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Learning and Knowledge Transfer in Africa-China JVs: Interplay between Informalities, Culture, and Social Capital

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ABSTRACT

This study examines 29 Africa-China JVs from 12 African countries to explore the ways in which African partners gain knowledge and learn from their Chinese counterparts. Based on the perspectives of social capital, cultural difference, and informalities, we analyze the strategies, behaviors, and tactics employed by Africans both at the individual and at the organizational levels to gain knowledge within JVs. By using a multiple case study method with semi-structured interviews, we find that African partners actively take advantage of multiple cultural and social capital-related factors to support learning. Africans often use informal, even clandestine, mechanisms to manage cultural differences and build trust in order to gain knowledge. Theoretically, the structural, relational, and cognitive aspects of social capital are found to be important in exploiting opportunities through informal actions and the creation of informal contexts more conducive to learning and knowledge transfer. The presented findings provide new insights into knowledge-seeking JVs, particularly in the Africa-China context, because they propose a not-yet-explored perspective that explains learning through the exploitation of informalities.

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1. Introduction

African countries are gradually engaging in cooperation with emerging countries such as China. During recent years, Africa-China connections have experienced rapid development, particularly through cooperation agreements that often materialize into new joint ventures (JVs) between Chinese and African partners. In addition to seeking enhanced profits (Beamish and Berdrow, 2003), partners enter into JVs to learn, develop new expertise, and leverage potential synergies (Crossan and Inkpen, 1995; Harrigan, 1986; Westman and Thorgren, 2016). The goals of each partner, particularly those from emerging countries, include knowledge gain in the form of individual as well as organizational learning (Tiemessen et al., 1997). JVs in emerging countries are used for the primary purpose of mutual learning (Nam, 2011), and “the process of learning along with the nature of its outcome takes precedence over the choice of a structural mode by which to exploit the learning opportunity” (Inkpen, 1995, p. 125). Accordingly, a JV is often a conduit for opportunities to obtain additional knowledge. Moreover, JVs facilitate the internalization of skills otherwise unavailable to organizations or not readily accessible (Hamel, 1991; Kogut, 1988). However, to achieve partners’ learning objectives, a collaborative approach is required within the JV (Inkpen and Beamish, 1997).

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The China-Africa context has some unique peculiarities that pave avenues for new insights to advance existing theories about learning in international JVs (IJVs hereafter). The context is particularly interesting for the insights it presents into knowledge acquisition processes within IJVs located in non-western multicultural contexts. This is an underexplored area in the literature on experiences and outcomes of international JVs. The national cultural differences between China and Africa are significant as demonstrated in Fig. 1. For example, based on Hofstede's (1991) six cultural dimensions (power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, indulgence), China shows a markedly different national culture compared with those in African countries (see Fig. 1). National culture contributes to shaping individual as well as organizational culture and behavior (Hofstede, 1991). Following Hofstede's perspective, we see culture in the current study as the characteristics and programming of the behavior of an organization or an individual that differentiate one organization, group, or individual from another. Therefore, the context of individuals or partner organizations that originate from culturally distinct regions (e.g., Africa vs. China) collaborating in an IJV setting presents an interesting opportunity for advancing learning and knowledge transfer studies. This is particularly interesting when looking at the context from an informality perspective, an angle that remains surprisingly unexplored in existing research.

Adapted from Hofstede (1991).

For instance, the literature shows that long-term orientation plays a significant role in forging a lasting and beneficial relationship (Minbaeva et al., 2014). In Chinese culture, this specific cultural dimension ranks extremely high, and is considered to be an important determinant for achieving relationship goals including gaining new knowledge from partners (Minbaeva et al., 2014). However, the figure also indicates that Africans score low on the long-term orientation dimension. This significant cultural difference is particularly interesting in the context of Africa-China JVs where Africans are seeking knowledge from individuals (i.e., the Chinese) who do not share their perspective or goal sharing mindset. Therefore, investigating this specific context allows us to explore how Africans cope with such a cultural challenge and navigate those cultural dimensions.

On Hofstede's other cultural dimensions, the gap is also significant. The extreme score indicated in Fig. 1 corresponds to a country's highest or lowest score. For instance, for long-term orientation, Nigeria has the lowest extreme score of 13 out of 100, while China has 87. For individualism, South Africa has the highest extreme score (65 out of 100), while for masculinity, Angola scores the lowest (20 out of 100) and Egypt scores the highest (80 out of 100) for uncertainty avoidance. From a theoretical standpoint, these cultural discrepancies among JV partners are poorly acknowledged in the learning literature and therefore require careful analysis to understand how partners' (here Africans) learning experiences in IJVs are shaped by such cultural differences.

Limited research addresses learning and knowledge transfer in the context of Africa-China JVs (Taylor, 2006). In particular, the literature on learning in Africa-China JVs fails to determine how African partners learn through their JVs (Haas and Cummings, 2014). The dearth of studies in this emerging field is noteworthy considering that China has become Africa's leading economic partner with investments increasingly occurring through JVs with local African companies (Ado and Su, 2016). To bridge this gap in the body of knowledge on this topic, this study examines the strategies Africans employ to learn and transfer knowledge from their Chinese counterparts through JVs established in Africa. A study that addresses the mechanisms by which Africans learn and transfer knowledge through inter-organizational collaboration with the Chinese is crucial considering that inter-organizational learning through JVs remains complex given the diversity of the partners involved (Miller, 1996).

Methodologically, the study adopts a social capital perspective to learning (Inkpen and Tsang, 2005) while drawing attention to partners' cultural differences and the use of informal mechanisms. By analyzing the individual and organizational behaviors used by Africans to facilitate learning and knowledge gain from their Chinese counterparts, we examine these parties' competitive-collaborative relationships (see Hamel, 1991) also known as co-opetition. More precisely, the study aims to answer

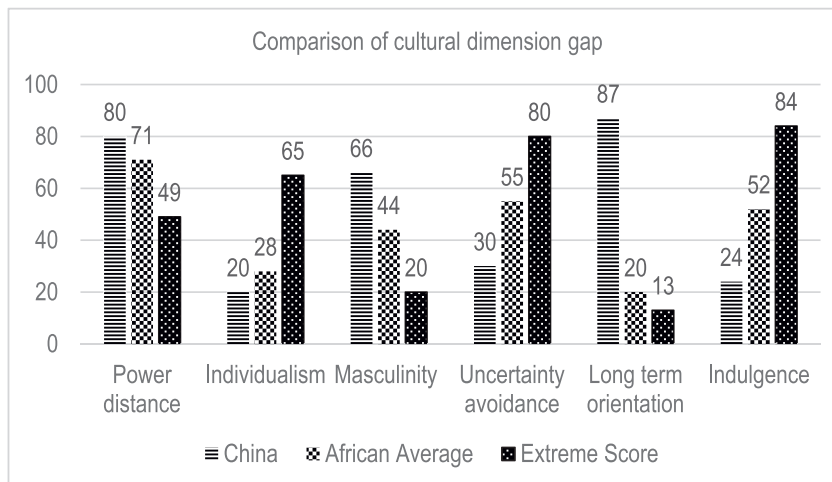


Fig. 1. Comparison of the gap in cultural dimensions.

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