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Copoiesis: Mutual knowledge creation in alliances



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ABSTRACT

Access and utilization of knowledge as in alliances drives firm performance. Prior studies pay heavy attention on knowledge absorption and knowledge transfer among firms, but less on the multifaceted and context dependent construct of mutual knowledge creation among firms in alliances. This study explains the concept of copoiesis as the genuine creation of joint knowledge among firms by referring to the socio-cognitive view and the structuration theory.

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Copoiesis: Creación de conocimiento mutuo en alianzas

RESUMEN

Acceso y utilización de conocimiento en alianzas impulsan el rendimiento de empresas. Estudios previos prestan mayor atención a la absorción y transferencia de conocimiento entre empresas, pero menos al concepto de construcción de conocimiento mutuo entre empresas en alianzas que es multifacético y depende del contexto. Este estudio explica el concepto de copoiesis como creación genuina de conocimiento conjunto entre empresas refiriéndose al punto de vista socio-cognitivo y a la teoría de la estructuración.

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Introduction

Sustained firm performance strongly relies on innovation that is stimulated by the conversion of knowledge through new uses or new combinations of previously disparate ideas, nurturing novel action and solutions (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). The conversion of knowledge depends on the sharing, integration, use, and leveraging of knowledge within firms and among firms in alliances (e.g. Mowery, Oxely, & Silverman, 1996; Kale & Singh, 2007). Firms in alliances can exchange and combine tangible and intangible knowledge and apply social processes that cover communication, interaction, collaboration, and discourse which create and specify knowledge (Kane & Alavi, 2007). Knowledge transfer and knowledge creation occur within firms but as well among firms and thus in an environment of social interaction, rules, and resources of the firms but also of rules and resources developed within the inter-organizational arena of alliances. The rules strongly influence the couplings, exchanges, and creative processes among firms.

Most existing literature focuses on the access to, transfer of, and absorption of knowledge among allying firms, for example by explicating the absorptive capacities among firms in alliances (Bouncken & Fredrich, 2016 (in press)). Although the absorption of knowledge and learning from the partner can help to extend the (receiving) firms' knowledge base and to enhance its innovation and performance potentials, this configuration of learning does not allow using the full potential of creative solutions of joint work among firms for innovation. Extending the knowledge absorption perspective and drawing upon the organizational learning or organizational knowledge creation perspective, some studies suggest a high importance of mutual knowledge among firms on innovation and performance (Grant & Baden-Fuller, 2004; Holmqvist, 2004; Larsson, Bengtsson, Henriksson, & Sparks, 1998).

Innovations, such as the development of lithium-ion battery for the electric car can improve incrementally and radically by the reciprocal combination and alteration of expertise among firms in alliances in which the partners not only exchange knowledge in one direction — but instead combine expertise, insights, and mutually create new knowledge. Although researchers emphasize processes and gains of mutual knowledge within firms and their benefits on innovation on the firm level, research tends to ignore the mutual-reciprocal-joint knowledge creation among firms (Meier, 2011) and calls for a more detailed understanding about the underlying processes among firms.

The purpose of this paper here is to explain the processes of mutual knowledge creation among firms. We label these processes as copoiesis, which builds on the Greek term of 'poiesis' — creation and co-indicating the joint creation among different entities. The understanding of social creation processes in an arena of interaction among individuals, groups, and firms require a move beyond the traditional economic literature. The socio-cognitive view and the structuration theory can help to entangle the reciprocal creation processes among firms in their context of goals, rules, and ongoing interactions.

From a socio-cognitive standpoint knowledge creation is a process of shifting or combining cognitive structures, which individuals's or group's representations of the world

and assumptions how it functions (Carley, 1997; Mathieu, Goodwin, Heffner, Salas, & Cannon-Bowers, 2000). The cognitive models constitute and structure knowledge by the identification of elements that are salient and deliver causal relations in a specific situation (Hargadon & Fanelli, 2002). The socio-cognitive view can explain how individuals process knowledge, but largely leaves out how the rules and resources of a social arena — for instance firms and their systems — influence the creation of and access to knowledge in social entities. Even though cognitive schemes exist within individuals, the social environment influences their development (Beach, 1997), transfers them to a group level. The different environments in firms and the interaction among firms create shared cognitive schemes. Further, knowledge creation across partners and within firms is not random, but directed (Holmqvist, 2004) — yet not fully steerable through rules, organizational structures, and their institutional environment (Giddens, 1984). Structure is both a medium and the outcome of social interactions in societies and thus within and among firms (Giddens, 1984). Thus, this paper contributes to the understanding of mutual knowledge creation among firms and to the integration of the socio-cognitive standpoint and the structuration theory into the alliance research, embedding these theories more closely in the economic literature.

Mutual knowledge creation

Several terms refer to the access and integration of knowledge from one alliance partner to the other: knowledge exchange (Cousins, Lawson, Petersen, & Handfield, 2011), knowledge transfer (Pérez-Nordtvedt, Kedia, Datta, & Rasheed, 2008), knowledge acquisition (Evangelista & Hau, 2009; Inkpen, 2000), learning from partners (Tsang, 1999), and absorptive learning (Jiang & Li, 2009; Bouncken & Kraus, 2013). Yet, this excludes the mutual creation of knowledge, the joint learning among firms as in alliances.

Jiang and Li (2009) describe creative learning within organizations as an iterative, multi-stage process of learning typically in the context of multinational, multiunit enterprises. Goerzen and Beamish (2003) analyze a transformation in which units and individuals in a multinational enterprise or firms of joint ventures apply and leverage knowledge for the creation of new knowledge and capabilities through joint activities. Oxley and Wada (2009) argue that firms in joint ventures engage simultaneously in informal learning behaviour that promotes shared understandings and tacit knowledge flows. Other research is more distinct in acknowledging that individuals and firms can have shared knowledge within alliances (Zollo, Reuer, & Singh, 2002) and that learning can occur mutually (Inkpen & Tsang, 2007) or reciprocally (Lubatkin, Florin, & Lane, 2001) with the alliance partner. Mutual knowledge can consist of a shared understanding about reality, shared routines, rules, or problem solving processes within the alliance (Fang & Zou, 2010; Holmqvist, 1999). Inkpen and Dinur (1998) explain that some of the knowledge associated with the communication, interaction, collaboration, and discourse among firms spirals beyond the group level to the organizational level and the inter-organizational level. For example, individuals and firms can engage in

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