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Culture as a cue in cross-border supplier assessment

In cross-border B2B settings customers can use their suppliers' culture as a cue in making supplier assessments. In order to better understand the mechanisms behind this we propose an adapted framework of culture as a two-level phenomenon with home country as a surface-level category and organizational competence as a deep-level category. For an empirical validation we undertook an exploratory and qualitative study among 17 purchasing agents from car manufacturers in three European countries. As methodology we applied repertory grid analysis. 8 competence traits related to culture could be extracted: customer competence, efficiency competence, project competence, solution competence, technology competence, innovation competence, relationship competence, and quality competence.

Introduction

Buying and selling across borders has always been of tremendous importance for companies acting in business-to-business (B2B) markets: In all times of history, manufacturers needed to procure input factors for their operations that often had to be sourced from countries or regions other than their home base (Monczka, Handfield, Giunipero, & Patterson, 2011). In turn, suppliers needed to look beyond the boundaries of their own home countries in order to find a customer base large enough to ensure the amount of demand needed for survival and healthy growth (Anderson, Narus, & Narayandas, 2009). And since the beginning of the 1980s, an ever growing increase in international trade has impacted market conditions for all sectors of modern economies even more significantly (Levitt, 1983). This is particularly true for countries of the European Union, where today on average two thirds of trade crosses borders (Eurostat, 2011).

Culture has been identified as a decisive device for explaining the differences between marketing in a purely national context in contrast to marketing in an international context (Tse, Lee, Vertinsky, & Wehrung, 1988). In a cross-borders B2B setting, the role of culture may be a very particular one: as has been suggested in procurement literature (e.g. Carter, Maltz, Maltz, Goh, & Yan, 2010; Blocker, 2011;) a supplier's cultural origin as observed by a customer may be a cue for preference shaping on the customer side. One quite early study, in fact, goes as far as stating that " … location has been found to be the most important supplier characteristic" (Hakansson & Wootz, 1975, p. 51) in industrial supplier selection. Observed culture – in contrast to inherent culture - thus potentially plays a pivotal role as a salient attribute within cross-cultural B2B market episodes. Knowing about and understanding the presumably rather implicit mechanisms behind this role of culture could be of major importance to both, suppliers and customers. Based on such insight customers could perhaps more purposefully direct their purchasing decisions and procurement activities while suppliers could use it to fine-tune their marketing and selling. Researchers would be able to better make sense of how B2B market transactions across borders unfold.

Previous research in consumer marketing has tackled a rather similar effect by looking at so called country-of-origin effects (Bilkey & Nes, 1982; Saran & Gupta, 2012). Here, information on a country-of-origin is described as a cue for product quality with a symbolic and emotional value to consumers (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). Country-of-origin effects in consumer marketing, therefore, primarily pertain to products or brands as objects of customer choice making (e.g. Bilkey, 1993; Lee, Lee, & Lee, 2013). While the existence of country-of-origin effects is generally acknowledged for B2B settings (Bradley, 2001; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999) too, specific differences between B2B and consumer marketing settings need to be considered. In B2B settings, procurement and purchasing people on the buying side take a more holistic perspective by looking a good deal more at characteristics of the supplier organization as object of assessment – in contrast to a more narrow perspective on the product as typical for end consumers (Cunningham & White, 1973). This position is also often purported in more fundamental writings on marketing in B2B settings, according to which competition is between firms (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) – and, thus, not products. A shift of emphasis in country-of-origin research from product to firm-level considerations particularly for the B2B sphere has therefore been quested (Samiee, 1994). Writers in industrial purchasing literature who took a more normative approach by suggesting formal decision models for systematic supplier selection (e.g. Min, 1994) have somehow conformed to this call by including suppliers' home country culture into proposed criteria lists for supplier evaluation. However, this supposes a rational comprehension on the side of the acting parties on culture as a selection criterion. By contrast, the effect we want to address in our research is more implicit and could be considered as a perceptional "bias" (Carter et al.,

2010, 357) rooted in (observed) culture. Both differences taken together justify a research perspective in its own right which up to now and to the best of our knowledge has not been taken yet (see also Cunningham, 1980; Tate & Ellram, 2009; Ulaga, 2011).

The purpose of this research, therefore, is to better understand the nature and role of culture as assessment cue for customer preference building on supplier firms in inter-cultural B2B settings. To do so, we will first position the topic in existing streams of thought and extant literature. This will then be followed by a primarily qualitative empirical study aiming at identifying corresponding cultural dimensions and their relevance for a customer's supplier assessment in a specific inter-cultural B2B setting.

Theoretical background

The nature of culture

The role of culture as prime determinant is regularly stressed in marketing writings (Cleveland & Laroche, 2007). Definitions of culture are manifold and include that of Kroeber and Kluckhohn (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952), that given by Trianidis (Triandis, 1972), and the more recent framework provided by Nisbett et al. (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001). A very prominent definition goes back to writings by Geert Hofstede who framed culture as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another" (Hofstede, 1984, p. 260). Hofstede also developed the much acclaimed Value Survey Module (VSM) which consists of originally four and later five cultural dimensions or traits. These include: power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and long term orientation. Hofstede's VSM is helpful in that it explains how a cultural context shapes values which then again impact perception, thinking and decision making of individuals. The framework, thus, paved the way for viewing culture as a two levels phenomenon where a surface-level and a deep-level are to be distinguished (Stahl, Maznevski, Voigt, & Jonsen, 2010). Surface-level culture reflects overt demographic criteria, such as nationality or national background (Jain, 2001). In contrast, a deep-level approach to culture assesses underlying values or traits. Both interact.

There is also much agreement on culture originating from different layers of establishment, such as national, organizational, or professional (e.g. Carter et al., 2010). In this sense, cultural influences on individual decision-making behavior, such as norms of thinking and perception, can emanate from many sources, resulting in a distinction of e.g. national culture, organizational/corporate culture, and professional culture. In addition to considering upper layers solely as sources of culture, others also conjectured and empirically demonstrated links even among those upper layers, more particularly Hewett et al. who found in their study "an association between national culture and corporate culture" (Hewitt, Money, & Sharma, 2006, p. 388). Thus, we can argue that genuine characteristics on a company level are subject to the specific national culture surrounding this company, an idea also clearly expressed in the theoretical reasoning by d'Iribarne (d'Iribarne, 2009). However, this link is not yet fully understood in marketing research (Cunningham, 1980) and, thus, needs more clarification. Figure 1 illustrates the traditional national/organizational-to-individual link in contrast to a national-to-organizational link.

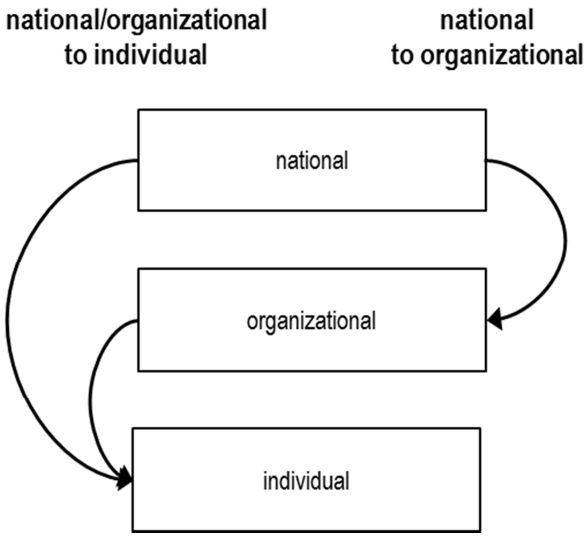

Figure 1: Levels of culture

When shifting the focus away from the individual and towards the company or organization as the carrier of culture a first but perhaps more formal implication is to replace nationality as for example documented in an individual's passport by home country as the general category to characterize the surface-level. A firm's home country is thereby understood as "the nation with which it is identified culturally … typically the home country is the area of the firm's core operating units, and often the nation that constitutes the largest portion of the firm's sales" (McGahan & Victer, 2010, p. 146). More far reaching implications from this shift, however, are to be expected on the deep-level where the validity of Hofstede's VSM with its five well known value dimensions is often questioned (for a general review see Spector, Cooper, & Sparks, 2001; Venaik & Brewer, 2013) . Karahanna et al. (Karahanna, Evaristo, & Srite, 2005) therefore suggest resorting to alternative frameworks for deconstructing culture and develop an independent proposal by drawing mostly on previous work of Rokeach (Rokeach, 1973). For that matter they conceptualize that competence dimensions may be better suited than value traits to explain culture's impact when the company or organization constitutes the object of analysis in contrast to the individual: "We posit that ... organizational and group cultures involve predominantly the acquisition of competence" (Karahanna et al., 2005, p. 12). Deep-level culture as pertaining to a company or organization would then be represented by firm competences instead of the value system as proposed for the individual. Figure 2 illustrates the shift in perspective on surface-level and deep-level when comparing the individual and the company as carriers of culture. Similar ideas have also been developed in the field of innovation management where causalities are postulated between the cultural context of the company (home country culture), innovation capabilities of the company (competences), and company performance (innovation) (Sun, 2009; also Quatraro, 2009).

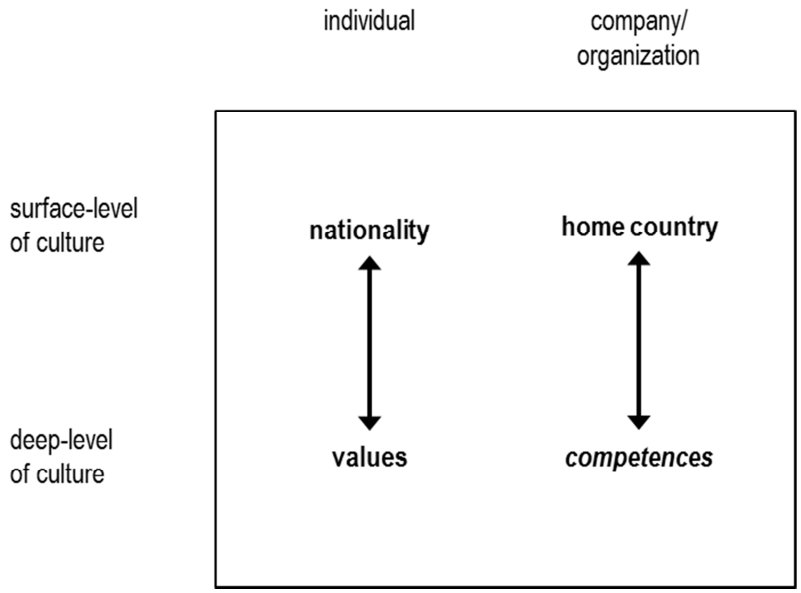

Figure 2: Surface-level and deep-level of culture

Based on this reasoning we conclude that the concept of competence deserves increased attention in our effort to understand the nature of culture on the level of the company and its role in supplier assessment across borders.

The competence culture link

Competence could be a key for better understanding the nature of culture on the level of the organization. While behavioral sciences traditionally looked at competence as a personality trait (Anderson, 1980), the competence-based view in management sciences (Prahalad & Hamel, 1990; Freiling, 2004) puts the focus on organizations, companies in particular. Competences, also competences or capabilities, thereby are defined as "complex bundles of skills and accumulated knowledge, exercised through organizational processes, that enable firms to coordinate activities and make use of their assets" (Day, 1994, p. 38). They, thus, complement resources and establish the foundation for the emergence of competitive advantages of a firm (Barney, 1991). This competitive power results from distinctive features of those competences including their nature as a source of customer value, their uniqueness in the market place, and their immunity to attempts of imitation (Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997). The latter is often traced back to the rather tacit nature of knowledge as standing behind those competences (Day, 1994). Tacit knowledge contrasts codified knowledge and typically is shared among members of an organization. In order to explain the emergence and diffusion of such tacit knowledge writers from the competence-based view (Grant, 1996) further refer to theories of knowledge creation (e.g. Nonaka, 1994) and the great emphasis that is given to socialization there. Socialization in knowledge creation is described as a learning mechanism that does not require language and, instead, is often based on sharing experience. The same authors (Grant, 1996; Grant, 1991) also point to culture as a major conduit for socialization. Culture would thus contribute to the shaping of organizational competences which in reverse could be categorized as higher-order, i.e. "capabilities going beyond the scope of single firm command" (Quatraro, 2009, p. 1334) or "capabilities that have a distinct national … stamp" (Foss, 1996, p. 7). Similar thoughts, in fact, have been put forward in writings on what could be called localized knowledge spillovers or intra-district competence (i.e. Camisón & Forés, 2011; Quatraro, 2009) where the context, however, was limited more narrowly as a geographical district and not the larger territory of the supplier home country.

When shifting our focus from the level of the individual to the level of the organization we could, thus, precise a specific understanding of culture as the collectively shared set of competences which distinguishes companies of one country context from those of another.

Observed culture and perceived competence

Customer companies in B2B markets interact with suppliers not only to procure products and services as input factors to their own operations but also to get access to such competences they deem important but do not dispose of currently (Zerbini, Golfetto, & Gibbert, 2007; Goffin, Szwejczewski, & New, 1997). By a somewhat paradoxical contrast, the tacit nature of competences that makes them so valuable on the one hand hampers exactly these attempts of identifying and assessing external sources of competence on the other hand. A customer company might therefore be very limited in its ability to diligently collect, consider and process information on a supplier's competence profile and forced to resort to more implicit and indirect modes of assessment making. The elaboration likelihood model or dual-process theory with their distinction of a central and a peripheral route of thinking provide a theoretical foundation for that (e.g. Petty & Brinol, 2012). Scarcity of mental resources and a lack of overt information thereby forces people to deviate from elaborated modes of cognition (central) and reverts them to rely much more on heuristics and cues (peripheral). Put differently, ambiguity from perceived information is disambiguated using contextual cues (Trope, 1986). Culture with its double nature of existing simultaneously both, on a surface-level and on a deep-level could provide exactly this functionality and thus fill the gap as found before. The prior makes culture easily identifiable and, hence, suitable as a cue and the latter provides access to at least some of the information undisclosed otherwise. In other words, supplier home country culture could act as an important cue in assessing a supplier's competence profiles. Others, in fact, refer to this as "country equity" (Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2001, p. 427).

We explicitly stress that this does not refute the existence and importance of many other both explicit criteria and implicit cues in assessing a supplier's competence structure. However, the salient nature of our argument to us justifies an independent perspective. It also seems worth mentioning that the notion of culture as a cue for competence has been put forward previously in the country-of-origin literature (e.g. Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Jun Xu, 2002) where it was discussed extensively (Chattalas, Kramer, & Takada, 2008). However, the use of the term in that context was one-dimensional and clearly judgmental (high versus low competence) in contrast to the multi-dimensional and categorical understanding of competence assumed here and adopted from the competence-based view of the firm (competence profile).

Our theoretical discussion can be summarized as follows: Despite much evidence from extant literature to assume a key role of culture as a cue in cross-border supplier assessment, insight into the mechanisms behind this effect is rather limited. A framework with the supplier home country as the category to describe culture on a surface-level and competence as the equivalent on a deep-level bears the potential of helping to fill this gap.

Our reasoning also yields questions that are still open and need to be answered in order to advance the endeavor we pursue, as among them eminently: What are the primary competence traits that are typically subject to a customer perceived cue effect from a supplier home country culture? Following writings by Hunt (Hunt, 2010; Hunt, 2013) we consider answering this questions a contribution to theory development in marketing. In the next section we will, therefore, present the design, the analysis of data, and the findings of an empirical study we undertook to investigate exactly this issue.

Empirical study

Methodology selection

In general, a qualitative approach to empirical research is recommended if the question under investigation is rather novel and elements for building detailed research models are still merely unknown or unclear (e.g. Malhotra, Birks, & Wills, 2012; Hunt, 2013). Special emphasis to a qualitative research mode is also stressed for the application in the wider field of issues in cross-cultural management (Javalgi, Granot, & Brashear Alejandro, 2011). Both criteria apply to our project and qualitative research, therefore, seems to be an avenue worthwhile pursuing. Focus groups, depth interviews, and projective techniques are general categories of qualitative research procedures. Despite many undoubted advantages the prior two, i.e. focus groups and depth interviews, are regularly criticized for several inherent disadvantages (e.g. Bailey, 2008), among them a tendency to nourish biases related to the interviewer and a limited capacity to provide for generalizations due to a low level of standardization. Projective techniques are defined as "a structured indirect way of investigating the whys of situations" (Donoghue, 2000 p. 47; also Webb, 1992). Repertory grid technique (RG) fits into that third group of procedures and has been praised for overcoming precisely the shortcomings mentioned before for focus groups and depth interviews (Lemke, Goffin, & Szwejczewski, 2003). The method is conceded to be powerful in uncovering or surfacing complex tacit perceptions while at the same time being characterized by a high level of standardization. Hence, RG is both "phenomenological … in that it would attempt to capture the participants own perceptions and constructs [and] idiographic in that those individual responses would not be lost in a statistical averaging exercise" ({Smith 1995 #2423, p. 162). RG allows for single respondent analysis as well as for multi-respondent studies (Jankowicz, 2005). Fields of prior application within the marketing discipline include research on luxury goods (Heine, 2009), on business relationships (Lemke et al., 2003), and studies on industrial products (Lichtenthal & Goodwin, 2006).

The RG method originates from Kelly's personal construct theory (Kelly, 1955; Kelly, 1963) and was later elaborated by other representatives of motivational research (e.g. Fransella & Bannister, 1977). According to this theory individuals make sense of their environment (other individuals, events, things, etc.) by assessing contrast or stating similarity and dissimilarity. The dimensions of similarity and dissimilarity are referred to as the personal constructs and help people to organize their thinking. As Kelly stated, "a person's construct system is composed of a finite number of dichotomous constructs" (Kelly, 1963, p. 59). RG aims at uncovering a person's repertoire of such merely implicit constructs and rests on two major pillars in practical execution: a triadic elicitation procedure and a grid based rating procedure (Jankowicz, 2005). To administer triadic elicitation, first, a sample set of elements needs to be specified. This set of elements represents the type of objects under investigation, e.g. other individuals etc. Second, from this set of typically around ten objects a sub-sample of three is drawn and the respondent is asked to select two out of three that are similar to each other and different from the remaining third. Finally, the respondent is invited to justify his grouping verbally. This justification should contain a generalization term reflecting the construct and two contrasting poles for that generalization. Once this is completed a new sample of three is drawn and the procedure reiterated until saturation is reached, i.e. results repeat. The grid rating builds on the list of construct developed in such a way. By applying a standardized table format (the grid) respondents are requested to rate each single element from the set of objects by each single construct on a scale between the two respective and opposite poles. The scale numerically spans between 1 for the pole with the positive valence and 7 for the pole with the negative valence. A practical hands-on guide to RG procedures is provided by

Jankowicz (Jankowicz, 2005). The type of constructs our study would strive to uncover is customer assumptions on supplier competences as hiding behind information on supplier home country and stemming from the culture as it characterizes this home country.

Based on the large fit between our broader research objectives and the nature of RG we decided to build our empirical work on this method.

Sample selection

A qualitative approach to data collection implies a different mode of sampling as compared to quantitative research. While representativeness in quantitative studies typically is reached through what is called random or probabilistic sampling, scholars suggested a purposeful or purposive sampling approach for qualitative work (Sandelowski, 1995). "The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth" (Patton, 2009, p. 169). Translated to our study purposeful sampling includes the systematic and appropriate choice of an industry sector, of companies on the customer side of this sector, and of informants from within those companies to finally undergo the RG interviews.

As for the industry sector it should first and foremost clearly be business-to-business. Within the B2B sphere the sector should also "manifest the phenomenon of interest intensely (but not extremely)" (Patton, 2009; p. 171). In order to support generalizability and avoid unsystematic distortion, although never completely, both sides of the market, supply and demand, should each be characterized by as much of homogeneity as possible. The sector should also exhibit a history in and a sufficient amount of cross-border trade. Reasons of pragmatism in research suggest to us finding a sector where geo-regional dispersion despite a prevalence of cross-border trade is not too extensive. All these criteria seem to be met by the automotive sector in Europe, with car producers on the customer side and component manufacturers as suppliers. First, both OEMs and suppliers are companies, thus providing for a B2B setting. Second, since the concept of the automobile as the core for both, car manufacturing and component production, is so well defined and fairly standardized a high level of inter-organizational homogeneity for both sides of the market emerged. Third, according to information publically available through financial reporting and pertaining to the period 2012 major automotive OEMs in Europe sourced at least 68 percent of their overall procurement volume from suppliers in Europe reinforcing the existence of a sufficient amount of cross-border business within the sector. And forth, Europe is a rather narrow region, however, still inherits different cultural areas. Hence, cultural diversity can be studied.

ACEA, the European car makers' industry association, lists 14 member companies in 2014. 12 of them have their focus in producing passenger cars, two clearly in commercial vehicles which were therefore excluded from our sample design. Of those in passenger cars eight can be assumed to have their home country in Europe while the others have a home base outside the region leading again to their exclusion. These eight passenger car manufacturers are dispersed over five different countries: Germany, France, Italy, the UK, and Sweden. Among them, the German, French, and Italian manufacturers clearly outperform the UK and the Swedish manufacturer with respect to volume output measured in number of cars. We, thus, decided to compose our company sample of French, German, and Italian passenger car OEMs.

Supplier assessment in general and across borders typically lies in the hands of procurement managers within car manufacturing companies. Thus, culture as a cue for supplier assessment would come to live with procurement managers who therefore can be considered as organizational key informants (Campbell, 1955; Seidler, 1974) for our research purpose.

In 2014 the researchers in this project established contacts and received agreement to co-operate from altogether 15 respondents as characterized before by using their existing academic and professional networks and acquaintances. This sample size is not untypical for qualitative research and exceeds the minimum threshold of 12 sometimes stated for content analysis (see below) in particular (Krippendorff, 2013). Table 1summarizes demographic data of those respondents.

Table 1: Demographics of sample respondents

average age	40 years
average total work experience	14 years
academic education	100 %
leadership responsibility	13 (76 %)
gender:	
male	100 %
nationality:	
German	7 (41 %)
Italian	6 (35 %)
French	3 (18 %)
Belgian	1 (6 %)

Data collection and data preparation

In order to prepare RG interviews with key informants as identified before we composed a set of 20 cards each displaying the name of a European country that had been identified as being considerably the home of automotive supplier companies. This group included Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and Turkey. By doing so we deviated from procedures suggested as standard for RG research according to which the pool of objects to later draw triads from should be generated by each interview person individually (Marsden & Littler, 2000). We justify this adaptation by two reasons: first, a standardized set will increase even further our ability to later draw generalizations from our results. Second, we presume complete and uniform transparency of the European automotive supply sector for our informants based on their professional expertise as procurement managers for leading car manufacturers. Thus, problems of missing familiarity with objects (country as home base of suppliers) are not to be expected from a predefined set instead of an individual set.

Interviews were scheduled with respondents in advance and took place either on the premises of the interview person's company or at more neutral place nearby, e.g. a room within a university building. Thus, we did interviews in Germany, France, and Italy. On average each interview took about one hour and principally followed the standard RG procedure. Respondents were first informed briefly about the topic of our research, the "realm of discourse" or "repertoire" (Jankowicz, 2005, p. 12), and thereby learned that we were striving to better understand how procurement managers from automotive manufacturers look at supplier companies in a cross-border context. Next, out of the total set of 20 cards with each containing the name of a European country three were randomly drawn and the interview person was requested to select two that appear similar to each other and simultaneously were different from the remaining third. The researchers took great care in stressing that the respondent should not envision a single and specific supplier from this country but suppliers from one country as a group. They were also instructed to focus on supplier organizations as a

whole and not on individuals working for those companies and acting as their contact points. The separation of the three into two and one was followed by a conversation in which the respondent explained his grouping approach using his own words. Before the interview ended, the reviewer entered the preliminarily elicited construct into a grid structure, then also added all countries covered in the interview, and, finally, asked the respondent to rate each supplier home country by each construct in that grid.

In cross-cultural research language typically poses specific challenges (Harzing & Maznevski, 2002). All respondents were offered to do the interview in their own native language resulting in German, French, and Italian as chosen languages respectively. Since RG involves a certain level of interaction between researchers and interview persons we needed to take precautions for providing the most extensive amount of mutual linguistic comprehension. In the research team, German and Italian native speakers were represented and, thus, acted as interviewers accordingly. As for the case of the French language all three researchers consider for themselves some level of proficiency as a second language. However, in order to avoid any confounding effect a French native speaker was included as a research assistant for the purpose of taking the lead in interviews with French speaking respondents. This assistant received a basic training in RG methodology and was familiarized with the basic research orientation in our project. In all French speaking interview cases, she was complemented in the interview situation by one author team member as a second interviewer. All interviews were voice recorded and later first transcribed in the original language before being translated into German by an external translator. Based on their first and second language skills the research team members checked these translations for correctness as well as for consistency and did corresponding corrections. Once this preparatory editing of interviews was completed the material was aggregated into a single text document extending to altogether 102.076 words. At this stage the number of triadic elicitations recorded and documented amounted to 142.

Data analysis and results

The text material then underwent an RG specific procedure of content analysis (Jankowicz, 2005; Hankinson, 2005). We thereby closely followed the example of Lemke et al. (Lemke, Clark, & Wilson, 2011). On average we succeeded in doing 8 rounds of triadic elicitation with each respondent and completed one grid. Based on the text compiled for each conversation on a triadic elicitation we first executed a standardization procedure. Resting on single statements and our interpretation of the flow of statements in each round we identified the underlying construct in ideally a single word, sometimes also two or three words. To establish reliability on the level of constructs, this procedure was executed independently by two different members of the research team who then discussed commonalities and discrepancies, thus providing for “inter-observer consistency” (Krippendorff, 2013, p. 271). The resulting common list of altogether 142 raw constructs over all our respondents was then checked by the same research team members for exact and nearly duplications reducing the number to a total of 39 constructs. These constructs are reported in Table 2.

Table 2: constructs and categories

category	constructs
process orientation and efficiency	efficiency, (lack of) inertia, emphasis on written communication, structured work, process orientation, process speed, knowledge on business requirements
innovation orientation	innovation, design competence
customer orientation	awareness of customer's cost situation, delivery reliability, engagement and motivation of employees, customer orientation, open communication
project management orientation	goal orientation, project management skills, flexibility
quality orientation	quality performance, quality awareness, attention to detail
supplier-manufacturer relationship orientation	willingness of supplier to invest in relationship with manufacturer, serious business, long term orientation
solution orientation	creative solutions, problem solving competence, co-design capability
technological orientation	technological competence, diffusion of technological knowhow across tiers
	economic conditions, locational cost factors, industrial maturity, geographical distance, bureaucratic complexity, bargaining power, financial power of suppliers, emotionality, sustainability

Standardization was followed by categorization which aims at grouping constructs on a more abstract level based on their content proximity (Krippendorff, 2013; Kassarjian, 1977) and providing for generalizability of results. An original system of categories was generated as the output of an intensive workshop session undertaken by the researchers who had been involved in conducting the interviews. This system counted eight distinct categories. For securing reliability on the level of categories we applied again procedures aiming at providing inter-observer consistency. To do so, a first researcher from outside the author team was asked to undertake an equivalent categorizing process. For the two schemes available at this stage we calculated a level of agreement (Jankowicz, 2005) which yielded an index of 79 % and indicated a need for more refinement. This was achieved via an additional discussion round including the authors and the first independent coder. A second independent marketing researcher was then involved in a procedure adapted from what is referred to as item-sort assessment (Anderson & Gerbing, 1991). For this procedure the external coder is presented on two separate lists all categories and all constructs. He is then requested to allocate each construct to a category and a level of agreement can be calculated by comparing the original construct/category scheme with the newly created. In this case a value of 58 % emerged. Again differences were discussed and changes to category labels and construct allocations executed. The same procedure was repeated two more times involving a third and a fourth independent researcher and finally arriving at an agreement index of 80 %. This does not yet meet the minimum threshold of 90 % as stated by Jankowicz (Jankowicz, 2005, p. 161), however goes beyond the 79% as found acceptable in the study by Lemke, Clark and Wilson (Lemke et al., 2011). The final list of categories and their respective link to constructs is reported in Table 2. Note that those constructs where the coders during the various discussions could not agree on a corresponding category are reported in the bottom row without a category label. Table 3 reports a frequency count (absolute and %) for the different categories with all constructs having been recoded before that to the corresponding category.

One column of that table indicates the percentage of interviews the category appeared in, either through one or more respective constructs, while the other counted all utterances allowing a single category to appear more than once in a single interview.

Table 3: frequency counts of categories

	number of interviews		number of utterances	
	absolute	percentage (of 18 interviews)	absolute	percentage
customer orientation	12	67%	28	29%
process and efficiency orientation	12	67%	17	18%
project management orientation	12	67%	14	15%
solution orientation	8	44%	8	8%
technological orientation	7	39%	7	7%
innovative orientation	6	33%	7	7%
supplier-manufacturer relationship	6	33%	7	7%
quality orientation	5	28%	7	7%
total			95	

Discussion

Our empirical research yielded a list of 8 categories emerging as underlying assumptions of purchasing agents in car manufacture firms and stemming from a cue on the home country of supplier companies from the automotive supply sector. In our theory section we established a line of reasoning according to which some of these assumptions are induced by a link from a company's home country context on organizational competences of firms from that country. We integrated this into a specific conceptualization of culture on the level of the company or organization. In order to find more validation from our empirical findings for this reasoning we now need to check for consistency with findings in other writings and extant pieces of literature (Krippendorff, 2013). Particularly we need to check whether the categories we identified really qualify as competences.

Customer orientation

Customer orientation appears to be the most important category in this study, emerging in 67 % of the interviews and accounting for 29 % of all utterances (see table 3). Building on studies by Kohli and Jaworski (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990) and Narver and Slater (Narver & Slater, 1990) Blocker, Flint, Myers, and Slater describe customer orientation as activities of a company aiming at "responding to customers' articulated needs and […] striving to proactively understand their latent and future needs" (Blocker, Flint, Myers, & Slater, 2011, p. 218). Bharadway (Bharadwaj, Nevin, & Wallman, 2012) later proposed to consider a corresponding outside-in capability of firms as being decisive for market success and thereby also built on work by Day (Day, 2006). We therefore see support for considering the inductively generated category as clearly matching as a competence.

Process and efficiency orientation

This category appears in 67 % of the interviews and has a share of 18 % of all construct utterances. Processes of collaboration and standards thereof in general aim to secure efficacy in collaboration with market partners. According to Zacharia, Nix, and Lusch "process competence reflects the firm's ability to select appropriate partners, establish processes to monitor and manage the initiative, and resolve conflicts and differences of opinion as they arise" (Zacharia, Nix, & Lusch, 2011, p. 594). These authors have also been able to empirically demonstrate the clearly positive effect emanating from a process competence carried by collaboration partners on the outcome of this collaboration. Process competence in turn aims to increase efficiency, the "efficacious use of current resources" (Möller & Törrönen, 2003, p. 111). Again, it seems appropriate to continue considering customer orientation an organizational competence. Thus process and efficiency orientation can be regarded as an organizational competence and retaining it in our candidate list of competences induced by the home country context of a company.

Project orientation

Manufacturer-supplier cooperation is often characterized as project driven on the operational level. Thus, to thrive on projects companies need "skills and knowledge in coordinating the scheduling and monitoring of defined activities to ensure that the stated objectives of […] projects are achieved" (Stratman & Roth, 2002, p. 603). Söderlund and Tell (Söderlund & Tell, 2009) explicitly conceptualized project competence as consisting of capabilities in project generation, project organization, project leadership, and in teamwork within projects. Consequently we see support for identifying project management competence as a relevant with respect to our research question.

Solution orientation

Several authors have proclaimed recently and particularly for the business-to-business sector the emergence of what is called the business of solution (e.g. Ceci, 2009; Tuli, Kohli, & Bharadwaj, 2007; Davies, Brady, & Hobday, 2006). Evanschitzky, von Wangenheim and Woisetschlaeger define as solution as "individualized offers for complex customer problems that are interactively designed and whose components offer an integrative added value by combining products and/or services" (Evanschitzky, v. Wangenheim, & Woisetschläger, 2011, p. 657). Storbacka (Storbacka, 2011) explicitly posits the need for a specific set of competences companies need to dispose of if they want to succeed in the solution business. This can be referred to as solution competence pertaining to both the development and the delivering of a solution. Early research gave empirical evidence on the power of such a competence in driving a supplier firm's market performance (Jacob, 2006). We can thus also confirm the nature as a competence of this construct as it emerged from the empirical study conducted here.

Technology orientation

Although every business and industry develops its own configuration of capabilities (Day, 1994), technological capability is one of the most important capabilities and investigated often in literature (e.g., Krasnikov & Jayachandran, 2008; Li, Zhang, & Chan, 2005). It refers to a firm's ability to develop and use substantial technological resources (Moorman & Slotegraaf, 1999). It encompasses new product development, manufacturing processes, technology development, and forecasting technological change in the industry (Song, DiBenedetto, & Nason, 2007). Technological competence is seen as a precondition of improving productivity and a critical source of competitive advantage (Bell & Pavitt, 1996;

Clark & Fujimoto; 1991; Day, 1994). In conclusion technological orientation can be regarded as a competence relevant with respect to the research question.

Innovation orientation

With reference to work by Dosi (Dosi, 1988) and Lall (Lall, 1992) Quatraro defines innovation competence as a firm's "ability both to absorb and to create technological knowledge" (Quatraro, 2009). Others completed this perspective by also including a company's ability to use and implement knowledge. Thereby innovation competence also comprises "what the firm really does given what it knows" (Zawislak, Alves, Tello-Gamarra, Barbieux, & Reichert, 2012, p. 18). It is a key to remain competitive and it is one of the most often mentioned competences and strongly anchored in extant competence literature (Zawislak et al., 2012; Sun, Wong, Zhao, & Yam, 2012) across studies in different industries and countries (e.g. Harmsen & Jensen, 2004). It is therefore also justified to continue considering it a competence in the sense of our theoretical framework.

Relationship orientation

Relationship capability in general is an enabler of cooperative relationships between suppliers and their partners, i.e. the manufacturer, by increasing the relational bonds between the firms (Mirani, More, Weber; 2001) and thereby enhancing relational embeddedness between the organizations (Granovetter, 1992). It supports suppliers to manage the quality of the interactions with its partners (Wiertz, de Ruyter, Keen, & Streukens, 2004) e.g. by facilitating the exchange and sharing of information (Fraser, Fraser, & MacDonald, 2000). In the long run it can lead to the development of trust (Wiertz et al., 2004; Storey, Kocabasoglu-Hillmer; 2013) which could indicate a competitive advantage. We also see a high level of congruence with network competence as conceptualized e.g. by Ritter and Gemuenden (Ritter & Gemünden, 2003).

Quality orientation

With varying intensity companies undertake efforts in engineering and in production or execution to improve existing products. This typically involves "experimentation, learning, and creation of new knowledge or combining new with old knowledge after the start of production of a product and its release into the market" (Mallick, Ritzman, & Sinha, 2013, p. 188). The aim is to improve quality. In this sense quality primarily encompasses the level of conformance with previously set specifications. In their seminal article, Teece, Pisano and Shuen (Teece et al., 1997) include in that sense a quality competence of a firm explicitly as one very typical source of competitive advantage. Thus, we may also presume the existence of a quality competence in our context.

Comparing the findings from empirical research undertaken in our project with positions stated in existing literature, thus, gives support for classifying the constructs discovered as being truly competences pertaining to organizations. We therefore feel confident in concluding that we are able to give answers for our initial research questions on typical competence traits that potentially play a role in describing deep-level assumptions associated with surface-level information on a company's home country.

Implications

Our research has implications for marketing theory as well as for marketing management. On the level of marketing theory we contributed by first introducing a framework that helps to better conceptualize effects from perceived culture on customers' assessment of suppliers in the context of cross-cultural B2B procurement. Central for that was an adaptation of the two

levels framework of culture. This adaptation includes a shift from individuals to organizations as carriers of culture and builds on home country as the prevalent dimension to describe culture on a surface level and competences as the dominant dimension on the deep-level of culture. In addition to this deductively derived contribution and applied to the context of cross-cultural B2B procurement we were also able to inductively and by means of qualitative research generate a list of altogether eight competence traits that seem to be recurring in how our concept unfolds in the realities of that context.

On a practical view this kind of insight enable customers in a B2B procurement context to even more scrutinize their purchasing activities by understanding mechanisms that up to now unrolled mostly implicitly, i.e. the role of culture as a cue in their own assessment and, finally, selection of suppliers. Suppliers on the other side can also better understand mechanisms of assessment and decision making on the customer side and, therefore, better direct their own activities, be it by passively taking advantage of positive cue implications from how their own culture is perceived or by actively trying to overcoming negative implications. The latter could be achieved through communication with customers and provisioning of competence related explicit information that alleviates customers from having to resort to a cue only.

Limitations

Despite the contributions that our research can make there is a number of limitations that needs to be considered. Primarily there are significant differences in the level of generalizability for the different components of our reasoning. Our research motivation and our empirical study are restricted to a certain sector, i.e. cross-cultural B2B procurement and, even more narrowly, the automotive sector. The adapted framework of culture, however, pertains to the world of companies or organizations in a very broad sense. In order to really sustain the new framework much more replication of our empirical approach in related sectors and industries will be needed. In a similar vein, we constrained our empirical research on Europe as a region in particular. The list of competence traits in fact may be broader, smaller, or just different when executing the same research approach in other parts of the world. Future research certainly must tackle these issues. And finally, at this stage of our research we were not yet able to include the grid data we also collected. Once this is possible we will also be able to develop profiles that describe competence patterns typically attributed to supplier companies originating from one specific country.

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