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Tania von der Heidt
Southern Cross University

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Abstract

This paper synthesises the diverse literature on interorganisational relationships (IORs) by comparing the ten theories explaining the IOR phenomenon. The aim is not only to gain a better appreciation of the relative contributions of the different theories, but also to develop an integrative perspective as a foundation for developing models of collaborative IORs.

In order to analyse and integrate IOR theories effectively, it is necessary to describe and discuss the conceptual and empirical contributions of the various theories. The first of four subsections summarises the survey of ten IOR theories in a diagrammatic representation of the contributions of and linkages between the theories. Extant conceptual and empirical work based on multiple IOR theories is reviewed next. In the third section a metatheoretical profile of the ten IOR theories is developed. Finally, these metatheoretical profiles are synthesised in terms of (1) level of analysis, (2) research tradition and (3) relative strengths and weaknesses.

Reconciling interorganisational relationships: A metatheoretical analysis and synthesis of ten IOR theories

The study of interorganisational relationships (IORs) was once considered a relatively under-researched area (Sweeney 1972; Starbuck 1976; Mattsson 1978). The last three decades, however, have seen an upsurge of papers dealing with the role of technology and other environmental characteristics indicative of attempts to shift concern away from the internal workings of organisations toward an open systems approach (Heide 1994).

Regrettably, the “conceptual confusion and overlap” in the IOR literature diagnosed more than twenty five years ago by Benson (1975, p. 229) has become even more pronounced in recent times as the volume of conceptual and empirical work has expanded. In her writings on the determinants of IORs, Oliver (1990) noted that “(t)he study of interorganizational relationships (IORs) has begun to suffer the consequences of its own growth in importance” resulting in “a vast but highly fragmented literature on IORs” (p. 241).

The plethora of approaches describing, measuring and seeking to explain IORs and their relationships with other organisational and environmental variables is related to (1) the complexity and multilayered character of the IOR domain, as well as (2) the availability of different ‘grand theories’ (institutional economics, organisational theories of the firm, theory of social exchange) pertaining to specific aspects of IORs. Some argue that this diversity of approaches is a strength of organisational research, as it yields a more realistic view of organisations than would any single approach (Eisenhardt 1989). However, it is the *integration* of the accumulation of existing literature that delivers the wisdom for understanding IORs (Oliver 1990). The challenge, clearly, lies in properly reconciling this polyglot of theories. Therein lies the aim of this paper.

A survey of IOR theories

Ten main approaches or theories offer guidance on IOR research:

1. Transaction cost (TC) theory
2. Agency theory
3. Resource dependency (RD) theory
4. Marketing theory
5. Relational exchange (RE) theory
6. Interaction theory
7. Political economy (PE) theory
8. Relationship Marketing (RM) theory
9. Stakeholder theory
10. Network theory

A survey was undertaken, systematically examining each theory using a common set of criteria: (1) theoretical foundations, (2) problem orientation, (3) unit of analysis and scope of theory, (4) basic concepts, (5) contribution to understanding of IORs and (6) criticisms¹. The contributions of each approach to the IOR discipline are summarised in **Figure 1**. Each approach is classified in terms of

¹ Due to the size of the review, it has not been included in this paper, but is available at request from the author.

the main underlying unit of analysis, so that a paradigmatic orientation moving from transactions to relationships to networks is reflected:

- (1) single dyads or micro relationships
- (2) multiple dyads or meso relationships or portfolios of IORs (PIORs)
- (3) networks or macro relationships.

Extant multi-IOR theory approaches

A number of academicians have attempted to profile two or more IOR theories, in order to arrive at a more holistic view of the IOR phenomenon. An overview of these efforts is presented in **Table 1**.

As is evident from the table, no single study has given consideration to more than four of the major approaches contributing to the IOR discipline. In so doing, some authors have elected to focus on contrasting perspectives, such as the economic-based TC theory and PE theory, which combines socio-political and economic considerations (Robicheaux and Coleman 1994; Möller and Wilson 1995a). Others have studied complementary approaches, such as marketing mix, relationship marketing and network theories (Bowring-Greer, Gardiner et al. 1997; Mattsson 1997; Gummesson 1999).

An *expanded* view of the theories or perspectives relating to a phenomenon delivers greater insights than a narrow view based on a single theory. However, the enormity of the task of comparing ten IOR theories has probably deterred researchers from attempting this route. Dwyer et al (1995) also caution that while the benefit from theoretical pluralism in the study of IORs is clear, “the limits of data availability and statistical analysis thwart tests of truly comprehensive models” (p. 73). They invite a focused inquiry into particular relationship phenomena integrating multiple theories of interfirm and interpersonal behaviour, but point out that this is a task for at least the next decade. The new millennium has arrived and an integrative approach to IORs has been attempted here. It takes the form of the previous descriptive summary and the following metatheoretical analysis of the ten theories.

A metatheoretical profile of ten IOR theories

Meta-analysis is a research approach in which the results from many partially comparable conceptual and empirical studies examining a certain phenomenon or relationships between similar variables are systematically combined and integrated. The appeal of meta-analysis is as a process to cut through the complexity of research literature. Typically, quantitative methods are applied to the problem of combining results from different analytical studies. However, Cooper (1989; 1990) makes a case for concentrating more on substantive interpretation rather than precise quantification². Following his advice, the meta-analysis employed here does not make use of statistics for two reasons:

- The studies analysed are at a broader conceptual level than is appropriate for quantitative analysis. The focus is on understanding how the various theories contribute to the IOR phenomenon.

² For studies in quantitative studies in meta-analysis see (Capon, Farley et al. 1990) (Churchill, Ford et al. 1985) (Farley and Lehmann 1986).

- The studies address the same general proposition - that a firm's collaborative IORs increase its performance - but not testable hypotheses.

Cooper (1989) refers to this type of meta-analysis as an *integrative research review*, whereby the aim is to present the state of knowledge concerning the relations of interest and to highlight important issues that research has left unresolved. Similar to primary research, an integrative review involves problem formulation, data collection, evaluation of data points, analysis and interpretation and presentation of results. The first four steps have been dealt with in earlier research – the focus here is on synthesis and interpretation.

Integrative research reviews may be described using six characteristics - focus, goal, perspective, coverage, organisation and audience (Cooper 1990). Using Cooper's categories, the following points outline this integrative research review:

1. The focus is on presenting IOR theories, as opposed to research methods and outcomes.
2. Multiple goals are pursued (1) to identify central issues in the IOR theories, (2) to critique the theories and (3) to integrate IOR theories through generalisation
3. The attempted perspective is one of neutral representation, notwithstanding that some theories are clearly more relevant to the research than others
4. The size of the IOR literature defies an exhaustive treatment. The coverage attempted is representative of the 'top' ten IOR theories only.
5. The review is organised on a conceptual basis, ie each IOR theory was described and analysed in turn, as opposed to an historical or methodological organisation.
6. The review has been written with a specialised or general scholar in mind.

With the exception perhaps of the TC approach, none of the approaches are theoretical monoliths. However, important differences exist in terms of their underlying assumptions. By comparing them, a better understanding can be gained on their relative contributions to the phenomenon of interest, ie IORs³. Möller and Wilson (1995a) provided a basic, non-quantitative meta-analysis or integrative research review of the IOR phenomenon represented by four IOR theories. To facilitate a comparison of the ten different IOR approaches, a metatheoretical profile of each theory is developed based on the seven dimensions employed by Möller and Wilson:

1. Problem orientation
2. Disciplinary background
3. Theoretical orientation, ie objectivist versus subjectivist orientation, realist versus nominalist ontology, positivist versus antipositivist epistemology, voluntary versus deterministic view of human nature
4. Level of analysis, ie single dyads (IOR), multiple dyads (PIOR), networks
5. Methodological orientation, ie nomothetic versus idiographic methodology
6. Research methods, ie qualitative (eg case studies) versus quantitative (eg surveys)
7. Focus on structure versus process, ie static versus dynamic view

The results of the analysis are presented in **Table 2 (A) and (B)**. This metatheoretical profile substantially extends that of Möller and Wilson. It provides a more holistic view of the IOR phenomenon by capturing and comparing ten instead of only four different IOR approaches.

³ Since the approaches are not internally homogeneous (with the exception perhaps of TC and agency theories), the following analysis is, of course, subjective and can be debated.

A synthesis of the metatheoretical profiles

Using the metatheoretical profile developed in the previous section, there are three ways for arriving at a synthesis of the ten IOR approaches: (1) a positioning of the theories in terms of the main level of analysis, (2) a positioning of the theories in terms of the underlying research traditions, (3) an assessment of the theories' relative strengths and weaknesses as well as the ways in which the theories converge or diverge.

1. Positioning of IOR theories in terms of unit of analysis

As illustrated in **Figure 1** and noted **Table 2**, three levels of analysis are discernible in the IOR research:

- single dyads or micro IORs
- multiple dyads or PIOR or meso IORs
- networks.

At the first level a distinction can also be made between IOR of a more transactional or relational type. TC, agency, RD and most marketing theories tend to focus on transactional dyads. A greater relational orientation is reflected in RE, interaction and PE approaches. Multiple dyads are the main level of analysis in relationship marketing and stakeholder theories. Network theory draws on the preceding dyadic levels, but focuses on networks of relationships, the highest level of IOR analysis.

2. Positioning of IOR theories in terms of research tradition

Together with the identification of the problem orientation of the IOR theory, the key assumptions on which the theory is based provide an abstract summary of the approach and help to position it among other approaches focusing on the same phenomenon.

One can note that all research approaches are more or less consistent in the sense that the IOR problem orientation or goals match the theoretical orientation and the methodological practices. For example, with its aim at understanding the interaction processes, the interaction approach implies a subjective, voluntarist view and idiographic methodology. By contrast, the objective world view and nomothetic methodology of the RE approach is in accordance with the explanatory and predictive nature of the applied social exchange theory.

According to Stern and Reve (1980), the traditional IOR literature consists of two main research streams - the microeconomic and the behavioural paradigms.

- The microeconomic paradigm draws on elements of functional and institutional marketing theory as well as neoclassical economics in explaining the way in which individual marketing functions are allocated across types of institutions. Its world view is objective, and the general decision criterion underlying its models is economic efficiency. The IOR approaches subscribing to this basic paradigm include TC, agency, RD and marketing perspectives. The microeconomic view has been criticised for failing to account for the processes that characterise relationships between channel members or partner organisations (Robicheaux and El-Ansary 1976).
- The behavioural research paradigm has evolved in response to the limitations of the microeconomic model. Its primary focus is on the design of mechanisms for controlling the role performance of individual channel members or partner organisations. Its theoretical orientation is subjective. With their concern for socio-political and relational aspects of channel structure, RE, interaction, RM, stakeholder and network theories employ principles of the behavioural research

paradigm. However, the paradigm has been criticised on two counts: (1) It fails to specify the relationships between behavioural phenomena and their antecedents and consequences; (2) it gives only limited attention to the effect of contextual variables (Heide 1994).

It has been suggested that the two paradigms should be viewed jointly (Stern and Reve 1980; Heide 1994) if channels theory is to move toward a unified theory, rather than fragment into the separate economic and behavioural streams. PEP is the only one of these approaches that overtly distinguishes between the political and economic aspects of IORs while emphasising the importance of assessing the interaction of these aspects. While the stakeholder perspective contains elements of both political and economic aspects, they are not explicitly referred to. Robicheaux and Coleman (1994) caution researchers against attempting to include economic and socio-political aspects in a singly formative construct. To do so runs the risk of “poor model fits, confounding of the operational measures, and the inability to support operationalisations of exchange relationship structure across different contexts...” (p. 42).

These two ‘rival’ paradigms typify the differences between the ten IOR research approaches in terms of European versus North American research culture (Möller and Wilson 1995a). European researchers prominent in network, interaction and partly RM approaches, embrace the understanding ontology and methodology, leading to description through ideographic methods. North Americans, dominating particularly the TC, RE, PE and stakeholder approaches as well as the explanatory research in the RM approach, subscribe to the objectivist orientation, providing propositions and models that are empirically tested through nomothetic measurement and analysis. Similarly, RM and stakeholder theories have a clear focus on management of IORs, whereas network definitions focus more on relationships as they are than as they should be (Mattsson 1997).

IOR theories may also be classified in terms of the static versus dynamic (or structure versus process) dimension inherent in their research tradition. IOR structure and content are well addressed in theories, such as TC, agency, RD and PE; however the capturing of processes constituting IORs is more difficult. The subjective theories (eg interaction, network) with their aim to describe and understand are better able to capture the complexity of more long-term IORs and, hence, have an edge over the objective theories (eg RE, stakeholder), which focus on explanation and prediction (Möller and Wilson 1995a). Johanson and Mattsson (1987) develop this dichotomy in more depth by comparing the TC approach rooted firmly in the neoclassical framework focusing on conditions for stable equilibrium with the network approach stressing the action possibilities within IORs. Both pairs of authors call for more methodological attention and development to the domain of dynamism.

3. Assessment of theories’ relative strengths/weaknesses and areas of convergence/divergence

The ‘from above’ perspective provided by the metatheoretical analysis gives a better understanding of their relative strengths and weaknesses. Möller and Wilson (1995a) suggest that it is easier to recognise trade-offs between approaches. For instance, what the PE approach has gained in its ability to explain complex channel structures, it has lost in ability to predict governance structures when compared to TC theory. Similarly, while the network approach has been able to provide a highly appealing description of industrial markets using its interpretative and ideographic orientations, it is difficult to integrate with more objective attempts to capture the IOR phenomenon. Problems with theories can be overcome by integrating other approaches. For example, the importation of relational concepts from RE theory has resolved the omission of TC theory of safeguarding transaction-specific investments, other than vertical integration. RE suggests that

dependent parties will act to reduce dependence on more powerful parties by engaging in bonding behaviour (ie making offsetting specific investments by adopting a more relational approach) (Robicheaux and Coleman 1994).

IOR theories are likely to converge in certain aspects and diverge in others, as Mattson (1997) found in his comparison of marketing, RM and network approaches. For example, RM shares with marketing the notion that the seller takes the initiative, however it differs from marketing by considering relational as well as economic exchange. RM is similar to network theory in that the IOR is seen as an investment, yet RM does not take into account the emergent nature of the network of interconnected IORs.

Theoretical advances result from convergence and cross-fertilisation of aspects of IOR theories (Robicheaux and Coleman 1994). For example, given their focus on dyadic transactions and their objective world view, the TC, agency and marketing theory views of the firm can be considered complementary (Zinkhan and Pereira 1994). Likewise stakeholder theory may be regarded as a special case of network theory (Thorelli 1986) or as an implicit part of marketing (Kotler 1972, p. 47; Polonsky 1995). An instance of cross-fertilisation is the concept of networks, which relies on an expanded version TC theory to explain the continuing development of long-term relationships in marketing activities and channels of distribution (Jarillo 1988). In a network of firms with high goal compatibility, if the total cost of a function can be reduced through cooperation to the point that total outsourced cost is less than the internal cost, then that function should be performed by a 'networked' firm.

Robicheaux and Coleman identify areas of divergence within IOR theories, notably within the RE paradigm. In some cases the differences are merely semantic. For example, Reve and Stern (1986) use the term 'norms of exchange' for one of the dimensions of transaction climate, and this corresponds closely with Dwyer and Oh's (1987) term 'trust'. Robicheaux and Coleman themselves add to the ambiguity by equating 'solidarity' with 'trust' in their conceptualisation of relationship quality. More significant differences are evident in the overall conceptualisation of 'relationalism'. Not only is it variously termed relationalism (Boyle, Dwyer et al. 1992; Simpson and Mayo 1997), relationship quality (Dwyer, Schurr et al. 1987; Robicheaux and Coleman 1994; Dorsch, Swanson et al. 1998) or relational syndrome (Noordewier, John et al. 1990), the scales used reflect significantly different constructs.

In conclusion, it is appropriate to recall Möller and Wilson's (1995a) suggestion that if researchers try to develop approaches that include benefits from several ontologically different disciplines, they must tolerate metatheoretically somewhat 'fuzzy' theorisation. A *pluralistic* approach is the only way to try to achieve understanding of the complex IOR phenomenon. "The economic perspective cannot penetrate the social aspects of exchange; resource dependency theory does not explain the cognitive aspects of organizational learning; social exchange theory does not cover the market and transaction-specific factors addressed by transaction cost economics" (Möller and Wilson 1995b p. 46). Each approach provides only a partial view of the IOR phenomenon. It is clear that "being both tolerant and 'multilingual' would help us to achieve a better understanding of our joint research domain" (Möller and Wilson 1995a p. 608). We should value the polyglot of IOR theories which *in combination* yield a more realistic view of the IOR phenomenon than the adoption of a single paradigm.

Figure 1 Ten research approaches for understanding IORs

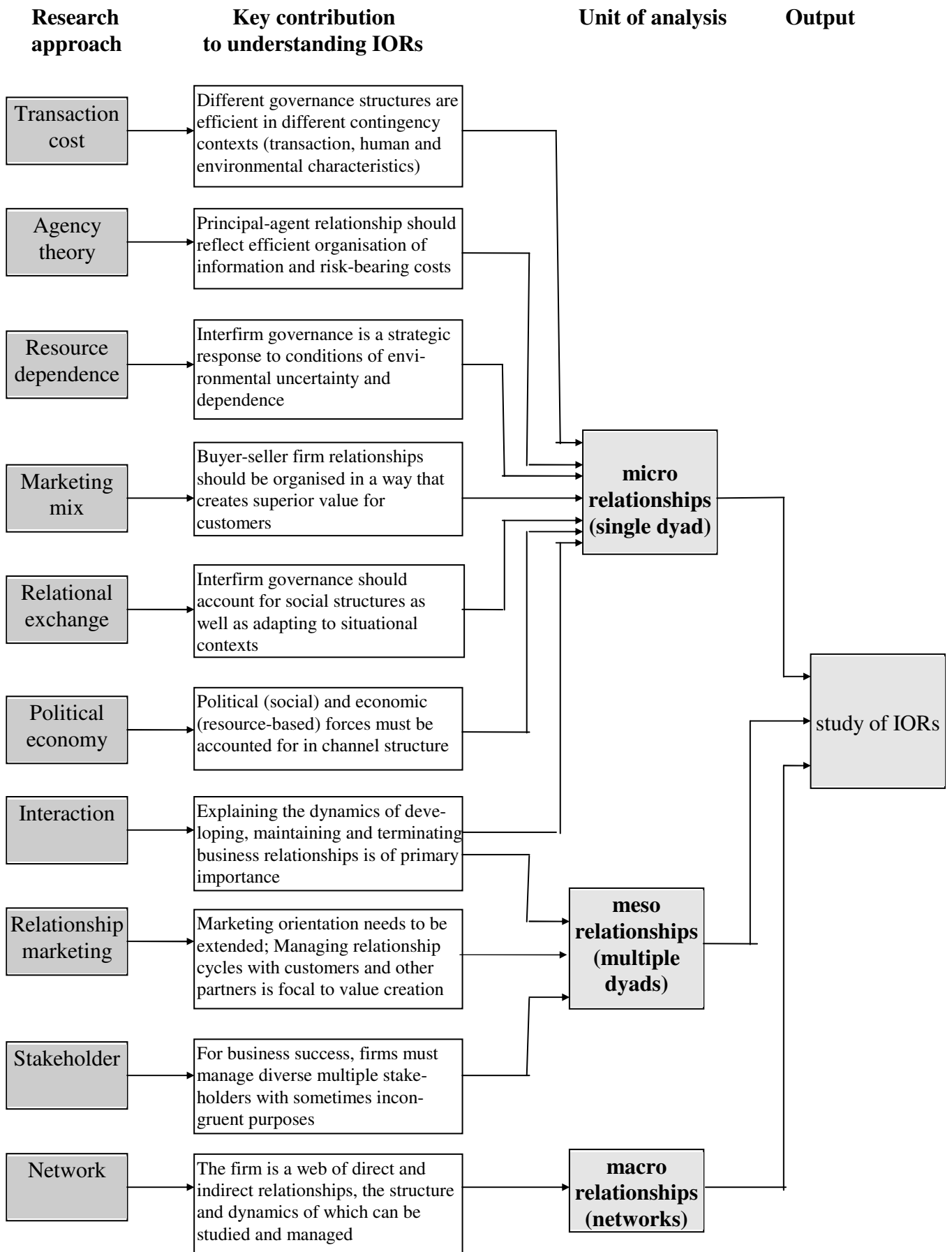


Table 1 Summary of conceptual and empirical work based on multiple IOR theories

	TC Trans- action cost	A Agency	RD Resource depen- dence	MM Marketing mix	RE Relational exchange	PE Political economy	I Interaction	RM Relation- ship marketing	S Stake- holder	N Network
(Eisenhardt 1989)										
(Volery 1996)										
(Zinkhan and Pereira 1994)										
(Heide 1994)										
(Dwyer, Dahlstrom et al. 1995)										
(Robicheaux and Coleman 1994)										
(Johanson and Mattsson 1987; Jarillo 1988)										
(Thorelli 1986)										
(Möller and Wilson 1995a)										
(Huse and Eide 1996)										
(Grönroos 1993)										
(Gummesson 1999)										
(Bowring-Greer, Gardiner et al. 1997; Mattsson 1997)										

Table 2 (A) Metatheoretical profiles of ten IOR approaches

Characteristics	IOR Theory				
	Transaction Cost	Agency	Resource Dependence	Marketing	Relational Exchange
IOR problem orientation	Determine and prescribe efficient governance structures under assumed contingency context, ie given characteristics of the transaction, actors involved and the environment	Determining efficient contract governing principal/agent relationship given assumptions about people (eg opportunism, bounded rationality, risk aversion), organisations (eg goal conflicts among parties) and information	Determine effective governance structures, ie those that satisfy demands of external parties in terms of reduced uncertainty and managed dependence	Determine necessary behaviours (in particular in terms of transactions between channel members) for creation of superior customer value relative to competition	Explain and predict relational behaviour (norms and processes) in IORs by accounting explicitly for the historical and social context in which transactions take place
Disciplinary background	institutional economics, contract law, organisational theory	information economics	Institutional economics, organisational theory	economics, organisational theory, systems theory	social exchange theory, social psychology of groups
Theoretical orientation	objective orientation, realistic ontology, positivist epistemology, deterministic view of man	objective orientation, realistic ontology, positivist epistemology, deterministic view of man	Objective orientation, realistic ontology, positivist epistemology, deterministic view of man	objective orientation, realistic ontology, positivist epistemology, deterministic view of man	objective orientation; realistic ontology; positivist epistemology; primarily deterministic view of man
Level of IOR analysis	dyadic transactions (ex post)	dyadic transactions (ex ante)	dyadic transactions	predominantly dyadic transactions	dyadic relationships
Methodological orientation	nomothetic, hypothetic-deductive reasoning	Nomothetic, hypothetic-deductive reasoning	nomothetic, hypothetic-deductive reasoning	nomothetic, hypothetic-deductive reasoning	nomothetic, hypothetic-deductive reasoning
Research methods	cross-sectional surveys, quasi-experimentation	cross-sectional surveys, quasi-experimentation	cross-sectional surveys	cross-sectional surveys	cross-sectional surveys
Structure vs process	static; focus on IOR structure	static; focus on IOR structure	static; focus on IOR structure	dynamic; focus on IOR content and processes	dynamic; focus on IOR content and processes

(Source: developed for this research following format of Möller and Wilson 1995, p. 600)

Table 2 (B) Metatheoretical profiles of ten IOR approaches (continued)

Characteristics	IOR Theory				
	Interaction	Political Economy	Relationship Marketing	Stakeholder	Network
IOR problem orientation	Understand and explain dynamics of developing, maintaining and terminating IORs assuming resource interdependence and reciprocal relations	Explain and predict dyadic governance structures and organisational behaviour based on interplay of internal/external political/ economic structures in channel context	Understand and prescribe creation/ distribution of value through managing relationships primarily with customers but also with other market and nonmarket partners	Understand and prescribe business success through managing numerous, diverse stakeholders with multiple, sometimes incongruent purposes	Understand structure and dynamics of industrial networks made up of actors governing resources, carrying out transactions and linked by relationships
Disciplinary background	Resource dependence, social exchange theory, organisational buying	institutional economics, organisational theory, political science	marketing, psychology, communication, managerial economics, relational exchange, network theory	organisation theory, systems theory, ethics, political science, marketing	resource dependence theory, systems theory, theory of social structure and exchange, institutional economics
Theoretical orientation	subjective and objective orientation; realistic and relativistic ontology; positivist and antipositivist epistemology; primarily voluntaristic view of man	primarily objective orientation; realistic ontology; positivist epistemology; deterministic and voluntary view of man	primarily objective orientation; realistic ontology; positivist and epistemology; primarily voluntaristic view of man	primarily objective orientation; realistic ontology; positivist epistemology; voluntary view of man	subjective and objective orientation; realistic and relativistic ontology; positivist and antipositivist epistemology; primarily voluntaristic view of man
Level of IOR analysis	single dyadic relationship	single dyadic relationship	multiple dyadic relationships	multiple dyadic relationships	network of relationships
Methodological orientation	logical-empiricist and inductive orientations as well as nomothetic and idiographic views	conceptual theorising, logical-empiricist orientation, hypothetical-deductive emphasis; nomothetic view of measurement	mostly normative, some logical-empiricist as well as inductive orientations; nomothetic views and idiographic views	logical-empiricist orientation, hypothetical-deductive emphasis; nomothetic view of measurement	Emphasis on understanding inductive, interpretative and idiographic orientations
Research methods	case studies, cross-sectional surveys	cross-sectional surveys; case studies	cross-sectional surveys, case studies	cross-sectional surveys, case studies	case studies, secondary data analysis, cross-sectional and longitudinal surveys
Structure vs process	dynamic; focus on relationship content and processes	primary focus on structure, but some dynamics considered	dynamic; focus on relationship content and processes	dynamic; focus on relationship content and processes	dynamic, focus on both structure and process

(Source: developed for this research following format of Möller and Wilson 1995, p. 600)

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