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Love me, love me not: A nuanced view on collaboration in sustainable supply chains



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ABSTRACT

In this paper we investigate the collaborative paradigm in Sustainable Supply Chain Management (SSCM). The depth and quality of the relationship between a firm and its suppliers is widely recognised as a critical facilitator of SSCM. Many authors in the field have argued that a collaborative approach to SC relationship management was likely to be more fruitful in achieving sustainable development goals. However, little research has offered a more nuanced perspective on collaborative SSCM and specifically assessed its feasibility outside the context of large companies collaborating on environmental activities. In this paper, we explore collaboration in SSCs through a qualitative study of a large multinational in the food sector working with small agricultural suppliers. We show that there are both supporting and hindering factors to collaborative SSCM. The study reveals the dynamic nature of SC relationships for sustainability and that collaboration can be developed through time thanks to investment in both formal relationship building mechanisms and more relational aspects. The main contributions of the paper lie in its nuanced view of collaboration for SSCM and systematic application of relational theory (Dyer and Singh, 1998) in SSCM.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, firms have become increasingly challenged with managing their supply chain (SC) relationships in order to address the widely unethical and unsustainable practices that emerge as part of their operational activities (Krause et al., 2009; Pagell and Shevchenko, 2014). The depth and quality of the relationship between a firm and its suppliers was the most commonly cited facilitator of sustainable SC management (SSCM) (Brammer et al., 2011).

Previous research on SSC relationships has put a strong emphasis on collaboration between SC partners to facilitate sustainability initiatives (e.g. Gold et al., 2010; Seuring and Müller, 2008). In particular cooperation and inter-organisational learning have been shown to improve sustainable SC performance. Cooperation with suppliers has been identified as a common best practice of SCM related to better organisational outcomes and therefore, unsurprisingly, has become viewed as a critical component of creating sustainable SCs (Pagell and Wu, 2009). Many examples of collaborative green SC activities have been investigated. Some examples include: collaborative waste reduction (Simpson and Power, 2005; Theyel, 2001), environmental innovation (Lee and

Kim, 2011; Vergheze and Lewis, 2007), adoption of environmental technologies (Vachon and Klassen, 2007), reduction of toxic material (Pagell et al., 2007), and joint development of recyclable products (Simpson, 2010). This ‘collaborative paradigm’, which had first emerged in more traditional SCM theory (Chen and Paulraj, 2004; Vachon and Klassen, 2006a), has become a predominant view of SSC relationships.

Trust between SC partners has been identified as a critical relational mechanism for collaboration, as opposed to compliance-based relationship orientation relying on power (Simpson and Power, 2005). In much SSCM research, the development of strong forms of collaboration, such as partnerships, has been viewed as the most desirable path to follow (Vachon and Klassen, 2006b; Youn et al., 2011). On the other hand, compliance is often perceived negatively and associated with coercive approaches to relationship management (Boyd et al., 2007).

Relational exchanges in a SSC context are complex, and it may be too idealistic to think that truly collaborative relationships can be developed easily. Managing SSC relationships raises some unique challenges such as developing stakeholder engagement and buy-in over time (Alvarez et al., 2010) in order to engage in, for example, environmental product development (Pagell and Wu, 2009). Organisations are reliant on other SC organisations upon which they have differing degrees of influence. Shifting from SCM to SSCM will thus lead companies to significantly rethink their relationship-management strategies to accommodate changes in

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the business landscape driven by sustainability needs (Pagell et al., 2010). Some authors have specifically identified the value of understanding the degree of collaboration in SSC relationships (Hall, 2000; Matopoulos et al., 2007).

There is little research however that explores in depth the collaborative paradigm, offering a more nuanced view of collaboration, for instance by including considerations about power imbalances (Hoejmose and Adrien-Kirby, 2012; Walker et al., 2012). While true collaboration can arguably be considered the best way forward, it may remain difficult to attain in reality. This is even more relevant when considering that most research in the field has investigated the activities of large corporations often working with small and medium (SME) suppliers at home or overseas to implement sustainable practices (Amaeshi et al., 2008; Hall, 2001; Lee and Klassen, 2008; Walker and Preuss, 2008).

SMEs account for 99% of the economic fabric of the European Union (European Commission, 2013), and are key players in SCs. While past research has shown mixed evidence regarding the role of size in addressing sustainability in SCs, there seems to be a converging argument towards acknowledging the importance of resource availability for SSCM (Bowen, 2002; Lee, 2008; Lee and Klassen, 2008). It is therefore important to understand what constitute the conditions under which true collaboration for sustainability between large and small companies may be impaired or difficult to achieve, and what may be possible ways forward.

In this paper we propose to examine collaboration in SSCs involving a large multinational working with small suppliers. We aim to develop a better understanding of the specific problems that may arise in SC collaboration on sustainability issues. We pay particular attention to identifying both supporting and hindering factors to collaborative practices in this context. An understanding of these factors is critical to enable collaboration to be effectively developed by SC players. We draw from relational theory (Dyer and Singh, 1998) to analyse our findings.

The contribution of this study is threefold. First, we offer relevant theoretical insights on SSC collaboration by exploring the relational view in sustainable SCM, which has not been used to a great extent (Vachon and Klassen, 2006a). While much research in SSCM remains a-theoretical (Carter and Easton, 2011; Touboulic and Walker, 2015), we offer a theoretically informed discussion of collaboration, which makes for an interesting contribution. Second, we examine both the factors that support and hinder collaborative practice on sustainability and therefore provide a more nuanced view of the collaborative paradigm. Last but not least, we contribute to developing a better understanding of how SSCM unfolds in practice, rather than of the content of SSCM practices, as called for by Pagell and Shevchenko (2014). This is helpful in viewing SSCM as a change process.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, we review the literature on collaboration and SSCs from a relational lens. We then highlight gaps in current research and articulate our research questions. The next part of the paper describes the methodology adopted in the study, providing details regarding research design, data collection and analysis. The findings of our study are presented and discussed in the subsequent part in light of the relational framework. Finally we provide answers to our research questions and reflect upon our application of relational theory and draw some conclusions that can inform managers and future research.

2. Theoretical background: a relational view of SSCM

2.1. Some background on SC collaboration and SSCM

There is a large amount of research that has been published on

“traditional” SC collaboration that can inform our research. Some studies have focused on the factors enabling collaboration between SC actors, such as coordination mechanisms and benefits sharing (Lehoux et al., 2014), information sharing (Kache and Seuring, 2014), joint relationship efforts and dedicated investments (Nyaga et al., 2010), and investment in technology and measurement systems (Fawcett et al., 2008). ‘People issues’ are fundamental to successful collaboration but are difficult to predict and manage – such as culture, trust, willingness to change, and willingness to collaborate (Fawcett et al., 2012, 2008). Some authors caution that collaborative relationship practices are susceptible to failure due to wider organisational and behavioural issues (Emberson and Storey, 2006). These issues form part of the process of developing and sustaining a collaborative culture (Barratt, 2004).

Collaboration in SC has been found to have an effect on SC performance (Kache and Seuring, 2014), although often an indirect or mediated one. For instance, trust and commitment developed through collaborative activities lead to improved satisfaction and performance (Nyaga et al., 2010). SC players may also value collaborative aspects differently. Buyers focus more on relationship outcomes while suppliers look to safeguard their transaction specific investments through information sharing and joint relationship effort (Nyaga et al., 2010).

In SSCM, the notion of performance is actually extended to encompass not only economic but also environmental and social dimensions (Carter and Rogers, 2008). Arguably successful SSC relationship management leads to increased value creation at all three levels (Pagell et al., 2007). Seuring (2004: 1059) actually argues that co-operation is “the only way for companies to improve the competitiveness of the chain while reducing environmental burdens”.

2.2. Relational theory and its relevance to collaboration in SSCM

When considering the link between cooperation and SSC performance, authors have essentially studied ways to create sustainable competitive advantage (Solér et al., 2010). This view of SSC relationship resonates with the core tenets of relational theory (Dyer and Singh, 1998), which shows that competitive advantage does not emanate solely from within the firm's boundaries, i.e. through the acquisition and use of unique resources (RBV Barney, 1991), but also from inter-organisational relationships. A key assumption of the relational view is that as firm are embedded in a network of relationships; collaborative efforts between organisations provide an opportunity to create value that could not otherwise be created by the organisations independently. Inter-organisational networks may be more efficient arrangements for achieving competitive advantage than single organisations.

In the relational view, developing a competitive advantage is about generating relational rents, i.e. above normal economic gains emanating from the ‘joint idiosyncratic contributions of specific SC partners’ (Dyer and Singh, 1998: 662). Dyer and Singh (1998) identify four supporting mechanisms for the creation of relational rents and four potential barriers as described in Table 1.

The relational view has been successfully applied to study traditional buyer–supplier relationships, in particular strategic collaboration (Chen et al., 2004; Chen and Paulraj, 2004; Fawcett et al., 2012; Paulraj et al., 2008; Rosenzweig, 2009; Walker et al., 2013). The theory has helped defined some of the key competencies or capabilities supporting successful collaborative SC relationships. For example, communication and inter-organisational learning, in turn supported by partners' levels of absorptive capacity, have been identified as important factors enhancing both buyers' and suppliers' performance (Paulraj et al., 2008; Zacharia et al., 2011). Applying the relational view has also helped authors

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