



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of World Business

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jwb

Contextualizing international business research: Enhancing rigor and relevance

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Context
Contextualization
International business research
National culture
Location
Complexity and polycomplexity
Research rigor and relevance

ABSTRACT

Context differentiates international business (IB) from traditional Business research. Along with many IB scholars, we argue that context should be much more adequately emphasized in IB research. Location differences are commonly ignored; complexity and polycomplexity—and other levels of analysis issues—are rarely acknowledged; and the relevance of models and theory developed in Western contexts is not adequately questioned or explored. This paper suggests contextualization guidelines for scholars to enhance the rigor of their research and to make their IB research more relevant for practitioners. In conclusion we suggest solutions for closing rigor and relevance gaps in IB research by enhancing contextualization.

1. Introduction

Peter Buckley, a luminary in the field of international business, challenged the distinctiveness of international business (IB) research (2002). Buckley argued for more integration of culture, more use of comparative studies and distinctive methods in IB research. Others join this argument and assert that contextual dynamics are what differentiate domestic research from international business and international management research (Child, 2009; Gligor, Esmark, & Gölgeci, 2016; Oesterle & Wolf, 2011; Shenkar and Von Glinow, 1994; Von Glinow and Teagarden, 1990, 2009; Von Glinow & Teagarden, 1990, 2009). We argue that more attention should be given to context in IB research to enhance the rigor of our research, and to increase its relevance. Some assert that context is not adequately, or at best modestly addressed in most of our IB research (Oesterle & Wolf, 2011; Doh, 2015). We concur.

Despite the urging of thought leaders in IB for more contextualization, our approaches to contextualization are relatively limited. Most IB research focuses on categorical data or concepts like country or nationality (Shenkar and Von Glinow, 1994). Superficial efforts to contextualize are better than nothing, but fall short of ensuring the degree of contextualization needed to ensure rigorous and relevant IB research. IB research is frequently executed from an ‘outsider looking in’ perspective (Teagarden et al., 1995; Tsui, 2004) which limits full understanding of a research subject, and the researcher’s ability to fully contextualize the research or interpret its relevance.

IB research often ignores the role that location plays in sensemaking

when interpreting research (Ghemawat, 2001; Rousseau & Fried, 2001). IB scholars commonly overlook or fail to acknowledge the complexity and polycontextuality inherent in IB settings (Shapiro, Von Glinow, & Xiao, 2007). The research designs used by IB scholars have remained fairly static—they do not appear to be changing significantly or fast enough despite many calls to do so (Buckley, 2002; Child, 2009; Doh, 2017; Teagarden et al., 1995). This Special Issue provides the opportunity to begin to close this gap.

At the same time the gap in IB research is becoming more evident, the scope of IB is expanding and changing dramatically. In light of the shift in business from United States and European based contexts toward more ‘exotic’ emerging markets, IB’s current research contextualization appears inadequate. Asian, Latin American and African markets exhibit more pronounced differences—or as Ghemawat (2001) would say, distances—in business, cultural and contextual environments than were previously encountered in the traditional Western contexts where much of our IB research derives. It is not clear that IB models and theory developed in traditional Western contexts are relevant or apply in the same way in these more ‘exotic’ contexts (Von Glinow & Teagarden, 2009). For our IB research to remain relevant we must more adequately contextualize our theory building to capture this variance and uncover differences that make a difference in traditional non-Western contexts. Several of the articles in this Special Issue provide excellent examples of rich contextualization.

Contextualization identifies boundary conditions or limitations surrounding the generalizability of our IB research findings.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jwb.2017.09.001>

Received 2 September 2017; Accepted 5 September 2017

1090-9516/ © 2017 Published by Elsevier Inc.

Table 1
International Business Research Contextualization Guidelines.

Contextualization Guidelines	
1.	Does context matter in this research? Is the subject of the research 'context-specific' or 'context-bound'?
2.	Is the subject embedded in a monocontext or in a polycontext (in multiple and qualitatively different embedded contexts)?
3.	Is the best perspective for enhancing rigor and generalizability an 'outside in' or an 'inside out' perspective?
4.	Does the research incorporate or consider the appropriate levels of analysis (e.g. supranational, macro, meso, micro, firm, and individual levels as appropriate)?
5.	Are the locations in which the subject occurs described with sufficient richness to support generalizability claims or limitations?

Mathematics, chemistry and physics require the specification of boundary conditions in solving problems and presenting findings. This is basically the specification of conditions, parameters or boundaries under which the finding can be generalized. We agree with those who criticize the growing “physics envy” or overt quantification encroaching on the IB research domain (Collinson, 2017; Thomas & Wilson, 2011). Qualitative research often provides the best approach for providing rich contextualization. Given that context is a key differentiator of IB research, a more thorough specification of that context would contribute to the robustness of our research contributions. The paucity of boundary condition specification, or the weak specification in most IB research, undermines or constrains robust IB theory development.

We suggest the following contextualization guidelines be considered as part of IB research project design (Table 1).

Contextualizing IB research focuses on the big question, ‘How do we identify and integrate context into our IB research?’ and a corollary, ‘Why should we identify and integrate context into our IB research?’ We sought submissions for this Special Issue that explored the implications of context for IB theory building, research design and methodology including methodological approaches that enable us to build more robust IB theories; articles that focused on the conceptualization and meaning of context; and those that identified the limitations of contextualization. Additionally, we sought submissions that demonstrated novel methodological approaches for integrating context into IB theory building. Contextualizing IB research to achieve research rigor and practical relevance is a challenge faced by all sub-disciplines within the IB domain. The research presented in this Special Issue responds to the questions we have raised—not all studies have applied all of our guidelines, nor is this necessary. However, taken as a whole we find excellent examples of each in this Special Issue. Through the contributions to this Special Issue, we aspire to expand the boundaries of rigor and relevance in IB research through our focus on contextualization.

2. Current approaches to IB research contextualization

Despite our observation that contextualization of research is under represented in IB research, there are contributions in this area. Context in IB research has been implicitly and explicitly viewed through a variety of lenses, and at multiple levels of analysis. Focusing on theory development, Whetten (2009) and Tsui (2004) differentiate context-specific and context-bound theory development. They surface a very fundamental question, “When does context matter in IB research? Is the subject of the research ‘context-specific’ or ‘context-bound’?”

For other scholars it is more complex. They contrast ‘mono-contextuality’ with ‘polycontextuality’, or the multiple and qualitatively different contexts embedded within one another (Shapiro et al., 2007; Von Glinow et al., 2004). Cheng (1994:165), for example, suggests that context-embedded research ought to include ‘...a nation’s social, cultural, legal, and economic variables as predictors and organizational attributes as dependent variables. Shapiro et al. (2007), for example, identify numerous contextual variables, including location, that address the multiple and qualitatively different contextual variables that influence understanding behavior in China. This takes us to a second

important question, “Is the research subject embedded in a single context or in multiple different embedded contexts, either of which need to be specified to support rigor and generalizability?”

Another line of thinking about contextualization focuses on the researcher conducting the research’s perspective. Child (2009) discusses an ‘outside in’ versus ‘inside out’ perspective of contextualization. In earlier work, Tsui (2004) argues for inside-out, context specific indigenous research, especially in understudied locations. Her perspective represents one potential response to the contextualization challenge, and presumes insiders are ‘experts’—most likely true in significantly understudied locations.

Given the magnitude of possible contexts, researchers are challenged to comprehend the contextual and polycontextual dynamics in a very limited number of cultures or societies. A team-based comparative-management research approach, that can be thought of as similar to multivariate analysis, is one way to provide the collective understanding needed to contextualize and make sense of multiple possible contexts in which a single multi-country research project is embedded (Teagarden et al., 1995). There have been numerous examples that demonstrate the effectiveness of the team-based approach (Bond, Leung, & Au, 2004; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004; Von Glinow, Teagarden & Drost, 2002a2002b). This highlights the opportunity to question the research methods and perspective used to contextualize IB research, and raises a third important set of questions, “Is this research being executed from the appropriate perspective? Is the best perspective for enhancing rigor and generalizability an ‘outside in’ or an ‘inside out’ design?”

Scholars have identified level of analysis as important for understanding IB dynamics (Enright, 2002; Gammeltoft, Barnard, & Madhok, 2010; Ricart, Enright, Ghemawat, Hart, & Khanna, 2004; Teagarden & Schotter, 2013). Teagarden and Schotter (2013) and Enright (2002) argue for the importance of multilevel analysis to contextualize research and provide a deeper understanding and framing of phenomena. Each of these studies acknowledges that context is important in IB theory building and each offer prescriptive recommendations for incorporating context. Enright (2002), for example urges the use of multilevel analysis in IB research including supranational, macro, meso, micro and firm levels in the integration of location into competitive strategy. This line of thought raises a fourth important question, “Does the research include incorporation of the appropriate and sufficient levels of analysis.”

IB Strategists and behaviorists assert that location, one form of context, has an impact on theory (Gelfend, Erez, & Aycan, 2007; Ricart et al., 2004; Rousseau & Fried, 2001; Rugman & Verbeke, 2001). Khanna (2000) explores institutions and institutional voids in locations. Ghemawat (2001, 2003) examines country differences and offers the CAGE (Culture, Administrative, Geographic and Economic) framework to guide analysis. Ghemawat (2007) argues that despite globalization, there are significant locational differences that must be considered in IB. For example, scholars have identified locational influences on human resource management best practices (Von Glinow & Teagarden, 1988, 1990; Von Glinow et al., 2002a, 2002b). The seminal GLOBE study identifies societies—another form of location and their impact on leadership (House et al., 2004). Studies like these surface the reality that in IB context varies by location and influences theory and practice

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