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Intersectionality as a new perspective in international business research

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Summary Using the intersectionality perspective as a theoretical lens in the study of the multinational company (MNC) – with its spatial separation of subunits, language and cultural diversity, organizational complexity, and multiplicity of activity environments – will yield exciting and novel possibilities for theory creation. A prime area of study deals with career patterns, i.e., who ‘makes it to the top’ in MNCs. Especially interesting are the effects of social interaction shaped in the interplay between MNCs’ talent identification and individuals’ identification processes. We discuss empirical research strategies for applying the intersectionality perspective, and managerial implications related to raising intersectionality awareness.

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Introduction

Multinational companies (MNCs), just like any organization, can be seen through two distinct lenses, one concerned with the management and functioning of organizations and another more concerned with the power and social dynamics. It has been argued that the former, more efficiency-centered, approach is the mainstream U.S. view, while the latter constitutes a more European view (Clegg & Hardy, 1996). For many decades, international business research has con-

sciously and unconsciously by-and-large “beaten around the bush” when it comes to studying central issues like power, influence, and social interaction in the MNC. We argue that the time has come to address the interplay of these issues and efficiency explicitly by applying intersectionality thinking to the complex identities of, and interaction between, individuals – both as persons and operational functions – in internationally active corporations.

“Intersectionality” is a term introduced to refer to the specific conditions that exist when one individual holds two or more social statuses and to the simultaneous and interacting effects of that combination. Firmly based in sociology, intersectionality theory thus suggests that – and seeks to examine how – various socially and culturally constructed categories interact on multiple levels to shape social interaction and consequences thereof (Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Hancock, 2007; McCall, 2005). Intersections are seen as simultaneous processes of identity, institutional, and social practices (Holvino, 2010). The concept of intersectionality is often

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used (but not limited) to grasp the interconnections between traditional 'background' categories of gender, ethnicity, age, sexuality, and class – while not being limited to such categories. The perspective in itself has partly originated from a multitude of different research traditions and academic disciplines, and is partly formulated to address the management of social relations, which are changeable, varying and multifaceted. As stated above, intersectionality seeks to examine the ways in which various socially and culturally constructed categories interact on multiple levels, for example in internationally dispersed organizations (de los Reyes & Mulinari, 2005). To use the concept is thus to stress and make use of this multitude and abundance within organizations, societies and regions.

In international business research, identity and identification are central issues that run across many themes and sub-fields. The identification and study of the complex intersection in the context of MNCs has to a limited extent and mostly implicitly been addressed in the writings of Nordic scholars on headquarter-subsidiary relationships and strategic change (see for example Hedlund & Åman, 1986; Regné, 1996), as well as language, power and influence in MNCs (see e.g., Barner-Rasmussen & Björkman, 2007; Marschan-Piekkari, Welch, & Welch, 1999; Piekkari & Zander, 2005; Vaara, Tienari, Piekkari, & Sääntii, 2005). Earlier empirical studies in international business have focused on specific individual-level background categories. Adler (1987) for example, studying women working in Japan found that the women were perceived as foreign, (a gaijin) and not as women. Apart from being exceptionally successful, this rendered them more degrees of freedom (and less gender-based discriminatory reactions) than at home or compared to what the Japanese women experienced in Japan. This clear example of foreignness trumping gender, illustrates how a gender perspective alone would have provided a faulty, or at best limited, understanding of what it is like for Western women working in Japan. A pioneering call for using intersectionality to understand the intersection between gender and diversity in international human resource management, linking it to power asymmetries, has been made by Hearn, Metcalfe, and Piekkari (2006). However, studies where the intersection of different categories is explicitly in the limelight for understanding the dynamics in geographically dispersed and multi-culturally staffed organizations remain relatively rare. Careful work on expatriates (Moore, 2005, 2007) provides one of the few exceptions. Moore (2007) argues that to understand individuals' "identity" in MNCs, one cannot only focus on e.g., "ethnicity" without studying other identities such as "gender".

Kogut and Zander (1996) maintain that one of the most important identities in modern societies is bound with the employment relationship and its location. As Bendix (1956) avidly describes, the genesis of the modern firm is intrinsically tied to the historical competition over the loyalty of workers and employees between the enterprise and class, and he introduces the notion of the firm *as a place of career*. However, even if a transformation has taken place making employees identify with the organization they work for, identities based on other categories like nationality, religion, language, region, craft, profession, family, and gender remain in the background and intersect with organizational belonging. Thus, studying "corporate women and men" (Kanter, 1977) will naturally reveal a multitude of interesting

intersections of identities, sometimes leading to groups of individuals being treated in particular ways in the organization. We believe that identity formation in interplay with power structures, as observed for example in career patterns, affects organizational performance.

In this article, we argue for the use of an intersectionality perspective to address and leverage the complexities found especially at the micro- and meso-level in MNCs. Scholars will be in a better position to understand the workings of central intra- and inter-organizational processes related to identification, where power and influence both play out and are (re-) produced within an economic frame. We will start by arguing that MNC complexity serves as a highly appropriate research context, before introducing the intersectionality approach as such. Subsequently, career patterns, both from MNCs' talent identification and individuals' identification process perspectives, will be drawn on as an example of how an intersectionality approach can be applied in international business research. We will also discuss empirical research strategies for developing new theories with an intersectionality perspective. Theoretical and managerial implications are addressed before closing the article with concluding reflections.

Multinational companies' complexity as research context

Discussing the MNC as a research context, Roth and Kostova (2003) argue that MNCs have been used to study MNC-specific phenomena, to validate and expand existing theories, and to develop new theories. Applying the intersectionality approach to MNCs, as suggested in this article, comes closest to the aim of developing new theories. In our view, the application of an intersectionality perspective when studying international business and the MNC is a way to "leverage complexity", in the sense that the complex nature of MNCs is used as an asset in our research efforts instead of complicating our quest for understanding fundamental organizational phenomena.

MNCs operate in many different environments, using an array of geographically separated units and groups with different goals, inhabited by managers and employees of different ethnical and cultural backgrounds and with different roles. Most scholars refer to "diversity in identity" based on membership in social and demographic groups, and how these differences in identities affect social relations in organizations. Diversity can thus be defined as a mixture of people with different group identities within the same social system (Nkomo & Cox, 1996). MNCs must in this context be regarded as a potentially very fruitful "bowl or kettle of fish" to botanize in. The contextual heterogeneity, combined with the intraorganizational complexity and individual variability makes it possible to study a rich and varied set of identification processes shaping social interaction and ultimately organizational performance. By using the MNC as context for intersectionality research, scholars will be able to leverage the fact that the default situation in an MNC is ample of variation in terms of the social categories available for intersectionality analysis. The ensured potential variability of patterns of identification processes and resulting outcomes should help answer questions and develop theories where small, local organizations can be seen as a special case.

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