

## **Is there a Regional Logic in the Management of Labour in Multinational Companies? Evidence from Europe and North America**

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### **1. Introduction**

Research concerning whether multinational companies (MNCs) develop an international element to the way they manage their international workforces is characterised by something of a disjuncture. The mainstream approach to this issue assumes that MNCs have strong incentives to develop a 'global' dimension in human resource management (HRM) but are constrained by the distinctiveness of national systems in applying this. From this perspective, MNCs are seen as 'an emerging global class of organizations' with the potential to 'form their own intra-organizational field' (Kostova *et al.*, 2008: 996) with firms having scope to exploit the competencies and expertise that they possess in HR and base international policies on these sources of competitive advantage (Taylor *et al.*, 1996). In contrast, a smaller strand of the literature asserts that MNCs make a virtue out of national differences by separating the various aspects of their operations so that each is located in the country with the most suitable conditions. Where this is the case, the technological context and occupational profile of a multinational's sites are so different that it has little incentive to develop common policies across borders (e.g. Wilkinson *et al.*, 2001; Kahancova and van der Meer, 2006). Consequently, a divide exists between the former argument that there are strong globalising tendencies in MNCs (albeit balanced against local constraints) and the latter that the incentives for MNCs to develop a global approach are limited (see Edwards and Kuruvilla, 2005).

This provokes two observations. First, given that each of the strands to the literature has some intuitive appeal and empirical support, there must be considerable variation in the extent to which MNCs exhibit an international logic in their capacity as employers (Edwards and Zhang, 2008). This indicates that a central task for those addressing this issue should be to explain variation between MNCs in this respect. Second, where there is an international logic, there are reasons to suppose that this may be more regional than global. It is well documented that the major flows of cross-border economic activity are within and between the 'Triad' regions of North America, Europe and Asia (e.g. Dicken, 2007) and that most MNCs are concentrated in these regions (Rugman, 2005). Perhaps even more significantly, each of these regions is developing its own regulatory institutions (Marginson and Sisson, 2004). Thus a key question is whether the regional dimension shows through in different ways in MNCs based in different regions.

These issues are addressed through a unique source of data, namely comparable, large surveys of MNCs in the UK and Canada. The surveys are the first of their kind to be based on a comprehensive sampling frame of MNCs in each country. The resulting data allow us to address two questions. First, to what extent does the regional logic in employment relations vary between the operations of MNCs in Europe and those in North America? Second, can variation among firms in each of these regions be explained by the same or different factors?

## 2. Regional Integration in Europe and North America

The vast majority of MNCs have their origins in Europe and North America: 57% of the stock of outward FDI originates in the former region while a further 21% stems from the latter (UN, 2008). These two regions are also major recipients of FDI, with Europe being the location of 48% of inward investment and North America receiving 17% (ibid.) The largest 100 non-financial MNCs in the world (ranked by foreign assets) are overwhelming from these two regions; 57 are European and 26 North American (ibid.). Rugman's conclusion of his analysis of the largest MNCs was that the vast majority are 'home region based', defined as having less than 50% of their sales in the other two regions of the Triad. As he put it: 'globalization, as commonly understood, is a myth. Far from taking place in a single global market, business activity by most large multinationals takes place within any one of the world's three great trading blocks' (Rugman, 2005: 6). (See also Rugman and Girod, 2003; Rugman and Verbeke, 2004). Moreover, Schlie and Yip (2000) argued that regionalisation was a mature stage of development: many firms that develop global scale organise themselves into regional clusters of countries with similar market conditions. In this sense, regional strategies could be associated with later, rather than earlier, stages in the evolution of a company's international strategy.

Accordingly, there is a growing body of evidence that MNCs are developing a strong European axis to their internal operations. In many cases this has involved downgrading the role of national lines of organisation in favour of a continental orientation (e.g. Coller, 1996; Hancké, 2000). In MNCs like IBM these European management structures have developed associated functions in HR such as a regional shared services centre (Ruel and Bondarouk, 2008). We may interpret the development of a European logic in MNCs, as distinct from a global one, as management responding to the emergence of Europe as a 'distinct economic space' (Marginson and Sisson, 2004: 34). Thus it is plausible that a part of the reason for the regional strategies that MNCs pursue is the development of regional institutions. In Europe these institutions date back half a century, initially covering the six founding members of what became the European Union but now extending across twenty-seven. The institutions have not only developed in their geographical coverage but also in their function, from those associated with the regulation and governance of particular industries such as steel and agriculture in the early phases of the development of the European Union to new ones relating to competition and monetary policy. In the employment field there are a range of regulations, which form key parts of the 'social dimension'. These relate to such issues as health and safety, workers' rights and the promotion of social dialogue, with the regulations concerning European Works Councils being of particular importance to MNCs (Marginson and Sisson, 2004).

Regional institutions governing economic activity have a shorter history in North America. The introduction of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, which brought about lower tariffs and freer capital flows between the US, Canada and Mexico, was accompanied by a 'compromise side agreement' (Bognanno and Lu, 2003: 370), the North American Agreement on Labour Cooperation (NAALC), which was a response to concerns amongst organised labour representatives and some politicians in the US that NAFTA would lead to jobs being displaced across the Mexican border. The NAALC obliges the three governments to 'maintain domestic labour law regimes that are characterised by easy access, based on transparent, fair and equitable procedures, and which guarantee effective enforcement action' and set out to 'promote in domestic employment legislation eleven identified labour principles' (Teague, 2003: 431). On the face of it, these institutional developments in product, capital and labour markets in North America appear to mirror those across the Atlantic. However, they differ markedly in character. Essentially, those in North America are more fledgling, with there being no genuinely comparable developments to European Monetary Union, for example. Moreover, in the labour sphere the NAALC has been criticised for its objectives being 'mostly aspirational or bland' (Teague, 2003) and for lacking 'the required means to prompt labor law enforcement and employer-compliant

behavior' (Bognanno and Lu, 2003: 369). In contrast, while the EU's 'social dimension' also has its critics, it has affected national employment systems in numerous tangible ways.

While this analysis of institutional developments might lead us to expect the regional logic to be stronger in Europe than in North America, there are grounds for expecting the reverse to be the case, namely that the greater diversity of business systems in Europe may weaken this logic. This diversity takes a number of forms, but most obviously there are more legal systems, forms of regulation, languages, and so on. This range of institutional settings may present challenges to MNCs in forming a common management style, for example, leading them to devolve more responsibility to national level than may be the case in North America. Thus we have two sets of factors that point in rather different directions. Regional integration is at different stages and is taking different forms between Europe and North America, pointing to the regional logic being stronger in the former region; in contrast, the greater range of national institutional forms in Europe might make a regional logic more difficult to implement. Thus the extent to which there are differences or similarities in the regional logic in MNCs in the two regions is an empirical question. Moreover, it may be that the factors that explain variation between MNCs within each region in the extent and nature of the regional logic also vary across the regions. The next section describes how we collected data capable of helping us address these issues.

### **3. Methods**

The findings are drawn from two parallel large-scale surveys of employment policy and practice in the national operations of MNCs, undertaken in the UK and Canada. The surveys are the product of international coordination between the two research teams, (as well as with other teams that are part of a wider project). Each survey employed common size criteria for defining the eligible population of MNCs, covering the operations of both foreign- and home-owned MNCs with 500 or more employees worldwide. Foreign-owned MNCs also had to have at least 100 employees in the national operation in the country being surveyed, whilst home-owned MNCs had to have an operation employing at least 100 in at least one other country. Each survey also undertook a similar approach to compiling a population listing for each country, going beyond the dangers of relying on a single listing that is so common in studies of MNCs. Both surveys also contained a common core of questions around four main areas of employment practice and were conducted at almost identical times (from late 2005 into 2006). An additional innovative feature shared by both surveys was that the population listing was 'screened' through a short telephone interview or web-based check to establish the key characteristics of the company prior to the main stage of the survey.

The survey in the UK covered 302 MNCs, estimated to represent 18% of the eligible population. In Canada 208 firms took part in the survey, constituting 15% of the population. In each country, robust checks for non-response bias were undertaken against known parameters in the population listing. A detailed account of the design and methods of the two surveys is provided in Edwards *et al.* (2007) for the UK and Bélanger *et al.* (2006) for Canada.

The conduct of the survey differed in three respects, however. The fieldwork for the British survey was undertaken by a professional survey agency, contracted by the research team, with the mode of administration being personal, structured interviews lasting about 70 minutes on average. In contrast, it was deemed impractical to carry out the Canadian survey in this manner given the geographical distances involved so the survey was conducted through self-administered questionnaires, either online or by post. The second difference flows from the first; given that the different mode of administration differed, not all the questions could be framed identically. Thus some questions are functional equivalents, producing comparable but not identical data. The third difference is that the UK survey was carried out anonymously in the sense that the research team received a dataset without

company names attached, meaning that we could not identify companies that took part in both surveys. We draw attention to these limitations where they are significant for the particular issues addressed here.

The issues at the heart of this paper, particularly those relating to the 'regional logic' and the independent variables, such as those to do with international integration, require some consideration concerning their measurement and it is a description of these key variables that we turn to in the next section.

#### **4. The Measures**

The regional logic is assessed in two ways in this paper. First, we sought to ascertain the extent to which there is a regional dimension to management style in MNCs in each region. This was derived from a question concerning the extent to which the respondent agreed or disagreed that there was a regional philosophy concerning its management style towards employees. The question differed slightly in that in the UK it asked specifically about a European-wide philosophy whereas in Canada it referred to regional philosophies in general; we judged that respondents would use their home region as the principal reference point, making these measures functionally equivalent. Respondents were presented with a 1 to 5 scale for this question. The descriptive statistics for this variable are presented with this scale in Figure 1 below, and a dichotomous variable was created by collapsing these into two groups – 1 to 3 relating to a weak philosophy and 4 to 5 representing a strong philosophy – with this new variable being the dependent variable in a logistic regression. The second aspect of the regional logic concerned regional employee information and consultation structures. In the UK respondents were asked whether there is a European Works Council 'or similar European-level employee information and consultation structure' whereas in Canada the question asked whether there is 'an employee information and consultation structure which brings together employee representatives from your operations in North America' (see Figure 2 below). These were the two measures which we compared to ascertain the extent of a regional logic and then used as dependent variables in the logistic regression analysis that sought to explain variation among MNCs in each region.

We included a number of independent variables in the regression analysis, with these falling into four categories. The first such category consists of a single variable, nationality. A large body of evidence testifies to the differences by country of origin in the way that MNCs manage their international workforces. One common finding is the centralised and standardised approach taken by US MNCs (e.g. Ferner *et al.*, 2004). However, little research addresses whether national differences are evident in the extent of a regional logic but we are able to shed light on this. The country of origin of each MNC was defined as the location of the operational headquarters of the worldwide company. The numbers in each individual country required the grouping of these into four larger geographical clusters: American, domestic (either Canadian or British), European and the 'Rest of the World'.

The second category is international integration, of which there are three aspects that are relevant (Edwards and Kuruvilla, 2005; Edwards and Zhang, 2008). We might expect the level of diversification to be negatively related to a regional logic since the wider the range of products and services, the fewer the commonalities between sites. The variable we use distinguishes four types of firm, from those that have a single product, through those that have a dominant product and a range of related products to those that have a range of unrelated products. A second variable concerns the standardisation of the multinational's main product. The more standardised is this, the stronger the commonalities in the context of sites and, therefore, the stronger is the scope for a regional logic. The variable contrasts those in which the product is adapted to national context, those in which it is standardised regionally and those in which it is standardised globally. And thirdly, we anticipate that a high degree of intra-firm linkages – whether MNC operations supply and/or are supplied by company operations in other countries – will be associated with a regional logic, but with the

direction not being clear cut. By creating incentives for firms to ensure smooth interchanges of components and services we might expect intra-firm linkages to be positively associated with a regional management style; on the other hand, such linkages mean that the firm's sites perform different functions with different technologies and occupational profiles, limiting the scope for a standard approach across countries. Thus the variable has four possibilities: linkages in neither direction; linkages from domestic to foreign sites only; linkages from foreign to domestic sites only; and linkages in both directions. Unfortunately, the variable for intra-firm linkages suffers from high non-response in the Canadian data and so does not feature in the regression analysis for Canada.

The third set of variables concern the structure of the multinational. In this respect it may be anticipated that structures that deepen managerial contact across borders facilitate the development of international coordination on HR issues. Thus such aspects of corporate structure as international divisions and global business functions may be associated with a regional logic, but a regional structure itself is of obvious importance. The three variables in this category are all dichotomous.

The fourth category is of control variables. In this respect, the broad industrial sector of operation of the MNCs was identified, distinguishing between manufacturing, services and other (primary, utilities and construction). We then have two measures of size, worldwide employment size and the number of employees in the home region. The regional size measure suffered from high non-response in the British case and so was excluded from the multivariate analysis for the UK. A final control in the models for regional employee information and consultation structures was whether unions are recognised in any of the firm's sites in the UK or Canada.

The regression models that we report in the next section are not identical for each country – intra-firm linkages are included for the UK but not for Canada while regional employment is included for Canada but not for the UK. We have presented the models in this way because dropping the variables from both models meant that they lost their significance, but we acknowledge that this lack of complete comparability must be borne in mind in evaluating the results.

## **5. The Results**

The first issue we consider is the extent of the regional logic in MNCs in each of the datasets. In interpreting the data on the first measure of this – the regional philosophy in management style – it is useful to set this in the context of whether MNCs in the two surveys differ in the prevalence of a worldwide philosophy. This can serve as a test of whether MNCs in one dataset are more likely to have an international logic in general and, hence, be a benchmark against which to judge the regional dimension to management style. If there were to be big differences between the two datasets this might mean that differences in the extent of a regional logic were merely reflecting the characteristics of the firms in each survey rather than the features of the region itself. In fact, there is remarkably little difference between the two groups of firms in the extent of a worldwide philosophy; the mean score on the 1 to 5 scale (where 1 is 'strongly disagree' and 5 is 'strongly agree' that the MNC has a worldwide philosophy for the management of employees) was 3.70 for the Canadian survey and 3.61 in the UK survey. The extent of the regional dimension to management style was also remarkably similar. Figure 1 provides the distributions across the 1 to 5 scale, which are rather similar, and the means are 2.88 in the Canadian and 3.01 in the British surveys.

Figure 1: Regional Management Style  
% of cases

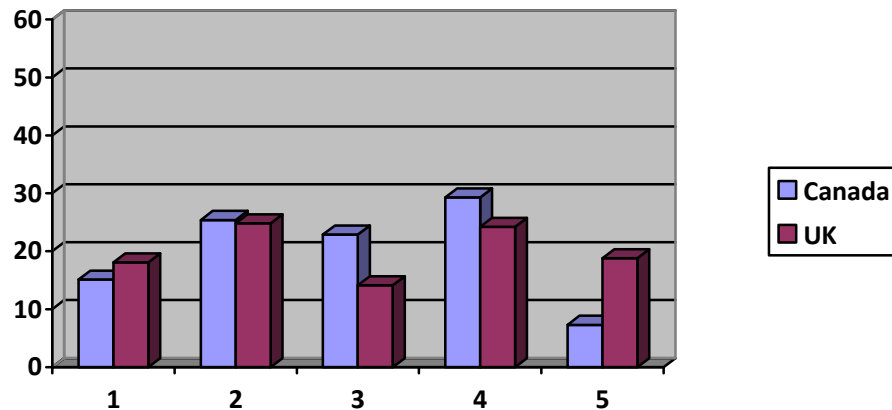
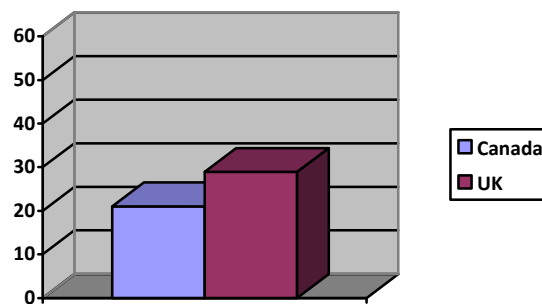


Figure 2 presents the results of the analysis of the second measure of the regional logic, showing that 28% of MNCs in the UK survey have a EWC or equivalent body and 21% of those in the Canadian survey have a structure for disclosing information and consulting with employee representatives across North America. Given that this is an issue on which there is legislation in Europe but not in North America, we might judge the differences between MNCs in the two regions to be rather modest.

Figure 2: Regional Information and Consultation Structures  
% of cases



Essentially, the results concerning the first issue suggest that the extent of a regional logic is rather similar across the two regions, even on the issue of representative structures where we may have expected marked differences.

What do the results tell us about the second issue of whether the variation among MNCs in each survey is similar or different? Taking the regional dimension to management style first, Table 1 reports logistic regression estimates for the dichotomised regional philosophy variable (see above). It shows that both of the models are significant and explain close to one-fifth of the variation in the dependent variable. Moreover, the impact of some independent variables is the same across the two models – regional philosophies are more common in smaller companies (measured by worldwide employment size) and other variables, such as diversification and international product divisions, are insignificant in both cases.

While there are similarities, there are notable differences in the factors that are significant in explaining this variation. One such difference is the impact of nationality. It has a significant impact in the Canadian analysis, with European MNCs more likely than US ones to have a regional identity. One interpretation of this is that American MNCs may be more likely to

have a *worldwide* philosophy in which all of their foreign operations are managed as cultural extensions of the parent. In this sense, the Canadian and Mexican operations of American MNCs may simply be controlled in the same way as those in the US, but with this control not being confined to the region nor articulated as a distinctively regional philosophy.

Table 1: Regression Analysis of Regional Management Style

	<b>Canada</b>	<b>UK</b>
<b>N</b>	159	249
<b>Missing cases</b>	49	53
<b>Model Chi Square</b>	24.047	35.360
<b>Model sig.</b>	At the 5% level	At the 1% level
<b>R<sup>2</sup> (Nagel.)</b>	.192	.178
<b>Nationality</b> <i>ref cat – US</i>	European more likely than US firms (at the 5% level)	Non-sig
<b>Diversification</b> <i>ref cat – single prod</i>	Non-sig	Non-sig
<b>Intra-firm Linkages</b> <i>ref cat – linkages both ways</i>	N/A	Linkages both ways more likely than one-way linkages (at the 5% level for foreign to UK)
<b>Standardisation</b> <i>ref cat – adapted to national systems</i>	Non-sig	Regionally standardised firms less likely to have a regional philosophy than those that adapt the product to national systems (at the 5% level)
<b>Regional division</b>	Non-sig	Positive (at the 5% level)
<b>Global business functions</b>	Non-sig	Positive (at the 5% level)
<b>International prod. Div.</b>	Non-sig	Non-sig
<b>Global employment</b>	Negative (at the 5% level)	Negative (at the 5% level)
<b>North-Am. Employment</b>	Positive (at the 5% level)	N/A
<b>Sector</b> <i>ref cat - manufact</i>	Non-sig	Non-sig

Nationality does not have a significant impact in the analysis of the British data, but integration and structure are more important in the UK than in Canada. None of the variables were significant in Canada (there were five rather than six as that measuring intra-firm linkages was excluded) whereas two of the three integration variables and two of the three structural variables were significant in the UK analysis. One interpretation of this is that regional integration is more challenging to bring about in Europe because of the greater range of national institutions and the organisational and structural linkages across borders are important facilitators of a regional dimension in this context.

In sum, we are able to explain variation in the regional dimension to management style in both North America and Europe with very similar models, but the factors that are significant differ. It is worth noting the apparently counter-intuitive finding on regional standardisation; we might have expected this to be positively related to a regional philosophy but it is in fact negatively related. One interpretation of this is that if a multinational has a product or service that is standardised across the region but differentiated from the product in other regions then this itself serves as the statement of the firm's regional identity and the need or incentive for a regional philosophy is reduced. In other words, they act as substitutes rather than complements.

The second regression model analyses variation in the incidence of regional representation structures. Again, logistic regression was utilised. Table 2 shows that both of the models are significant, with the Canadian model explaining a third and the British model explaining a quarter of the variation in the dependent variable. There are also similarities in the role of the

Table 2: Regression Analysis of EWCs / North American information and consultation structures

	<b>Canadian</b>	<b>UK</b>
<b>N</b>	159	247
<b>Missing cases</b>	49	55
<b>Model Chi Square</b>	36.029	47.023
<b>Model sig.</b>	At the 1% level	At the 1% level
<b>R2 (Nagel.)</b>	.335	.247
<b>Nationality</b> <i>ref cat – US</i>	Canadian and European less likely than US (at the 5% level)	European more likely than US (at the 1% level)
<b>Diversification</b> <i>ref cat – single prod</i>	Non.-sig	Non-sig
<b>Intra-firm Linkages</b> <i>ref cat – linkages both ways</i>	N/A	Non-sig
<b>Standardisation</b> <i>ref cat – adapted to national systems</i>	Non-sig	Non-sig
<b>Regional division</b>	Non-sig	Non-sig
<b>Global business functions</b>	Non-sig	Non-sig
<b>International prod. Div.</b>	Non-sig	Non-sig
<b>Global employment</b>	Non-sig	Non-sig
<b>North-Am. Employment</b>	Non-sig	N/A
<b>Sector</b> <i>ref cat – manufact</i>	Non.-sig	Non-sig
<b>Union</b>	Non-sig	Positive (at the 1% level)



independent variables in the integration and structure categories and in the controls for size and sector, none of which have a significant impact.

There was a marked difference in the role of nationality in the two models, however. In keeping with the findings of other sources, US MNCs are less likely than those from Continental Europe to operate an EWC. More surprisingly, US MNCs are *more* likely than European and Canadian MNCs to have a regional information and consultation structure in North America. This differing impact may reflect the character of these regional structures across the two regions; whereas in Europe they are shaped by legislation and may thus be viewed by American managers with suspicion or even hostility, in North America they are established primarily on management's terms and, therefore, might serve functions for managers, such as allowing them to make coercive comparisons of their sites in different countries or to communicate the rationale for organisational restructuring. As noted above in relation to regional philosophies, these structures at the regional level may be the extension to the international level of national structures that managers have set up within the US. It may be, then, that what lies behind these patterns is that the distinctive preferences of senior managers in American MNCs play out differently in the two regions.

One other difference of note is that the dummy variable for whether unions are recognised within the country in which the survey is conducted was significant in the UK data but it was insignificant in Canada. The overall assessment might be that we are able to explain variation between MNCs in the presence of regional representational structures in both North America and Europe with very similar models, but the key factor that is significant – nationality – has a different impact in each case.

## **6. Conclusion**

What may we conclude concerning the two issues at the heart of the paper? First, the extent of the regional logic is greater in MNCs in Europe than in those in North America, but only marginally so. One interpretation of this is that the influence of the greater development of European-wide institutions in creating incentives and pressures for MNCs to pursue a regional logic is largely offset by the wider range of national institutions in Europe that present challenges to MNCs in doing so. Whether this is what lies behind the observable patterns or not, it is evident that the regional logic to how MNCs operate is important and that they are key actors in the regionalisation of economic activity.

However, there is clearly variation in the extent to which they do this and understanding this variation has been the second aim of the paper. The analysis revealed some marked differences in the impact of nationality. For regional management style it is nationality that is central to understanding variation in North America whereas nationality is not part of the story in Europe, where integration and structure are more important. It seems that how MNCs are organised across borders matters more in Europe with its wide range of national institutional settings, whereas whether there is a regional management style is shaped more by distinct national managerial preferences in the more homogeneous region of North America. For regional representation structures, nationality is significant in both regions albeit in different ways, probably reflecting the different character of these bodies in the two regions.

There must be some caution exercised in making these conclusions, however. Richard Hyman has argued that 'comparative analysis is essential but perhaps impossible' (2009: 12). While this may be overstating the point a little, carrying out reliable comparisons of phenomena across borders is certainly challenging and the paper has highlighted some of the difficulties in doing comparative research. One aspect of this is that the surveys were not carried out in an identical way and the measures are not all identical either. Second, owing to non-response on particular questions, with this differing across the two studies, the models were not constructed in exactly the same way. Third, and related to the second

point, the results of the regression analysis are sensitive to the exact specification of the models (illustrated by the slightly different formation of the model on the issue of EWCs in one of the other papers in this symposium). Nevertheless, such analysis has been very revealing, throwing light on the key issue of regionalisation and its role in the management of labour in MNCs.

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