-making individual or collective (e.g., B2B sales team, purchasing department) comprises several aspects that can affect decision makers' motivation and ability. Key factors are the decision maker's hierarchical position in the organization and the amount of autonomy this decision maker has. If a decision is not made by the top management team of an organization, various formal and informal organizational coordination mechanisms likely act on decision makers (e.g., centralization, formalization, connectedness; Tsai, 2002; Tuncdogan et al., 2017b). In terms of resources, slack resources (financial or otherwise; Vanacker, Collewaert, & Zahra, 2017; Wang, Choi, Wan & Dong, 2016), the age and size of the organization, and its primary organizational culture (Cameron & Quinn, 2011; Zheng, Yang, & McLean, 2010) represent salient considerations. From a situational strength perspective (e.g., Meyer, Dalal, & Hermida, 2010), the social, structural, and even physical design of an organization can drive various psychological mechanisms (Ayoko & Ashkanasy, 2019; Elsbach & Pratt, 2007). For example, is the environment nurturing, emphasizing risk taking and innovation, or does it push people to be careful and avoid making mistakes?

3.4. Interorganizational relational aspects

With our focus on B2B decision making, we must go beyond the organizational environments of each partner to consider different aspects of their relationship, such as its duration, whether it is close or more arm's-length (e.g., Gadde & Snehota, 2000; La Rocca, Perna, Snehota, & Ciabuschi, 2017), and the levels of financial and emotional resources invested in it (e.g., Leek & Christodoulides, 2012). The extent of the parties' commitment to the relationship, and why (e.g., de Ruyter, Moorman, & Lemmink, 2001; Sarangee, Schmidt, & Calantone, 2019), including the possibility of degenerative episodes (e.g., Westberg, Stavros, & Wilson, 2011), represents another crucial consideration, which might relate to the balance of power between them too (e.g., Rehme, Nordigården, Ellström, & Chicksand, 2016). Legal or social factors also might be keeping the companies together (e.g., alliance agreements).

3.5. Market characteristics

Finally, industry- and market-level factors affect B2B decisions. The market structure, competitive intensity, and turbulence (level and type, such as technological or political; Chen, Neubaum, Reilly, & Lynn, 2015; Zahra, 2019) have clear impacts (e.g., Pe'er, Vertinsky, & Keil, 2016). The transaction costs in the market (Bunduchi, 2008) also might determine whether it is preferable to work with another firm or conduct business functions in-house (e.g., Good & Calantone, 2019; Zhang, Fang, Yang, & Zhang, 2018). The national cultures of operating markets define decisions and potentially create friction, when the relationship spans different markets (Rosenbloom & Larsen, 2003). Finally, various institutional pressures exist in the market environment (Beddewela & Fairbrass, 2016; Khanagha & Vermeulen, 2019). Taking these external factors into account, we derive the framework in Figure 2, which we call the B2B interaction model.

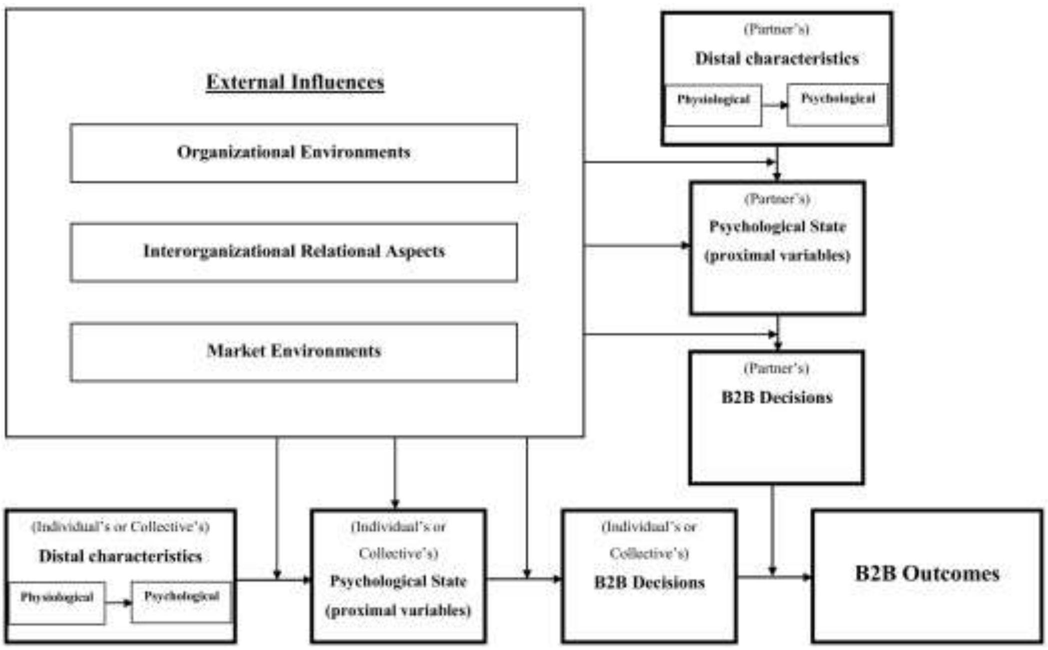

Fig. 2. Business-to-business interaction model.

4. Structure of the Special Issue

Because the articles included in this special issue span many of these topics and themes, we avoid imposing a neat but potentially uninformative classification on the broad span of issues they investigate. Instead, we jump into summaries of their insights by starting with the first article in this special issue, Chanchai Tangpong, Ken Hung and Jin Li's "Toward an agent-system contingency theory for behavioral supply chain and industrial marketing research." This specific representation of contingency theory rests on the assumptions of both agent decision authority and bounded rationality. In such a setting, both agent-level (personality traits of human agents in supply chains and industrial marketing) and system-level (inter- or intra-firm) properties influence managerial choices in supply chain and industrial marketing settings, interactively and concurrently. Combining experiments and surveys, the methodological framework offers a route to extend behavioral supply chain and industrial marketing research by applying the proposed agent-system contingency theory. Two empirical illustrations, pertaining to opportunism and vertical integration, reveal how this agent-system contingency theory and its methodological framework can lead to new insights. That is, this study offers both theoretical and methodological advances, at multiple levels, that researchers can leverage to advance their behavioral supply chain and industrial marketing research agendas.

Benjamin Lawrence and Patrick Kaufmann acknowledge that channel members are not the only ones with important relationships; they also enter into significant relationships with the brands that they represent or sell. Therefore, in "Channel members' relationships with the brands they sell and the organizations that own them," the authors draw comparisons with consumer–brand relationships to demonstrate that downstream agents co-create brand meanings, but unlike the case in extant consumer models, brand relationships in B2B settings tend to be distinct from the links that downstream agents form with brand owners/managers.

Furthermore, these unique brand relationships feature high switching costs and long-term investments. According to a four-year research project that relies on both ethnographic and survey data, these brand relationships are critical for channel management. In addition, the perceived stability of the corporate channel partner and perceptions that the corporate identity overlaps with the brand identity largely define downstream channel members' relationships with the corporation.

The next article also addresses an overlooked element of alliances, but in this case, the focal question pertains to "The role of regulatory focus and trustworthiness in knowledge transfer and leakage in alliances." That is, Xinlu Qui and Sven Haugland propose that boundary spanners' regulatory focus can promote tacit knowledge transfers while also preventing knowledge leaks in strategic alliances. Perceptions of partner trustworthiness also might moderate this influence of regulatory focus. Survey data from 142 firms that actively transfer knowledge indicate that when boundary spanners have a promotion focus and perceive that their partner is trustworthy, it has direct positive effects on tacit knowledge transfers. If instead they have a prevention focus but still trust the partner, it not only has a positive effect on transfers of tacit knowledge but also exerts a negative effect on knowledge leakage.

Finally, Tommi Mahlamäki, Timo Rintamaki, and Edwin Rajah recognize that successful key account management initiatives usually require sufficient individual-level performance by key account managers, so a key consideration is "The role of personality and motivation on key account manager job performance." With a structural equation model that includes personality, motivation, and key account manager job performance, the authors show that both learning and performance orientations determine key account managers' job performance. These motivational constructs also exhibit links to personality traits; extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability all reveal significant relationships. In particular, extraversion and conscientiousness each is linked to both learning and performance orientations.

5. Avenues for Further Research

The content of this special issue and its conceptual structure, depicted in our B2B interaction model, suggest various directions for continued research. First, the theoretical and empirical studies in this special issue cite their limitations as inspiration; for example, Tangpong, Hung, and Li examine their agent-system contingency theory model by applying it to opportunism and vertical integration decisions, so opportunities clearly exist to test other decisions using this model. Likewise, Mahlamäki, Rintamaki, and Rajah mention that their carefully selected set of variables successfully explain some variance in performance, but the majority of the change in this variable remains unaccounted for, so further research could extend their model beneficially by adding more variables. Lawrence and Kauffman's study focuses mainly on longtime franchisees; they call for studies that address newly formed relationships to complement their findings. Similarly, Qiu and Haugland address a specific type of decision maker (boundary spanners) and accordingly note the need to study other relevant actors, such as middle managers and other employees.

Second, the studies in this special issue address some parts of the B2B interaction model, leaving several other areas unexplored. For example, Mahlamäki, Rintamaki, and Rajah advance our knowledge by examining the indirect effects of distal psychological variables (personality traits) on B2B outcomes (performance) through their effects on two proximal variables (learning and performance orientations). Tangpong, Hung, and Li examine the interaction of distal psychological and external variables on B2B decisions. Therefore, in line with our conceptual model, continued research could examine both sides of the interaction. Likewise, Qiu and Haugland focus on the relationship between a proximal variable (regulatory focus) and B2B outcomes, while Lawrence and Kaufmann focus on the B2B interaction itself. To build on these studies, further research might clarify the precise role of distal variables in these models. Notably, we did not receive any submissions dealing with physiological traits, despite its inclusion in the call for manuscripts. Finally, we acknowledge that the B2B interaction model itself is preliminary and open to further conceptual development.

Although the articles are diverse in their methodological forms (e.g., survey, experimental, qualitative), there is room for more. This research domain would benefit greatly from traditional methods, such as combinations of lab and field experiments, as well as from incorporating novel methods that have gained popularity in recent years. For example, an agent-based modeling perspective might shine new light on B2B decisions and interactions (e.g., East, Uncles, Romaniuk, & Lomax, 2016). Neurological tests (e.g., EEG, fMRI, PET) and endocrinological assessments might illuminate some of these mechanisms too. The use of Big Data, together with computational modeling or artificial intelligence (e.g., support vector machines; Ghaddar & Naoum-Sawaya, 2018), may help produce innovative results too.

6. Acknowledgments

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