Title

International HRM in multinational companies: global norm making within strategic action

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Abstract

The formation of global norms that shape the nature of work is a crucial element to how multinational companies (MNCs) achieve a degree of HR integration across borders. We establish a 'strategic action fields' framework to guide research into global norm-making in MNCs in general and for analysing the work of those that we term 'globalizing actors' – those who are active in globalizing a firm's management approach – in particular. We position our framework with relation to existing research in international HRM, and show how the field can benefit from achieving an approach to global norm-making that is contextualized, personalized and contested.

Keywords

International HRM, global norms, multinational companies, strategic action fields

Practitioner Implications

What is currently known:

- Many aspects of international assignments, global human capital and the nature of international HR policies and practices

- Institutional influences on the cross-national transfer of practices

What the paper adds:

- An extension of the notion of 'strategic action fields' to understanding how global norms are formed in MNCs;

- A framework for understanding global norm formation that is contextualized, personalized and contested.

Implications:

- Global norms are the organising frameworks for integration efforts around how work is done in MNC It is crucial to understand the relationship between norms and the wider context;

- Global norms come into existence through the interaction of a range of types of 'globalizing actors';

- The relationships between these globalizing actors is often contested.

Introduction

A key challenge within the field of international HRM is the greater integration of the multinational firm and how this gives rise to the globalization of norms that affect work (Schotter, Meyer and Wood, 2021). Work is becoming more globalized and increasingly governed by international structures. Many MNCs utilise international teams and work groups, while cross-national task forces in policy-making are widespread. These forms of integration are underpinned by, and give rise to, sets of norms concerning employment practice (Edwards, Marginson & Ferner, 2013; Reiche, Lee & Allen, 2019). Yet, a focus on norms within international HRM research is under-developed, constraining our ability to understand the processes of global norm formation.

In this article, we tackle the need to better understand the global nature of work by establishing a framework for global norm-making within MNCs that is contextualized, sees norm-making as dynamic and is sensitive to agency and contestation. We view norms as standards of appropriate behaviour (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998: 891) which have some degree of governing force over the nature of work, such as how the performance of people is assessed or how a degree of equity is achieved. The role of norms in shaping behaviour at work has long featured prominently in employment relations research where, as Hill (1974: 213) puts it, norms 'must occupy a central place in any discussion of the workplace'. Norms include both codified rules with explicit rewards and sanctions for particular actions and guidelines or enunciated ideas about management which lack explicit regulatory force, but which nonetheless develop the capacity to shape behaviour by providing frames of reference for action (Ferner, Almond, Colling & Edwards, 2005). New norms never enter a vacuum but rather always exist alongside other norms within 'institutional norm complexes' (Therborn, 2002: 871). Norms isolate single standards of behaviour, while institutions are the ways in which behavioural rules are structured together; accordingly, the difference between a 'norm'

and an 'institution' is one of aggregation (Finnemore & Sikkink 1998: 891; see also Therborn, 2002: 871). This clarifies that a particular norm's ability to reduce uncertainty is contingent on its relationship to a constellation of other norms, a point we return to below.

One strand of the IHRM literature that is relevant to global norms emphasises an apparent convergence on global 'best practice' in HR in MNCs (e.g. Pudelko and Harzing, 2007). While there are undoubtedly signs of this, it is also clear that there are numerous different ways in which such practices are implemented (Kristensen and Zeitlin, 2005). In other words, there are many different flavours of global recipes. A different strand of literature concerns the existence of distinctive organizational cultures that affect HR practice and employee attitudes in MNCs (e.g. Taylor, Levy, Boyacigiller and Beechler, 2008) or the related notion of the influence of 'corporate effects' in explaining distinctive parent company influences on HR across a multinational (e.g. Delbridge, Hauptmeier and Sengupta, 2011). While there often are elements of an organizational culture that are common across a multinational, and there are indeed corporate effects in evidence across borders, we contend that there are almost always multiple variants of organizational cultures or strategies in large, multi-product MNCs. As Santistevan and Josserand (2019) argue, while a common assumption in the literature on global teams is that the way that they function is shaped by an overall company approach, in practice there are many variants of how global teams operate as each one responds to the preferences of particular clients or other contextual factors. In our terminology, there are multiple 'fields' of relevance within MNCs, even within national units of MNCs.

We conceive of global norm-making as a dynamic interaction of local ideas and standards with efforts to expand the reach of global ideas and standards, a process that occurs through numerous 'meso-level linkages between institutions and firms' (Jackson & Deeg, 2019: 15) and across a range of arenas or fields. In elaborating these elements of a framework,

we develop the concept of 'strategic action fields' (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012), and adapt this to address the area of international HRM in general and of global norm-making within MNCs in particular. We examine the processes and those active in the formation of global norms 'globalizing actors'. In the following sections we……

The formation of global norms affecting work entails a number of steps: they originate either through a new idea or an existing practice in one part of the multinational; they must be disseminated and gain purchase with a wider group; and they must be implemented in units, divisions and workplaces. Each step can be complex, and those advocating new norms must decide whether they want the new norm to cohere with, or challenge and disrupt, other norms within the norm complex. At each point, organizational norms may be contested, reinterpreted and modified, resulting in the process often being fragmented or even transitory. We term the individuals who are active in these processes 'globalizing actors', who we define as those within MNCs who have an active role in the creation, diffusion and/or implementation of global norms that affect work.

Globalizing norm formation: towards a conceptual framework

Webs of norms

Global norm-making produces a multiplicity of norms in different arenas and across different levels, in what we conceive of as a multi-polar web. The notion of a web draws attention to the inter-dependence of norms on each other, all of which are dependent on the structural supports of the web. Globalizing actors, rather like spiders, must have the ability to navigate these webs. A spider chooses the most favourable conditions to construct its web, but these conditions are never perfect. Similarly, globalizing actors may find that the multinational's environment is not wholly supportive of the web of norms or of particular norms within the web; the distinctive demands of investors that are new to certain environments, such as private equity firms in France, may challenge such norms as the

assurances of job security that exist within internal labour markets, for example (Stevenot, Guery, Wood and Brewster, 2018). Moreover, the conditions in which the spider's web is located may change over time – wind, heavy rain or a larger creature may damage it. The multinational's environment is also susceptible to changing conditions, and the entry of a larger firm can alter the firm's market position and ability to sustain particular norms, such as committing resources to training. Accordingly, we must *contextualize* global norm-making within both an intra-corporate web of norms and an extra-corporate setting that is more or less supportive of this web.

In arriving at an appropriate contextualization we view the multinational as a 'transnational social space' (TSS) (Morgan, 2001). Following Morgan, a TSS is 'an arena of social interaction where the main modes of connection between groups cross national boundaries' and in which there is an 'open-ended set of cross-border connections between multiple nodes' (2001: 115). The *social* element draws attention to the inter-dependencies between individuals and groups across the firm in general and to how norms can build trust and reduce uncertainty in these relationships. The *transnational* nature of this space is increasingly important, partly through the growth of global regulations and partly through technological and communication changes that make it easier for a range of forms of integration across countries to be constructed within MNCs. However, a transnational space comes up against institutional distinctiveness at national level, giving rise to 'contextual rationalities' (Geppert, Matten and Walgenbach, 2006) that shape the preferences and expectations of actors concerning strategies and practices in distinct ways. Any analysis of global norm formation must be informed by the challenges that this global context presents in a way that is sensitive to the various ways in which actors' sense-making is shaped by their immediate context (Cooke, 2018).

While a web may be created by a single spider, norm-making in organizations is rarely the work of a single actor. Czarniawska (2009) likens the process of institution-building to the creation of an anthill in which thousands of ants performing different roles are involved, and we view global norm-making in a similar way. The various steps involved in the formation of global norms are not carried out by one person and our conceptualisation recognises the roles of actors and the resources and capabilities they use to advance their interests. While their agency is constrained by pre-existing rules and norms, which are rarely of the actors' choosing, we see globalizing actors as having the ability to exploit ambiguities in structures, such as those arising from the rapidly evolving nature of cross-border mechanisms and global teams (Santistevan & Josserand, 2019). Accordingly, our approach to global norm-making must be properly *personalized* in that it should recognize the range of actors involved, the interests they have and the different roles that they play.

Personalization demands that we put the individuals involved in global norm-making at centre stage. The ability of actors to navigate around these complex spaces is not uniform. It varies in part because of the skills and experiences that actors have differ across individuals, for example in the skills that relate to 'issue selling' (Dörrenbächer and Gammelgaard, 2016). It also varies owing to the position of individuals within the hierarchy of the MNC, and those that have authority and / or familiarity with the structures and rules of the game are more likely to be able to navigate and shape these fields (Levy and Reiche, 2018). Thus actors' position within the multinational, including the authority they possess and their length of service, but also other personal factors such as gender, race and social background, are important factors (Cooke, 2018). Consequently, the roles of those involved in 'global work' will vary (Reiche et al. 2019).

The anthill analogy also has a major problem, however: ants follow their instincts and adopt roles unquestioningly; humans generally do not. The interests of organizational actors

commonly diverge, and they can use the resources at their disposal to protect or advance their interests. Some researchers have addressed the ways in which power is crucial to how MNCs operate in general and to how novel practices are transferred in particular. Higher levels of management might seek to develop norms to neutralize the power of particular actors within their organization, albeit in ways that vary by nationality and sector. Similarly, actors at local level use sources of power to contest the control or influence from higher levels of management, leading some to characterize the MNC as a 'battlefield' (Kristensen & Zeitlin, 2005, see also Edwards, Colling and Ferner, 2007;). Potential resistance through the mobilisation of resources is central to global norm formation and so we must incorporate the *contestation* of global norm-making into our framework.

Within MNCs one source of this contestation stems from the embeddedness of actors in distinct environments, meaning that they engage in interactions with those in other countries from different normative contexts (Schotter et al. 2021. These different contexts shape the expectations and preferences of actors concerning norms, while the expertise formed within them can also act as a resource for actors to protect or advance their interests in interaction with those in other countries. As Morgan and Kristensen (2006: 1469) argue: 'It is the structured nature of difference arising from institutional distinctiveness that … makes micro-politics essential to an understanding of multinationals'. Accordingly, emergent or new norms may have an uneasy co-existence with pre-existing ones across the multinational, and the actors that seek to advance new norms may be at odds with others.

Assessing the IHRM Literature

How well does the international HRM literature fare when assessed against the criteria of contextualization, personalization and contestation? Fan, Zhu, Huang and Kumar (2021) identify three principal strands of the literature, the first of which concerns expatriation and international assignments (e.g. Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen & Bolino, 2012). This strand has

addressed a range of issues, such as how people are prepared for, and adjust to, such assignments (Kraimer, Bolino and Mead, 2016; Reiche, 2012), what it takes to be 'multicultural' (Fitzsimmons, 2013), the various roles that assignees play (Harzing, 2001; McNulty and Brewster, 2017), and the changing nature of such assignments (Collings, Scullion and Morley, 2007). While this literature is personalized in that it explores differing experiences between individuals, it is insufficiently grounded in the corporate or cross-national contexts within which these actors operate. Moreover, while this literature tells us something about 'role conflict' among expatriates and ways in which MNCs may be more or less successful in using expatriates as a control strategy (Kraimer et al., 2016), it does not fully get to grips with the ways in which global norms can further the interests of some and challenge those of others.

A sub-strand of international assignments concerns 'boundary spanners', defined as individuals who engage in coordination activities that 'integrate a firm's operations across cultural, institutional and organizational contexts' (Schotter et al. 2017). There is direct relevance to norm-making here since this integrating role incorporates the generation of shared meanings across boundaries (Meyer, Li and Schotter, 2020). This strand is personalized through the recognition that there is strong variation among this group, for example through the focus on capabilities varying with the extent of prior international experience (Holtbrugge and Mohr, 2011). There is a more informed contextualization than in other strands, particularly of the material aspects of the job context (Mäkelä, Barner-Rasmussen, Ehrnrooth and Koveshnikov 2019), although the wider institutional context often relies on the somewhat limited notion of cultural or institutional duality and does not shed much light on the global spaces within MNCs. There is only limited recognition of the contested nature of the work of boundary spanners – Birkinshaw, Ambos and Bouquet (2017) articulate their work as including the tasks of 'reconciling' and 'lubricating' for instance – but

there is little attention to how their work can advance the interests of some and challenge those of others.

A second broad strand identified by Fan et al (2021) is global human capital. One element of this concerns the way in which MNCs engage in knowledge transfer across their sites internally (e.g. Minbaeva, Pedersen, Björkman, Fey and Park, 2014; Harzing, Pudelko and Reiche 2016) while another focusses on the ways in which MNCs engage in capability building through management training that constitutes a firm-specific advantage (Meyer and Xin, 2018; Yiu, Lao and Bruton, 2007). A particular extension of this literature that has received attention recently is the extent to which executives in MNCs possess a 'global mindset'. This notion has been defined as a 'complex individual level cognitive structure characterized by an openness to and articulation of multiple cultural and strategic realities on both global and local levels, and the cognitive ability to mediate and integrate across this multiplicity' (Levy et al., 2007: 344). Writers in this sub-field have highlighted the particular attributes of openness and cosmopolitanism as crucial determinants of effective decision-making in contexts characterized by complexity (Andresen and Bergdolt, 2017). In general, this literature recognizes the importance of personalization in that there is variation in the extent to which individuals possess global human capital in general or utilize a global mindset in particular. There is some consideration conceptually given to contextualization too, through studying the complexity of the environment such as the job-related antecedents of global human capital (e.g. Andresen and Bergdolt, 2019), though in much empirical research individuals are not studied within their job or organizational contexts, revealing rather little about what people actually do in global roles. This partial contextualization is exacerbated by a very weak approach to contestation. Certainly, individuals are seen as having to balance complex and sometimes competing demands, but the ways in which multinationals are characterized by differences of interest and disputes is not prominent in this strand.

A third strand is termed IHRM practices and policies by Fan et al. (2021) which includes the debate about convergence, divergence and cross-vergence (e.g. Farndale, Brewster, Ligthart and Poutsma, 2017), the mix of home, host and third-country nationals that MNCs employ in key positions (e.g. Collings and Isichei, 2018) and the link between IHRM and international strategy (Bjorkman, Fey and Park, 2007). Much of this literature utilises institutional theory (Schotter et al., 2021). For example, Kostova and colleagues (Kostova 1999; Kostova & Roth, 2002) argue that the key challenge facing MNCs is 'institutional duality' across countries. Actors within MNCs are under pressure both to gain legitimacy in host environments by going with the grain of local institutional contexts, while also attempting to gain legitimacy within the multinational by fitting in with the *modus operandi* of the firm internationally (e.g. Zhang and Luo, 2013). Others have used the literature on comparative capitalism to explore how institutions shape the cross-national transfer of practices within MNCs (e.g. Brookes, Brewster and Wood, 2017), providing a stronger contextualization than the other strands through its focus on how frames of reference are nationally constituted. However, it says little about personalization, and generally is weak on contestation too (Ferner, Edwards and Tempel, 2012).

In sum, there appears to be a recognition that the IHRM literature 'is moving away from studying employees in clearly defined roles to studying more diverse ways of organizing work internationally' (Schotter et al, 2021: ???), while Fan et al. (2021) emphasize the need to examine the 'purposive actions' of individuals in achieving global integration. However, despite these welcome trends, existing approaches do not sufficiently combine a contextualized, personalized and contested treatment of such issues.

A Framework for Understanding Global-norm making

A wider institutionalist literature, not applied to MNCs, takes us further. The complex ways in which institutions combine to form a 'patchwork' (Abdelnour, Hasselbladh &

Kallinikos, 2017) is consistent with our notion of a multi-layered web of norms. This transnational web never stands still. Institutions are sometimes 'weakly entrenched' (Phillips and Tracey, 2009) and generally contain a degree of ambiguity and uncertainty. Equally, with multiple pressures for change from a turbulent environment, the normative and institutional context is constantly evolving, in 'perpetual motion' as Abdelnour et al. (2017) put it. Global norm-making, therefore, is a dynamic process.

Moreover, some institutionalist theorising stresses the way in which actors can be inventive, able to exploit ambiguities and changes in structures, form coalitions to extend their influence, engage in learning and recursive processes, and initiate new forms of behaviour that can become norms (e.g. Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). Applying these lessons to the context of the Within MNCs, actors in HQs may seek to shape or manipulate norms in other countries to help them implement a particular approach (Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2016). Moreover, global norm-making, wherever it originates, can be contested, as a literature on the micro-politics of MNCs testifies (Boussebaa et al., 2012; Kristensen & Zeitlin, 2005). Thus, we need an adaptation of institutionalism that stresses what is 'at stake' for different actors (Ferner et al., 2012).

SAFs and global norms within MNCs

In developing a dynamic and contextualized approach to global norm-making that is sensitive to agency and contestation, we build on the conceptualisation developed in Fligstein and McAdam's (2012) work on 'strategic action fields'. For Fligstein and McAdam, a strategic action field (SAF) is an arena in which actors 'interact with knowledge of one another under a set of common understandings about the purposes of the field, the relationships in the field (including who has power and why), and the field's rules' (2012: 3). The social world is made up of a myriad of such 'meso-level social orders', which are interwoven with each other. Assumptions concerning the 'legitimacy' of such social orders

are much looser than in neo-institutionalism – actors are assumed to broadly understand the ways in which SAFs shape their choices, and to, at least temporarily, accept the structures of these social orders, but 'common understandings' about what is going on in a particular SAF do not necessarily imply any kind of ideational consensus. Relatedly, the SAF conceptualization allows the constraints that social orders place on individual actors to be viewed as fluid: as actors choose strategies in relation to the field, the field itself shifts, . Crucially, an adaptation of SAFs to MNCs allows us to incorporate the three conceptual dimensions identified above.

Contextualization. Concerning the globalization of norms in MNCs, a SAF can be identified as the terrain across which a norm is in place or is being constructed. Those initiating new norms or amendments to existing ones have a sense of the intended coverage of the norm that they envisage, whether they intend it to apply throughout the MNC or whether it is circumscribed by function, occupation or division. In any empirical case, there are likely to be multiple global norms, often having different coverage from each other. This means that fields inevitably intersect with one another in a range of ways. For Fligstein and McAdam (2012) this interdependency is a general feature of SAFs, and leads to 'rolling turbulence' as change in one field destabilizes others, particularly those that are 'proximate'. This allows for a range of overlapping and dynamic structures that characterize norm transmission in MNCs, helping us get away from a simple HQ-subsidiary distinction.

Previous research has demonstrated the interdependencies between different types of structures and fields in MNCs. In-depth analysis of US MNCs, for instance, has revealed how a strong hierarchical element to corporate structures (primarily through an influential operational HQ with authority to make policy at the international level) co-exists with the emergence of international network structures, such as working groups and task forces dealing with issues such as cultural values or workforce diversity (Almond & Ferner, 2006).

Such structures may be designed as permanent features of the firm's norm transmission apparatus, while others may be designed as time-limited and concern a particular objective. Many of these structures, and the 'fields' they relate to, do not fit neatly into one another – for example, task forces on workforce diversity operate across national and local structures and cannot be seen as constructed through the interplay of global and local influences. Moreover, SAFs in MNCs sometimes transcend the formal boundaries of the firm. For example, SAFs which exist to construct and monitor compliance with corporate CSR codes comprise those within the firm, but also external actors such as those in international union federations (Riisgaard, 2004). Equally, many MNCs are part of international networks of firms which exist for the purpose of facilitating inter-firm learning (Gupta & Polonsky, 2014). By highlighting the complexities raised by interdependencies between fields and the ways in which these often do not fit neatly into pre-existing corporate management structures or nationally constrained organisational boundaries, the SAFs approach provides a useful framework to analyse the complex transnational spaces in which work norms are globalized.

However, their framework must be adapted to be applied to MNCs. Fligstein and McAdam's (2012) theory of SAFs rests on 'meso-level social orders'. Indeed, the interdependence between fields suggests that they operate at *multiple* levels, and the analogy of Russian dolls (p. 59-60), in which fields are nested within one another, reinforces this picture. Consider norms relating to the performance of employees in a multinational, for instance. The conventional approach in IHRM sees these as subject to global influences stemming from the corporate HQ's desire for consistency across borders, often formalized into a global performance management system, but with these subject also to local factors, including such issues as the role of unions in representing staff in discussions concerning performance and the consequences of these judgments (e.g. Bader, Bader, Froese, and Sekiguchi, 2021; Festing, Knappert, Dowling and Engle, 2012; Lindenholm, 2000; Vance,

2006). However, there are other fields of relevance besides the corporation and the country. Many professional service workers are organized into global virtual teams, for example, and these appear to develop their own identity in some respects (Santistevan and Joesserand, 2019), reflecting such factors as the requirements of a particular multinational client which may shift rapidly and which erode the notion of coherent corporate approaches. Thus there are essentially multiple fields of relevance: some global, some local; some covering thousands of workers, some just a handful. These multiple fields certainly go beyond a simply global-local distinction, and are not always neatly nested within one another in the way that the Russian dolls analogy suggests. It is therefore necessary to relax the notion of nestedness, and think in terms of multiple forms of intersectionality to arrive at an accurate picture of how norms around work are contextualized in MNCs.

Personalization: Actors, roles and skills. The strategic action fields approach highlights the ways in which fields are comprised of those with different sources of influence, interests and frames of reference. In other words, it points to the need for a personalized approach to global norm formation. In attempting to operationalize these differential positions, Fligstein and McAdam make a distinction between 'incumbents', who 'wield disproportionate influence within a field and whose interests and views tend to be heavily reflected in the dominant organization of the SAF', and 'challengers', who 'occupy less privileged niches within the field and ordinarily wield little influence over its operation' (2012: 6). They also identify 'governance units', defining these as a group that is 'charged with overseeing compliance with field rules and, in general, facilitating the overall smooth functioning of the system', and whose role is to 'reinforce the dominant logic' (ibid.).

In examining complex SAFs, it is useful to go beyond a contrast between 'incumbents' and 'challengers', as there may be a range of actors who do not fit comfortably into this binary distinction. To extend the SAF framework to the globalization of norms in

MNCs we propose a distinction between three broad groups of globalizing actors. One group is those who are active in *creating and initiating the diffusion* of the idea or intended norm at the global level. The interests of these actors in creating and disseminating ideas that become norms may range from seeking to raise their own profile in the organization and legitimizing their position, through to initiating norms to provide a greater degree of certainty in their work. They will often, but not always, be relatively senior managers, disproportionately male and of particular social classes and educational backgrounds. While this group corresponds quite closely to Fligstein and McAdam's category of 'incumbents' in that they enjoy a degree of authority in global norm-making, our conceptualization of those who are creating and initiating diffusion is a broad one encompassing those on a temporary basis and at a range of levels. The second category consists of those who have a role in the *implementation* of the norm in national or business units. This group consists partly of those who are part of the wider authority structure of the MNC in that they have management responsibility relating to a set of issues including the norm in question, sometimes with a geographically defined role (e.g. Meyer et al., 2021), and who may be seen as 'junior incumbents'. It also includes those who have responsibility for monitoring the norms once they are enacted, who are in what Fligstein and McAdam refer to as 'governance units'. The interests of these range from feeling the need to comply with the expectations of those in the dominant coalition through to advancing their role in the organization to strengthen their case for career progression. The third category consists of those who are the *subject* of the norm and may be able to influence, perhaps even block, its local implementation, but whose influence is confined to their local setting. These individuals are not globalizing actors, but rather are those who are affected by the work of globalizing actors and may come into contact with them. This group have varied interests, including those who accept the norm enthusiastically (who see it as legitimate), those who are agnostic about it, those who do not favour it but lack the resources or

commitment to oppose it, and those who oppose it and are to some extent successful in preventing or modifying its operation.

This conceptualization allows us to link the substance of norms and HR practices with the interests of various types of actors and more clearly distinguish between sets of actors who occupy different positions within SAFs and who assume different roles and have different interests, taking us beyond a focus on HR practitioners. The field position of an individual is not necessarily consistent across various global norming processes – an individual may be involved in creating norms relating to performance management, but the recipient of those concerning financial reporting procedures, for example. In other words, operationalizing field positions with regard to individual globalizing actors requires prior definition of the purpose of a particular SAF. Moreover, an individual may move between different roles across the field. For example, in a small multinational, an owner-founder-manager may take on many responsibilities, including creating, disseminating and implementing management performance norms.

Responsibility for the generation, transmission and negotiation of global norms means that globalizing actors require substantial cognitive capacity, as well as the capabilities required to develop and maintain the relevant SAFs. On this point, the work of Fligstein and McAdam adds a further central concept, 'social skill', defined as 'cognitive capacity for reading people and environments, framing lines of action, and mobilising people in the service of…action frames' (2012: 7). Such skills (or capabilities) involve the ability to shape understandings that provide other actors with identities that influence their actions. These 'must resonate with varying groups and are open to interpretation and modification' (ibid.).

This skill of 'framing' is necessary in the maintenance of settled, or 'institutionalized' social orders. However, it becomes particularly crucial where SAFs are unstable or emergent – what Fligstein and McAdam refer to as 'uninstitutionalized SAFs'. Actors must have 'the

ability to transcend their own individual and group's self-interest and consider the interests of multiple groups, in order to mobilise support from those groups for a certain shared worldview' (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012: 8). This does not necessarily imply that all groups must buy into these frames wholly or unquestioningly, but it does require the development of a shared understanding and acceptance of the principles by which the SAF operates which offers enough to subordinate actors for it to be in their perceived self-interest to operationalize its principles. The notion of framing is closely linked to Dörrenbächer and Gammelgaard's (2016) notion of 'issue selling' in which those in 'subsidiaries' push an initiative to other actors in the MNC.

The concept of social skill is particularly apposite to the development of our framework given that the SAFs we are interested in are fractured by national institutional configurations and cultural systems of meaning (see below), making the task of constructing a collective identity across these divides challenging. Moreover, as we have indicated, the organizational manifestations of SAFs in MNCs are diverse, with some taking the form of well-established international bureaucratic structures (and therefore 'institutionalized'), while others take the form of newer, and perhaps temporary, features of corporate structures, such as working groups ('uninstitutionalized'). Equally, actors may have choices about whether to pursue norm diffusion through established structures or more 'norm-specific' platforms. The social skills possessed and developed by globalizing actors are, therefore, crucial in how they engage in the creation, diffusion, implementation and maintenance of global norms,

Contestation. The notion of SAFs is also useful in opening up analysis of contestation in a variety of forms. It assumes that fields are characterized by the existence of a diffuse understanding of what is going on, and that to some extent there are shared understandings about the 'rules' of social action in the field. At the same time, however, there is explicit recognition that actors within a field have differential power, and that their interests vary,

such that actors (individual and collective) continually 'jockey for position' within fields. 'Jockeying' is particularly pronounced during 'episodes of contention', which are periods of 'emergent, contentious interaction between actors' (ibid.: 5). While social orders require shared understandings about their functioning, these understandings do not need to attain the status of full legitimacy among actors. Both high-power and, particularly, low-power actors may tolerate the existing order because an immediate frontal challenge does not suit their interests, rather than necessarily because they fully buy-in to this order. Indeed, SAFs are 'only rarely organized around a truly consensual "taken for granted" reality' (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012: 4-5).

As argued above, the IHRM literature does not entirely ignore this contestation. For instance, research on expatriates notes tensions between those on assignments and others, while much research has examined how HQ managers exercise influence over subsidiary managers on HR issues. However, the varied nature of fields, and their dynamic character, points to there being many more lines of potential conflict than these. And that these conflicts are important in shaping the norms that emerge. Some research in the organization studies approach to MNCs has highlighted how such strategizing by those in relatively junior positions within the international hierarchy of the multinational can present challenges in the implementation of a genuinely global approach. For instance, Boussebaa's (2015) work on management consultancies showed that while these firms adopted structures aimed at creating global processes and global service teams, they were at best only partially successful in doing so. This was not primarily due to national institutional differences in regulation or patterns of work, but had more to do with the 'coordination mechanisms being continually undermined by inter-office struggles over the allocation of resources to client projects' (Boussebaa et al., 2012: 481). National units sometimes shied away from including staff from other countries in their projects as this involved sharing revenue with other national units, and were similarly

reluctant to loan their top performing employees to other offices for fear of losing them permanently. Thus, 'in practice, global teams were often little more than local teams operating internationally' (Boussebaa et al., 2012: 476). The contested nature of how global virtual teams are constructed is not a feature of the IRHM literature.

In such contexts, those seeking to create global integration – typically those in relatively senior positions within the hierarchy with an international remit – need to actively structure fields in MNCs to make them more receptive to the spreading of global norms. One aspect of this is how actors in senior positions strive to create a homogenised corporate context/management culture?. For instance, work in the 'transnational communities' tradition has shown how British law firms acquired firms in Italy and subsequently undertook a policy of 'field relocation' (Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2016). This involved a series of organizational tactics that they termed re-scoping (getting out of some lines of business), re-scaling (cutting back in some markets and expanding into new ones) and re-staffing (taking on new staff more open to the 'English' way of working). These moves were designed to circumvent local institutions that did not fit with the globalized 'One Firm' model, thereby creating a field that was more conducive to the acceptance of global norms. The treatment of national institutions as malleable in the hands of MNCs contrasts with the mainstream approach in IHRM which sees the national context as a given.

Summary

This extension of a strategic action fields approach meets the three criteria set out earlier. It establishes SAFs as transnational intra-organizational configurations that overlap and intersect with one another and are in constant evolution, thereby providing a convincing contextualization. It provides the basis for distinguishing between different types of globalizing actor according to their structural position within the field whilst also seeing individuals as active in shaping their context, constituting a personalized approach to global

norm-making. And it sees global norm-making as a process in which actors advance and defend their interests, such that the process is viewed as appropriately contested.

Operationalizing research on globalizing actors

Here we set out the methodological implications of our theoretical framework. One aspect of our emphasis on contextualization concerns variations in the internal organization of the multinational. In MNCs in which units perform broadly similar functions to each other, global norm formationis likely to relate to technology and knowledge transfer. In contrast, in MNCs that are segmented through inter-connected units each with distinct functions, global norms are likely to focus on the smooth functioning of production chains (Edwards et al., 2013). This source of variation is shaped by sector in that the ease with which MNCs can build inter-connected units is influenced by industry context. A further source of variation in internal organization concerns how settled or otherwise are the 'platforms' through which norms are diffused. Some norms may spread through relatively formal HR structures which are settled in the sense that they have established goals and procedures for resolving conflict, others may travel through less structured platforms that reflect emergent priorities, such as transnational working groups, task forces and project teams. One methodological implication of these variations in internal organization is that we need data from different types of actors: those who are senior enough to describe the workings of corporate structures and strategies, and also those who are close enough to the ground to reveal the workings of 'pop-up', single issue platforms. A further implication is that if norms spread through emergent or informal platforms, and if these are dynamic in their coverage, then we should not be constrained by conventional approaches to studying the multinational that revolve around formal, geographically organized structures such as 'national subsidiaries' but rather should allow for the boundaries of fields to shift rather frequently.

A second point about contextualization concerns national variations within fields. While neo-institutionalist studies of MNCs have major deficiencies, research in the comparative institutionalist tradition has much to contribute here (Hothko & Saka-Helmhout, 2017). In particular, it demonstrates how national institutions form an 'interlocking ensemble' (Howell, 2003). The application of this approach to MNCs presents numerous instances of how enduring national institutions present constraints, albeit partial ones, to MNCs (e.g. Edwards, Coller, Ortiz, Rees & Wortmann, 2006). Clearly, national institutions are part of the story of how global norms are formed, and the interaction between national and global norms constitutes a dialectical process in which 'national and supra-national agents learn to coexist and together produce new compacts' (Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2011: 143). The existence of these norms and institutions at different levels is a key element of the 'multi-polar global web'. In methodological terms, the cross-national diversity of the context suggests that it is necessary for the research team to be comprised of experts in the national contexts in question – to occupy different positions in the web – and this points to the need for collaborative networks of researchers in different countries, each of whom must be conscious of their own 'intellectual and social upbringing and theoretical orientation '(Cooke, 20??: ???).

Turning to personalization, it is crucial to gather data concerning the material aspects of the roles of globalizing actors. Without ascertaining what they actually do and the contexts they work in, it is difficult to see how we can accurately characterize the range or intensity of cross-border interactions. The research by Andreotti, Le Galès and Fuentes (2013), which charted numerous material elements of the work of senior professional and managerial workers through in-depth interviews, provides a useful model for how researchers might do this. Such an approach would permit the construction of an inductive categorisation of types of GA, which is likely to be diverse. Some may play an 'entrepreneurial' role in that they are charged with bringing forward solutions to perceived problems; others may be expected to

generate 'buy in' from their constituency; while others may aspire to become a globalizing actor and utilise their knowledge of local context to exert influence over the process even though they do not have authority to do so. In charting these diverse roles, we see value in exploratory qualitative work, involving interviews with a range of respondents in multiple roles. The selection of these respondents should be flexible in the sense that it 'follows the story' that emerges from ongoing fieldwork as opposed to being determined by pre-set assumptions.

Our analysis of contestation also has methodological implications. The process of 'jockeying for position' is ongoing, as is the 'contentious interaction between actors' (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012) while the results of the struggles over norm formation sometimes lead to formal processes being subverted (Boussebaa et al., 2012). This highlights the need to actively seek out processes of international norm diffusion and the evolution norms go through. Accordingly, research should track the emergence of norms, charting how actors construct a new field rather than target some pre-determined process of norm formation. Thus research should seek to uncover the dynamics of norm evolution in a flexible manner, 'following the story' as we put it above, suggesting that a method might usefully draw on accounts 'from below' as well as those 'from above' (Edwards, Almond and Colling, 2011). The skills, platforms and resources globalizing actors require may well be different as a norm passes through different stages and as it encounters different types of contention. Within international relations, a similar exercise identified the stages of emergence, cascade, and internalization (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Future research could examine the mechanisms within MNCs that are important in each stage. While the movement of key staff across borders may well be important in the cascade phase, we need new mechanisms to shed light on other elements of the process. For instance, what role do employee surveys play in gauging whether new norms have become established?

The implications of this discussion are summarised in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the role of 'globalizing actors', who we have defined as

those who create, disseminate and implement new global norms in MNCs. We have

established a conceptual framework capable of analyzing the spaces in which they operate

through an extension of the 'strategic action fields' approach and established a way of

researching global norm-making that is contextualized, personalized and contested. Such an

approach can move us beyond the rather static, and somewhat outdated, notion of MNCs

being comprised of an HQ and various national subsidiaries towards a more dynamic view of

the MNC in which a range of structures at different levels become norm-making spaces.

This conceptualization advances the field of IHRM in a number of ways. First, in

providing a convincing contextualization, we see actors as both embedded in organizational

and national contexts – meaning that there are multiple pre-existing rules of the game which

are rarely of the actors choosing and to which there are pressures to conform – and also as

active, creative and inventive, able to exploit ambiguities in structures, form coalitions to

extend their influence, engage in learning and recursive processes, and initiate new forms of

behaviour that can become norms. In further contextualizing the domains in which

'globalizing actors' operate, we take into account a range of intra-organizational

configurations that cross borders, and recognize the variety of forms of cross-border work,

global teams, and other forms of intersectionality in the constant organizational churning that

characterizes so many MNCs. These dynamic configurations can overlap with one another

and evolve in response to environmental changes as well as to internal changes of priority.

Second, the framework sets out the circumstances in which those proposing a norm may encounter contestation, sometimes leading to the blocking of a new norm or the unsettling or displacement of existing ones. Globalizing actors must be able to overcome such contestation if a particular norm is to become established, or institutionalized. Third, a proper personalization has established that there is a diversity of globalizing actors who occupy different positions within fields, and given the complex and dynamic nature of these fields and the uneven and shifting distribution of authority and other sources of influence within them, navigating around them is inherently challenging. It requires considerable skill in reading environments and developing appropriate strategiesto operate effectively. We believe that this contribution is a significant advance in our thinking on how global organizational norms develop.

Given the socio-economic reach or impact of global firms in human capital development, utilisation and exploitation, this framework provides a tool for addressing wider questions around globalization. The framework has the potential to yield research better able to nuance the institutional and organisational dynamics that unsettle or displace competing global norms governing employment and could be extended to such issues as how carbon reduction targets are addressed in MNCs, or how social concerns around employees' welfare or skills are addressed. For the practice community, the framework brings to the fore the capabilities of globalizing actors and their position as global norm makers, particularly the importance of identifying 'social skills' as a key aspect of nurturing global talent within international firms.

In conclusion, we believe that the complex challenges of normative globalization, and the significance of the challenges these processes create for managers, workers and regulators worldwide, requires research much more squarely focused on the role of those individuals charged with making ideas about management 'travel' internationally across firms. This

requires a focus on the fields such globalizing actors operate within and the capabilities they deploy. While our focus is on multinational firms, and more specifically the norms about managing human capital in MNCs, we believe that many aspects of this framework are adaptable to other research on the role of individual actors elsewhere who are involved in processes of international norm-making.

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Table 1 An Adapted Strategic Action Fields (SAF) Approach to the Norm-Making of Globalizing Actors in Multinational Companies (MNCs)

Conceptual Challenges for Understanding Norm-Making in MNCs	Methodological Requirements	SAF Insights	Applying SAF to Understand Norm-Making in MNCs
Taking account of the multiplicity of norms across arenas and levels and within different environmental contexts	Contextualization: need to understand the material nature of the work of globalizing actors within intra- and extra-corporate settings	The "rolling turbulence" and impermanence of intersecting norms and fields within larger, transnational intra-organizational configurations	Locating the myriad of micro-level social orders within macro- and meso-level fields, the ways that they intersect and the complexities and often messiness of their interdependencies
Taking account of the variety of roles and actor agency in MNC norm-making	Personalization: the range of roles and the inventiveness that actors bring to those roles requires a dynamic view of norms and longitudinal analysis to capture change over time	Understanding incumbent and challenger in fields as an expression of their structural position within a field and in relation to their skills (capabilities) in shaping their immediate context	Moving beyond binary distinctions between actors to encapsulate the variety of roles in terms of what they actually do (e.g. creation, implementation, etc.) and how actors fashion elements of these roles, and hence the importance of framing and other social skills in these processes
Taking account of the co-existence of new and pre-existing norms and the divergence between norms	Contestation: power and conflict are crucial to understanding top-down and bottom-up processes through qualitative analysis	Conflicts between actors in different positions within fields and the structuring of fields through the emergence of shared understandings and coalitions	Giving due analytical weight to both the "shared understandings" of SAF to jockeying for positions where actors advance and defend their interests through contestation