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Abstract

Dynamic capabilities are central to strategic management, yet the theory remains hampered by a "universalist" bias that treats organizational adaptation as a culturally neutral, technical process. This paper challenges this assumption by developing a contextualized framework that identifies national culture as a critical conditioning context for the enactment of dynamic capabilities. By integrating the GLOBE framework with the microfoundations of strategy, we theorize how cultural logics, specifically power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and institutional collectivism, filter managerial cognition and the organizational routines necessary for sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring resources. We move beyond "culture-as-variable" models to explain how cultural logic provides the social legitimacy required for capability deployment. This research contributes to the microfoundations movement and the Attention-Based View (ABV) by explaining why identical strategic routines yield heterogeneous results across different social contexts, offering a more robust, context-sensitive theory of firm adaptation.

Keywords: *Dynamic capabilities; National culture; Contextualization; Power distance; Uncertainty avoidance; Institutional collectivism*

1. Introduction

Dynamic capabilities, the firm's ability to sense, seize, and reconfigure resources, have become the dominant paradigm for explaining how firms navigate environmental turbulence (Teece, 2007; Schilke et al., 2018). However, despite decades of refinement, the theory remains tethered to a "universalist" orientation. It treats organizational routines as objective, technical scripts that can be applied with equal efficacy regardless of the social environment. By abstracting from the context in which managers actually operate, the literature has inadvertently modeled the "firm-as-machine," overlooking the fact that adaptation is a socially embedded process requiring collective interpretation and legitimacy.

This paper addresses a fundamental theoretical omission: the role of national culture as a conditioning context that shapes the microfoundations of dynamic capabilities. While the "microfoundations" movement has successfully shifted focus toward managerial cognition and internal routines (Felin et al., 2012), it has largely remained "context-blind." We argue that because dynamic capabilities rely on authority structures, risk-taking, and collective coordination, they are not culturally neutral. For example, a "reconfiguring" routine designed for a low-power-distance environment may face social friction or outright failure when deployed in a high-power-distance context where bottom-up initiative is socially discouraged.

By integrating the GLOBE (House et al., 2004) framework's dimensions—power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and institutional collectivism—into the dynamic capabilities hierarchy, we develop a contextualized theory of firm adaptation. Our contribution is threefold. First, we resolve the "universalist" flaw in strategy research by demonstrating how macro-level cultural norms filter down to micro-level managerial actions. Second, we provide a mechanism to explain persistent heterogeneity in firm performance across borders that cannot be explained by resource endowments alone. Finally, we offer a framework for future research to treat "context" not as a nuisance variable, but as a primary theoretical boundary condition for strategic action.

2. Theoretical Foundations and the Contextual Gap

Before turning to the role of national culture, it is important to clarify how dynamic capabilities have been conceptualized in prior research and why prevailing universalist assumptions limit their explanatory power in international business contexts. Much of the dynamic capabilities literature emphasizes firm-level processes of adaptation while abstracting from the cultural environments in which these processes are embedded. As a result, existing accounts provide limited insight into how and why capability enactment may vary systematically across national settings. The following subsection reviews dominant conceptualizations of dynamic capabilities and highlights the theoretical limits of treating them as culturally neutral.

2.1 The Core Logic of Dynamic Capabilities

Dynamic capabilities theory emerged as a response to static views of competitive advantage, emphasizing firms' abilities to adapt to environmental change (Teece et al., 1997). Subsequent work has refined this perspective by identifying key capability dimensions and microfoundations, including sensing, learning, integrating, coordinating, and reconfiguring activities (Teece, 2007; Teece, 2014).

Although scholars acknowledge that dynamic capabilities are shaped by history and path dependence, they are often treated as functionally equivalent across contexts. Firms are assumed

to develop similar capabilities through comparable managerial processes, regardless of national or cultural environment.

2. Theoretical Foundations and the Contextual Gap

2.1 The Culture-Blind Assumption

This universalist orientation reflects an implicit "context-blind" assumption (Johns, 2006, 2017). Managerial agency is typically modeled as rational, information flows are assumed to be open, and organizational change is framed as a technical rather than social process. By overlooking national culture, dynamic capabilities theory risks explaining *how* firms adapt without adequately accounting for *why* adaptation processes differ systematically across countries (Meyer et al., 2011).

2.2: Beyond Cultural Determinism to Cultural Logics

Traditional strategic management research has often fallen into the trap of "cultural determinism," treating national culture as an exogenous independent variable that directly dictates firm outcomes (Hofstede, 1980). This "culture-as-variable" approach is limited; it assumes a linear, almost mechanical relationship where a specific cultural score automatically produces a specific organizational structure. Such models fail to account for organizational agency and the complex ways managers navigate their environments.

In contrast, we conceptualize national culture as a conditioning context—a set of shared "logics of action" that provide the social scripts for what is considered rational, legitimate, and effective (Thornton et al., 2012; Tsui et al., 2007; Johns, 2006). Under this view, culture does not act as a direct cause of a dynamic capability; rather, it functions as a meaning-making filter through which managerial microfoundations are processed.

For instance, "sensing" a market opportunity is not a neutral act of data collection; it is a cognitive process shaped by what a society deems a "valid" source of information. In high uncertainty avoidance contexts, the cultural logic privileges "hard" data and formal reports, whereas in other contexts, the logic may privilege informal networks. By shifting from variables to logics, we can explain why firms in the same country exhibit heterogeneity: they are all drawing from the same cultural "toolkit," but they apply those tools to their specific organizational routines in different ways.

3. National Culture as a Conditioning Context

While strategic management research has increasingly embraced the importance of context, the "how" of contextual influence remains underspecified. This section develops the argument that national culture acts as a conditioning context—a pervasive set of social cues that define the boundaries of "appropriate" and "legitimate" managerial behavior.

3.1 Selection of Cultural Dimensions: The GLOBE Framework

To examine the conditioning effect of culture on dynamic capabilities, we draw upon the GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness) framework. We specifically focus on three dimensions, Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, and Institutional Collectivism, because they align directly with the core organizational problems that dynamic capabilities seek to solve: authority, risk-management, and coordination. Unlike other cultural models, the GLOBE framework explicitly distinguishes between societal values (what should be) and practices (what is), providing a more accurate reflection of the actual environment in which managers operate.

3.2 The Mechanism of Conditioning: Macro-to-Micro Alignment

The influence of national culture on firm-level capabilities is not deterministic but rather conditional. We theorize culture as a "logic of action" that conditions the microfoundations of the firm through three primary channels:

1. **Managerial Cognition:** Culture shapes the "mental models" managers use to interpret environmental signals (Sensing).
2. **Procedural Legitimacy:** Culture determines which organizational routines are viewed as socially acceptable. A routine that violates cultural norms (e.g., a junior employee challenging a CEO in a high Power Distance culture) will face internal resistance.
3. **Coordination Norms:** Culture provides the "default" settings for how individuals interact, share knowledge, and align their activities without constant oversight.

3.3 Culture as a Boundary Condition for Theory

In management theory, a boundary condition specifies when a theory's predictions are likely to hold. By treating national culture as a conditioning context, we move away from the universalist assumption that dynamic capabilities function identically in all settings. Instead, we argue that the efficiency and direction of capability development are bounded by the prevailing cultural logics of the society in which the firm is embedded. This perspective allows us to explain why identical strategic investments in sensing or reconfiguring can lead to radically different performance outcomes across national borders.

4. The Framework: Visualizing the Filtering Mechanism

The core of our theoretical contribution is illustrated in Figure 1, which depicts national culture not as a direct driver of performance, but as a Conditioning Context. This model explains why identical strategic routines yield heterogeneous results across borders by focusing on the Refraction Point within the firm.

4.1 The Three-Level Filtering Model

Level 1: The Macro-Conditioning Context (GLOBE Logics)

The outermost layer consists of societal values and practices (e.g., Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance). Following Johns (2006, 2017), we treat this as the "Social Atmosphere." It defines the default scripts for what is considered legitimate. These logics exert pressure on the firm to conform to local standards of authority and risk-taking.

To explain how macro-cultural logics penetrate firm-level routines, we adopt the Attention-Based View (ABV) of the firm (Ocasio, 1997). We posit that national culture acts as the 'foundational context' that channels managerial attention toward culturally legitimate signals while shielding it from those that lack social or procedural resonance

Level 2: The Agentic Mediator (The Organizational Filter)

This is where the firm's Dynamic Capabilities (DCs) operate as a selective prism.

- **Cognitive Filtering:** Managers do not see "data"; they "sense" signals through mental models coached by culture (Gavetti, 2012).

- The Refraction Point: High-DC firms do not simply obey cultural norms. They use their Reconfiguring Capabilities to either Align (Social Legitimacy) or Decouple (Strategic Efficiency). By using Institutional Entrepreneurship (Battilana et al., 2009), firms can "reframe" their routines to reduce the "Legitimacy Tax."

Level 3: Micro-foundational Enactment and Performance

The result of this filtering is the actual deployment of routines.

- Contextual Fit: Leads to Adaptive Performance—the firm successfully navigates environmental turbulence while maintaining internal social cohesion.
- Strategic Mismatch: Occurs when the filter is weak, leading to internal resistance, "sensing blindness" (Day & Schoemaker, 2016), and ultimately, performance failure.

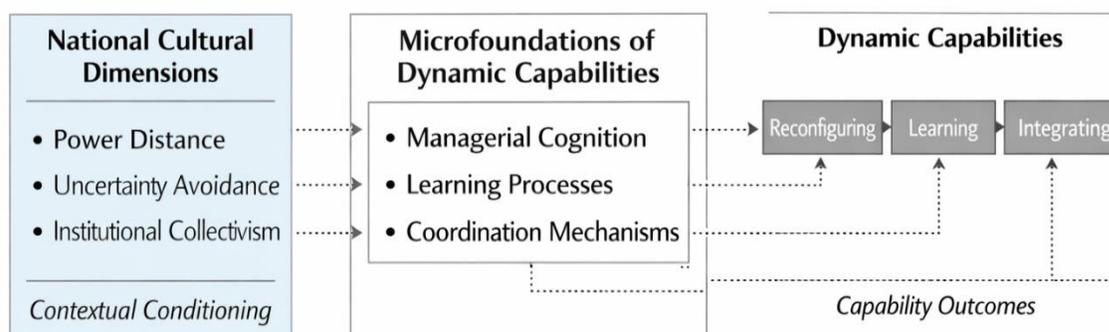


Figure 1. A Conceptual Framework Linking National Culture to Dynamic Capabilities

4.1 The Filtering Mechanism: From Society to Routine

The framework operates on the premise that dynamic capabilities are "socially fragile" routines—they depend on the willing participation and cognitive alignment of managers and employees. We identify three distinct pathways through which the cultural conditioning context filters into firm-level processes:

1. The Cognition Path: National culture influences the "sensing" phase by shaping the attention of managers. Cultural norms determine which environmental shifts are perceived as "threats" versus "opportunities."
2. The Authority Path: Culture shapes the "seizing" and "reconfiguring" phases by defining who has the legitimate right to redistribute resources and initiate change.
3. The Coordination Path: Culture conditions "integrating" capabilities by providing the default social scripts for collaboration, trust-building, and knowledge-sharing.

4.2 The Mediating Role of Firm Agency: Institutional Entrepreneurship and Decoupling

While national culture provides the "dominant logic," firms with advanced dynamic capabilities possess the agency to navigate, resist, or transform these cultural scripts. This requires a Macro-to-Micro-to-Macro (MMM) loop (Abell, Felin & Foss, 2008). In this loop, macro-conditions are filtered through managerial cognition to produce micro-actions, which then aggregate back into firm-level performance.

High-DC firms often engage in Strategic Decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). They maintain a formal structure that signals compliance with cultural expectations (e.g., traditional hierarchical titles) while operating through an informal structure that follows a different logic (e.g., agile project teams). Furthermore, firms act as Institutional Entrepreneurs, consciously reframing cultural scripts to create a "micro-climate" favorable to their routines (Battilana et al., 2009).

Dynamic capabilities also empower firms to act as institutional entrepreneurs. Rather than simply adapting to a conditioning context, these firms consciously manipulate cultural logics to create a "micro-climate" favorable to their routines.

- Reframing Logics: For example, an MNE introducing a "failed fast" learning routine in a high Uncertainty Avoidance culture may reframe "failure" not as a loss of face, but as a "scientific data-gathering exercise" (aligning with a logic of precision).
- The DC Connection: This ability to reframe, persuade, and mobilize resources toward new social norms is a microfoundation of reconfiguring. It allows a firm to shift the cultural conditioning of its own workforce, creating a hybrid organizational culture that bridges local norms and global strategic requirements.

4.3 Theoretical Implications of the Model

By mapping these relationships, Figure 1 offers a "boundary condition" map for dynamic capabilities. It suggests that the effectiveness of a capability is a function of the alignment between the routine's requirements and the surrounding cultural logic. When a firm attempts to deploy a "mismatched" capability (e.g., an egalitarian learning routine in a hierarchical culture), the framework predicts a decrease in adaptive performance due to a lack of social legitimacy.

5. Cultural Conditioning of Dynamic Capability Microfoundations

Building on the framework established in Section 4, we now derive a set of propositions that specify how individual cultural dimensions condition distinct dynamic capability processes. We focus on the interplay between societal orientations and the microfoundations—the individual-level cognitions and group-level routines—through which sensing, learning, and reconfiguring are enacted (Teece, 2007). In doing so, we move beyond simple correlations to explain the theoretical tensions created by cultural context.

5.1 Cultural Conditioning of "Sensing": The Filter of Environmental Scanning

Sensing, the microfoundation of dynamic capabilities involving the identification, development, and assessment of technological opportunities, is often treated as a neutral information-processing task. However, we theorize that "sensing" is a socio-cognitive act bounded by cultural definitions of what constitutes "valid" information.

High vs. Low Context and the "Signal Noise" Problem

In Low-Context cultures (e.g., Germany, USA), the cultural logic privileges explicit, codified information. Sensing routines in these environments are designed to capture "hard data", market reports, patent filings, and legal trends. Conversely, in High-Context cultures (e.g., Japan, Arab nations), sensing relies on relational networks and "reading the atmosphere."

Firms from low-context environments may experience "sensing failure" when entering high-context markets because their formal routines are blind to the "weak signals" embedded in informal social hierarchies and implicit negotiations.

Uncertainty Avoidance and the Sensing Paradox

High Uncertainty Avoidance (UA) serves as a pervasive conditioning context that restricts the microfoundations of sensing by institutionalizing a "Quantification Bias" (Day & Schoemaker, 2016). In these environments, the cultural logic of action privileges certainty and procedural reliability over the exploration of ambiguity.

- The Filtering Mechanism (Attentional Channeling): This cultural orientation dictates the firm's Attention-Based View (Ocasio, 1997), where the organization's "attentional channels"—its formal meetings, reporting templates, and KPI structures—are calibrated to prioritize "hard," explicit, and standardized data. Because numerical evidence offers a veneer of objective certainty, it becomes the primary source of procedural legitimacy. Managers focus on quantifiable signals not necessarily because they are more accurate, but because they are more "defensible" within a risk-averse social hierarchy.
- The Strategic Blind Spot (Peripheral Blindness): Consequently, qualitative "weak signals"—which are often ambiguous, non-linear, and embedded in informal networks—are filtered out as "noise" (Day & Schoemaker, 2016). This creates a structural paradox: the very routines designed to minimize risk through rigorous quantification actually increase the firm's vulnerability. By delegitimizing qualitative insights, the firm remains blind to the peripheral shifts that precede radical environmental turbulence, resulting in a severe "sensing penalty."

Radical innovations often emerge as "weak signals", ambiguous, qualitative, and non-linear data points. Because high UA cultures impose a "Legitimacy Tax" on non-standardized information, firms in these contexts may overlook disruptive threats because the data "isn't formal enough" to be acted upon.

Proposition 1: National culture conditions the "Sensing" capability by defining the boundaries of informational legitimacy; specifically, high uncertainty avoidance and low-context orientations restrict sensing microfoundations to formal, quantifiable data, thereby increasing the risk of missing qualitative "weak signals" that precede radical environmental shifts.

5.2 Uncertainty Avoidance: The Reliability-Adaptability Trade-off

Uncertainty avoidance (UA) is often characterized as a defensive societal trait, yet in a management context, it functions as a logic of process integrity. In high UA contexts, the microfoundations of learning are rooted in the pursuit of "best practices," standardization, and the elimination of error. This creates a powerful capability for exploitative learning, where firms become exceptionally efficient at refining existing knowledge and ensuring organizational reliability.

However, the dynamic capabilities framework suggests that long-term survival requires "exploratory learning", the willingness to embrace "failure" and "variance" to find new paths (March, 1991). In high UA cultures, the social cost of failure is high, and the "legitimacy" of a manager is tied to their ability to predict outcomes. Therefore, the cultural context creates a friction point for exploration. The firm doesn't just "fail" to learn; it rationally chooses reliability over ambiguity to maintain internal social cohesion.

Proposition 2. National culture conditions learning capabilities by defining the logic of risk; specifically, high uncertainty avoidance enhances the microfoundations of exploitative learning through standardized routines but imposes a "legitimacy tax" on exploratory experimentation, thereby constraining the firm's variance-seeking adaptive capacity.

5. 3 Institutional Collectivism: Relational vs. Transactional Integration

Institutional collectivism conditions integrating capabilities by fundamentally redefining the "social glue" required to synthesize disparate organizational units (Helfat & Raubitschek, 2018). In these contexts, the microfoundations of coordination shift from formal, transactional contracts to deeply embedded relational ties.

In high-collectivism environments, the cultural logic prioritizes the health of the collective over individualistic credit-seeking. This fosters relational coordination, a process of high-frequency communication driven by shared goals and mutual respect. This social orientation significantly reduces the "agency costs" and internal "siloeing" typically found in large, diversified organizations, as employees are culturally predisposed to share knowledge without the need for complex incentive alignment (Eriksson et al., 2014)

However, this internal cohesion creates a distinct strategic vulnerability. When integration is built purely on harmony and shared identity, the firm may fall into a "consensus trap." This logic creates a "social wall" that limits the assimilation of disruptive external knowledge—a phenomenon characterized as "the myopia of learning" (Levinthal & March, 1993). The firm becomes exceptionally efficient at integrating "known" internal perspectives but remains structurally resistant to divergent or dissenting external ideas that might threaten the group's internal status quo.

Proposition 3. National culture conditions integrating capabilities by shifting the microfoundational basis of coordination from transactional contracts to relational ties; while higher institutional collectivism enhances the integration of interdependent internal knowledge synthesis, it simultaneously creates a "consensus bias" that limits the assimilation of divergent or disruptive external perspectives).

6. Methodological Implications: Measuring the Filtering Effect

Testing a contextualized theory of dynamic capabilities requires a Multi-Level Modeling (MLM) approach allows scholars to disentangle "Within-Firm" variance (Managerial Agency) from "Between-Country" variance (Cultural Conditioning).

6.1 Operationalizing the "Legitimacy Tax"

To empirically validate the "Filtering Mechanism," researchers should adopt a Multi-Level Modeling (MLM) approach (Aguinis et al., 2013). This allows for the simultaneous analysis of individual managerial traits (micro), firm-level routines (meso), and national cultural clusters (macro).

Specifically, we recommend Scenario-Based Experiments to isolate managerial cognition. Presenting managers from different GLOBE clusters with identical "Weak Signals" (Day & Schoemaker, 2016) allows researchers to observe how cultural conditioning filters the categorization of environmental threats versus opportunities.

How do we measure the friction between a routine and a culture? We propose the use of Perceived Organizational Legitimacy (POL) as a moderator.

- The Study Design: A multi-country survey of MNE subsidiaries.
- The Hypothesis: The relationship between a specific DC routine (e.g., decentralized "Seizing") and Adaptive Performance will be moderated by the Cultural Alignment between that routine and the host country's GLOBE scores.
- The indicator: High "Legitimacy Tax" is evidenced when a routine is technically sound but leads to high turnover or low employee engagement in specific cultural contexts.

6.2 Capturing the MMM Loop (Macro-to-Micro-to-Macro)

To empirically validate Figure 1, researchers should adopt a Mixed-Methods Sequential Design:

Phase 1 (Quantitative): Use large-scale secondary data (e.g., ORBIS combined with GLOBE) to map the broad "Boundary Conditions" of DC effectiveness across 40+ countries.

Phase 2 (Qualitative): Conduct Comparative Case Studies of firms in "Mismatched" contexts (e.g., an egalitarian Nordic firm operating in a high-Power-Distance context like Brazil).

- Focus: How do managers "refract" the signal?
- Observation: Look for evidence of Decoupling (formal hierarchy vs. informal agile work) as a signature of high dynamic capabilities.

6.3 Using "Scenario-Based" Experiments

To empirically isolate Managerial Cognition—the primary filter of the sensing capability—we propose the use of Scenario-Based Experiments (Vignette Studies). This approach allows researchers to control for industry-level variables while varying the cultural conditioning of the subjects.

- The Experimental Task: Managers from distinct cultural clusters (e.g., *Confucian Asia* vs. *Anglo*) are presented with standardized, ambiguous "Weak Signals" (Day & Schoemaker, 2016) regarding an emerging disruptive technology. These signals are intentionally designed to be "pre-quantitative," lacking formal market data or patent filings.
- The Measurement of Attentional Channeling: Following Ocasio's (1997) Attention-Based View, researchers should measure two distinct cognitive outputs:
 1. Categorization: Do managers frame the signal as a threat to be avoided (common in high Uncertainty Avoidance contexts) or an opportunity to be seized?
 2. Sensing Prioritization: What specific "tools of legitimacy" do they invoke to validate the signal? High-UA subjects are expected to prioritize Hard Data and formal reports (Quantification Bias), whereas high-collectivism subjects may prioritize Relational Networks and expert consensus.

By observing how identical signals are refracted differently across cultural cohorts, this method provides direct evidence of the Cognitive Filter. It demonstrates that "Sensing" is not a objective technical skill, but a culturally coached process of interpretation that determines whether a firm remains blind to, or aware of, the "Mud" of environmental turbulence.

7. Conclusion: The Path Toward a Context-Sensitive Strategy

The "universalist" era of strategic management is giving way to a more nuanced, Contextualized Theory of the Firm. By treating national culture as a conditioning context rather than a nuisance variable, we provide a more realistic account of why adaptation is so difficult for global firms.

Our framework suggests that the ultimate dynamic capability is "Contextual Intelligence", the ability of an organization to sense not just the market, but the cultural logics that enable or disable its own routines.

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