



Importance of social capital to student creativity within higher education in China



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ABSTRACT

Drawing on socio-cultural theory, this paper investigates the effects of different sources of social capital on student creativity. A sample of 216 graduate students from a leading Chinese research university were surveyed regarding their social capital and creativity. Our results indicated that the peer, advisor, and expert social capital of graduate students can independently and interactively influence their creativity. Specifically, the three sources of social capital can positively affect creativity. In addition, peer and advisor social capital had a significant joint effect on creativity. However, peer and expert social capital had a negative interactive effect on creativity. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed in this paper.

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1. Introduction

Creativity is a popular topic among practitioners, and has entered discourse on higher education (Chan & Ngok, 2011; Reza & Reza, 2011; Yeh, Yeh, & Chen, 2012). Creativity is the ability to develop novel and potentially useful ideas (Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004; Zhou & George, 2001). It has been recognized as a beneficial factor for a society such as China, which continually requires innovation to survive and prosper (Chan & Ngok, 2011; Cropley & Cropley, 2009). Thus, studies on higher education indicate that “it is essential for students to cultivate creativity in an increasingly competitive contemporary society” (Davis, 2008, p. 223). Consequently, enhancing student creativity is currently regarded as the priority aim of higher education institutions (Reza & Reza, 2011) because they are responsible for educating, instructing, and generating knowledge (Celik, 2013). However, an increasing number of administrators and scholars have realized that the higher education system must do more to encourage the development of student creativity (Cropley & Cropley, 2009; Pil & Leana, 2009; Wu & Albanese, 2010). Such realization has prompted calls from numerous scholars for more research into ways to help boost student creativity in higher education contexts (Chan & Ngok, 2011; McWilliam, 2009).

In the existing literature, scholars increasingly realize that socio-cultural origin is becoming critical for creativity development, especially student creativity (Amabile, 1996; Barron & Harrington, 1981; Eteläpelto & Lahti, 2008; Rojas-Drummond, Albarrán, & Littleton, 2008; Sternberg & Lubart, 1996). According to the socio-cultural theory, which emerged from the work of psychologist Lev Vygotsky, social interaction plays a fundamental role in individual development (Vygotsky, 1978b). This theory describes human learning as a social process (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Sawyer, 2002). In this view, some scholars indicate that social interaction, which provides access to new knowledge and information (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998), is essential

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and fundamental for creativity development (Glăveanu, 2010). Rojas-Drummond et al. (2008), for example, posit that creativity development is “achieved through dialog and that education is enacted through the interactions between students and teachers reflecting the historical development, cultural values and social practices of the societies and communities in which educational institutions exist” (p. 178). Accordingly, social capital, which reflects important socio-cultural resources of the respective communities, has been proposed as the essential socio-cultural factor for creativity (Reagans & McEvily, 2003). Social capital refers to “the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit” (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998, p. 243). Scholars have argued that social capital helps people acquire, allocate, and utilize resources to develop personal competence (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). This premise indicates that establishing close relationships with key field professionals could help students achieve critical resources and expertise, which is important for fostering their creativity (Davies et al., 2013; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However, few studies have empirically investigated the role of social capital, especially its sources, in fostering student creativity in higher education (McWilliam, 2009; Wei, 2012).

This research is an effort to address the above mentioned shortcoming. We aim to investigate how various sources of social capital affect the development of student creativity in China according to socio-cultural theory. In China, research network of graduate students normally involves peers, advisors, and external experts, who are the key sources of social capital for graduate students (Bienkowska & Klofsten, 2012; Reza & Reza, 2011). Thus, we label the sources of graduate students' social capital as (a) peer social capital; (b) advisor social capital; and (c) expert social capital, respectively. Peer social capital is developed based on connections with classmates or research team members, whereas advisor social capital reflects the nature of the relationship between students and their supervisor (Bienkowska & Klofsten, 2012). Expert social capital originates from student ties with experts who are outside of the organization (Hansen, 1999). Accordingly, we argue that the different sources of social capital play different roles, both independently and interactively, in affecting student creativity.

The present study is distinct from previous research in several aspects. First, this study applied socio-cultural theory to examine how socio-cultural origins (namely, social capital sources) affect the development of the creativity of graduate students. The findings help extend the application of socio-cultural theory in general and social capital in particular in higher education. Second, this study facilitates a more detailed understanding of the influence of social capital on creativity because it examines the nuances of different sources of social capital and their effects on student creativity. The study investigates not only the independent effects of various sources of social capital but also their interactive influences on creativity. Finally, this study empirically examines how various sources of social capital would affect the development of student creativity in the emerging economy of China. Complementing prior research on social capital that was primarily conducted in mature economies, this work empirically assesses the role of social capital to explain the development of student creativity in China.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Graduate student creativity in the higher education sector in China

The creativity of graduate students reflects their ability to generate novel and potentially useful ideas concerning products, procedures, and processes (McWilliam, 2009; Zhou & George, 2001). For higher education today, especially in China, cultivating the creativity of graduate students is becoming the critical quality evaluation standard. The higher education sector in China is experiencing rapid expansion (Chan & Ngok, 2011) and has become the largest in the world (Zhou, 2009). The total enrollment in higher education has increased nearly fourfold in six years, from 3.6 million in 1998 to 14.2 million in 2004 (Zha, 2009). Graduate student enrollment has reached approximately 540,000 in 2010, which is 2.26 times that in 2001. These graduate students have significantly contributed to innovation and economic development in China. For instance, they have participated in more than 58% of scientific research projects in China (Zhou, 2010). A study reported that 70% of graduate students, advisors, and college administrators in China consider student creativity as a key measure of the quality of graduate education (Zhou, 2010). Nevertheless, through headlines such as “Chinese students lack creativity” and “Chinese people need to be more creative,” the Chinese media and academic journals continue to portray the Chinese as lacking in creativity or as needing to be more creative (Wu & Albanese, 2010), which implies that Chinese higher educational institutions must do more to promote the innovation and creativity of graduate students.

In the existing literature, scholars indicate that socio-cultural factors can function as critical predictors of graduate student creativity (Westwood & Low, 2003). The literature contends that interaction between students as well as between students and faculty members functions as one of the key university experiences associated with student development, including enhancing creativity (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In China, the government and higher education institutions have realized the importance of socio-cultural factors in creativity development and have substantially invested resources and effort in improving research cooperation to enhance graduate student creativity. For instance, the government has promoted the “Project of Innovation in Postgraduate Education” to help graduate students enhance their creativity through participation in research teams or the research innovation process (Ministry of Education, 2005). However, the effect of these projects is limited and difficult to investigate because of the lack of a specific theoretical direction. Although several studies have explored how socio-cultural factors influence creativity, they were primarily conducted in the context of mature market economies (Rudowicz, Tokarz, & Beauvale, 2009). Insights from these studies may not be directly applicable in the context of China because of different economic, cultural, and political contexts. Hence, scholars propose that understanding the

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