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From Cultural Differences to Identity Politics: A Critical Discursive Approach to National Identity in Multinational Corporations

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ABSTRACT   There is a paucity of knowledge of one key aspect of diversity in and around international organizations: national identity. This is especially the case with research on multinational corporations (MNC) that has focused on cultural differences instead of processes of national identification or national identity construction. Drawing on a critical discursive approach, this paper offers four perspectives that can help to advance this area of research. First, MNCs can be viewed as sites of identity politics, within which one can study 'us vs. them' constructions and the reproduction of inequalities. Second, MNCs can be seen as actors engaged in identity building and legitimation vis-à-vis external stakeholders, and the analysis of the discursive dynamics involved illuminates important aspects of identity politics between the organization and its environment. Third, MNCs can be viewed as part of international relations between nations and nationalities, and analysis of discursive dynamics in the media can elucidate key aspects of the international struggles encountered. Fourth, MNCs can be seen as agents of broader issues and changes, which enables us to comprehend how MNCs advance neocolonialism or promote positive change in society.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, discourse, diversity, identity, multinational corporation, nationalism, national identity, power

INTRODUCTION

A key issue that unites and divides organizations and organizational members is national identity. While there is a proliferation of research on cultural differences (Hofstede, 1994; Shenkar, 2001), research on international management has focused only limited attention on the processes of national identification or national identity construction (Koveshnikov et al., 2016; Vaara and Tienari, 2011). Moreover, advances

in diversity research, such as critical analysis of inequality linked with gender or ethnicity (Benschop, 2011; Kelly and Dobbin, 1998; Nkomo and Hoobler, 2014; Pringle and Strachan, 2015), have remained largely disconnected from research on culture and identity in international organizations. This is unfortunate given the predominance of national identity as a social category that matters in society. In particular, it has led to a lack of in-depth understanding of identity politics in and around international organizations.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to offer a theoretical framework to make sense of national identity politics in and around international organizations such as multinational corporations (MNC). Identity is a notoriously complex concept, and we see it as socially and discursively constructed. This helps to focus attention on how identities are enacted in specific organizational settings, sometimes with significant implications for the people and organizations involved. Identity politics in turn is originally associated with the implications of identification and categorization about race, ethnicity, and gender (Smith, 1983), but we see it more broadly as a concept that allows us to focus on the ways in which national identity constructions are linked with interests and ideologies and the implications thereof.

We draw on a critical discursive approach (Angouri, 2018; Van Dijk, 1998; Wodak and Meyer, 2015). The origins of critical discursive analysis can be traced back to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) developed by Norman Fairclough (2010) and colleagues in applied linguistics. In this paper, we draw from the discourse-historical perspective developed by Ruth Wodak and her colleagues (Reisigl and Wodak, 2015), and zoom in on the discursively constructed notions of national identity, the historical roots of which can be found in nationalism. This view resonates with the idea of nations as 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1983) and the ways in which national identities are articulated in 'banal nationalism' (Billig, 1995).

We specify and elaborate on four different but complementary perspectives to make sense of national identity politics in and around MNCs. First, MNCs can be viewed as sites of identity politics, within which one can study various kinds of struggle and confrontation, including 'us vs. them' constructions and reproduction of inequalities within the organization. Second, MNCs can be seen as actors engaged in identity building and legitimation vis-à-vis external stakeholders, and the unravelling of the discursive dynamics thereof helps to better understand important aspects of identity politics between organizations and groups of people. Third, MNCs can be viewed as part of international relations between nations and nationalities, and the analysis of discursive dynamics elucidates key aspects of the struggles involved. Fourth, one can also focus on MNCs as agents of broader issues and changes, which allows us to better understand how MNCs advance neocolonialism or promote positive change in society.

This leads us to suggest four issues that warrant special attention in future research: intersectionality; displacement and immigration; elitism and cosmopolitanism; and new discursive dynamics in mediatized society. Our main contribution is to offer a theoretically grounded framework to explore the discursive construction of national identity in and around MNCs. This offers tools to critically examine the new rise of nationalism and its implications, to re-evaluate the role of MNCs in globalization and nationalism, and to better understand the processes that work against and at times promote diversity in organizations.

DIFFERENCE AND DIVERSITY IN MULTINATIONAL CORPORATIONS

In what follows, we first offer an overview of how cultural differences have been studied in international management research and then contrast it with a view on diversity and its management. This leads us to argue for a novel conceptualization of identity politics as a fruitful way to connect these largely separate literatures to better understand the ways in which constructions of difference based on national identity matter in and around MNCs. Table I below offers a comparison of the three perspectives.

Cross-cultural management in and around MNCs

'Cultural differences' have been of interest to researchers studying MNCs for a long time (Hofstede, 1994; Shenkar, 2001). These studies have typically adopted an essentialist approach to cultural differences – seeing them as factors that influence the MNC and its international operations and are reflected in the behaviour of organizational actors. Acknowledging the cultural diversity of MNCs, the key idea has been that, if not managed, cultural differences can cause conflicts and confrontations among actors (Doz and Prahalad, 1991; Ghoshal and Bartlett, 1990). Several typologies of cultural differences have been proposed, including Hofstede's work (Hofstede, 1980, 1991) and the GLOBE project (House et al., 2002). They describe and objectify cultures along a set of pre-determined dimensions, such as masculinity/femininity, individualism/collectivism, and power distance. Moreover, a measure of 'cultural distance', aimed at capturing the extent to which different cultures are similar or different (Kogut and Singh, 1988), has become a key variable in international management research.

Cultural typologies and the measure of 'cultural distance' have been widely criticized because they tend to oversimplify the phenomenon at hand. They portray 'culture' as being taken-for-granted, static, inflexible, and frozen in time, stripped of any political or power connotations (Ailon, 2008; Ailon-Souday and Kunda, 2003; McSweeney, 2002; Shenkar, 2001). Moreover, the essentialist approach tends to be rather deterministic, thus downplaying the role of human agency in cross-cultural interactions (Dörrenbächer and Geppert, 2011, 2013).

As a result of this criticism, scholars have started to view 'culture' and its attributes in the MNC not as static structural factors or endogenous properties of actors, but rather as social constructions, which are (re)negotiated by actors through their cross-cultural interactions. The underlying idea is that actors in the MNC are motivated by both their self-interest and the need to belong to a group with a common identity (Kogut and Zander, 1993). This approach attributes much more agency to organizational actors defining their collective selves by imagining boundaries which separate a unified and superior 'us' from a different and usually inferior 'them' (Ybema et al., 2009). By creating such cultural and hierarchical distance in and through cross-cultural interactions, actors may also gain power and dominance over the culturally different 'other' (Clausen, 2007; Ybema and Byun, 2009).

An extension of this approach known as comparative institutionalism has developed from the observation that the preferences of actors in the MNC are influenced by their socialization processes, which involve the internalization of cultural norms and values largely arising from localized or national settings (Kostova et al., 2008). This leaves a

Table I. Three approaches to national identification and national identity construction in and around MNCs

	Cross-cultural management in MNCs	Diversity and its management in MNCs	Identity politics in MNCs
National identity characteristics	• Macro-level aspects determine essential characteristics and differences in international contexts • These result in sociocultural challenges and confrontation in and around MNCs	• National identities are linked with gender, race and ethnicity • Such identities and their intersections involve inequality	• National identities are historically embedded constructions • They are discursively constructed and reconstructed in specific settings with various kinds of power effects
Actors / Agency	• Actors have and are guided by their national cultural background or imprint • A specific challenge for management is to deal with the differences and overcome the related problems and challenges	• One's sex, race or ethnicity cannot usually be changed, but managers and other organizational members can strive for equality • Diversity management is a particular means to focus attention on these issues	• Actors are constantly engaged in (re)constructing national identities • Some of this identity work is 'automatic' and reproduces generally held conceptions • However, nationalistic discourses can also be used to promote or resist specific interests and ideologies
Resources in making sense of national identity	• Cultural attributes and differences • They can be measured by cultural distance	• Gender, race and ethnicity are key components of identification and identity construction • Intersectionality is a way to focus attention on their interlinkages and implications in different contexts	• National identification and identity construction takes places by using a variety of discursive resources • They include stereotypes, tropes (e.g. metaphor and metonymy), narratives (e.g. national legends and myths) and various types of nationalistic discourses • The use of these discursive resources reproduces commonly held conceptions but may also at times transform them or create new understanding

Table I. *Continued*

	Cross-cultural management in MNCs	Diversity and its management in MNCs	Identity politics in MNCs
Implications	• Cross-cultural confrontations and conflicts representing problems and challenges for the management of MNCs • Problematic implications for headquarters–subsidiary relationships, collaboration, learning and careers	• Marginalization, discrimination, stigmatization • These represent barriers for the development of globally inclusive practices in the MNC	• All kinds of power effects within MNCs, between the MNC and its stakeholders, and between nations • These include reproduction of various types of nationalism and (anti-) globalism and are linked with post- and neo-colonialism • In post-truth society nationalism is increasingly used to promote or resist specific interests, with new kinds of direct or indirect effects on MNCs (e.g., via mass and social media)

national imprint on organizational actors and their behaviours. This research has placed greater emphasis on how actors' interactions are influenced by their national, cultural, and institutional home and host contexts (Boussebaa and Morgan, 2008; Ferner and Quintanilla, 1998; Geppert et al., 2003). Socialized into the cultural norms and values of their contexts, actors in different parts of the MNC are argued to behave and make decisions in line with these norms and values.

The inclination of actors to construct cultural differences and the division between 'us' versus 'them' increases the salience of national identification and cross-cultural confrontation. These have been shown to strengthen in competitive and politicized relationships of cross-cultural mergers and acquisitions (Ailon-Souday and Kunda, 2003; Monin et al., 2013; Vaara et al., 2003), joint ventures (Brannen and Salk, 2000), and international projects (Barinaga, 2007; van Marrewijk, 2010; Ybema et al., 2012). In such contexts, organizational actors become increasingly aware of their own 'culture' and engage in articulating and communicating differences to dissociate from the culturally different others. The drawing of boundaries between 'self' and 'other' and the articulation of 'cultural differences' have been shown to construct superiority and inferiority (Vaara et al., 2005) and to (re)negotiate the distribution of power in the MNC (Jack et al., 2008). Yet, our understanding of such processes is incomplete, which is why we focus on identity politics in this paper.

Diversity and its management in international contexts

Research on diversity and its management has for the most part developed in parallel to the literature on cultures and cultural differences depicted above. The concept of diversity emerged in the aftermath of the civil, women's, and gay rights movements in the USA. The core categories of workforce diversity, such as race/ethnicity, sex/gender, and sexual orientation were drawn from ideals of equality and social justice advanced by these social movements (Benschop, 2011; Kelly and Dobbin, 1998; Nkomo and Hoobler, 2014; Pringle and Strachan, 2015). The concept itself was adapted from biology; from referring to species and biodiversity to help order differences and variance between people into distinct, identifiable, and manageable characteristics (Litvin, 1997). Diversity management – the idea that diversity can be managed – also emerged in the 1980s. It took form as a strategic approach to managing employees' characteristics to bring about positive workplace relations and to improve group and organizational performance in the face of expected demographic shifts in society (Johnston and Packer, 1987).

Categories familiar from social justice struggles were combined not only with (dis)ability and age, but also with others such as hierarchical position, organizational function, educational attainment, and professional competence (Page, 2007). 'Cultural diversity', too, became a subject of inquiry (Cox and Blake, 1991; Ely and Thomas, 2001). The focus of attention shifted from regulatory support for oppressed social groups to the management of individual characteristics and identities in organizations (Kelly and Dobbin, 1998; Liff, 1997; Nkomo and Stewart, 2006; Wrench, 2005). After its inception and growing influence in the USA, diversity management was disseminated by MNCs worldwide (Jonsen et al., 2011; Singh and Point, 2004). However, it remains a contested terrain (Linnehan and Konrad, 1999), and 'resistance to diversity efforts' in organizations is

persistent (Bell and Berry, 2007, p. 21; Thomas et al., 2004). Moreover, many organizational initiatives aimed at promoting diversity have proved to have limited efficacy (Dobbin et al., 2015; Kalev et al., 2006).

Research on diversity and its management have developed into distinct streams. Some studies have investigated the antecedents, forms, and effects of what is conceptualized as diversity (for reviews and meta-analyses see Harrison and Klein, 2007; Jackson et al., 2003; Joshi and Roh, 2009; Mayo et al., 2016; Roberson et al., 2017). Other studies have focused on questions of representation and power (Zanoni et al., 2010). Rather than viewing diversity as a phenomenon observable as traits and qualities in individuals and groups, this body of work sees diversity as something that is socially constructed, historically contingent, relational, and often resisted. Scholars have also begun to focus attention on how and why diversity attains different meanings in different societal, socio-cultural, and local contexts (Boxenbaum, 2006; Jones et al., 2000; Sippola and Smale, 2007). In addition, we have seen a stream of discursive studies focusing on the social construction of diversity in and through language. They pay specific attention to texts, discourses, and narratives through which diversity is rendered 'real', and elucidate how some differences become salient in a given context and not others, as different actors engage with diversity (Brewis, 2018; Greedharry et al., 2019; Swan and Fox, 2010; Tatli, 2011; Zanoni and Janssens, 2007).

This stream of research has also been given critical attention. Ahonen et al. (2014, p. 267) argue that diversity research produces knowledge that 'renders individuals as objects of biopolitical management through their classifiable differences'. Both implicitly and explicitly, studies draw attention to naming in practices of, and research on, diversity and its management. Exploring how diversity naming or labelling is applied and how differences are classified is a way to study how diversity discourse exerts power (Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000). It is argued that acts of naming or labelling in organizations constitute the norm against which the diverse are measured (Ostendorp and Steyaert, 2009; Prasad and Mills, 1997) and that the labelling is often done without consulting those who are labelled (Ahmed, 2007; Ahonen and Tienari, 2015).

Even in the face of resurgence of nationalism across the world, national cultures and identities have for the most part passed unnoticed in research on diversity in organization studies. While there is a wealth of studies on the idiosyncratic features of how diversity is understood in different societies (Boxenbaum, 2006; Jones et al., 2000; Sippola and Smale, 2007), concerns over nationalism are rare in this literature. Research on 'cultural diversity', too, is notably silent about how national cultures and diversity are related. In Cox and Blake's (1991) seminal article, cultural differences refer to a broad spectrum of identity markers. Focused on the USA, 'nationality' figures as a side note in 'spheres of activity in the management of cultural diversity', following race and ethnicity (p. 46). Nationality is not elaborated in any way, apart from vague references to 'first-generation Americans having strong ties to their root cultures' (p. 49). Ely and Thomas (2001) only make a passing reference to nationality as a 'demographic variable' (p. 230). Nielsen and Nielsen (2013) argue, however, that in top management teams of highly internationalized firms, nationality diversity is positively related to performance. Barinaga (2007) provides an exception in that she studied the multiple ways in which members of international project groups used cultural diversity and national culture as discursive resources. These

uses include excusing confusion and misunderstanding, positioning vis-à-vis the group, justifying decisions, and giving the group a raison d'être.

However, the concept of 'global diversity management' puts national culture and identity on the diversity agenda (Nishii and Özbilgin, 2007; Özbilgin and Tatli, 2008). This research integrates studies in the fields of cross-cultural management and diversity, and aims at a comprehensive take on diversity that is available for companies and other organizations operating worldwide. Global diversity management is based on the assumption that conditions and definitions of diversity markers are local and that competences for managing (cultural) differences must be developed throughout the organization for effective diversity work. Differences in national (and supranational such as in the European Union) legislation and variations of diversity discourse are taken into account (Özbilgin and Tatli, 2008), and connections between the global organization and its local environments are taken seriously (Mor Barak, 2011). However, it seems that national cultures and identities are mainly assumed to be a hindrance in developing globally inclusive practices in international organizations (Nishii and Özbilgin, 2007). A normative framework is offered for tackling differences across the world, and there is thus a distinct connection with the essentialist studies on 'cultures' and 'cultural differences' discussed above.

Taking diversity and its management to the global stage at this particular historical moment is a complex proposition. Implications of diversity and its management at the international or transnational level are ever more difficult to determine, as spaces and places where people of different backgrounds meet are more fluid and complex, and as counterforces to globalism emerge in different locations and forms (Mor Barak, 2011; Özbilgin and Tatli, 2008). Also, notions of diversity and its management established in the USA and in the Global North through corporate policies and consultancy as well as research and teaching in universities are met with limited resonance elsewhere (Bird and Mendenhall, 2016; Cascio and Boudreau, 2016).

Connections between national cultures, identities and diversity are also addressed in literatures in other fields. With a vantage point in different historical models of nationhood such as the 'ethnic' and the 'civic', scholars in sociology and political studies have attempted to map rising nationalism with concerns over diversity. As Smith (1991, p. 13) argued, there is 'a profound dualism at the heart of every nationalism'. He asserted that 'sometimes civic and territorial elements predominate; at other times it is the ethnic and vernacular components that are emphasized'. On the one hand, national identity can facilitate social cohesion, and a common shared identity can function as a category superordinate to ethnic, religious, or linguistic ties (Reeskens and Wright, 2013). On the other, ethnic nationalism is likely to increase the negative social impact of diversity (Reeskens and Wright, 2013). At the level of nationally diverse workgroups, for example, the presence of workgroup members with strong nationalistic attitudes is found to lead to 'relationship and process conflicts' (Ayub, 2006). To be able to dig deeper into these processes, we will now turn to the notion of identity politics.

Towards a novel conception of identity politics

In this paper, we argue that there is a need for a shift of perspective from cultural differences to identity politics in and around MNCs. Identity politics is about people

identifying with positions in society that are based on perceived shared experiences, interests and perspectives as members of specific social groups. The political nature of the concept is grounded in black feminist groups such as the Combahee River Collective that coined the concept in the 1970s (Smith, 1983). Those oppressed under systemic social inequalities based on gender and race sought to find ways to articulate their experience and collectively act against oppression. The concept of identity politics embodied their individual and collective experiences and struggles, and its use expanded to gay, lesbian and other social movements.

Today the concept of identity politics is used more loosely in popular discourse and in academic research. It has diverted from its origins with oppressed groups, and there is increasing interest in the social and discursive construction of identities and their political dimension more generally. Some argue that what the populist political right are doing today is a form of identity politics; that identity politics can thus take the form of ideas of white supremacy, racism and xenophobia as well as sexism and homophobia; and that it can be intertwined with religion and religious identities. Thus, the implications of identity politics can be severe: 'Identity has taken on the status of a sacred object, 'an ultimate concern, worth fighting and even dying for,' Gillis (1994, p. 4) warns us. Further, specific identity constructions may disguise 'intense contest and change behind its strong and simple identity claims' with intersecting processes and contradictory forces (Todd, 2018, pp. 84–85).

We argue that identity politics can – and must – be connected to national identity if we are to better understand key aspects of diversity in and around contemporary MNCs. Nationalism is about ideological boundary setting (Amer, 2012; Malesevic 2006). It plays out as an 'ideology of boundedness and a believed or claimed congruity between people, territory and state, or population, geography or politics' (Lindholm Schulz, 2003, p. 15). National identity is in this sense a particularly interesting construct and source of identity politics. Discursive strategies of the nationalist right are an acute example of this (Wodak, 2015). This is, however, not the whole picture in terms of contemporary society. Idealizations of history serve to constitute nationalist discourses and identities also more generally (Christou, 2007). Powerful leaders can influence and change people's ways of being national(ist) by making use of a variety of historical repertoires in a given 'nation' (Aydin-Duzgit, 2018).

A CRITICAL DISCURSIVE APPROACH TO NATIONAL IDENTITY POLITICS

To dig deeper into national identity politics in and around MNCs, we draw on critical discursive analysis (Angouri, 2018; Van Dijk, 1998; Wodak and Meyer, 2015). This is a theoretical and methodological approach, which allows examination of the constitutive role that discourses play in society. In this view, discourse is both socially conditioned and socially constitutive. Accordingly, discourses not only reflect 'reality', but are the very means of constructing and reproducing the world as we experience it. As the term 'critical' implies, critical discourse analysis aims at revealing taken-for-granted assumptions, and examines power relationships between various discourses and actors

(Fairclough, 1989, 2003; van Dijk, 1998). Its origins lie in applied linguistics (Fairclough, 2003; van Dijk, 1998; Wodak and Meyer, 2015), but it has been applied in various ways in other areas such as organization and management studies (Phillips et al., 2004; Vaara and Tienari, 2008).

While critical discursive studies are often linked to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2010), we maintain that there are several perspectives and ways of using critical discursive analysis including discourse-historical analysis (Wodak and Meyer, 2015), critical multimodal analysis (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001; van Leeuwen, 2018), and Foucauldian discourse analysis (Foucault, 1977, 1980). The discourse-historical perspective developed by Wodak (Reisigl and Wodak, 2015) offers a fruitful approach to national identity due to its focus on the historical (re)construction of contemporary discourses. This is especially useful in the case of national identities, which involve the reconstruction of various kinds of symbols, myths and legends about national histories and international relationships. This allows us to better understand how nations are constructed as 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1983) and to see the ways in which national discourse is reproduced, often without reflection about the underlying assumptions, as in 'banal' everyday nationalism (Billig, 1995).

As such, critical discourse scholars have frequently focused on issues of national identity construction (Wodak, , 2011a, 2011b; Wodak and De Cillia, 2007; Wodak et al., 1999). What stands out in this work is that it both reveals the historically constructed ideological elements in nationalism and explains how nationalistic discourses are used for various purposes in contemporary organizations and societies. Thus, it helps us to understand identity politics in and around MNCs (Forchtner and Wodak, 2018). In this view, nationalism as ideology and discourse is linked with and often manifests itself in relation to globalization (Wodak, 2011b; Wodak et al., 1999). At the heart of these processes are constructions of sameness and difference (Wodak, 1996), leading to reproduction or at times transformation of commonly held conceptions.

To understand how national identity politics play out in MNCs, we offer four different but complementary perspectives: MNCs as sites of identity politics, MNCs as actors engaged in identity-building and legitimation, MNCs as part of international relations, and MNCs as agents of broader issues or changes.

Perspective #1: MNCs as sites of identity politics: Unraveling 'us' vs. 'them'

MNCs are political arenas (Kristensen and Zeitlin, 2005) and transnational social spaces (Morgan and Kristensen, 2006) where organizational actors coexist and compete for influence and dominance (Dörrenbächer and Geppert, 2013; Geppert and Dörrenbächer, 2014). All this involves constructions of culture, nationality, gender, race, and ethnicity. These constructions of difference allow actors to define 'who they are' or 'how different or similar' they are from/to 'the other'. Thus, MNCs become sites of identity politics in a sense that actors occupy particular identities in the organization based on discursively constructed similarities and shared experiences with similar others. This is also political in that the groups that are formed can pursue their own agendas and interests vis-à-vis other social groups.

As actors representing different social groups within the MNC attempt to make sense of their organizational reality, they inevitably do so by employing cultural and discursive resources to construct divisions between 'us' and 'them'. Together with intra-organizational divides between headquarters and subsidiaries, organizational functions and hierarchical levels, the 'us vs. them' divide in the MNC is often constructed based on national identity and the notion of 'cultural difference'. In particular, actors within MNCs use discursive resources such as stereotypes (Ailon-Souday and Kunda, 2003; Koveshnikov et al., 2016), that is commonly held generalizations of themselves and others, to construct their national identity-based subject positions in relation to 'others'. For instance, studying a merger between Israeli and US companies, Ailon-Souday and Kunda (2003) described how Israeli employees used stereotypes to make sense of the merger and their identity vis-à-vis their American counterparts. The authors encountered an interesting practice among Israeli employees to label their colleagues from the partner US company as 'Americans' or 'Jimmys'. The latter was used to turn the personal names of US colleagues into 'general, impersonal labels' implying that 'these names were meaningless… typical American names' (p. 1081). The Israeli employees also spoke English with an American accent to each other in humorous imitation when their American colleagues were absent. They did so to emphasize the difference between themselves and their US colleagues, to construct their national identity as superior and stress the distinctiveness and coherence of their national identity-based social group

In another study, Koveshnikov et al. (2016) showed that the identity work of managers in MNCs is to a significant extent stereotype-based. When managers in intercultural encounters construct the identities of 'the self' and 'the other' they rely on widely held, but relatively fixed and oversimplified, ideas rooted in the cultural and geopolitical category membership of themselves and others. The authors distinguished between three forms of identity work with enabling and/or constraining power implications. These are stereotypical, reactive and self-reflexive talk. Managers use stereotypical talk to enact their stereotypical conceptions of 'the other' to bolster their self-image and inferiorize 'the other'. Reactive talk then emerges from managers' reaction to stereotypical talk in an attempt to renegotiate the proposed social arrangement for their own benefit. Finally, managers engage in self-reflexive talk to go beyond the social arrangement produced through stereotypical and reactive talk by distancing themselves in a self-reflexive manner from essentialist cultural conceptions. Koveshnikov et al. (2016) argue that the stereotype-based identity work has broader than merely self-definitional implications for organizational actors in terms of positions and appointments, resource allocation, delegation of authority, and decisions related to control and autonomy. In this sense, it feeds MNC identity politics as it (re)produces distinct social groups based on their often stereotype-based shared experiences and distinctiveness from the 'other'.

In some cases the (re)construction and manipulation of national identities and cultural differences is closely linked with other sources of identity and identification in the MNC such as gender, raising issues pertinent to the diversity literature. Tienari et al. (2005) examined explanations by Danish, Finnish and Swedish male senior executives in an MNC for the absence of women in the top echelons of the organization. The authors show how such gender inequality was explained by references to other nations and particular histories, and how national identities were (re)constructed through these references.

Danish, Finnish and Swedish male senior executives mobilized nationalistic discourses by (re)constructing national differences in terms of what is equality and how it should be attained, rendering one's own way as self-evident and that of others as inferior. Tienari et al. (2005) argued that MNCs intensify such discursive (re)constructions and that they represent a significant arena for (re)producing gendered relations of domination. Thus, the analysis shows how gender intersects with nationality in shaping the MNC and the identities of male executives in globalizing business.

In all, the perspective on MNCs as sites for identity politics elucidates how MNC actors employ discursive resources such as cultural stereotypes to construct their national identities as distinct and superior to those of 'the other' in cross-cultural interactions around contested issues. Given the political nature of MNCs, this perspective allows us to dig deeper into the linkages of national identity with other sources of identity such as gender, race, and ethnicity, often approached under the label of diversity. In spite of the advances made in the studies referred to above, there is a need to better understand how national identity-based politics and the resultant discursive struggles construct realities among different social groups in the MNC and produce various forms of exclusion, stigmatization and discrimination in these organizations. In particular, there is a relative paucity of knowledge concerning discursive strategies and other resources that MNC actors utilize to construct national identity and difference in MNCs thus forming group coalitions based on national identification and presumably shared experiences. An interesting question is how such shared experiences are constructed. It is also important to elucidate how actors can construct and manipulate national identities and differences coexisting in MNCs to be able to create shared supranational collective identities.

Perspective #2: MNCs as actors in identity building and legitimation

Any global organization, such as the MNC, strives in one way or another to build its overall organizational identity or image as well as to legitimate its activities and projects. These include international mergers and acquisitions (Vaara and Tienari, 2011; Vaara et al., 2006), investments with controversial environmental effects (Joutsenvirta and Vaara, 2015) or restructurings involving layoffs (Erkama and Vaara, 2010; Vaara and Tienari, 2008; Vuontisjärvi, 2013). As a result, MNCs can be conceived as actors that co-create and legitimate a particular version of organizational reality and specific identities. The view on MNCs as identity- and legitimacy-building actors provides another perspective on how identity politics plays out, building on power-laden and interest-driven constructions and manipulations of national identity and difference.

Exploring these issues, Vaara and Tienari (2011) studied the making of a financial services corporation through a series of cross-border mergers in the Nordic countries. They focused attention on antenarratives (Boje, 2001, 2008), defined as 'fragments of organizational discourse that construct identities and interests in time and space' (Vaara and Tienari, 2011, p. 370), as essential means for giving a sense to change and for managing meaning in the MNC. The authors illustrated how the corporate top management used globalist antenarratives to legitimate the merger and to create a new and overarching

MNC identity. However, these antenarratives were challenged by local managers' nationalistic storytelling that highlighted and focused on national identities and interests. These depicted the new company as a crucial step in the development of national financial services sectors, and promoted national interests especially around contested issues such as the distribution of top positions, resource allocation and cutback decisions, and in choices regarding organizational systems and practices. Organizational actors in local units mobilized national identification via cross-cultural comparisons especially around controversial issues and decisions. While the construction of national identities was an antidote to globalist storytelling, it later transformed into a storytelling built around Nordic regional identity and ultimately led to developing a common, regional Nordic organizational identity. As such, this analysis elucidated how national identity construction processes had direct implications for how the new organization came into being and how national identity constructions and storytelling around them were used to legitimate or resist organizational change.

In another example, Maclean et al. (2018) posit that organizations and powerful organizational actors can use national identity constructions in connection to particular ideologies as foundational belief systems to pursue their business interests in relation to stakeholders. In this way, actors construct an organizational image that allows them to position the MNC as a key proponent of the ideologies in question when engaging with potential customers, politicians, state officials, and partners. Mclean et al. (2018) explored the use of political ideology in the discursive construction of the multinational hotel industry by examining public speeches by Conrad Hilton, the founder of Hilton hotels. The analysis shows how Hilton employed the ideology of anti-communism and world peace through international trade and travel to build the foundations of a global hotel industry and to promote Hilton hotels internationally by constructing the company as an exemplar of the American business model offering a route to freedom and prosperity. The speeches constructed a clear dividing line between 'us' represented by the anti-communist USA with its allies and 'them' represented by the communist Soviet Union and its allies. Although not dealing with identity construction of employees within the company itself, the study illustrates how powerful organizational actors can utilize broad political ideologies to construct a specific nationalist (here, American) organizational identity for employees and external stakeholders to identify with.

Thus, this perspective casts light on how powerful actors in MNCs make efforts to legitimate organizational changes and/or construct a particular organizational image for the benefit of internal and external stakeholders, and how this can involve narratives and storytelling. Such storytelling and national identity constructions invoke ideas around national (and regional) interests and ideologies. However, more research is needed to shed light on how MNC actors employ ideologies to construct specific corporate images with strong national identification and how MNC stakeholders make sense of and react to them. It would also be important to better understand how MNC corporate images based on nationalistic ideas transform into regional and other transnational identities, how discursive strategies can be used to achieve such identities or to dismantle them, and how MNCs manipulate their corporate images to strengthen positive and hide or disguise negative aspects. Finally, there is a need to unravel how 'difference' and 'diversity' are constructed, normalized or problematized in such national identity-based storytelling.

Perspective #3: MNCs as part of international relations

Given the significance of MNCs for the world economy, these organizations often feature in broader discussions involving national interests. Thus, the third perspective we offer is to view MNCs as part of international relations, shaping and being shaped by struggles between globalization and nationalism. In this view, MNCs and their representatives are involved as participants in discussions taking place in various arenas, influencing how national interests or identities are framed, promoted, and resisted. In many ways, these discussions and struggles involve constructions of national differences and identities as opposed to forces of internationalization or globalization.

For instance, Joutsenvirta and Vaara (2015) employed a critical discourse analysis of a media dispute between Finnish, Uruguayan and Argentinean actors over a pulp mill project of a Finland-based MNC in Uruguay to examine the discursive (de)legitimation of controversial investment projects. The authors argue that the ways in which MNC actions in relation to society and the environment are evaluated differ considerably depending on the national context of the MNC and stakeholders, such as politicians and environmental activists. They examined how the rights and responsibilities of MNCs and other actors are constructed in different national and geopolitical settings and how these constructions are linked to national interests, national identities, and international relations. Drawing on research on discursive legitimation (Rojo and Van Dijk, 1997; Van Leeuwen and Wodak, 1999), the authors identified four legitimating discourses used by different actors in the discursive struggle over the project: technocratic, societal, national-political, and global-capitalist. The last two in particular elucidate how various national identity-related arguments are mobilized by actors in media to (de)legitimate MNC actions in international settings and how (de)legitimation is linked to the relationships between the countries involved as well as to the ideological underpinnings of globalization processes.

In another example, Riad et al. (2012) focused attention to the role of media in constructing national identities and nationalistic ideas around MNCs by drawing on international relations between MNCs' home countries. They examined the media coverage of an acquisition of American IBM by Chinese Lenovo and analysed key discursive themes and rhetorical elements in the media accounts. English-language texts discussed the deal as a 'threat' to US security and the economy as an increasing amount of US jobs are lost or outsourced to China. In contrast, Chinese texts emphasized Chinese businesses' 'peaceful rising' and 'going out'. Both media also employed strong emotional rhetoric. Whereas English-speaking texts expressed 'fear' and 'concern' over China's increasing economic power and technological sophistication, Chinese texts were full of 'cheer' and 'strong national pride'. Finally, there were pronounced ideological underpinnings, such as the 'Cold War', reproduced in and through the media texts. In English-speaking texts, these were used to oppose the acquisition whilst in Chinese texts to support it. In the former, several texts aligned Lenovo at a national level with 'red' (communism and the Red Army) and the sale of IBM to Lenovo was referred to as 'arming China'. In relation to 'globalism', the deal was presented as a way to manage international relations with China by helping it to become more Western. In Chinese texts, the 'Cold War' ideology featured in representing the acquisition as a response to US imperialism and

US nationalism. The 'globalism' ideology was used to present the deal as accelerating Lenovo's attempts at 'global' positioning.

Thus, due to their significance for international relations and globalization, MNCs directly and more often indirectly participate in broader discussions concerning international relations. These discussions inevitably involve constructions and manipulations of national identities aimed at protecting and promoting national interests vis-à-vis other nations and/or against globalization. In this way, MNCs become vehicles and in some cases central actors in discursive struggles over the legitimation of local interests and the resistance against globalization and neoliberal global capitalist ideology. There is, however, a need for more research to examine the strategies of (de)legitimation of MNC contested actions and practices in the media. In particular, there is a paucity of knowledge of how MNCs and media appropriate and manipulate particular historical events and experiences (e.g., wars and political conflicts) to construct national identities and divisions between 'us' vs 'them'. Furthermore, we lack understanding of how the media utilizes MNCs as rhetorical tools and constructs these organizations in different ways (e.g., powerful political actors versus powerless victims of international geopolitical relations) to promote national interests. At the same time, we also need to better understand how MNCs can resist and distance themselves from such constructions, which are often closely interlinked with nationalism and national identity. How MNCs can manipulate their national identity constructions while participating in broader societal discussions in media to pursue their interests and/or cover and legitimate questionable organizational practices and business actions also warrants more attention.

Perspective #4: MNCs as agents of broader issues or changes

MNCs can also act as influential agents of change in relation to broader issues of societal and global significance. The proposed discourse-historical approach (Wodak, 2001; Wodak et al., 1999) offers a powerful lens to investigate and increase our understanding of how MNCs actively engage in identity politics on a global scale. By analysing historical, organizational and political topics and texts, it integrates a large amount of knowledge about the historical sources and the background of the social and political fields in which discursive events under investigation are embedded.

The British and Dutch East India Companies, founded in 1600 and 1602 respectively, were the harbingers and the first commercial agents of modern globalization (Clegg, 2017; Phelan, 2013). They began their operations by bringing porcelain and spices from Asia to Europe. For more than 200 years, both companies extracted enormous revenues from their international activities and made their home countries – Great Britain and the Netherlands – global powers. What arguably makes these two companies the first MNCs as opposed to other commercial endeavours undertaken by other colonial powers such as Spain, France and Portugal, is that the two were primarily driven by merchants and their commercial interests as opposed to military force (Phelan, 2013). In the case of the British East India Company, Clegg (2017) argues that it was a pioneer in offering limited liability to its shareholders, building a bureaucratic apparatus and developing 'a company man', and practicing lean operations. By the end of the 17th century, the two companies were the richest and most powerful in the world, operating in a wide range

of businesses such as construction, sugar refining, cloth manufacturing, tobacco curing, weaving, glass making, distilling, and brewing. They paved the way for globalization and spawning its transnational structures shaping our modern world.

Yet, the foundational *modus operandi* of the first modern MNCs was the idea of white British and Dutch supremacy with institutionalized nationalism and racism (Clegg, 2017). All this also involved discursive and visual constructions of various kinds reproducing and legitimating specific worldviews. For instance, in his book *The Corporation that Changed the World*, Robins (2012) describes a painting that was installed in the British East India Company's London headquarters. It was Spiridione Roma's allegory of *The East Offering Her Riches to Britannia*. 'At the heart of the painting is the relationship of three women, each representing their country. The scene is an Asian shoreline. Sitting high on a rock to the left, a fair Britannia looks down on a kneeling India who offers her crown surrounded by rubies and pearls. Beside her, China presents her own tribute of porcelain and tea. From a grove of palm trees to the right comes a convoy of laborers carrying bales of cloth, along with an elephant and a camel, all directed westward by a stern Mercury, the classical god of commerce. The British lion sits at Britannia's feet, as does Old Father Thames, a sign that it was to London that much of this wealth would flow. Far off, beyond the figures, one of the Company's famous merchant ships sails into the distance, laden with the treasure of the East, its striped ensign fluttering in the wind'.

Phelan (2013) writes that trade was so vital to the Dutch East India Company and the Dutch national interests that the company was permitted any action that would secure its monopoly and tighten its control over territories under its interest. In what was a military campaign against sovereign nations, the Dutch tortured and killed Indonesians who hesitated to break off long-standing trade relationships with nearby Chinese and Indian merchants – who would bring rice and medicine – in favour of trading exclusively with the Dutch, who offered heavy wool and velvet that were useless in the tropics. The company kept mercenaries on staff and burned or otherwise destroyed spice fields not under its control in order to induce artificial shortages. The Dutch fought against Portuguese and English traders, torturing or killing them and capturing their forts.

Today, imperialism and colonialism take more subtle forms. Yet, the underlying mechanism of the superior 'us' versus the inferior 'them' based on nationalistic ideas and national identification remains powerful. It manifests itself in neo-colonial underpinnings in MNC operations around the world (Boussebaa and Morgan, 2014; Frenkel, 2008; Jack et al., 2008; Prasad, 2003). Some authors argue that contemporary MNCs continue to operate along the dividing line between neo-colonial Western economies and developing, peripheral others thus reproducing colonizer/colonized power relations in and around MNCs (Boussebaa et al., 2012, 2014). The latter become mostly recipients of skills and knowledge produced by the superior former. By extension, ideas emanating from the West or Western parts of MNCs concerning various broader societal issues such as diversity management, gender equality, employee rights, and corporate social responsibility are constructed and disseminated as superior. They are expected to be accepted by the less developed units of MNCs as truths. In this view, the lingering legacy of the first modern MNCs, i.e., the continuing construction of difference between developed and core 'us' versus developing and peripheral 'them,' remains the core mechanism behind MNC

global operations directly contributing to the reproduction of core-periphery relations in the contemporary world economy (Boussebaa and Morgan, 2014).

However, while recognizing the neo-colonial nature of the modern MNC, it is important to realize that the core-periphery relations are malleable and change over time and space. In fact, changes in the world economy leading to the relative decline of the European and US economies and the rise of MNCs from BRIC countries and in particular China, India and Russia point toward changing the patterns of domination at the global level. It is clear that these MNCs very closely associate themselves with national interests and rely heavily on their national identification, which is seen as an asset and a sign of distinction from the formerly dominating Western MNCs. They emphasize and value their different characteristics, which include closer links to and support from the state, different employee-employer ethics and relationships, the ability to operate in dynamic and uncertain conditions and environments, and more flexible and less formalized approaches to business relations and strategy (Guillén and García-Canal, 2012). For instance Russia and China have imperialistic aspirations due to their sheer size (geography and population) and the significant geopolitical positions and influences in the past.

However, it is also important to consider the other side of the coin. MNCs are also agents of positive development and changes across the world. As foreign investors and employers, MNCs may introduce changes to gender relations and gendered norms in local communities (Koveshnikov et al., 2019). For instance, Chelekis and Mudambi (2010) explored how MNCs provided local women with employment and a source of income by nurturing direct marketing in rural areas of the Brazilian Amazon. This enabled women to express their opinions and make decisions at home and in their community. More generally, MNCs acting in enlightened self-interest can engage with strategies aimed at creating new profit-seeking market opportunities for low-income segments in developing countries. As such, they can contribute to addressing significant societal problems (Olsen and Boxenbaum, 2009). MNCs have been argued to provide a more welcoming environment to individuals with immigrant background (Newburry et al., 2006, 2014; Siegel et al., 2019) as well as socially excluded or marginalized groups such as women in South Korea (Siegel et al., 2019), women and members of lower status groups in Latin America (Newburry et al., 2014), and women and visible minorities in the USA (Newburry et al., 2006). MNCs are arguably less bound by stereotypes about marginalized groups such as women and immigrants, thus reducing the degree of stigmatization of these groups in society (see Hinds et al., 2014).

In particular, MNCs can be instrumental for the diffusion of corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices and discourses across countries (Brammer et al., 2009; Marano and Kostova, 2016; Yin and Jamali, 2016). As MNCs globalize, they face increasing scrutiny by different stakeholders whose interests and demands they need to address. To develop and nurture trust-based stakeholder relationships, MNCs pay special attention to their corporate community involvement activities (Brammer and Millington, 2003). This is especially the case in emerging and developing markets where CSR norms and standards are generally lower (Yang and Rivers, 2009). Driven by public scrutiny and the desire to benefit from their 'advantages of foreignness' (Edman, 2016), Western MNCs in developing markets are largely forced to transfer and retain, albeit with some modifications, CSR practices from their home markets in their local operations (e.g., Jamali,

2008). In this way, MNCs engage in institutional conditioning in relation to CSR norms and standards. They may thus contribute to the gradual acceptance and legitimation of higher CSR standards across the world.

Yet another way in which MNCs act as agents of social change is through their interaction, as political actors that surpass the regulative influence of individual nation states, with various non-governmental actors, such as political activists, in the process of transnational institution-building (Clegg et al., 2018; Zajak, 2017). Scherer and Palazzo (2011) argue that MNCs engage in these activities for two reasons: (a) they operate with an understanding of responsibility when they develop political solutions with other state and non-state actors and (b) they are subject to democratic control and legitimacy concerns when engaged in these political processes. In these circumstances, MNCs are 'confronted with demands for regulation, participate in controversial public discourse, and engage in political contestation with other non-state actors across a diverse range of institutional settings' (Zajak, 2017, p. 390). Scholars have also pointed to the structuring and discursive construction of political contests and politicization in different institutional fields and industries (de Bakker et al., 2013; Zajak, 2017). Yet, there is a little knowledge of how discursive practices, such the construction and manipulation of national identities, impact upon the interaction between MNC actors and external stakeholders, e.g., NGOs and political activists.

Thus, the final perspective draws our attention to the role of MNCs in global identity politics through its engagement and involvement with nation states and other external stakeholders and is closely linked with history, national interests, democratic control, neocolonialism, as well as imperialism and neo-colonialism. What lies at the heart of all these global processes and their societal repercussions is the ubiquitous political tendency of MNC actors to (re)construct and manipulate their national identification or the absence of thereof in interactions with 'the other'. There is, however, a paucity of knowledge of how the discursive processes play out and which types of strategies are used in the struggles involved.

ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While these four perspectives help us to better understand key aspects of national identification and national identity construction at different levels of analysis, there are key themes that cut across these perspectives and warrant specific attention in future research: intersectionality; displacement and immigration; elitism and cosmopolitanism; and new discursive dynamics in mediatized society. All these themes are of uttermost importance for future research on national identity politics in and around MNCs.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality offers us a way to make sense of the complex ways nationalism and national identity are connected with gender, race and social class in sustaining and legitimating practices of domination and oppression in the functioning of MNCs on a global scale (Acker, 2006). Grounded in the experience of women of colour in the USA, intersectionality was developed as a concept to address overlapping, or intersecting, social

identities of gender and race, and related systems of oppression, domination, and discrimination in society (Crenshaw, 1991). As such, intersectionality helps make visible the multiple positionings that constitute people's everyday lives and the power relations that are central to it (Holvino, 2010; Phoenix and Pattynama, 2006). It can also highlight the contradictory effects of different identity categories as well as domination and subordination within social groups or categories (Anthias, 2002). Overall, intersectionality of different social divisions such as gender, race and class can be considered a constitutive rather than an additive process (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

MNCs are a specific setting for analysing intersectionality. Social divisions such as gender and race tend to be 'naturalized' as resulting from biology. However, naturalizing narratives and discourses differ in different cultural traditions (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Discourses of naturalization tend to homogenize social categories, but these can take different forms across local contexts. These discourses are also shaped within, and by, transnational processes in MNCs. How the local and national turn into global and how the global impacts upon the national and local thus become important questions for analysis. MNCs can be conceptualized as 'gendered social spaces' where cross-border activities 'reproduce and transform gender relations, practices, and norms, but are also transformed by them' (Koveshnikov et al., 2019, p. 44), and this view can be extended by taking into consideration how gender intersects with race in processes of inclusion and exclusion (Acker, 2012; Greedharry et al., 2019; Nkomo, 1992). However, we must be mindful of how we think of the local in and of the global, and vice versa, without falling into colonizing or cultural relativist platitudes about difference (Mohanty, 2003). The MNC context is particularly illuminative in this sense.

As such, reflections on the multinational and transnational complement 'domestic' understandings of intersectionality. This refers to the multiple relations and interactions that link people and institutions across borders of nation-states (Metcalfe and Woodhams, 2012). Intersectionality helps build our understandings of MNCs as agents of broader issues or changes. For example, transnational elites in MNCs are supported by care services offered by immigrant women (Acker, 2006), and availability of cheap female labor is an important factor in location decisions of MNCs in the Global South (see Frenkel, 2017). Gendered and racialized divisions of labour are thus sustained, and inequalities are (re)produced beyond the boundaries of MNCs (Acker, 2006). In MNCs of the Global North, masculinity and whiteness emerge as dominant. Subject positions offered for non-white men and women are subordinate and inferior, as discussed above in relation to MNCs as agents of imperialism and neo-colonialism.

National identity and nationalism have thus far featured little in studies on intersectionality. Yet it is clear that while boundaries of nations are naturalized, certain groups of people are marginalized and excluded from belonging to the community. The research challenge is to analyse 'the differential ways in which different social divisions are concretely enmeshed and constructed by each other and how they relate to political and subjective constructions of identities' (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 205). While histories of nationalism are about masculine and racial domination, gender and race operate in somewhat different ways in these processes. While women often attain a paradoxical position as both symbols and 'others' of the nation-state community, people who are constructed as members of 'other' ethnic or racial collectivities are often not considered to 'belong' to

the community at all, even if they are entitled to it as citizens (Yuval-Davis, 2007). This is a form of banal nationalism at play (Billig, 1995). In the MNC context, critical discourse analysis and discourse-historical inquiry offer us ways to analyze, first, the different ways in which this is done and, second, the varied consequences that nationalism and national identity have in terms of gender, race, and intersectionality in and around MNCs.

Displacement and immigration

Another important issue that warrants special attention from the perspective of national identity politics is the global rise of migration (United Nations, 2017). As more and more people relocate in search of better employment and living conditions, they form a sizeable talent pool for international organizations (Doherty, 2013; Hajro et al., 2019; Vaiman and Haslberger 2013). Many of these people can bring valuable skills and competences to their employers due to their high levels of education and qualification as well as their diverse international experiences (Cerdin et al., 2014; Tung, 2016). Thus, highly skilled migrants can add to the cultural and national diversity of MNCs. However, the inflow of migrants as potential and valuable employees for MNCs creates an interesting confrontation between MNCs and society. How this confrontation plays out and with what implications for identity politics within MNCs and beyond is an important avenue for future research.

On the one hand, MNCs as powerful societal agents drive societal changes in relation to various marginalized and disadvantaged groups including women and migrants (Chelekis and Mudambi, 2010; Siegel et al., 2019). Being powerful vehicles for diffusing assumptions, practices and social norms, MNCs can have an important influence on how various societal stakeholders perceive, discursively construct and (de)legitimate such *a priori* marginalized groups. Importantly, these groups are valuable for MNCs. For instance, Siegel et al. (2019, p. 370) argue that the ability of MNCs to 'pinpoint social schisms in host labour markets and exploit them for competitive advantage' constitutes a significant competitive weapon. The authors examined how MNCs in South Korea identify social schisms and focus on hiring and promoting members of the socially excluded group of women to management positions and enjoy an increase in net profitability. Although this specific study focused on female managers as an excluded and discriminated group, we can extend the argument to other social schisms including the ones that concern migrants. Similarly to how MNCs introduce new market opportunities for low-income segments in developing countries (Olsen and Boxenbaum, 2009) and empower women to express their opinions and make decisions in their local communities (Chelekis and Mudambi, 2010), they can also provide migrants with new opportunities. In fact, MNCs have been shown to offer a fairer and more welcoming environment to individuals with immigrant background, who fit their organizational needs in cross-cultural competence (Newburry et al., 2006, 2014). MNCs are arguably less bound by stereotypes about marginalized groups, reducing the degree of these groups' stigmatization (see Hinds et al., 2014). In this way, MNCs influence the inclusion of previously excluded social groups such as migrants and, more generally, the (re)production of differences and inequalities between people, countries, and regions globally.

On the other hand, nationalism and anti-immigration sentiments are on the rise in many Western societies, and 'the fear of immigration is poisoning Western politics' (The Economist, 2018). Thus, it remains to be seen and studied how the inflow of more or less skilled migrants into MNCs will affect national identity construction processes in and around the MNC, and what is the role of wider, societal-level attitudes and discourses toward migrants in these processes. It would be important to study whether and how MNC actors and the media appropriate and use the immigration argument when engaging in identity politics in relation to MNCs and their international activities.

Elitism and cosmopolitanism

Processes of domination and subordination in and around MNCs can be approached also in other ways. MNCs have been conceived of as a platform on which new transnational business elites operate (Beaverstock, 2002) and where others are systematically disadvantaged and excluded (Bauman, 1998). In this way, MNCs are spaces where abundant societal inequality originates. Several authors have pointed out how assumptions about management in MNCs have repercussions far beyond the boundaries of these organizations (Acker, 2004; Connell, 1998). These assumptions give rise to a specific type of masculinity, which is argued to be widely cultivated and celebrated in modern MNCs (Connell, 1998, 2001). It describes an MNC executive as a self-assertive and energetic individual who is mobile, egocentric, and career-oriented, focuses on maximizing one's personal gains, and dwells in transnational social networks that spread around 'global cities' (Beaverstock, 2002; Faulconbridge et al., 2009).

Such masculinity has interesting repercussions for these individuals' identities. For instance, Moore (2004) studied what she calls social maps of such individuals and found that their identities were constructed from a complex mix of connections to various global and local groups. Primarily concerned with their career development, they are constantly seeking opportunities to gain the right capabilities and credentials or to acquire the right contacts and connections. They are ready to move on and take up these opportunities elsewhere. It appears that these individuals have weaker national identification, which is replaced by a stronger identification with their professional career and success.

An interesting alternative take on national identities in MNCs suggests that some actors in MNCs deliberately distance themselves from any national affiliation in favour of embracing more 'universalistic norms related to openness, tolerance and virtues such as rejection of parochialism and ethnocentricity, respect for cultural difference and commitment to dialogue between cultures' (Skovgaard-Smith and Poulfelt, 2018, p. 132). In this way, individuals construct themselves as cosmopolitan 'citizens of the world' (Calhoun, 2003; Levy et al., 2019; Nussbaum, 1994). Importantly, constructing one's identity in this way also carries certain power implications. For instance, Skovgaard-Smith and Poulfelt (2018) analysed how transnational professionals in Amsterdam draw on cosmopolitanism to construct themselves as 'non-nationals'. The authors argued that these constructions are not power neutral but demarcate the cosmopolitan 'us' in relation to parochial 'them', i.e., those with national and (mono)cultural identification. Thus, these discursive constructions create a divide between a superior 'we' vis-à-vis inferior 'others' in and

outside MNCs, and delineate a distinct and elitist social group of cosmopolitan non-nationals with their group-based interests and aspirations.

Clegg et al. (2018) stressed the differentiation between employees at MNC headquarters and local subsidiaries for our understanding of elitism and cosmopolitanism. They claim that the former are more likely to associate with the qualities of global elitism, cosmopolitanism and extra-territoriality, since MNC headquarters are typically located and embedded in 'global cities'. In contrast, employees at local subsidiaries, especially the ones located in emerging and developing economies, are more likely to be locally rooted and territorially constrained in their social orientations. In this way, the authors offer an interesting perspective at the interrelatedness of organizational structures and sociocultural characteristics of MNCs that is pertinent also for national identity constructions.

However, we still know relatively little of how members of transnational business elites and cosmopolitan individuals construct their national identities vis-a-vis their own kin. We need more research on how these individuals construct notions of 'sameness' (and perceived shared interests and experiences) and 'difference' among themselves and what role does national identity play in these constructions. Given the constant tensions between global and local in MNCs and society at large, it would also be interesting to delve deeper into how the identity constructions of elites and cosmopolitan individuals are resisted and opposed by 'non-elites', that is, more locally embedded MNC actors.

New discursive dynamics in mediatized society

National identity as a social category and nationalism as an ideology have been with us for a long time (Anderson, 1983; Billig, 1995; Smith, 1991), but their specific forms and key dynamics evolve. Interestingly, we now appear to experience an era where nationalism, and especially 'banal nationalism' (Billig, 1995), has gained new strength with populist movements and changes in communication technologies and practices. In a sense, nationalism has come to challenge globalization in new ways.

This phenomenon is linked with the mediatization of our society, which has created new platforms and tools to express one's views and to promote or resist specific ideas. This also means that MNCs and their operations are discussed, promoted and challenged in new ways, including overt expressions of nationalist views and sentiments. Sometimes this involves criticism of controversial actions, linked for instance with concerns about corporate social responsibility or sustainability, leading to positive change (Alamgir and Banerjee, 2019). At other times, such talk is linked with ethnocentrism, xenophobia, and sexist racism (Cooke, 2014; Wang and Wang, 2007). Especially in the social media, such discussions are also characterized by a 'post-truth' orientation (see Knight and Tsoukas, 2019), that is a tendency to express points of view without a care for their truth value. Furthermore, many discussions in and around MNCs are taking place in specific social spheres or 'bubbles', where particular ideas and worldviews are reproduced and reinforced among like-minded people. How such discursive dynamics unfold in and around MNCs is, however, poorly understood. Thus, unravelling the variety of identity-building and legitimation strategies used and the ways in which these reproduce commonly held and often problematic assumptions about difference and diversity is a major challenge for future research.

Another interesting and important feature of the discursive dynamics linked with national identity and nationalism is multimodality. As Robins's (2012) account of the painting installed in the British East India Company's London headquarters illustrates, visuality has always played an important role in national identity building. Nevertheless, visuality and multimodality more generally have not received adequate attention in organization and management studies in general, and in research on MNCs in particular (Höllerer et al., 2019; Meyer et al., 2013; Van Leeuwen, 2018). This is a theoretical deficiency per se, but it is especially significant in view of the fact that today's communication technologies and practices increasingly involve visual images, sound, and videos. Thus, more research is needed to enhance our understanding of the various multimodal ways in which national identity constructions takes place and how nationalistic discourses are being reproduced and at times transformed in the new media platforms in and around MNCs, giving rise to new understandings of difference and diversity.

CONCLUSION

The starting point of this paper has been the realization that there is a paucity of knowledge concerning one key aspect of diversity in and around international organizations: national identity. To advance research in this area, we have called for a shift from a focus on cultural differences to an appreciation of identity politics. This shift is needed to be able to integrate insights from research on diversity into studies of international organizations and management. By so doing, we can better understand the antecedents, forms, and consequences of national identity constructions from a critical perspective. We have specifically drawn on insights from critical discursive analysis, which has led us to highlight the role of discursive resources such as stereotypes, discursive processes such as storytelling, and discursive strategies such as those used in organizational identity building and legitimation in national identity construction.

Thus, our main contribution is to offer a theoretically grounded framework to explore and better understand the discursive construction of national identity in and around MNCs. In particular, we have outlined four different but complementary perspectives: MNCs as sites of identity politics, MNCs as actors engaged in identity-building and legitimation, MNCs as part of international relations, and MNCs as agents of broader issues or changes. Each of these perspectives is important in itself and can be used to dig deeper into national identity politics in MNCs. Together, these perspectives form a framework that shows the multifaceted and dynamic nature of national identity constructions in and around these organizations.

While our focus has been on MNCs, we believe that this reflection can also help to better understand the new rise of nationalism and its implications to re-evaluate the role of MNCs in globalization more generally. Underlying the discursive dynamics discussed seems to be a dialectic of globalization and nationalism, which takes different forms and results in specific types of discourses in particular social spheres and discursive spaces. Importantly, many of these discourses seem to reproduce problematic divisions and inequalities, thus working against the ethos of diversity. However, at other times the discourses can be used to promote diversity. Unravelling how these discourses work and the

role of national identity constructions in them is a key challenge for future research, and we hope that the perspectives outlined in this paper can help in this important endeavor.

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