

# International Management Research and Social Networks

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## INTRODUCTION

Social networks concepts and methodology have been used increasingly in empirical research published in leading U.S.-based management journals over the past ten years. Yet, use of similar social networks concepts for the study of international management phenomena has lagged this trend, although these concepts offer an untapped opportunity for research that would add considerable insights to our understanding of how multinational corporations are managed.

The purpose of this article is threefold. First, it surveys the management literature to identify and discuss the trends in empirical studies that use social networks concepts and that have been published in leading management journals from 1989 to 1999. Then, within this broader set of articles, the subset that focuses on MNCs is examined. Second, this article briefly discusses how certain key concepts about multinational corporation (MNC) structure and its management can be viewed from a social networks perspective. Third, it summarizes the constructs examined by recent (1982-1996) empirical studies of international strategic management literature. The article then concludes that such constructs can be studied through a social networks lens.

## MANAGEMENT JOURNALS AND SOCIAL NETWORK METHODS

One objective of this review is to examine studies in academic journals that are perceived as accepting papers that are rigorous in their methodology and influential in the field of management and international business management. Several recent studies identify the Academy of Management Journal (AMJ), the Administrative Science Quarterly (ASQ), the Strategic Management Journal (SMJ), Organization Science (OS), and the Journal of International Business Studies (JIBS) as leading management journals (Johnson & Podsakoff, 1994; MacMillan, 1991; Tahai & Meyer, 1999). Journals such as the Academy of Management Review or the Harvard Business Review were not included because they do not publish empirical research and as such do not explain methods and construct/variable operationalization. Also, non-U.S. based journals were not included, in order to control for editorial preferences and review practices. U.S. based journals that focus mostly on organizational behavior were not reviewed because the focus of the study was on the strategy formulation and implementation level of management research.

A total of 60 articles identified as using social network methodology were published in these journals between 1989 and mid-1999 (listed in Appendix I). A close examination of these publication data reveal that the number of articles with a social networks methodology published annually increased considerably during the most recent half of the period examined (Table 1). Further, one can see that AMJ and SMJ were the journals that published more than half of such articles while ASQ recorded the third largest volume over this period. Significantly, JIBS, the journal dedicated to international business research, published only three articles based on social network concepts during this period. Thus, one can see that social networks concepts and methods are becoming more known and more acceptable among management researchers and journal editors.

**Table 1**  
**US management journal articles with a social networks perspective**

Journal	'89-'90	'91-'92	'93-'94	'95-'96	'97-'98	'99*	Total
AMJ	1	0	2	10	10	0	23
ASQ	3	2	1	2	1	1	10
SMJ	3	1	5	3	4	3	19
OS	0	0	1	3	1	0	5
JIBS	0	0	0	0	2	1	3
Total	7	3	9	18	18	5	60

\*(6 months)

When the 60 articles were reviewed to identify articles with international business/management focus, only 8 were found (Appendix II). Of these, 3 were those published by JIBS, 4 by SMJ and 1 by AMJ. ASQ and OS published no such articles (Table 2).

**Table 2**  
**U.S. Management Journal Articles**  
**With a Social Networks Perspective *and* an International Business/Management Focus**

Journal	'89-'90	'91-'92	'93-'94	'95-'96	'97-'98	'99*	Total
AMJ	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
ASQ	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
SMJ	0	1	1	1	0	1	4
OS	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
JIBS	0	0	0	0	2	1	3
Total	0	1	1	2	3	2	8

\*(6 months)

Of the 8 articles with an international focus, 6 have a level of analysis at the country or the interorganizational level. The two remaining articles have a level of analysis internal to the organization, the individual manager level (Table 3). It is noteworthy that more than half of the 53 non-international articles examine phenomena internal to the organization.

**Table 3**  
**Level of Analysis for Social Network-Based**  
**International Management/Business Articles**

	AMJ	ASQ	SMJ	OS	JIBS	Total	Int'l.
Country	0	0	0	0	1	1	1
Interorganizational	10	3	14	1	1	29	5
Intraorganizational	0	1	4	1	1	7	0
CEO	1	0	0	0	0	1	0
Groups/Teams	3	1	1	2	0	7	0
Managers	9	5	0	1	0	16	2
Total	23	10	19	5	3	60	>8

From the above analysis we can conclude that international management articles using social networks methods are beginning to be published in U.S. management journals but at a slow pace. There is no way to know why the pace is so slow. As the following section points out, the multinational corporation is a networked organization. Therefore, a social network approach to its analysis should be appropriate.

### **THE MNC'S ORGANIZATION AS A NETWORK**

The multinational corporation (MNC) is a dynamic and multifaceted organizational phenomenon. It is a corporation that has a physical presence through direct investment in multiple national markets over which it exerts managerial control. Such an investment had traditionally been made to secure resources overseas and/or to manufacture and sell products in the MNC's overseas location. Today, in addition to tangible products, an MNC's investment overseas may also generate intangible products such as services and other knowledge-based products that may be destined for any market around the world.

Because the MNC has a physical presence in multiple national markets, its value chain activities (Kogut, 1985a; Kogut, 1985b; Kogut, 1993; Porter, 1986) resemble a multinational network whose nodes are located in the firm's operating entities that are dispersed across countries around the world. These dispersed operating entities are interdependent to different degrees depending on the MNC and its strategic needs. Also, these operating entities may have a range of different

forms. At one extreme, the MNC may operate overseas through wholly owned subsidiaries, i.e., through cross-border transactions that take place within its boundaries and can be thought of as interdependent value chain activity flows across the MNC's wholly owned entities around the world. At the other extreme, the MNC may operate overseas through direct export sales originating in its home market or through licensing, i.e., through arms-length external transactions between the MNC and independent business entities located in the foreign markets. These external transactions can be conceptualized as linkages of the MNC's value chain activities with those of the independent businesses with which the MNC is interacting. Between the two extremes lie hybrid operating arrangements such as international joint ventures, strategic alliances and franchising which add further complexity to the value chain activity interdependencies that may exist within and across the MNC's boundaries in different foreign markets. Furthermore, an MNC may employ several of these overseas operating forms at any one time.

When an MNC operates overseas through wholly owned subsidiaries, it assumes capital investment risk exposure and has managerial control over all of its activities throughout its international operations (Kogut, 1985a; Kogut, 1985b; Porter, 1986). In this case, its structure and processes must be designed to control a complex network of value chain activities that are embedded in diverse cultural environments across many national borders and cultures around the world. Furthermore, an MNC that operates overseas through direct exports has virtually no overseas investment or investment risk exposure and needs a structure and processes to manage a very limited number of value chain activities in each overseas market at the cost of no managerial control.

The dispersion and complexity of its world-wide value chain activity network causes the MNC its major organizational challenge: how can it integrate these dispersed and diverse activities to achieve maximum efficiencies while it retains the necessary levels of local market responsiveness in order to sustain its competitive advantage (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1998; Prahalad & Doz, 1987). Thus, decisions on the initial distribution of the MNC's discrete activities and the configuration of its assets are only one factor that influences the MNC's long term performance. Additionally, long term performance is determined by the MNC's ability to leverage the flexibility of the sequential advantages of its multinational network and coordinate its activities to face the contingencies and constraints imposed by the firm's evolving complex environment at any particular time (Kobrin, 1994; Kogut, 1993). This flexibility allows the MNC to shift activities to the most advantageous of its international locations in order to maintain its competitive edge as conditions shift over time.

Much empirical work on MNC strategy finds that normative integration is a primary means to the challenge of coordinating dispersed activities (Boyacigiller, 1990; Edström & Galbraith, 1977; Ghoshal & Nohria, 1989; Nohria & Ghoshal, 1997; Roth & Nigh, 1992; Roth, Schweiger, & Morrison, 1991). An MNC strives for global strategic advantage through normative integration, which is a horizontal process of informal task forces, committees, and other information and knowledge sharing and enhancing activities. These activities depend on nurturing the learning process in a direction such that the desired coordination linkages are developed. Thus, normative integration is created through personal relations among managers who develop shared beliefs and increasingly harmonize their managerial behavior around the world.

Thus, the MNC's configuration of operating linkages around the world and the nature of the mechanisms it uses to manage these linkages in order to achieve organizational integration are two broad sets of managerial challenges that can be studied using social networks methods. A further set of relationships that can be studied with social networks methods concerns the MNC's

web of relationships within its external environment of multiple and differentiated overseas markets. To date, international management researchers have studied MNC organizations internally and their external embeddedness through the examination of dyadic relationships. As the following section shows, these relationships can be studied more comprehensively through the social network perspective.

## **INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT CONSTRUCTS AND SOCIAL NETWORKS**

A recent study of international strategic management literature (Samiee & Athanassiou, 1998) identified 42 articles published by leading journals between 1982 and 1993. A review of these articles identifies 16 constructs that have been studied to better understand management of the MNC. None of these studies used social network methodologies, though with the exception of one, R&D intensity, they describe relationships among actors in a network (Table 4).

**Table 4**  
**International Business Strategy Research Relational Constructs**

Behavior control  
Centralization of decisions  
Competitive intensity  
Conflict  
Control  
Coordination  
Flexibility  
Foreign commitment  
Headquarters-subsiidiary integration  
Headquarters-subsiidiary relations  
Information processing capacity  
Interdependence--Activity  
Interdependence--complexity of  
Normative integration  
Social harmony (procedural justice)  
R&D Intensity

As discussed earlier in this article, the present review of studies on management research identified eight studies with an international business focus that were published since 1993. Of these, only one addresses MNC management issues (Athanassiou & Nigh, 1999). This article treats the MNC's top-management-team as a network and examines how internationalization of the MNC changes the way these managers interact to exchange advice on international business issues.

There could be a number of reasons for this minimal influence of social network concepts on international research. One reason may be the difficulty of collecting social network data across multiple organizations that span multiple national borders. Another reason may be a lack of awareness of social network methods, of the concepts that can be examined through these

methods, and of their advantages over more commonly used methodologies by the more general management research community. The lack of awareness is clearly changing, as shown by the increasing number of social networks based articles that have been published more recently (Table 1). Difficulties of collecting social network data across multiple organizations that span multiple national borders are likely to be overcome as more international management researchers become increasingly familiar with the nature of social network research and its natural fit with the nature of the multinational corporation's organization and its managerial challenges.

Clearly, the networked nature of the MNC organization and the prominence of relational tools such as normative integration as means to manage the MNC would indicate that social networks methods should offer an appropriate approach with which to study these phenomena. The MNC remains an untapped opportunity for future research based on social networks concepts and methodology.

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## Appendix I

### Empirical Research Articles, Published in Management Journals, that Draw on Social Network Concepts

#### *Academy of Management Journal*

- Baum, J. A. C., & Korn, H. J. (1996). Competitive dynamics of inter-firm rivalry. *Academy of Management Journal*, 39(2), 255-291.
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- Shah, P. (1998). Who are employees' social referents? Using a network perspective to determine referent others. *Academy of Management Journal*, 41(3), 249-268.
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- Wade, J. (1996). Community-level analysis of sources and rates of technological variation in the microprocessor market. *Academy of Management Journal*, 39(5), 1218-1244.
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## APPENDIX II

### Articles Published in Management Journals with Both a Social Network and an International Focus

Athanassiou, N., & Nigh, D. (1999). The impact of company internationalization on top management team advice networks: A tacit knowledge perspective. *Strategic Management Journal*, 19(1), 83-92.

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