

# The social constitution of knowledge integration in MNEs: A theoretical framework

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## Abstract

The goal of this article is to present a theoretical framework for a better understanding of knowledge integration in multinational enterprises (MNEs). It is argued that the enormous body of mainstream contributions from the field of International Business has largely failed to consider the transformational nature, the micro-foundations, and above all the social constitution of knowledge integration. Mainly drawing on and combining two sociological theories – Scandinavian Institutionalism and Structuration Theory – this paper contributes to an alternative understanding on knowledge integration in MNEs. In this view, knowledge integration is seen as dialectic transformation, constituted by human actors and embedded in social systems. It is argued that if we wish to understand knowledge integration, we need to ask on the micro-level, how specific actors are differently affected and able to shape such processes based on their social-systemic positioning.

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## 1. Introduction

The strategic role of knowledge in furthering the competitive advantage of the multinational enterprise (MNE) has been realized for some time and remains a vibrant field of research (Blomstermo et al., 2004; Buckley and Casson, 1976; Kogut and Zander, 1993). The field of International Business (IB) in particular has contributed to the growing body of literature on knowledge processes in MNEs. At the heart of these studies lies a ‘differentiated network’ view of

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the MNE (Doz and Prahalad, 1991; Nohria and Ghoshal, 1997), within which subsidiaries assume different roles, and knowledge is ideally developed, shared and diffused on a global base (e.g. Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1998). The ability to manage knowledge processes, that is, the creation, adoption and diffusion of innovations, is hailed as the single most important strategic challenge of the MNE. However, while the importance to understand knowledge processes has been recognized for some time and knowledge ‘adoption’ (Ghoshal and Bartlett, 1988) or ‘integration’ (Szulanski, 1996) have been identified as distinct aspects of knowledge processes, mainstream IB literature has taught us remarkably little about how knowledge integration actually happens on the ground. More specifically, mainstream IB literature has largely left us in the dark about the transformational nature of knowledge integration, about how knowledge processes in general and knowledge integration in particular play out on the micro-level between specific actors and about how knowledge integrating agency is socially constituted.

It is argued in this article that understanding the social constitution of knowledge integration on the ground implies two crucial questions: The first question concerns the outcomes of knowledge integration and involves asking, what happens to the transferred knowledge as well as the receiving context as a result of integration. The second question concerns the process and involves asking, how specific actors embedded in social systems constitute knowledge integration. To address these questions, the paper develops a theoretical framework that draws on the combined strength of Scandinavian Institutionalism and Structuration Theory. However, as both, Scandinavian Institutionalism and Structuration Theory are by their origin not concerned with knowledge processes in MNEs, they will be translated and amended with insights from IB literature to fit this research context. The theoretical framework suggested in this article is seen as a much needed counterbalance to mainstream approaches on knowledge processes in MNEs that are little concerned with the social constitution of knowledge processes in general and the transformational nature of knowledge integration in particular. By addressing these shortcomings the article makes a contribution to an emerging body of alternative approaches that have started to consider social constitution of knowledge processes in MNEs.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Section 2 comprises a critical review of mainstream and alternative contributions on knowledge processes in MNEs. Section 3 lays the foundations for an alternative concept of knowledge integration in MNEs by adopting and adapting core concepts from Scandinavian Institutionalism and Giddens’s Structuration Theory. Section 4 draws on core concepts developed in the previous section and builds a theoretical framework for a better understanding of the social constitution of knowledge integration in MNEs. Section 5 discusses managerial and research implications of the theoretical framework presented.

## **2. A critical review of extant literature**

### *2.1. Mainstream approaches*

The field of IB has recently seen an enormous upsurge of publications on knowledge processes in MNEs. These contributions have for the most part investigated how complex organizational characteristics of ‘differentiated Networks’, the characteristics of the knowledge transferred, and the knowledge-related characteristics of sending and receiving subunits impact knowledge flows in MNEs (see Table 1).

To be sure, the mainstream body of knowledge research in IB research has furthered our understanding about knowledge processes in MNEs particularly because it rests on complex and

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