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**A PLURALISTIC PERSPECTIVE TO OVERCOME MAJOR BLIND SPOTS
IN RESEARCH ON INTERORGANIZATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

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Abstract

Interorganizational relationships have attracted much scholarly attention in the last two decades. Despite the significant advances made in this field, the literature still largely relies on assumptions that overlook core features of interorganizational relationships. We build on the organizational research on pluralism to evaluate and identify opportunities to extend the literature on interorganizational relationships. Drawing on a synthesis of the last 20 years of research (1996-2016) on interorganizational relationships, we discuss four major “blind spots” concerning (1) the assumption of symmetry between parties or the focal party’s perception is taken to reflect the whole relationship (single party focus), (2) the assumption of uniform relationships between parties (single valence focus), (3) the assumption of an interorganizational phenomenon within one level of analysis (single level focus), and (4) the assumption of universal time (focus on a single conceptualization of time). Through an analysis of exemplary studies, we discuss how and when overcoming each of these blind spots provides novel insights to revisit theoretical mechanisms concerning the functioning of interorganizational relationships. We also identify a coherent set of strategies to address each blind spot. We advance the literature by articulating a pluralistic perspective to guide future research into core questions about interorganizational relationships.

Introduction

The last two decades have witnessed a sustained increase in interorganizational relationships (IORs), and, in turn, much attention has been devoted to their study. The extensiveness of past research is evident in several literature surveys on specific aspects of IORs, including collaboration dynamics (Majchrzak, Jarvenpaa, & Bagherzadeh, 2015), conflict (Lumineau, Eckerd, & Handley, 2015), cooperation (Salvato, Reuer, & Battigalli, 2017), and governance (Cao & Lumineau, 2015). These reviews provided insightful syntheses of the literature by reporting key themes and underexplored issues. However, the existing reviews seldom engage with the core assumptions made concerning the phenomenon of the IORs itself.¹ In contrast to prior reviews, our primary aim in this study is to revisit core assumptions underlying the study of IORs to critically evaluate how researchers have studied this phenomenon. Although useful for illuminating one or a few aspects of IORs, such assumptions have also limited our ability to engage with other important aspects built into the setup of IORs.

To assess past research, we drew from the organizational research on pluralism (Eisenhardt, 2000; Shipilov, Gulati, Kilduff, Li, & Tsai, 2014). Pluralism emphasizes the heterogeneity and multiplicity of a social phenomenon rather than its homogeneity and unity (Beckman, Schoonhoven, Rottner, & Kim, 2014; de Rond & Marjanovic, 2006; Glynn, Barr, & Dacin, 2000). Although IORs involve complex and contextual interactions between parties over time (Cropper, Huxham, Ebers, & Ring, 2008), most of the existing literature has yet to address the inherent heterogeneity and multiplicity of these interactions. For example, researchers may either address aspects of cooperation or conflict in IORs, but they rarely address the co-existence

¹ Although its main objective is to highlight different purposes and forms of IORs, a notable exception is the meta-review by Parmigiani and Rivera-Santos (2011).

of the two valences. We argue that a pluralistic perspective promises to uncover hitherto overlooked features of IORs and the underlying mechanisms concerning the operation of IORs.

Our discussion draws on a synthesis of the IOR literature published in top-tier journals in business and management between 1996 and 2016. In total, we reviewed 475 articles. Rather than producing a typical literature review, we shifted attention to the predominance and characteristics of four major issues, which we call *blind spots*, referring to the four structuring elements of an IOR (i.e., organizations, relationship, context, and time). Each blind spot concerns a dominant assumption about one of the four structuring elements of an IOR.

We make several contributions to the field of IORs. First, we provide an original overview of the existing research on IORs in that we discuss key, often unexamined, assumptions made concerning the phenomenon under study. In this manner, we identify important issues that have received relatively little attention in the IOR literature. Second, we advance an analytical framework based on a pluralistic perspective that illuminates four blind spots and discuss when each of these blind spots is particularly relevant to address. For each blind spot, we examine the assumptions on which it rests. In turn, we discuss the research implications of each blind spot and the many research opportunities to advance research on key features built into the setup of IORs. Furthermore, we draw on our discussion of these four blind spots to develop generic strategies that support a coherent agenda for future research about IORs.

In the following sections, we present an overview of the IOR literature, key concepts, and their respective definitions. We then present our literature search procedures. Next, we proceed to identify four major blind spots viewed through the lens of pluralism. We then discuss how each of these four blind spots posits opportunities for research. We conclude by discussing an agenda for future research.

Research on Interorganizational Relationships: Concepts, Scope and Pluralism

Core Concepts and Scope

As the term indicates, IORs refer to the set of relationships between and among organizations. Therefore, IORs are a broad organizational phenomenon that has occurred for as long as autonomous organizations have related to one another (e.g., firm ties to early credit institutions and Dutch guilds).

Despite the wide empirical scope and theoretical diversity of IOR studies, “what unifies IOR research is this: in one way or another, it focuses on the properties and overall pattern of relations between and among organizations that are pursuing a mutual interest while also remaining independent and autonomous, thus retaining separate interests” (Cropper et al., 2008, p. 9). Scholars have rarely attempted to advance a definition of IORs beyond relationships between organizations. This lack of attention to definitions of IORs contrasts with the rich debates concerning specific types of IORs, such as alliances (e.g., Elmuti & Kathawala, 2001; Gulati, 1998; Varadarajan & Cunningham, 1995) or joint ventures (e.g., Harrigan, 1988; Kogut, 1988; Lyons, 1991).²

One exception is Oliver (1990, p. 241), who defines IORs as “relatively enduring transactions, flows, and linkages that occur among or between an organization and one or more organizations in its environment.” Echoing this definition, the field of IOR studies has converged around four key structuring elements of IORs. First, by definition, IORs involve several *organizations*, that is, legally autonomous entities. Although most IORs involve two

² IOR scholars have mostly provided “extensional” definitions focusing on the constituent parts of IORs (i.e., by listing the objects or situations of IORs) rather than an “intensional” definition that attempts to give the essential properties of IORs.

organizations, researchers have reported, for instance, that between 30% and 50% of alliances and joint ventures have three or more partners (García-Canal, Valdes-Llaneza, & Ariño, 2003; Makino, Chan, Isobe, & Beamish, 2007). Second, IORs concern *relationships* and not mere arm's length transactions. IORs refer to connections between organizations and the manner in which organizations behave toward each other or address each other (Cropper et al., 2008). A third critical building block of IORs is the *context* in which organizations and their relations are embedded (Hitt, Beamish, Jackson, & Mathieu, 2007). The context surrounding IORs includes both micro (e.g., individual and team) and macro levels (e.g., industry and country). Finally, relationships between organizations occur over *time*. IORs involve organizational processes through which organizations are formed, managed, changed, and terminated. Time is therefore another structuring element of IORs (Mitchell & James, 2001; Shi, Sun, & Prescott, 2011).

Based on a meta-review of the review articles published in management research, Parmigiani and Rivera-Santos (2011, p. 1109) listed the following types of arrangements as constituting IORs: “strategic alliances, joint ventures, buyer-supplier agreements, licensing, co-branding, franchising, cross-sector partnerships, networks, trade associations, and consortia.” We used this approach to delineate the scope of our discussion of IORs. This scope delimitation has the advantage of being inclusive of the heterogeneity of the IOR phenomenon (e.g., public, for-profit, or non-for-profit) and encompasses the types of IORs that are most frequently discussed in the literature.

A Pluralism Perspective to Analyze Four Blind Spots in Interorganizational Research

In this paper, we build on pluralism research (Eisenhardt, 2000; Shipilov et al., 2014) to analyze the four key features of IORs: organizations, relationship, context, and time. We draw on

pluralism research to emphasize the heterogeneity and multiplicity of the core features of the IOR as a social phenomenon (e.g., Beckman et al., 2014; de Rond & Marjanovic, 2006; Glynn et al., 2000). Although parsimony is a central quality criterion of theory development (Popper, 1959), past research on IORs is incomplete if that research overlooks important features of the phenomenon under study, resulting in over-stylized and abstract analyses (Foss & Hallberg, 2014; Glynn et al., 2000). Our pluralistic perspective specifically brings to light core features typically built into the setup of IORs, such as the heterogeneity of the involved organizations or the multiplicity of positive and negative valences.

Pluralism research supports our study of each of the four structuring elements of IORs (i.e., organizations, relationship, context, and time) to highlight critical blind spots. Researchers often focus on a single party (blind spot #1), view relationships through a single valence (blind spot #2), study a single level without analyzing the micro and/or macro contexts (blind spot #3), and follow a single conceptualization of time (blind spot #4). A blind spot for IORs occurs when researchers overlook aspects of IORs that are nonetheless relevant to their own research question or make assumptions concerning the phenomenon of IORs as a consequence of focusing on the homogeneity and unity of core IOR features. However, this does not mean that all empirical studies should be pluralistic or that a simultaneous analysis of the four blind spots is desirable. In addition, we do not use the notion of a blind spot as shorthand for a critical flaw in research. We distinguish between studies that are problematic because the blind spot hindered the robustness of the insights and studies that are narrow in focus but in which narrowness meets the research objectives. Furthermore, the term blind spot is not meant to imply that there is a complete absence of research on the issues that we identify. Rather, we use the term to highlight that typically used assumptions about salient aspects of IORs have often led researchers to overlook

important opportunities to develop and refine existing theory on IORs. We evaluate how and when revisiting those assumptions is particularly useful to advance our understanding of IORs. Figure 1 presents a stylized representation of where each blind spot resides relative to the four structuring features of an IOR.

----- Insert Figure 1 around here -----

Our goal was not to address every limitation of the IOR literature. Instead, we advance a coherent and parsimonious pluralistic perspective to guide further research. The research blind spots that we discuss do not cover all the shortcomings in the IOR literature but, rather, a specific set of issues that are solvable through a pluralistic perspective. We used pluralism research to delineate the conceptual boundaries of our analysis and to better gauge why we analyzed these blind spots and not others.

Twenty Years of Research on Interorganizational Relationships

In this section, we report on the procedures of our computerized search of empirical studies on IORs. We began by searching the *Web of Science* database for articles on IORs published in the last 20 years (ranging from January 1, 1996 to December 31, 2016).³

For our computerized search, we followed Parmigiani and Rivera-Santos (2011, p. 1109), by focusing on specific types of IORs, such as alliances, joint ventures, and consortia. We covered most types of IORs, thus enhancing the comparability of our review to findings from

³ We restricted our analysis to articles published in the *Academy of Management Journal*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Journal of Management*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Management Science*, *Organization Science*, and *Strategic Management Journal*. We selected these journals due to their impact factors, their general management approach (in contrast to discipline-based journals), and their use in other literature reviews in the field of management (e.g., Shepherd & Suddaby, 2016). In doing so, we covered the top-tier journals in business and management while keeping our search manageable.

reviews on specific aspects of IORs (Gulati, Wohlgezogen, & Zhelyazkov, 2012; Majchrzak et al., 2015).

Analytical Procedures

We followed a stepwise approach to code the articles. We opted for standard procedures of coding data for the sake of transparency and reliability of the analysis (Krippendorff, 2013).

Selection of relevant articles. Our initial search yielded a total of 1,843 articles. We then identified articles relevant to our study. We read each of the 1,843 abstracts from our initial search to establish whether each article was empirical and whether it was indeed focused on IORs.⁴ We excluded articles that did not focus on IORs primarily (e.g., articles for which the keyword *networks* related to wireless networks, as in Berger, Gross, Harks & Tenbusch, 2016). We also excluded conceptual (e.g., Arikan & Schilling, 2011) and review articles (e.g., Porter & Woo, 2015), since we were interested in the assumptions made in empirical studies of IORs. In total, we found 475 relevant articles.

Coding of the blind spots. We then coded the potential blind spots in the relevant articles. In line with qualitative research guidelines (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), we devised a coding protocol to characterize each blind spot concerning each of the four structuring elements of IORs. We piloted the coding protocol. Three coders used this tentative

⁴ We undertook several steps to ensure reliability in the coding. Two independent coders read each abstract and, whenever necessary, referred to the body of the article. We coded every article into three non-ordinal, non-overlapping categories: irrelevant (= 0), relevant (= 1), and unclear (= 2). An inter-coder analysis shows a highly satisfactory level of agreement (Cohen's Kappa = 0.834); therefore, we concluded that agreement between the two coders was not due to chance (Cohen, 1960). We opted to use the "unclear" category to avoid forcing the coders to make a choice (Krippendorff, 2013). In total, 58 out of the 1,876 articles (that is, 3.09%) were coded as "unclear" by either coder. The "unclear" articles were also read by a third coder who decided on the relevance of each article upon consultation with the other two coders. We identified 482 relevant articles in total. The use of a third category for "unclear" articles pushes down the inter-coder reliability score (i.e., agreement is spread across more categories), which nonetheless is high (Cohen, 1960). Our measure of inter-coder agreement is thus conservative. The upshot is that the team of coders had a great degree of confidence in the distinction between relevant and irrelevant articles. Considering only two categories (irrelevant = 0, and relevant = 1), inter-coder agreement becomes extremely high (Cohen's Kappa = 0.974).

protocol to code 10 articles independently. Upon completion of the coding, the coders discussed the workability of the coding protocol and made improvements. We found no significant differences across coders in the average number of articles coded as overcoming the blind spots. The three coders settled disagreements by discussing each case.

An Overview of the Four Blind Spots

Our literature review shows a sustained interest in IORs over the last 20 years. However, our analysis also shows that most of the past research has developed a relatively narrow perspective across the four structuring elements of IORs (i.e., the parties, the relationship, the context, and time). Our analysis indicates that only 35.02% of the articles address at least in some way blind spot #1 (single party), 17.19% blind spot #2 (single valence), 38.64% blind spot #3 (single level), and 10.09% blind spot #4 (single conceptualization of time). Table 1 provides definitions, examples, and consequences of the four blind spots (the order of presentation does not reflect any relative importance of the blind spots).

----- Insert Table 1 around here -----

In the remainder of this paper, we discuss the underlying assumptions and research opportunities. For each blind spot, we distinguish between two groups of articles that in one way or another limit our understanding of the IOR phenomenon. The first group of articles displays a mismatch between pluralistic objectives (e.g., to theorize at the dyadic level) and the empirical strategy (e.g., data collected from one party only). The second group, by developing a narrow focus concerning one or several of the four structuring elements of IORs, does not present a problem with the viability of the results (which the first group does), but implies a lost

opportunity to explore new avenues of research. In different ways, the two categories of research show the relevance of our pluralistic perspective to the study of IORs.

We developed a critique of past research by comparing articles using a non-pluralistic perspective with those using a pluralistic perspective that we viewed as being exemplary in overcoming the blind spots. This comparative analysis enabled us to illustrate the value added by a pluralistic perspective. We further elaborated on when using a pluralistic perspective is particularly relevant to advance the literature on IORs. Next, we present the four blind spots separately; for each blind spot, we discuss the underlying assumptions, research implications, and research opportunities.

Blind Spot #1: Single Party Focus

Underlying Assumptions

By definition, IORs involve two or more autonomous organizations. The first blind spot involves researching one party but drawing conclusions concerning the relationship between two or more organizations. Specifically, the single-party blind spot involves extrapolating from observations of a single party in an IOR to arguments concerning the IOR as a whole. This extrapolation may relate, for instance, to behavioral (e.g., beliefs or attitudes) or structural (e.g., bargaining power) features. While such an approach may facilitate data collection, it may ignore the inherent differences in objectives, power, and outcomes that typically exist in IORs.

Past researchers have often assumed that one party's perceptions reflect the outcomes at the IOR level. In this case, scholars have focused on only one organization (or, more broadly, a subpart of the whole IOR) to make inferences at the dyadic or network level (that is, the whole IOR). This practice of extrapolation occurs when the focal party's perceptions (we refer to the

focal party as the organization studied by the researcher) are reported to represent the perceptions for the whole IOR (i.e., the focal firm = the IOR). Another type of extrapolation occurs when the focal party's perceptions are assumed to be similar to the other party's perceptions (i.e., the focal firm = its counterpart). This assumption is found, for instance, in Jap and Anderson (2003, p. 1686), who stated that "although the buyer and supplier organizations may differ in the functions they perform, symmetry is expected in the nature and pattern of causation of the behavioral constructs that underlie their relationship." There is nothing fundamentally wrong about making such an assumption. However, under certain conditions, there are research opportunities worth pursuing by going beyond this single-party focus and considering potential asymmetries between parties in the IOR.

Research Implications

Our review of the IOR literature indicated that most of the existing research has not engaged with the co-existence of different parties in an IOR. While a narrow focus might be consistent with the research objectives, such a narrow focus is also perplexing given that IORs, by definition, entail multiple parties. Perhaps more importantly, the heterogeneity and plurality between parties is built into the setup of IORs (for an overview, see Oliver, 1990; Parmigiani & Rivera-Santos, 2011).

A pluralistic perspective that addresses the single party blind spot is particularly relevant when the research question explicitly relates to relational concepts.⁵ By relational concepts, we

⁵ We acknowledge that researchers often lack full knowledge of the key concepts and an exact formulation of the research question at the start of their research project. For instance, one of the strengths of inductive research is precisely in uncovering new relevant concepts during the research process. Here, we focus on the development of guiding questions – useful to inductive and deductive researchers – that aid management researchers in determining when a pluralistic perspective is more likely to be relevant.

mean those that primarily touch upon the interaction between parties (e.g., trust, fairness, power) – in contrast to concepts that are not directly interactional (e.g., organizational capabilities). In other words, relational concepts take their meaning in relation to a counter-party. For example, the power of an organization refers, in particular, to its ability to control or influence other organizations. The categorization of relational concepts might often be unclear, but this is where taking a specific theory into account and in-depth knowledge of the empirical setting will aid in the researcher's assessment of which insights will be gained by overcoming the single party blind spot.

Two influential articles (as of September 2017, each of these two articles has received more than 1,000 citations in the *Web of Science*) illustrated the relevance of addressing the single party blind spot. In their study on learning and the protection of proprietary assets in strategic alliances, Kale, Singh, and Perlmutter (2000) noted the critical role of relational capital based on mutual trust and the interaction between alliance partners. Although their theoretical arguments and conclusions are at the alliance level, their empirical study addressed one side of the alliance only. A close examination of their survey shows the use of data collected from one partner only to develop dyadic constructs, as reflected in items such as “there is close, personal interaction between the partners at multiple levels” or “the alliance is characterized by mutual respect between the partners at multiple levels.” By following this empirical strategy, the authors prevented themselves from evaluating the extent to which the parties in an IOR display different perceptions regarding the closeness or respect that is present in that IOR. In this article, the authors were very clear about this limitation (p. 233: “Ideally it would be beneficial to get an assessment from all/both partners on aspects like relational capital or conflict management since they relate to aspects concerning both/all partners”). However, many studies proceed without

reference to their single-party assumption. We cannot precisely indicate how the conclusions would differ if the researchers had distinguished between both sides of dyads, but this type of single-party approach invites caution concerning any conclusions drawn at the IOR level. Indeed, many IOR researchers have argued that perceptions of conflict (e.g., Hardy & Phillips, 1998) and learning vary systematically between partners (e.g., Yang, Zheng, & Zaheer, 2015).

The study by Poppo and Zenger (2002) on the interplay between contractual and relational governance is another illustration of an influential article that downplays the discrimination between the different parties in the IOR. In contrast to Kale et al. (2000), who extrapolated from the focal party to the dyad (i.e., alliance), Poppo and Zenger (2002) assumed symmetry between parties. They developed arguments concerning exchange agreements in buyer-supplier relationships while their data collection captured the buyers' perspective by only surveying the information service managers at buying firms. They also acknowledged this issue by stating that "buyers' and suppliers' perceptions of exchanges appear to be quite consistent" (Poppo & Zenger, 2002, p. 714).

To clarify, the simplification by means of a single party focus is not always incorrect (provided that it is acknowledged and there is consistency between the theoretical and empirical parts). Indeed, such studies have been successful in answering specific research questions. However, this practice of extrapolation (from a single party to multiple parties) may be particularly problematic when the research question refers to relational concepts. More importantly, a single party blind spot provides a one-sided analysis of a phenomenon that is multi-party by definition. 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. By projecting known information about a party into an area not known (e.g., the other

party or the whole dyad) to arrive at conjectural knowledge of the unknown area, this blind spot exposes scholars to making a logical leap.

The prior literature has suggested a number of structural and perceptual factors of differentiation between parties in an IOR. Systematic differences between parties vary according to factors ranging from their role (e.g., buyers *vs.* suppliers, franchisor *vs.* franchisees) to their relative size (e.g., a small biotech firm *vs.* a large pharmaceutical firm), their organizational structures (e.g., centralized *vs.* decentralized), their status (public *vs.* private firms, non-governmental organizations *vs.* for-profit organizations), or their country of origin (e.g., cultural or legal differences). Partnering organizations experience different exchange hazards and incentives as well as goals and motivations to join an IOR. They also have different levels and types of financial and non-financial resources and, in turn, alternative options outside the focal IOR. For example, McEvily, Zaheer, and Fudge-Kamal (2017, p. 75) observed that “while buyers may be more concerned with relationship outcomes such as price, performance, and service, suppliers may focus more on safeguarding their relationship-specific investments (Geyskens et al., 1998; Nyaga et al., 2010). Such differences in expectations make it imperative to develop a theoretical framework that goes beyond the mutual aspects.”

Research Opportunities

Revisiting the assumption underlying blind spot #1 provides the opportunity to contribute to several critical IOR theories in management research, such as power theory (e.g., Emerson, 1962; Selznick, 1949) or resource dependence theory (Pfeffer & Nowak, 1976; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). These two theories are largely interested in the differences and relative dependence between parties (i.e., they are research domains where the research questions

typically refer to relational concepts). For example, asymmetric bargaining power may affect the structure and outcomes of IORs, but this issue remains understudied (for exceptions, see Argyres & Bercovitz, 2015 or Lumineau & Malhotra, 2011). Research that addresses the single party blind spot can shed light on why an organization may continue to participate in an unbalanced relationship when its partner has monopoly or monopsony power. For instance, it may help to understand whether some organizations might stay in unbalanced relationships, due to investments in specific assets and high switching costs.

The first and most obvious advantage of overcoming the single party blind spot is for scholars to develop theories about the types and levels of asymmetry between organizations. Such research will contribute to existing literature on IORs by specifying the antecedents of such asymmetries between parties in the IOR as well as their consequences. Our pluralistic perspective supports, for example, a better understanding of the sources of power (a)symmetries within IORs.

Second, by studying the multiple parties, future researchers will be better placed to examine and develop theory about the direction of the asymmetry between partnering organizations. For instance, the differences between a small firm and a large firm influence the ways in which each firm perceives dependence, uncertainty, and risk in an IOR. A more pluralistic view into the issues hitherto concealed by a single party blind spot is particularly relevant because an increasing number of IORs involves many diverse stakeholders from across sectors, such as interorganizational project networks (Oliveira & Lumineau, forthcoming; van Marrewijk, Ybema, Smits, Clegg, & Pitsis, 2016).

Third, researchers have analyzed the tensions and competition between partners to capture more of the value created by an IOR (Belderbos, Gilsing, & Lokshin, 2012; Gnyawali, He, &

Madhavan, 2006). A pluralistic perspective points towards the importance of examining how the distribution of resources produced by an IOR affects its longevity or performance. It further enables the theorization of the distribution of undesired resources (e.g., risks or costs) among partners. The study of multiple parties is particularly suitable to extend the literature on justice and fairness in IORs (e.g., Luo, 2008).

Finally, research that overcomes the single party blind spot provides an opportunity to examine under which conditions specific types of asymmetries are beneficial or detrimental to an IOR. Scholars often assume that distance between parties exerts a negative influence on an IOR between them. Distance is then viewed as a liability and a source of tension between firms. Alternatively, distance may confer specific advantages. Bertrand and Lumineau (2016) showed that the variety of knowledge and experience may benefit firms by supporting a broad range of perspectives, skills, and insights that enhance problem-solving capabilities and learning whereas distance in terms of value incongruence is likely to be a source of integration difficulties and communication problems. A multi-party perspective is instrumental to theorize under which conditions differences among IOR partners may be beneficial or detrimental.

In sum, addressing the single party blind spot is particularly relevant when the research question explicitly refers to relational concepts. Our pluralistic perspective facilitates the development of theory about pervasive features of IORs, such as the maintenance of unbalanced relationships, antecedents and consequences of types and levels of asymmetries, and the emergence of beneficial or detrimental asymmetries.

Blind Spot #2: Single Valence of Relationships

Underlying Assumptions

A valence generally refers to the degree of attraction or aversion that a party feels toward a specific event, entity, or object (e.g., Lerner & Keltner, 2000; Pietri, Fabio, & Shook, 2013). In the context of IORs, positive and negative valences are intrinsic to any IOR since organizations share risks and pursue interests that are not possible to attain via simple transactional relationships (Gulati et al., 2012; Oliver, 1990).

Our synthesis of the IOR literature indicates that attention to multiple valences is mostly limited to passing references—in the theoretical framing or discussion of directions for future research—to the importance of multiple valences. Most studies examine either a positive valence (e.g., cooperation) or a negative valence (e.g., conflict). A focus on a single valence may fit existing data sources or facilitate data collection, but it ignores the inherent heterogeneity and plurality of ways in which autonomous organizations work together toward an agreed-upon goal. The relationships between organizations in an IOR are complex and multifaceted (Labianca & Brass, 2006; Shipilov et al., 2014); thus, attention to both positive and negative valences is essential for understanding how IORs operate and ultimately attain specific outcomes. The duality of valences manifests in multiple ways in IORs such as opportunism *vs.* cooperation or trust *vs.* distrust. Furthermore, the study of multiple valences relies on the assumption of orthogonality between valences rather than assuming that they are opposite ends of the same continuum (in such case, measuring one inherently measures the other).

Research Implications

In contrast to arm's length market transactions, a degree of collaboration between parties is typically built into the setup of IORs. Collaboration necessarily involves trade-offs (Davis, 2016; Hardy & Phillips, 1998) and problem solving (Nickerson, Silverman, & Zenger, 2007).

Organizations engage in lengthy negotiations about the contributions and pay-offs. The definition of the scope of the IORs is often incomplete because part of working together is precisely about developing a common understanding about the relationships; thus, IORs typically display a mix of positive and negative valences.

A pluralistic perspective designed to address the single valence blind spot is particularly relevant when the research question explicitly relates to the collaboration between parties. In this regard, IORs that we are interested in (e.g., alliances, joint ventures, and consortia) differ from transactional relationships where the parties do not need a high degree of collaboration to create value. A high degree of collaboration is expected in most types of IORs as the parties have to do some joint learning or problem solving or build up knowledge transfer.

The study of multiple valences is a fruitful avenue to examine the fundamental tensions and contradictions involved in the functioning of IORs. In her analysis of 15 interorganizational service delivery systems, Alter (1990, p. 479) observes that “if either conflict or cooperation is absent from the collective experience, a system [e.g., an IOR] is unlikely to have the capacity to develop effective operations.” Further attention to the valences of IORs is congruent with seminal conceptual works (e.g., van de Ven & Poole, 1995) and empirical research on, for example, alliances (de Rond & Bouchikhi, 2004). These studies have noted the inherent contradictions that occur within an IOR (for an overview, see Das & Teng, 2002).

Research that addresses multiples valences facilitates the development of theory about the heterogeneity and multiplicity of IORs. Positive and negative valences co-exist, but negative-valence relationships may have greater explanatory power than positive-valence relationships (Labianca & Brass, 2006). For example, the valence of collaboration and the valence of conflict jointly contribute to value creation between organizations rather than a valence alone (Assael,

1969; Davis, 2016; Hardy & Phillips, 1998). Indeed, research that embraces a pluralistic perspective is necessary to advance theory on how partnering organizations manage effectively intense cooperation and competition within the same IOR. As illustrated by the partnership between Samsung Electronics and Sony Corporation (Gnyawali & Park, 2011), without the study of multiple valences, the understanding of core strategic outcomes (e.g., value creation) or the formation of specific types of IORs (e.g., alliances between competitors) remains incomplete.

Research Opportunities

Our pluralistic perspective on multiple valences in IORs unveils several research opportunities. Perhaps the most immediate research opportunity refers to conceptual and methodological work aimed to unpack the definition of valences in the context of IORs (for examples from psychology, see Lerner & Keltner, 2000; Pietri et al., 2013). The conceptualization of valences varies according to (a) the valences under study and (b) the theoretical framework that underlies the study. A positive and a negative valence co-exists in relation to a specific event (e.g., transaction), entity (e.g., counterpart), or object (e.g., transacted product). An illustration of these challenges is the study of cooperation (typically a positive valence) and conflict (typically a negative valence; Assael, 1969). For example, in the case of long-term alliances, at which level are different valences considered? Is it for the whole alliance or for different transactions within the alliance (e.g., cooperation for the development of a new product but conflict for its marketing)?

The study of multiple valences provides opportunities to extend existing research on dialectics in IORs (de Rond & Bouchikhi, 2004; Hardy & Phillips, 1998), the duality of social structures (Heider, 1946; Sytch & Tatarynowicz, 2014), and psychological perspectives on

positive and negative ties (Labianca & Brass, 2006; Lerner & Keltner, 2000). For example, Sytch and Tatarynowicz (2014) gained a further understanding of the social structure (patterns of ties among organizations) by examining the co-existence of multiple valences of IORs. Without examining collaboration and conflict simultaneously, these authors would not have been able to anticipate the valence of future ties and how organizations seeking to avoid triads characterized by tensions drive network dynamics.

By overcoming the single valence blind spot, researchers can also advance theorizing on the interplay between positive and negative valences across phases of IORs. In some instances of IORs, organizations start in a “positive frame,” which fades away in later stages as episodes of conflict overshadow cooperation between parties. Other IORs initiate already entailing negative valences, such as low competence trust between parties (Azoulay, Reppenning, & Zuckerman, 2010). These studies point toward research opportunities about how negative valences impact the activation of positive valences (e.g., conflict that leads to a clarification of the relationship between parties) or vice versa (e.g., collaboration that ends up in conflict between parties).

The study of multiple valences sheds light on unexplored sources of value creation in IORs. Where collaboration intended to value creation is built into the setup of most IORs, the emergence of positive and negative valences posit interesting research questions about the development of constructive but also negative dynamics of value creation. The study of multiple valences provides the opportunity to delve into the activities of problem solving, creativity across organizations, pooling, and a combination of knowledge and resources in an IOR. By gaining further understanding of the multiple valences, researchers are in an advantageous position to advance theory on strategic issues for IORs, such as the process of value creation, learning from partners, and sources of unplanned termination of IORs (Kale & Singh, 2009).

Overall, the single valence blind spot is particularly problematic when the research question explicitly implies a high degree of collaboration between organizations. By overcoming the single party blind spot, researchers will particularly gain insight about problem-solving, value creation, learning, and unplanned termination of IORs. The study of multiple valences is instrumental to theorize the tensions and contradictions that typically characterize IORs.

Blind Spot #3: Single Level of Analysis

Underlying Assumptions

Much of the existing research on IORs deals primarily with a single level of analysis. That is, the core constructs and variables concerning IORs tend to emphasize only one focal unit in the IOR phenomenon. By focal unit (or unit of analysis), we mean the entities or features in an IOR (Hitt et al., 2007). The levels of analysis in IOR research range from both lower levels of analysis (e.g., business unit, department, team, individual, intra-individual) to higher levels (e.g., industry, institution, country).

The choice of the level of analysis varies according to the research question and the underlying theory. However, as with many social phenomena, the assumption that the IOR phenomenon is confined to only one level of analysis is frequently untenable or at least invites caution (Hackman, 2003; Salvato et al., 2017). The single level assumption is perpetuated by the use of mono-level theories that overlook the nested nature of the IOR phenomenon (Foss & Nielsen, 2012). Perhaps, a paradigmatic example of a mono-level theory is transaction cost economics – a dominant theoretical perspective in the study IORs – in which the transaction is the focal unit of analysis (for exceptions, see Argyres & Liebeskind, 1999, 2002).

Research Implications

It is thus striking that most of the existing IOR research focuses on one level of analysis. First, multiple-level features are built into the setup of IORs (Padgett & Powell, 2012; Rosenkopf & Tushman, 1998). Each party in an IOR is represented by individuals. Parties feature internal departments, authority mechanisms, and norms and goals. The formation and operation of an IOR adds a specific level of analysis. The IOR level features, for example, specific governance mechanisms, decision-making rules, deadlines, norms, and values. The partner organizations agree to carry out their activity under a specific regime that requires relinquishing some freedoms in return for resources and opportunities that a single organization would not otherwise have access to.

Overcoming the single level blind spot is particularly relevant when the research question explicitly touches on mechanisms involving other levels of analysis (in addition to the IOR level) and suggests a nested phenomenon. Under these generic conditions, dealing with the single level of analysis blind spot helps to mitigate “cross-level fallacy” (Rousseau & House, 1994). Such a fallacy occurs when researchers infer a level of analysis that is different from the one in which the data were analyzed. Studies that overcome the single level blind spot often develop specific theoretical arguments at different levels of analysis, thus minimizing the risk of anthropomorphizing organizations by treating IORs as equivalent to inter-personal relationships. In other words, overcoming blind spot #3 may support an accurate causal understanding of the actual levels of analysis underneath the research question of interest.

The nested nature of the IOR phenomenon (Oliver, 1990; Parmigiani & Rivera-Santos, 2011) indeed calls for research on the mechanisms across levels in IORs. In their overview of evolutionary perspectives on IORs, Lomi, Negro, and Fonti (2008, p. 328) observed that “the Chinese box-like character of intra- and inter-organizational hierarchies implies that evolutionary change is essentially a multilevel process: what occurs at one level is difficult to understand without reference to what is occurring simultaneously at lower and higher levels of aggregation.” By considering multiple levels of analysis, IOR researchers act on the advice that “a robust understanding of social and organizational dynamics requires attention to higher as well as lower levels of analysis” (Hackman, 2003, p. 905).

Furthermore, our pluralistic perspective draws attention to how dynamics at one level of analysis might have implications at a higher or lower level of analysis. For example, most researchers have drawn on alliance datasets (e.g., SDC, RECAP, MERIT-CATI) without surveying managers’ attributes. This practice appears largely unsuitable to examine a wide range of IOR issues that occur at multiple levels of analysis, such as managers’ actions in conducting transactions between organizations (Perrone, Zaheer, & McEvily, 2003) and the continuation—or disruption—of business between organizations after executives depart (Rogan, 2014). By developing mono-level analysis, researchers run the risk of developing under-socialized analyses—IORs are explained without taking into account the social context—or over-socialized analyses—in which IORs are explained by over-emphasizing the context (e.g., industry structure).

Research Opportunities

Our pluralistic perspective highlights research opportunities associated with a multi-level analysis. Despite calls for research including the individual level (e.g., Abell, et al., 2008), this level of analysis is still rarely considered in multi-level analyses of IORs. Collecting data at the individual level often requires additional resources, but the development of multiple level analysis aids in unpacking the source of explanatory mechanisms as it enables the researcher to be closer to the heart of the action. For instance, Stern, Dukerich, and Zajac (2014) advanced theory on the role of the founder's reputation and status (individual level) in alliance formation (IOR level). Another research opportunity relates to the study of interorganizational conflicts, which should further address the individuals working in different organizations. Such conflicts may involve inter-individual dynamics in addition to interorganizational features, but researchers have yet to examine the interplay between these levels (see Lumineau et al., 2015; McCarter, Wade-Benzoni, Fudge Kamal, Bang, Hyde, & Maredia, 2016).

A research opportunity that stems from overcoming the single level blind spot is to further theorize the role of boundary spanners—managers working across organizational boundaries—and their influence on processes and outcomes for IORs (Perrone et al., 2003; Tushman & Katz, 1980). Through their leadership style or their socio-psychological profile, boundary spanners convey opinions, beliefs, and attitudes to other parties in the IOR with implications for collective sense-making concerning specific events in the IOR (i.e., how the micro-level supports meso-level actions). Individuals working across organizations are central to the development of a common understanding between parties in the IOR. The literature on IOR capabilities has only recently begun to advance theory on the relationship between cognition (individual level) and capability (organizational level; Abell, Felin, & Foss, 2008; Eggers & Kaplan, 2013).

Additional research opportunities lie at developing a better integration of the macro context into the dynamics of IORs (i.e., how the macro-level supports meso-level actions). For example, considerations of country-level factors in international collaborations require a fine-grained analysis from the institutional, political, economic, cultural, environmental, and historical contexts of each organization (Cropper et al., 2008). Arikan and Shenkar (2013) combined insights from history and political science to examine the formation of alliances between firms among nation-dyads with and without a history of conflicts. In their wake, we encourage IOR scholars to develop interdisciplinary research and to further collaborate with colleagues from other social sciences such as history, political science, or geography.

Other researchers have pursued research opportunities by developing a multi-directional approach to influences across levels of analysis. For example, Berends, Burg, and Raaij (2011) examined how the dynamics of interfirm ties are rooted in the quality of personal ties among managers. Their theoretical insights concerning cross-level network dynamics showed a mutual influence among individual-level, contract-level, and network-level factors. More broadly, the multi-directional approach often aids researchers in theorizing about reinforcing loops (de Rond & Bouchikhi, 2004) and the mutual interplay between structure and agency (Sydow & Windeler, 1998).

To sum up, we have shown that multiple levels of analysis are inherent to IORs. Thus, when the research question explicitly implies a nested phenomenon, research that overcomes the single level blind spot is particularly relevant to advance theory on IORs. We have drawn on several exemplar studies to illustrate a wealth of research opportunities to develop and refine theory on IORs by theorizing multiple layers of the IOR phenomenon.

Blind Spot #4: Single Conceptualization of Time

Underlying Assumptions

The last blind spot refers to the relative lack of multiple conceptualizations of time in past research on IORs. A widespread assumption in the literature is that time is a continuum along which “events occur in apparently irreversible succession from the past through the present to the future” (Ancona, Okhuysen, & Perlow, 2001, p. 514). This notion corresponds to *clock time*, in which time is quantifiable in homogeneous and uniform units (e.g., number of hours).

Following Ancona et al. (2001), other conceptualizations of time (i.e., cyclical time, event time, and the life cycle) emphasize the heterogeneity and diversity of this key construct. *Cycle time* refers to a progression of stages that re-starts after a known period/cycle (e.g., weather seasons). *Life cycle time* suggests a logical progression of stages (e.g., a building project’s design-build life cycle). Time might also relate to *event time* in which a specific event is the reference point to what occurs before and after (e.g., 9/11). Events might repeat and be predictable (e.g., elections) or might neither repeat nor be predictable (e.g., a natural disaster).

Research Implications

The dominance of clock time in existing studies of IORs is puzzling given that multiple notions of time are inherent to the formation and operation of an IOR (Ariño & de la Torre, 1998; Ring & van de Ven, 1994). For instance, many multi-organization projects entail a start and an end date. The project might terminate prematurely or be extended, but the fact that specific project organizations are often bounded to different start and end dates (depending on their specific contributions to the project at each project phase) illustrates the plurality about time conceptualizations. If one takes a more holistic perspective, the formation and cessation of the

IORs is an activity that is embedded within and across industries (potential partners often transact together even before they enter in an IOR). An extensive body of research has pointed out the importance of temporal dynamics, namely the “shadow of the past” (prior ties between partners facilitates cooperation) and the “shadow of the future” (the prospect of future transactions might facilitate cooperation between parties; Heide & Miner, 1992; Lumineau & Oxley, 2012; Poppo, Zhou, & Ryu, 2008). At the same time, both conceptual (Koza & Lewin, 1999; Ring & van de Ven, 1994) and empirical analyses of IORs foreground the relevance of temporal aspects, such as phases and cycles in the evolution of IORs (e.g., Davis, 2016; Heimeriks, Bingham, & Laamanen, 2015). These studies converge towards a main insight: clock time often provides a limited perspective on the functioning of an IOR.

The blind spot about the single conceptualization of time is particularly problematic when the research question explicitly refers to temporal concepts. In contrast to mostly static concepts (e.g., CEO dismissal), temporal concepts concern more time-related elements, such as strategic change, evolution, or progressive definition of priorities. The consequences of the use of a single conceptualization of time manifest in at least two ways. First, from a methodological viewpoint, a growing number of researchers use longitudinal analyses to gain further understanding of the causal mechanisms at play in an IOR. In other words, the combination of multiple conceptualizations of time is desirable to enhance the research analysis and therefore the validity of empirical claims (Bakker & Aguinis, 2017; Grzymala-Busse, 2011). Second, and this is the primary concern in our paper, researchers who examine multiples conceptualizations of time may address specific shortcomings in the current understanding of IORs.

By studying multiple conceptualizations of time, researchers are able to explore the ways in which different facets of time influence the interaction between parties (Gersick, 1994; Lewis

& Weigert, 1981). Consider a relationship between a supermarket and farmers. Both organizations share a notion of clock time, but the weather seasons (i.e., cycle time) and the occurrence of a flood or a heatwave (i.e., event time) are also expected to influence the dynamics between the two organizations over time. The weather influences the supply/demand equilibrium and is likely to have an impact on the bargaining power of the parties (e.g., when quantities of a specific fruit are unavailable but demand from consumers is still high). This example illustrates the co-existence of clock time and cycle time in IORs. The choice of the conceptualization of time largely influences which aspects of the IOR phenomenon are given attention in developing and testing theory and which aspects are thought to be less relevant. A study that follows a clock-time rationale will primarily focus on processes that occur during the IOR, whereas another study drawing on a life cycle rationale will pay attention to the processes of transition between stages. In turn, those different foci of interest may call for distinct theories.

Research Opportunities

It is time for IOR scholars to take time more seriously. Opportunities abound to study how activities unfold over time and produce specific outcomes (see Grzymala-Busse, 2011). Scholars interested in IORs may pay further attention to questions such as *when* (e.g., timing issues), *in what order* (e.g., temporal ordering and sequencing issues), *for how long* (e.g., duration and temporal length issues), *how often* (e.g., frequency, rate, repetition, tempo, cycle issues), *in comparison to what* (e.g., early vs. late move, triggering event, tipping point, deadline, feedback issues), *how* (e.g., self-reinforcing process, snowball effect, trajectory issues), and *how fast* (e.g., pace, speed, acceleration/deceleration issues). Future researchers might also explore the role of

subjective and objective conceptualizations of time in the attainment of strategic change behavior in IORs.

The interplay between multiple conceptualizations of time is particularly relevant for understanding the evolution of IORs (Ahuja, Soda, & Zaheer, 2012) and the strategies prioritized by managers in IORs (Shi et al., 2011). The joint examination of different conceptualizations of time enables the development of contingency arguments that are time-bound (e.g., Heimeriks et al., 2015). Further, our theoretical understanding of IORs can progress by examining how different parties in IORs uphold socially constructed notions of time. This line of research is particularly relevant because management teams are increasingly diverse in terms of cultural backgrounds, and many instances of IORs span national borders (e.g., international joint ventures). Further studies on socially constructed time afford insights concerning time as a key intangible structuring aspect of social action (Abbott, 2001) and thus help us better understand its impact on the operation and decision-making processes in IORs.

The study of multiple conceptualizations of time enables research into some of the core aspects concerning IORs that remain understudied, such as timing in strategy making and implementation (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013; Mitchell, & James, 2001). Multiple conceptualizations of time capture how parties assess and interpret time and, in turn, structure their actions over time (Nadkarni, Chen, & Chen, 2016). For example, strategic plans are implemented in phases in which linear time and phase time are central to understanding strategy implementation (Galbraith & Kazanjian, 1986; Villalonga & McGahan, 2005).

Furthermore, the use of multiple conceptualizations of time extends research on the dynamics of IORs. For example, the evolution process (how ties among organizations change over time) and inter-temporal processes (how the shadow of the past and the shadow of the

future influence processes in the present) have a bearing on how IORs function and how and why managers prioritize different strategic actions. In a study on repeated collaboration in R&D consortia, Mannak (2015) suggested that the heterogeneity of repeated collaborations in R&D consortia, that is, the duration and sequence of past ties, has implications on the relationship between repeated interactions and future tie formation. His findings contrast with the homogenous view of past ties common in existing research where all past ties matter in the same way.

In conclusion, overcoming the blind spot about the single conceptualization of time is particularly desirable when the research questions explicitly address temporal concepts. Overcoming this last blind spot presents a wide range of research opportunities about the temporality, evolutions, and timing in IORs. These issues are relevant to fill gaps about the current understanding of IORs.

Further Implications for Research

Our prior discussion of four blind spots underscores the benefits of a pluralistic perspective to advance the literature on IORs. By developing a pluralistic perspective, we mean the commitment to (a) study multiple parties in the relationship, (b) examine the potentially ambivalent valences of relationships, (c) examine multiple levels of analysis and their interactions in context, and (d) make use of multiple conceptions of time. Our analysis of four blind spots largely aims at stimulating future research. Bearing this in mind, we now turn to discuss (a) four generic strategies to benefit from a pluralistic perspective and (b) many research opportunities that lie at the intersection of blind spots.

Four Generic Strategies to Benefit from a Pluralistic Perspective

We identify strategies to deal with the different blind spots and, in turn, to benefit from a pluralistic perspective. Specifically, we identify four strategies: (a) distributive, (b) distance, (c) singularity, and (d) influence. Each strategy is applicable to any of the four blind spots. We aim to balance depth and breadth in our analysis. Accordingly, we delve into a few illustrative examples focused on only one specific blind spot for each strategy – as opposed to discuss the application of each strategy to all four blind spots. Our presentation further draws on exemplar studies to illustrate the implementation and the type of new insights yielded by these strategies.

Distributive strategy (A vs. B). This strategy concerns the distributive dynamics underpinning any of the four structuring elements of an IOR: organizations, relationship, context, and time. We discuss how this strategy supports research intended to overcome the single party blind spot (note, however, that a similar rationale could be used for the three other blind spots).

The distributive strategy can, in particular, be used to deal with blind spot #1 to focus on the question of “who gets what” between each organization in the IOR. The distribution may refer to tangible and/or intangible resources (e.g., market share or access to new markets). Studies using the distributive strategy often hinge on the assumption of a fixed set of resources, and in turn, the researchers aim to understand how these resources are shared between organizations within the IOR. Because these studies primarily focus on issues of value distribution and appropriation, the “pie splitting” or “pie sharing” metaphors often underlie the research using a distributive strategy (Adegbesan & Higgins, 2011; Elfenbein & Lerner, 2003).

For instance, Adegbesan and Higgins (2011) distinguished between pharmaceutical firms and biotechnology firms in alliances to study how relational rents are shared between alliance partners. Thus, they circumvented blind spot #1 by distinguishing between the respective rents

and not assuming a systematically equal distribution of rents between alliance partners.

Following from their theoretical focus on the share of a valuable pool of rights won by each alliance partner, they studied the amount won by each partner relative to the size of the pool. The use of a distributive strategy enables researchers to advance theory on when and why alliance partners may benefit equally or asymmetrically from relational rents. The distributive approach has been instrumental to develop theory about the intra-alliance dynamics of value appropriation, thus complementing the broader literature on value creation in strategic alliances (Chatain, 2011; Dyer & Nobeoka, 2000; Gulati et al., 2012).

In another exemplar study, Cheung, Myers, and Mentzer (2011) took advantage of the distributive strategy to overcome the single party blind spot. They started by observing that research in collaborative IORs has typically focused on the value of these relationships to a specific supply chain partner. They then studied the buyers and suppliers using independent informants in the dyad without presuming symmetry across the partnership. They investigated the influence of relational learning on the relationship performance of the buyer and the supplier, testing the contention that both members benefit from relational learning efforts and enjoy equal pieces of the benefits pie. They showed that distinct dimensions of relational learning are distributed differently between buyers and suppliers. The use of a distributive approach helped these researchers clarify key contingencies that influence disproportional learning benefits between buyers and suppliers. By developing theory concerning the relative value of relational learning in buyer-supplier relationships, they also showed the usefulness of the distributive strategy to advance the literature on learning in IORs (e.g., Barkema, Bell, & Pennings, 1996; Lane & Lubatkin, 1998).

Distance strategy (A – B). This strategy seizes research opportunities on the distance of attributes or features within any of the four structuring elements of an IOR. Accordingly, the distance strategy deals with differences in features or valences in IORs (e.g., how far apart organizations are on a specific feature or valence).

Immediate applications of this strategy refer to geographic and cultural distances between organizations. Typically, distance refers to an objective amount of space between organizations. For example, Perryman and Combs (2012) converted the firms' location address to latitude and longitude coordinates to calculate the geographical distance of an outlet to the franchisor's headquarters and the distance to the owner's headquarters. A related set of studies addressed the distance between organizations by examining, for example, the extent to which firms patent in the same technology classes (Diestre & Rajagopalan, 2012; Schildt, Keil, & Maula, 2012), their patent cross-citation rates (Mowery, Oxley & Silverman, 1996), or the ratio of their average productivity (Li, Zhou, & Zajac, 2009).

In contrast, other researchers have emphasized the subjective nature of distance. This approach is particularly represented in the international business literature on cross-cultural differences (Park & Ungson, 1997; Reuer & Tong, 2005). Subjective measures can also capture status distance between partners in an IOR (e.g., Collet & Philippe, 2014; Lin, Yang, & Arya, 2009). For example, Collet and Philippe (2014) measured the firms' status using the database of historical recommendations from the Institutional Brokers' Estimate System. In this case, the use of the distance strategy was instrumental to show how the relationship between market uncertainty and a firm's status differences in the formation of alliances is context-dependent.

Furthermore, we illustrate the wider application of the distance strategy through a discussion of the single valence blind spot. The distance strategy is particularly relevant to

advance theory on the multiple valences built into the step up of IORs. Researchers often study contrasting valences (e.g., trust and distrust) or draw on specific analytical approaches (e.g., cooperation and ambivalence). The justification for the choice of specific pairings of valences and the measurement of the valences and their distance are grounded in theories in the IOR literature.⁶

An increasingly frequent pair is the collaboration-conflict valences (e.g., Chung & Beamish, 2010; Hardy, Phillips & Lawrence, 2003). For example, Sytch and Tatarynowicz (2014) examined the relationship between the valences of collaboration and conflict within network communities of firms. Specifically, the authors argued that collaboration and conflict are not only two of most salient valences in IORs, but these valences also co-exist within network communities.

Furthermore, the strategy of studying the distance between valences is particularly relevant to examine the tensions, trade-offs, and contradictions that managers face in managing IORs. We envisage opportunities to use the distance strategy to theorize the development and maintenance of asymmetric perceptions of valences within (e.g., how do boundary spanners vs. the top management of a partnering organization perceive the valence of an alliance differently?) and between organizations (e.g., how do partnering organizations perceive the valence of an alliance differently?).

Singularity strategy (A // B). This strategy foregrounds the singular aspects within any of the four structuring elements of an IOR. For example, a singularity strategy is useful to identify

⁶ For instance, game theory studies (e.g., Agarwal, Croson, & Mahoney, 2010; Chatain, 2011) are more likely to readily differentiate between collaboration as a positive valence and competition as a negative valence than studies that draw generally on organization theory (e.g., Gnyawali et al., 2006) for which competition needs not be detrimental. The implication of this insight should not be that certain theories are better for overcoming the single valence blind spot than others but, rather, that theory should define the pairing of multiple valences.

the uniqueness of organizations' behaviors, resources, or notions of time held by managers engaged in IORs. A typical application of the singular strategy appears in the literature on the uniqueness of resource and capabilities as a source of competitive advantage (Hitt et al., 2000; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) and formation of IORs (Cropper et al., 2008; Oliver, 1990).

For the sake of future research in the field of IORs, we illustrate the usefulness of the singularity strategy to new domains deemed as relevant to the literature on IORs. Specifically, we demonstrate the usefulness of the singularity strategy in the context of the blind spot about the single conceptualizations of time. Research on collaboration dynamics often draws on multiple conceptualizations of time, specifically by emphasizing how each singular conceptualization of time shapes the dynamics of IORs (Ariño & de la Torre, 1998; Davis & Eisenhardt, 2011).

For example, van Burg, Berends, and Raaij (2014) built theory on organizational actors' decisions concerning interorganizational knowledge transfer (i.e., event time) and the cycle of contracting supplies in the aircraft industry (i.e., cycle time). Rather than continued knowledge transfer between organizations over two decades (clock time), these authors showed that the decision of knowledge transfer varies according to singular cycles of contracting in the industry. Specifically, managers modify the framing of knowledge transfer and innovation (threat *vs.* opportunity) as a strategy of engagement or disengagement throughout the cycle of contracting. Following a similar approach, other researchers have combined cyclical time and life cycle time (Doz, 1996; Lipparini, Lorenzoni, & Ferriani, 2014). For instance, Lipparini et al. (2014) examined the cycle of contracting supplies (i.e., cycle time) in projects that have pre-specified start and completion dates (i.e., life cycle time) in the context of the Italian motorcycle industry. Through the conceptualization of cyclical time and life cycle time, the authors advanced a four-

stage model of the exchange and the co-creation of knowledge among suppliers. Some scholars have theorized key events (i.e., event time) that occur in IORs with a pre-defined life cycle (Inkpen & Pien, 2006; Shi & Prescott, 2012). The combination of conceptualizations of time illuminates strategic decisions that range from the timing of market entry to the management of the product life cycle and a cross-cultural understanding of time in managing international collaborations between organizations. However, we found that researchers do not always provide clear definitions of the concepts of time. As a result, the conceptual boundaries of different notions of time are often blurred.

Most researchers have used a singularity strategy to combine clock time with other concepts of time. Clock time is often measured in years, as illustrated by the vast literature on alliances, joint ventures, and networks (e.g., Powell, White, Koput, & Owen-Smith, 2005). Past studies have combined clock time and life cycle time (e.g., Huxham & Vangen, 2000), clock time and event time (e.g., Broschak, 2004), and clock time and cyclical time (e.g., Jap & Anderson, 2007). The combination of clock time and event time enables the theorizing of how key events over time change the dynamics of IORs (e.g., Berends et al., 2011).

The conceptualization of time might focus on time-related perceptions, specifically on the singularity of the understanding of time by each party. Time is culturally constructed and thus leads to different perceptions across cultures (e.g., African vs. Western; Reinecke & Ansari, 2015). Similarly, notions of being late and deadlines vary, for example, between Scandinavian and Mediterranean cultures (Cunha & Cunha, 2004). Specific conceptions of time structure the action of individuals within and between organizations (Aeon & Aguinis, 2017; Orlikowski & Yates, 2002). The singularity of subjective constructions of time is particularly relevant in the context of the international business. In addition, managers of new ventures and managers of

incumbent firms perceive the sense of emergency differently. Perceptions of the sense of urgency influence strategic decisions (e.g., what are the priorities for each partner?) and strategic actions (e.g., which decisions should be made first?).

Influence strategy ($A \leftrightarrow B$). The last strategy concerns the influence exerted by multiple elements within any of the four structuring elements of an IOR. The influence strategy includes, for instance, studies of the development of relational norms or interorganizational learning (Lane & Lubatkin, 1998) through repeated interactions between alliance partners (Singh & Mitchell, 1996).

We illustrate the influence strategies by drawing on exemplars that address the single level blind spots (i.e., influence between levels of analysis). For example, Mindruta, Moeen, and Agarwal (2016) showed how a firm seeking a preferred partner is constrained by the partner's preferences and opportunities for realizing higher value in a different alliance. Instead of considering that a firm chooses partners independently from and unconstrained by other firms, their matching model permits the integration of two-sided decision making in voluntary collaborations. This strategy is helpful in researching how each party is influenced by other organizations, whether intentionally or not. Ultimately, such research contributes to the advancement of theory about the antecedents of tie formation between organizations where the influence of individual, organizational, and contextual factors are taken into account (Oliver, 1990; Padgett & Powell, 2012).

At the same time, other studies follow a more focused approach by implementing the influence strategy largely within a single level of analysis. As an illustration, consider studies using a game theory perspective. Agarwal et al. (2010), for example, used experiments to test game-theoretic arguments about cooperation between parties. In their study, each alliance partner

had different monetary benefits from the success of the alliance, which affected their decisions concerning how many of the resources contribute to or extract from the strategic alliance. Other examples include Arend (2009), who modeled a two-firm alliance as an iterated prisoners' dilemma, or Grennan (2014), who used a model of buyer demand and buyer-supplier bargaining to show how variation in bargaining abilities is an important source of firm profitability.

In sum, we have identified four generic strategies (i.e., distributive, distance, singularity, and influence) that are useful to overcome any of the four blind spots. One of the strengths of these strategies is their versatility to adapt to specific empirical contexts and research questions. Further, multiple strategies might be combined within a given research project as the researchers aim to attain a balance between parsimony and explanatory power.

Research Opportunities at the Intersection of Blind Spots

True to the pluralistic literature, our pluralistic perspective to the study of IORs highlights that many research opportunities lie at the intersection of blind spots. Table 2 visually summarizes our pairwise analysis of future research opportunities. The four cells on the diagonal represent the four blind spots in the existing literature on IORs. We used a pairwise analysis to extend our pluralistic perspective into further research concerning the IOR phenomenon. Specifically, we included research questions that are specific to pairs of blind spots but sufficiently generic to be adapted to each researcher's objectives. Next, we detailed some of the research opportunities that invite research at the crossroads of multiple blind spots.

----- Insert Table 2 around here -----

Studying multiple parties through multiple conceptualizations of time. The study of multiple parties (blind spot #1) in the IOR makes it possible to distinguish between different

perceptions and, in particular, different conceptualizations of time across organizations (blind spot #4). The joint study of multiple parties and conceptualizations of time is desirable when the research question explicitly refers to both relational concepts and temporal concepts.

The differences in time perceptions have a number of origins ranging from organizational style to business priorities or cultural values specific to each partnering organization (Ancona et al., 2001; Bakker & Aguinis, 2017). Overcoming the single party blind spot provides the opportunity to further understand the origins, forms, or consequences of the time-related aspects. Different parties in an alliance often hold varying views on the timing to enter a specific market or to launch a new product (Murray & Mahon, 1993).

Further understanding of the conceptualizations of time held by multiple parties is relevant to advance theory on some of the outstanding questions on how parties form, maintain, and dissolve ties. Some researchers have discussed the evolution of IORs as an emerging process versus an engineered process (see Doz, Olk, & Ring, 2000). However, much of the literature has focused on the dynamics of IORs as an engineered process of working together (e.g., Doz et al., 2000; Mason & Leek, 2008; Robertson, Swan, & Newell, 1996). The advancement of theory on the emergent processes of tie formation would benefit from the examinations of how managers' actions influence tie dynamics to influence outcomes (Davis & Eisenhardt, 2011; Maurer & Ebers, 2006). In an exemplar study of emergent processes, Davis and Eisenhardt (2011, p. 159) showed that the innovation performance of start-ups in the telecommunication industry “involves dynamic organizational processes” alongside shifts of leadership among the different partners.

The study of multiple conceptualizations of time held by multiple parties is particularly advantageous for the fast-growing strategic management literature on project-based collaborations (Cattani, Ferriani, Frederiksen, & Täube, 2011; Oliveira & Lumineau,

forthcoming). In project-based IORs, multiple conceptualizations of time are at play, ranging from timelines (i.e., clock time) to project milestones (i.e., event time) and inter-temporal aspects (e.g., past, present, and future). We envisage research opportunities on the intertemporal aspects of IORs (e.g., how do different parties cope with the transition between phases in IORs?). Most time-bounded enterprises (e.g., projects) are organized around phases – where each phase is characterized by specific task interdependence and therefore coordination requirements, but existing literature on the transition between phases remains scarce.

Studying multiple valences across levels. Examining the intersection of blind spots on the single valence and single level is a fruitful method by which to stimulate future research. The joint analysis of multiple valences across levels of analysis is particularly desirable when the research question refers to the nested nature of collaboration between parties. With the aim of setting a coherent research agenda, we organize our suggestion for multi-level research on multiple valences in two strands: constructive dynamics and destructive dynamics.

Future research on constructive dynamics can draw on multi-level analysis of how positive and negative valences jointly operate in a productive and beneficial manner in IORs. For example, de Rond and Bouchikhi (2004) argued that the co-existence of positive and negative valences (e.g., trust and vigilance) creates synergies between organizations, specifically in the early stage of the collaboration as the parties are still finding their way. Hardy et al. (2003) suggested that aspects of collaboration and conflict jointly influence—often in an enabling manner—the outcomes of collaborative ties for NGOs in Palestinian territories.

Research on constructive dynamics between valences will illuminate aspects of balance, creative tension, the clarity of problem formulation, and synergies in IORs. Although it has been shown that managers tend to overemphasize negative information relative to positive information

(for a review, see Rozin & Royzman, 2001), a specific research opportunity is to study whether organizations have stronger valence weighting biases than individuals. For instance, IOR scholars should examine whether moving to higher levels of analysis (organizations or teams *vs.* individuals) alleviates the differences in the ways parties understand and react to positive and negative valences

In contrast, future research on the destructive dynamics carries out multi-level analysis of how the co-existence of positive and negative valences unfolds in a way that it creates generalized dissatisfaction and detrimental outcomes in IORs. For example, Polidoro, Ahuja, and Mitchell (2011) examined how positive and negative valences affect tie formation and dissolution among firms in the global chemicals industry. The authors (2011, p. 280) noted that “the embeddedness of interfirm relationships in a social structure can engender order in new tie formation, but competitive incentives may undermine the order that firms seek to achieve and lead to tie dissolution.” By unpacking the connection between different features of IORs—which entail positive and negative valences—these authors advanced theory on the issues of stability and the pursuit of self-interest in the context of an unplanned joint venture dissolution.

More specifically, research on destructive dynamics between valences underscores aspects of costs, inertia, unbalance, tension, and lock-in effects (e.g., Whitford & Zirpoli, 2014). Future researchers could analyze the possible influence of the institutional, legal, or cultural contexts on valences in IORs. A particularly relevant area for future research is to examine how the development of dual valences (e.g., conflict-cooperation and trust-distrust) may differ across various national contexts.

Studying multiple levels through multiple conceptualizations of time. Different conceptualizations of time (blind spot #4) may originate at different levels in an IOR (blind spot

#3). We argue that studying multiple levels through multiple conceptualizations of time is useful when the research question explicitly points towards a nested phenomenon and it refers to temporal concepts. Advancement on theory of IORs can be made by studying the multi-level antecedents and consequences of multiple conceptualizations of time.

Because different traditions and philosophies of time exist across cultures and geographical areas (e.g., Western *vs.* Eastern approaches), we call for further research on the multiple conceptualizations of time having their roots in the individual and organizational levels. Such research is particularly relevant for IORs that spans across national contexts. Because of their education, training, or individual preferences, employees working in IORs may have radically different approaches to time and its management. These differences may also initiate at a collective level as a function of the age and size of the organization, its industry, or the existence of well-established procedures for addressing unplanned events. Time structures and time norms operate across levels of IORs, but the development and implications of these structures and norms remain largely unexplored in the literature on IORs. A time-based view of the IORs will place time in context to examine how temporal aspects influence strategic outcomes in IORs (see also Janowicz-Panjaitan, Bakker, & Kenis, 2009).

Because researchers are increasingly interested in theorizing the dynamics of IORs, examining the intersections of blind spots #3 and #4 is particularly promising for future research. A specific example refers to how individuals in organizations and across organizations develop ties under time ambiguity (March, 1987; Srivastava, 2015). A change event at the organizational level (e.g., a merger between a buyer and a supplier) prompts ambiguity, which influences how individuals seek to develop ties over time. We also suggest examining how events and the timing of events at multiple levels trigger the dynamics of tie formation under times of ambiguity

throughout the duration of the IOR. Strategic change provides unique opportunities to examine the multiple level nature of temporal aspects, for example, by examining the role of individuals' beliefs and attitudes towards time-related issues in the wider IOR and market.

Empirical and Methodological Considerations

If a pluralistic approach does not necessarily require the use of multiple sources of information, then collecting data from a single source invites caution. We note several opportunities to strengthen the data collection process, thus increasing the accuracy of the information collected and the response rate.

Scholars who conduct surveys to address blind spots should pay particular attention to the ability and willingness of respondents to retrieve information (e.g., the subjectivity and sensitivity of the information, the lag between data collection and the time to which the information refers). Scholars may minimize the risk of obtaining a low response rate by developing confidentiality agreements to ensure anonymity and to avoid compromising the identity of respondents. Another strategy is to collaborate with professional associations (e.g., the Association of Strategic Alliance Professionals, the International Association for Contract & Commercial Management) to reassure participants. Although a promising avenue for future research on IORs, the use of matched samples remains scarce among IOR studies, particularly due to the difficulty of engaging participants (for exceptions, see Handley & Angst, 2015; Poppo & Zhou, 2014).

Although the use of existing databases (e.g., RECAP and MERIT-CATI) often leads to a focus on concrete information, archival data (e.g., activity reports or meeting minutes) may also allow scholars to code perceptual information concerning IORs (Malhotra & Lumineau, 2011).

We also observe many opportunities concerning the use of laboratory experiments. A few IOR experimental studies (Agarwal et al., 2010; Arend, 2009) have proven encouraging to conjointly study multiple parties and multiple valences. We believe that qualitative research—including but not limited to ethnography and action research—has much to offer to gain a finer understanding of the IOR phenomenon. It has been shown to be very useful, in particular, for studying perceptual accounts of time and temporality in IORs (e.g., Cunha & Cunha, 2004; Reinecke & Ansari, 2015). We call for more explicit conceptualizations of time and a stronger construct validity of time-related concepts.

Further, the growing availability of new sources of data (e.g., Internet of Things, Big Data, the real-time tracking of data with electronic tags or radio-frequency identification) and analytical techniques (e.g., data scraping and functional magnetic resonance imaging) open many possibilities for gaining access to more detailed and precise information associated with blind spots. For instance, the use of functional neuroimaging tools can complement psychometric measures of valences (see Massaro & Pecchia, 2016). In this regard, the study of timing and the brain activity that underlies trust and distrust by Dimoka (2010) represents an excellent illustration. An interesting extension of this study would be to analyze whether specific empirical and methodological approaches are more appropriate than others for specific blind spots.

Although it might be too difficult to collect information on the different parties in the IOR, we encourage scholars to be explicit concerning the assumptions that they make. For instance, why should we expect that buyers and suppliers behave in the same manner in a given empirical context? If a study involves data from only one party, then its theoretical development, hypotheses, and conclusions are best framed to reflect one-sided measures. Thus, our call is for more transparency concerning assumptions and the clarity of boundary conditions. For instance,

scholars should specify whether their measures reflect one party's level of resources or one party's assessment of the degree of mutual resources in the relationship. If the level of resources is asymmetric between partners, then these may be two very different matters.

Conclusion

In this study, we endorsed a pluralistic mindset that addresses four blind spots concerning core features of IORs: multiple parties, multiple valences, multiple levels of analysis, and multiple time conceptualizations. Specifically, we provided guidance about when a pluralistic perspective is particularly relevant to study the complexity and richness of the IOR phenomenon. By more accurately capturing some of the salient aspects of the IOR phenomenon, our pluralistic perspective may also help IOR research to be more relevant to practitioners.

Our contribution to advancing research on IORs is threefold. First, we revisited some underlying assumptions in past research and discussed their consequences for the current stock of knowledge. We showed how the assumptions made about IORs are often at odds with the very definition and core features of IORs. Second, we discussed how overcoming each of these blind spots provides novel insights to revisit theoretical mechanisms concerning the functioning of interorganizational relationships. Finally, we drew on exemplary studies to devise a set of strategies that are useful for pursuing specific research opportunities concerning each blind spot. We also discussed research opportunities across blind spots. One advantage of our discussion is that each strategy can be readily implemented and adapted to best serve the researcher's interests.

Scholars inevitably have to make trade-offs, but we showed that a pluralistic understanding of IORs is not at odds with a parsimonious and rigorous theoretical analysis. Instead of

advancing theory through a paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1990), our pluralistic framework suggests many practical directions to strengthen the predictive power of research on IORs. By “going back to the basics” and revisiting the structuring elements of IORs, our discussion primarily aimed to stimulate new and seasoned researchers to think creatively about IORs within their research interests and expertise. We thus hope to provide inspiration to revamp IOR research to further address the challenges faced by organizations working together.

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Table 1 Overview of the Four Major Blind Spots in Research on Interorganizational Relationships

Blind Spots	Structuring Elements of IORs	Assumptions	Main Consequences⁺
#1 Single Party Focus	IORs involve several organizations	Symmetry between parties or the focal party's perception is taken to reflect the whole IOR <i>e.g., a buyer's satisfaction is assumed to be symmetric to its supplier's satisfaction</i>	Neglecting possible asymmetries of behaviors and outcomes Overlooking a focal party's gains at another party's expense and the reasons for the persistence of this pattern
#2 Single Valence of Relationships	IORs concern relationships	Uniform relationships between parties <i>e.g., a relationship is treated as being cooperative or conflictual but not as having co-existing valences</i>	Developing an oversimplified analysis of the nature of relationships Delivering an incomplete analysis of the strategic outcomes or the formation of collaborative arrangements
#3 Single Level of Analysis	IORs are situated in a context	Focus on one level of analysis <i>e.g., managers are studied to infer about relationships between organizations</i>	Over- or under-estimate the explanatory power of mechanisms found at one level of analysis Downplaying tensions across levels Limited insight into the nature of the dynamics nested across levels of analysis
#4 Single Conceptualization of Time	IORs occur in time and over time	Universal time <i>e.g., the perceived duration of a project is assumed to be exactly the same between parties</i>	Oversimplifying how socially constructed time influences the interaction between parties Neglecting the explanatory power of temporal dynamics Overlooking inter-temporal processes (i.e., past, present and future) as an important feature of IORs

⁺ Our discussion of the main consequences relates to empirical papers only (the focus of our synthesis). We acknowledge that conceptual articles might have touched upon some of the issues that we noted here.

Table 2 Research Opportunities at the Intersection of Blind Spots

	Blind Spot #1: <i>Single Party</i>	Blind Spot #2: <i>Single Valence</i>	Blind Spot #3: <i>Single Level</i>	Blind Spot #4: <i>Single Time Conceptualization</i>
Blind Spot #1: <i>Single Party</i>	Single blind spot research	How does each party experience valences differently?	To what extent does each party experience cross-level elements differently?	Why does each party approach time in a specific manner?
Blind Spot #2: <i>Single Valence</i>	How do multiple valences influence the parties in an IOR differently?	Single blind spot research	How does the asymmetry of perceived valences occur at different levels?	How does the asymmetry of perceived valences relate to different time conceptualizations?
Blind Spot #3: <i>Single Level</i>	To what extent do cross-level differences impact parties in an IOR differently?	How do cross-level differences influence multiple valences?	Single blind spot research	To what extent do cross-level differences relate to different conceptualizations of time?
Blind Spot #4: <i>Single Time Conceptualization</i>	Why do different time markers (e.g., deadlines) influence the parties in an IOR differently?	To what extent do different time markers (e.g., deadlines) prompt different valences in an IOR?	How do different time markers (e.g., deadlines) impact on levels in an IOR differently?	Single blind spot research

Figure 1 The Four Major Blind Spots in Interorganizational Relationships

