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Accepted Version

Liu, Y., Sarala, R. M., Xing, Y. and Cooper, C. L. (2017) Human side of collaborative partnerships: a micro-foundational perspective. Group & Organization Management, 42 (2). pp. 151-162. ISSN 1059-6011 doi: 10.1177/1059601117695138 Available at https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/81589/

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See Guidance on citing.

To link to this article DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1059601117695138

Publisher: Sage

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Human Side of Collaborative Partnerships: A Micro-foundational Perspective

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Abstract

The research on collaborative partnerships has accumulated a vast body of knowledge, which has assisted us with comprehending several complex organizational phenomena, including mergers and acquisitions, strategic alliances, joint ventures, and entrepreneurial partnerships. Yet, the existing studies have not paid sufficient attention to the human side factors. We join the current conversation within the micro-foundations perspective of management and organization studies by suggesting that investigating the human side factors as the micro-foundations of collaborative partnerships can advance our collective understanding of the phenomena in important ways. This article has three general objectives. First, we show that collaborative partnerships have been a long-standing issue in management and organization studies and provide an overview of the puzzles that informed and motivated this special issue. Second, we highlight the key insights and contributions of the papers included in this special issue by reviewing their theoretical underpinnings, methodological approaches and findings. Finally, we outline a future research agenda on the human side of collaborative partnerships that can help advance management and organization studies.

Keywords: human side, collaborative partnerships, psychological micro-foundations, mergers and acquisitions, M&A, strategic alliances, joint ventures, JV

Introduction

Collaborative partnerships constitute an important phenomenon in contemporary organizations (Child, Faulkner, & Tallman, 2005). While there are many different types of collaborative partnerships— such as mergers and acquisitions (M&A) (Graebner, Heimeriks, Huy, & Vaara, 2016; Tarba, Cooper, Sarala, & Ahammad, 2016), joint ventures (Beamish & Lupton, 2009), strategic alliances (Das & Teng, 1998), cooperative network alliances (Bunyaratavej, Doh, Hahn, Lewin, & Massini, 2011; Koza & Lewin, 1999), and entrepreneurial partnerships (Liu & Almor, 2016; Lu & Beamish, 2006; Pahnke, Katila, & Eisenhardt, 2015)—the key characteristic of this organizational form centres on the cooperation of individuals across traditional organizational boundaries. Although the existing research on collaborative partnerships has accumulated a vast body of knowledge and thereby has assisted us with comprehending these complex organizational phenomena, we argue that the existing studies have not paid sufficient attention to the human side factors. Therefore, by joining the current conversation on the micro-foundations movement in management and organization studies (Felin, Foss, & Ployhart, 2015), we suggest that investigating the human side factors from a micro-foundational perspective can advance our collective understandings of collaborative partnerships in important ways.

This article has three general objectives. First, we seek to show that collaborative partnerships have been a long-standing issue in management and organization studies and provide an overview of the puzzles that informed and motivated this special issue. Second, we highlight the key insights and contributions of the research articles included in this special issue by reviewing their theoretical underpinnings, methodological approaches and findings. Finally, we outline a future research agenda for examining the human side of collaborative partnerships to advance management and organization studies.

The Human Side and Micro-foundations in Collaborative Partnerships

Prior research on collaborative partnerships has investigated several important human side factors (Buono & Bowditch, 2003; Seo & Hill, 2005), such as emotions in mergers and acquisitions (M&A) (Kusstatscher & Cooper, 2005; Reus, 2012), psychological contract to retain management team in M&A (Kiessling, Harvey, & Moeller, 2012), commitment and trust in strategic alliance (Cullen, Johnson, & Sakano, 2000), HRM, socio-cultural integration, and knowledge transfer in M&A (Sarala, Junni, Cooper, & Tarba, 2016), and leaders' identity work in M&A (Xing & Liu, 2016). However, the existing studies tend to lack an overarching theoretical framework to organize the multifaceted human side factors. Therefore, in the following we refer to the micro-foundations movement in management and organization studies and argue that the micro-foundational perspective can further advance research on the human side of collaborative partnerships.

Microfoundations Movement in Management and Organization Studies

Importantly, we argue that the fields of organizational behaviour and organizational psychology can offer significant opportunities to advancing research on collaborative partnerships. Building upon the micro-foundational approach (Foss, 2011), we believe that exploring the social mechanisms and illuminating the multi-faceted micro-foundations of human side factors can advance collaborative partnerships research. Based on cognitive and behavioural perspectives, managers' cognitive framing underpins their decision-making and manifested behaviours in confronting with, and navigating through, complex issues. Therefore, a closer scrutiny of micro-aspects embraces issues such as emotions (Reus, 2012) and resilience (Robertson, Cooper, Sarkar, & Curran, 2015), which provide potentially significant antecedents of collaborative partnerships from a micro-foundational perspective.

A better understanding of human behaviours and social interaction at the micro-level potentially provides an opportunity for advancing our understanding of the processes and outcomes of collaborative partnerships at the macro-level (Barney & Felin, 2013). Using a micro-foundational approach, it is also possible to examine in more detail the two key mechanisms of collaborative partnerships: aggregation and social interaction (Felin et al., 2015) wherein "organization analysis should be fundamentally concerned with how individual level factors aggregate to the collective level" (Barney & Felin, 2013: 145) and the role that social interaction plays in these processes. In summary, a nuanced and micro-level understanding of individuals, their behaviours, and their social interactions in organizations is instrumental for explaining macro-level outcomes and thereby important for further developing our current comprehension of collaborative partnerships in conjunction with shaping future research agendas.

However, the current research on micro-foundations has primarily focused on single organizations, with less attention to examining cross-organizational phenomena, including collaborative partnerships. This can be seen, for instance, in the literature on the psychological foundations of a firm's competitive advantage (Ployhart & Hale Jr, 2014), human capital resources perspective (Ployhart, 2015), and organizational routines (Felin, Foss, Heimeriks, & Madsen, 2012). It is encouraging to notice, though, that some recent research has begun to emphasize the collaborative partnership aspect, which includes work on routines as dynamics (Feldman, Pentland, D'Adderio, & Lazaric, 2016) and microfoundations of internal and external absorptive capacity routines (Lewin, Massini, & Peeters, 2011).

A Brief Introduction to the Papers in this Special Issue

In this section, we introduce the four papers in this special issue. We discuss their theoretical underpinnings, methodological approaches, findings and overall contributions to the study of the human side of collaborative partnerships. Before we introduce the individual papers, we first provide some background about this special issue project. The call for papers was announced in early 2015. Our guest editing team organized two dedicated Professional Development Workshops in 2015 to solicit high quality papers and promote the focal theme of this special issue: one titled "Human Side of Collaborative Partnerships" at the 2015 Academy of Management Annual Meeting and the other one titled "Psychological Micro-foundations of Collaborative Partnerships" at 2015 British Academy of Management Conference. The submission deadline for this special issue was in November 2015 (Cooper, Liu, Sarala, & Xing, 2015). In total, we received 19 submissions covering multiple aspects of collaborative partnerships. We were pleased to see some manuscripts cover the topic beyond our original call, such as cross-sector partnerships and global project development. After a rigorous review process with each paper reviewed by three high quality reviewers undertaking multiple rounds of reviews, we included four papers in this special issue. Table 1 offers an overview of these four papers along with some key dimensions.

Insert Table 1 about here

In the first article, Paustian-Underdahl and colleagues examine employee reactions to acquisitions. The authors take a novel theoretical approach by drawing on the theoretical

underpinnings of economic institutions theory and transactional stress theory, which allows them to link institutional-level factors to the human side of acquisitions. The empirical setting includes 29 countries, including both more advanced economies and less advanced economies, with a total sample of 10,803 middle managers and executives. The novelty of the paper is in showing that the country-level economic development plays an important role in determining employees' perceptions of growth opportunities resulting acquisitions: in less advanced economies, acquisitions are associated with increased perceptions of growth opportunities, which in turn lead to more positive perceptions related to the human side employee outcomes, such as worklife balance, job satisfaction, organizational satisfaction, and reduced turnover intentions. A vital contribution of the paper is in showing the interplay of institutional and micro-level factors, which sheds new light to understanding the human side of acquisitions in specific and the human side of collaborative partnerships in more general.

In the second article, Bauer, Dao, Strobl and Tarba study how shared team and task mental models that were developed prior to an acquisition can influence exploration and exploitation innovation activities during post-acquisition integration. The theoretical underpinnings are based on shared mental models as informal coordination mechanisms and exploitation and exploration as innovation activities. By using a sample of 101 transactions of acquirers from the German-speaking countries in Europe, this study contributes by identifying more nuanced relationships between shared mental models and innovation activities depending on the type of the innovation activities: while both shared team and task mental models positively influence exploitation activities following an acquisition, only shared team mental models are beneficial for exploration. Furthermore, the study shows that the effect of informal coordination is contextual: the beneficial effect of shared team mental models on exploration tends to be devitalized as the relative size increases. Thus, the study

contributes by highlighting important contingencies and boundary conditions when examining the human side of acquisitions in specific and the role of informal coordination in collaborative partnerships in more general.

In the third article, Søderberg and Romani use the qualitative case study method to examine collaboration in global information technology development projects between Indian vendor managers and their European client. Applying the theoretical underpinnings of Bourdieu's concept of capital as economic, cultural, social and symbolic, the study focuses on inter-organizational boundary-spanning activities in vendor-client relationships. The novelty of the study is that it articulates a context-sensitive understanding of boundary work from the rare perspective of Indian vendor managers and thereby sheds light for understanding collaborative partnerships within the 'West-Meets-East' context. More broadly, the study contributes to the understanding of the human side of collaborative partnerships by showing the coexistence of transactive and transformative modes of collaboration in vendor-client relationships and by elaborating on the role of partner status in boundary-spanning activities.

In the fourth article, to continue with the theme of boundary-spanning of Søderberg and Romani (this issue), Luvison and Cummings focus on alliance managers as boundary spanners who navigate receiving firm-sent role expectations while also receiving legitimate partner-sent expectations. Building upon the role theory, this conceptual paper proposes a theoretical framework that illustrates how the limiting nature of firm-sent expectations is affected by alliance managers' receipt of legitimate partner-sent roles, and how this effect is moderated by alliance managers' entrepreneurism and the structure of the inter-firm collaborative environment. This conceptual paper contributes to the understanding of microfoundations by providing a theoretical, multi-level framework that connects micro-level

behavioural antecedents with their macro-level structure manifestations in the organizational setting of collaborative partnerships.

Collectively, these four papers nicely illustrate the wide topic scope of collaborative partnerships by including partnerships ranging from mergers and acquisitions to joint projects and alliances. Theoretically, the wide range of theoretical perspectives—from economic institutions theory to shared mental models and boundary spanning—shows that different theoretical views and their combinations are needed to truly understand the nuances of phenomena as complex as collaborative partnerships. Methodologically, the presence of quantitative and qualitative studies as well as conceptual work demonstrates the broad range of possibilities for scholars to investigate the human side of collaborative partnerships from many different methodological orientations.

Future Research Directions

Our focus on the importance of the human side of collaborative partnership resonates with the micro-foundations movement in management and organization studies by emphasizing the micro-level, psychological underpinnings that may better explain macro-level phenomena. By including the human side and psychological micro-foundations in conjunction with diverse research contexts and methodologies, future research efforts can obtain a more nuanced understanding of collaborative partnerships. In specific, we identify three fruitful directions for future research on collaborative partnerships: (1) increasing focus on positive organizational behaviour; (2) paying more attention to the specifics of emerging economies and to the role of context in general; and (3) embracing methodological pluralism.

First, the field of positive organizational behaviour has emerged from the movement of positive psychology (Cooper, 2013; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The purpose of positive psychology ‘‘. . .is to begin to catalyze a change in the focus of psychology from pre-occupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities’’ (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). Thus, positive psychology studies individuals’ strengths and virtues that enable individuals and their organizations to thrive. We suggest that there are many opportunities for future research on the human side of collaborative partnerships to build on positive psychology. For instance, positive emotions and resilience are useful concepts for explaining how individuals deal with failures and setbacks (Fredrickson, 2003). Collaborative partnerships tend to be associated with especially high likelihood of failures, hence concepts derived from the literature on positive organizational behaviour may be conducive to designing intervention tools for teams and organizations to thrive and forge resilient pathways in collaborative partnerships.

Second, emerging economies such as Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) are still enjoying an unprecedented growth rate, despite the current turbulent global economic environment. By leveraging the power of cross-country collaborative partnerships, especially those that connect emerging and advanced economies, innovative solutions can be created to address global societal challenges, such as climate change (George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi, & Tihanyi, 2016). Given that the emerging economies differ in several important institutional and cultural dimensions, we suggest that future study should pay more attention to the human side of collaborative partnerships in emerging economies. In so doing, new insights can be generated for theoretical advancement and empirical refinement in terms of understanding the contingencies and boundary conditions of collaborative partnerships. This approach also resonates with the importance of considering the role of context in management and organization studies (Johns, 2006). Some papers included in this special

issue examine collaborative partnerships in the emerging economy context (e.g., Søderberg and Romani), while some emphasize the role of context in explaining collaborative partnerships (e.g., Paustian-Underdahl and colleagues).

Third, we encourage methodological pluralisms in social sciences research based on our belief that there is no 'golden rule' method, but the nature of research questions determines the choice of the appropriate research method. We argue that a diversity of research methods—including quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods—allows for examining social phenomena from multiple theoretical perspectives. In fact, in order to capture the complexity of micro-foundations theory, multilevel research may help to build theoretical and empirical bridges across multiple levels of analyses (Hitt, Beamish, Jackson, & Mathieu, 2007). Furthermore, qualitative research can help to embrace and leverage the power of pluralism in generating novel insights (Cornelissen, 2016), whereas rigorous inductive research also carries the potential to tackle global societal challenges (Eisenhardt, Graebner, & Sonenshein, 2016). A recent critique of empirical social science urged scholars to utilize the appropriate methods when examining complex social science phenomena (Lewin et al., 2016). We believe that embracing pluralism in research methods contributes to tackling collaborative partnerships from multiple perspectives and this approach is reflected in this special issue.

In conclusion, understanding the multifaceted aspects of human side through the microfoundations perspective can help us better understand and predict antecedents, outcomes, and contingencies related to collaborative partnerships at multiple levels. We invite other scholars and practitioners to join the debate to move forward this interesting research agenda.

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Table 1. An Overview of the Papers in this Special Issue

Authors	**Theoretical perspectives**	**Methological approaches**	**Key findings**	**Focus on human side**	**Types of collaboative partnership**	**Geographical coverage**
Paustian-Underdahl, Samantha; Fainshmidt, Stav; Sanchez, Juan; Misati, Eve; Zhao, Yue; Zhang, Haiyan	-Economic institutions -Transactional stress theory	Quantitative	-In less advanced economies acquisitions are associated with increased perceptions of growth opportunities, which are in turn associated with more positive employee outcomes (e.g., worklife balance, job satisfaction, organizational satisfaction, and reduced turnover intentions).	Employee reaction to mergers and acquisitions	Mergers and acquisitions	29 countries
Bauer, Florian; Dao, Mai Anh; Strobl, Andreas; Tarba, Shlomo	-Shared metal models -Innovation	Quantitative	-Shared team and task mental models positively influence exploitation activities following an acquisition whereas only shared team mental models are beneficial for exploration.	Shared team and task mental models	Mergers and acquisitions	German-speaking countries in Europe

Søderberg, Anne-Marie; Romani, Laurence	- Bourdieu's concept of capital -Boundary spanning theory	Qualitative	-Transactive and transformative modes of collaboration coexist. -Partner status impacts the forms of boundary-spanning activities.	Managers' boundary spanning activities	Global information technology development projects	Indian vendor managers and their European client
Luvison, Dave; Cummings, Jeffrey	Role theory	Conceptual	-The nature of firm-sent expectations is affected by alliance managers' receipt of legitimate partner-sent roles. - The above relationship is moderated by entrepreneurism and the structure of the inter-firm collaborative environment.	Alliance managers' legitimacy	Alliance managers	NA