



Call for Papers

**Multinational Companies in Turbulent Times:  
Strategies, Norms, and Experimentation across Borders**

16-17 April 2020

Seoul National University, Seoul, Republic of Korea

*Turbulent times* is an apt metaphor for today's global economy. Economic, political, and technological uncertainties have grown continuously, and digitization accelerates the blurring of temporal and spatial boundaries of global business and work (Johns et al., 2015). Despite contributing to the creation of turbulence, MNCs must also cope with turbulent times by altering not just business matters, but the ways in which their workforces operate globally (Smets, Morris, & Greenwood, 2012). MNCs exist in contested fields where organizational actors compete, negotiate, disrupt, and consistently create-and-recreate work norms in rapidly changing environments (Ferner, Edwards, & Tempel, 2012; Geppert, Becker-Ritterspach, & Mudambi, 2016). In this conference, we are keen to share scholarly efforts that aim to answer questions regarding how these norm changes occur in MNCs. We also explore their production networks and uncover how the mechanisms of norm changes differ across countries and regions during turbulent times.

We are particularly interested in the roles played by individual and collective actors, otherwise known as globalizing actors. These actors intend to create, maintain, and disrupt norms (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011) in multinational organizations while dealing with fluctuating environments and increasingly diverse workforces in their day-to-day operation. These globalizing actors exercise reflexive agency to create, diffuse and negotiate norms in the iterative and fragile process of institutional experimentation (Malsch & Gendron, 2013), engaging in MNC's strategic action fields (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). As individuals play the roles of globalizing actors, they exploit ambiguities, form alliances, employ formal and informal resources, and interact with existing institutional and normative beliefs to advance their interests without risking their relationship with the companies (Malsch & Gendron, 2013). This conference intends to shed light on the less documented topics of strategic and reflexive roles of globalizing actors and the implications of their actions in MNE strategies, norms, and experimentation.

In addition, we propose broadening the research horizon by incorporating global value chains (GVCs). MNCs participate in and coordinate GVCs as lead firms or suppliers. Today's turbulent economy means that GVC conditions are changing (i.e. consolidation of value chain activities by lead firms and rise of powerful suppliers) (Gereffi, 2014; Lee & Gereffi, 2015) and that these changes present new risks and opportunities to MNCs, triggering organizational impulses to change how they coordinate tasks across borders and manage labor across international operations (Coe & Yeung, 2014; Locke, 2013). Recognizing MNCs as constituents of GVCs, we encourage researchers to consider how the GVC context affects company's global ways of working and how globalizing actors along the chains experiment, interpret, enact, and negotiate resultant changes.

Last but not least, we encourage a comparative inquiry of globalizing actors and institutional experimentations taking place in different countries and regions. Our focal point is emerging MNCs from non-Western countries, particularly Asian countries. Their emergence as new lead firms of global and regional value chains and strategic suppliers of global companies has attracted much scholarly attention in the past decade (Azmeah & Nadvi, 2014). However, theories about MNCs in this scholarship generally lack comprehensive understanding of how these emerging MNCs leverage their positions as latecomers and in doing so, how globalizing actors exercise their reflexive agency to experiment with new norms and practices concerning work and employment.

This conference welcomes scholarly works in any social science discipline that enhances our understanding of both emerging and established MNCs as the strategic action fields. We identify three themes for theoretically rich and timely discussions as follows, and submissions can address one or cross-cutting themes.

- **Theme 1 is globalizing actors in MNCs**, referring to individuals who create, diffuse, interpret, and negotiate norms (which includes rules, principles or guidelines) across international operations (Kern, Almond, Edwards, & Tregaskis, 2017). Relevant topics include but are not limited to: roles and strategic actions of globalizing actors, GVC- and organizational-level conditions that enable or constrain these actors, comparison between globalizing actors in MNCs from various regions and phases of global integration, etc.
- **Theme 2 concerns institutional experimentation** within and involving MNCs that aim to promote better work. Our discussion of better work and associated experimentation goes beyond the issue of the quality of jobs and includes concerns for worker well-being, collective representation of worker interests, and democracy at work. Such initiatives can stem from social activists in and around MNCs, as they can express CSR pressures from consumers and buyers along GVCs or new sets of obligations stemming from free-trade agreements, or they can result from domestic and transnational worker organizations and strategies. We are interested in submissions that explore individual, organizational or institutional initiatives aimed at experimenting for better (or worse) work in the increasingly fluctuating global business context.
- **Theme 3** pays special attention to **emerging MNCs**. We aim for an inductive understanding and theorization of emerging MNCs that may reflect the institutional legacies of their country of origin, and their experience navigating GVCs. We are also interested in comparative studies between emerging and established MNCs to investigate whether and how the roles that globalizing actors play in disrupting and creating norms within their day-to-day work.

The conference will be held at **Seoul National University, Seoul, Republic of Korea, on 16-17 April, 2020**. Conference organizers will cover two nights' accommodations and meals, and there is no conference fee. Participants are expected to cover the cost of their international travel.

Participants will have an opportunity to submit their full papers for consideration of a special issue in Spring 2021 at the *Journal of Asian Sociology*. (<https://www.jstor.org/journal/jasiasoci>). Interested participants of the conference should **submit their abstracts** with a maximum length of 1000 words by **20 January, 2020** to Dr. Jinsun Bae at [mnctt2020@gmail.com](mailto:mnctt2020@gmail.com). Please email inquiries to this address as well.

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Conference organizers:

Prof. Hyunji Kwon (Seoul National University, Project Leader), Prof. Seok-ho Kim (Seoul National University), Prof. Joonkoo Lee (Hanyang University), and Prof. Sunwook Chung (Sogang University)



HANYANG UNIVERSITY



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ISDPR

THE INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT  
AND POLICY RESEARCH  
SEOUL NATIONAL UNIVERSITY  
서울대학교 사회발전연구소



National Research  
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