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Competitive Agency for Surviving in the BRICS? Practices in the South African Mining and Manufacturing Industry.

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The major empirical purpose of the multiple-case study was to improve our understanding of how South African economic actors react to the gradual entry of non-South African BRICS firms in their established business areas of mining and the related industries. New competitive companies, mainly from China, are reconfiguring markets in Sub-Saharan Africa. They are perceived as challenging the local manufacturing industry. Investigating *how* economic actors practically engage with state-owned or private corporations from other BRICS countries through six case studies of South African private or public corporations addresses a largely underresearched problem.
Economic geography has a contribution to make in understanding of 'agency' at the inter-firm level. A relational practice-orientated approach investigated *executive teams* as a collection of individuals and their improvised social practices that directly result in the desired economic outcomes in space and time and their socio-economic meanings (Jones and Murphy 2011).
From the perspective of South African political economy, the study's alternative conceptual argument translates inter-BRICS economic relationships and their effects on development processes in African countries from the macro to the meso levels, where inter-firm practices happen. The meso level is more appropriate for evaluating and understanding effects beyond measuring trade and investment flows from a macro perspective.
In-depth-interviews and/or in-firm observations reveal that South African corporations increasingly prefer stabilising: collaborative strategies to protect against price competition. Migrating with established clients into third markets shall mitigate the threat of becoming displaced from traditionally profitable relationships in home and third markets. Anecdotal evidence suggests three distinct types based on differing conditions that generate competitive agency. Competitive agency is created by contextual conditions, subjective reflexivity, as well as ongoing practices and arrangements. It means taking on target-oriented capacity to induce desired effects in a situation of uncertainty. Entrepreneurial methods can fortify competitive agency to overcome perceived impediments to growing business.
Companies repositioned their distinct operations through new collaborative agreements with non-South African BRICS firms, such as ring fenced buyer-supplier relationships, offshore-sourcing agreements, joint distribution agreements, marketing joint ventures, or manufacturing joint ventures. These activities can leverage collective strengths and greater financial stability in order to invest into local skills and technological solutions that improve value addition from local content.
A detailed and robust description of the concept *practices* is developed for capturing diversities that influence larger-order economic phenomena. This more holistic approach contributes to the theoretical debate in human and economic geography: it encourages detailed examinations of the relative positions that various actors have vis-á-vis one another within the 'field' they 'play in', and how these positions are maintained or adjusted. Power relations and their changing, as an effect of practices, and that have often been overlooked in management or organisational theories, come into empirical focus. This is an additional point in the findings to encourage practice-oriented thinking in the study of competition and collaboration under economic transitions.

Jury:
Prof. Dr. Olivier Graefe (thesis supervisor)
Prof. (em.) Dr. Bill Freund (thesis co-supervisor)
Prof. Dr. Marc Boeckler (external examiner)
Prof. Dr. Bernard Grobéty (president of the jury)