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# Contextualizing in International Business research: Why do we need more of it and how can we be better at it?

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## KEYWORDS

International Business research;  
Context;  
Contextualization;  
Status quo;  
Suggestions for improvement

**Summary** This paper joins the academic conversation about context and contextualization in Management and International Business (IB) research. I explain why it is both relevant and interesting to debate issues of context and contextualization and, as an IB scholar myself, I argue that while IB as a discipline can and should be at the forefront of meaningful contextualization of research, the current situation is that it is not. I maintain that we are much too often context-blind or blindfold ourselves intentionally against context. I advocate that there is no justification for this state of affairs and offer suggestions as to how we can improve the status quo. I propose that we are well equipped to conduct deep contextualization rather than merely study processes and phenomena across contexts. More specifically, I argue that we should include contextual attributes in our theorizing in a more direct manner, without fearing that causal explanation suffers from contextualization. I make the point that we will benefit from presenting and discussing our methodological choices as tough decisions based on multiple context-related criteria and that voicing context can help us to be stronger in selecting, employing and justifying our methodologies. I take issue with the fact that conducting IB research in research teams that transcend countries (and other contexts) does not, per se, guarantee that the team research is context-sensitive. Finally, I emphasize that it is meaningful and responsible to report context in a genuine manner as this helps to provide details that are relevant to understanding and trusting our findings even though it does not, in general, help in winning the academic publishing race.  
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## Introduction

Context and its relevance to theory, methodology, analysis and findings has been and continues to be discussed in relation to various fields and bodies of knowledge. A disci-

pline that has traditionally been very strong in examining and explaining the impact of context on the phenomena under investigation is Psychology. For instance, the examination of the occurrence of typical emotions is impossible without examining the situations in which these emotions arise and occur. When psychologists examine how gender operates in organizations, they typically connect individual difference variables to organizational context features. Psychology studies are compelling in explaining how contextual cues

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influence dependent phenomena and in the way they employ contextual salience to understand the essence and dynamics of these phenomena. In Anthropology the dependent variables are typically contextual phenomena, without a thorough understanding of which no explanation is possible, regardless of the paradigms, assumptions and objectives followed. Ever since Malinowski, anthropologists have chanted the mantra of “placing social and cultural phenomena in a context” (Dilley, 1999, p. 1), an analytical strategy adopted to make authentic sense of ethnographic material. Communication Studies, too, has shown that organizational discourse has very little meaning outside its context and that to understand the meaning of any discourse, one must theorize about both the discourse’s possibility and the circumstances of its constitution (Sillince, 2007). Bamberger (2008) qualified Management scholars’ interest in context and the ability to give greater consideration to its role as first efforts to “generate nothing short of a revolution in management theory” (p. 839). Strategic Management scholars have also joined the conversation. In a preface to a special issue on understanding context in this field McKiernan (2006a, p. 5) concluded that “much research remains to be done before a body of knowledge can be promulgated to the point at which contextual issues become integral to each strategy process. But of context, content, and culture, there is a sense here that the greatest source of inspiration may be context”. In another piece McKiernan (2006b, p. 19) pointed out that while “contexts have changed markedly in recent years [...] their treatment has wandered between prominence and obscurity in the literature”.

For the purposes of the present paper I define context as a dynamic array of factors, features, processes or events which have an influence on a phenomenon that is examined. This influence can be exercised and expressed in multiple ways. Rather than treating context as an external, clearly definable and measurable entity that impacts what one studies, context will here be understood as something that is multifaceted and that both influences and is influenced by the phenomenon under investigation.

One would imagine that International Business (IB) research, by its very definition, would not only welcome contextual considerations, but would actually be unreliable if it did not seriously take on board issues of context and contextualization. In fact, it is reasonable to expect that IB research should provide state of the art examples on context(ualization) from which other disciplines can learn. After all, the nature of the processes and phenomena we<sup>1</sup> study more than often invite us to treat context itself as an important explanatory variable – or at least for examining these processes and phenomena as inherently embedded in, bounded by, dependent on or sensitive to multiple contexts. No matter which of these approaches is considered, the theory and practice of contextualization seem to be naturally positioned at the nexus of our IB studies. But is this actually the case?

<sup>1</sup> For variation in articulation I sometimes refer to “IB scholars” and sometimes to “we”. I belong to and identify with the community of IB scholars and so, the criticism I voice is to be also interpreted as self-criticism.

In numerous conversations with colleagues from the broader field of Management and other disciplines over the years I have come to realize that they (implicitly, but strongly) assume that IB scholars are good at contextualizing simply because they are IB scholars. While the assumption is well grounded, the question as to whether we deliver on it deserves closer examination. In these pages I will argue that more often than we would wish the answer is negative. Specifically, I will argue that we tend to ignore specific contexts when and where they really matter, fail to account for obvious differences in the contexts we study and often treat contextual features merely as exogenous variables when they are, in fact, central to the phenomena we research. I am curious as to why we do not reveal in our research writings important contextual details when they clearly influence important decisions we make at different stages of conducting our studies. Is it a lack of awareness of the importance of context or is it an intentional, well-designed effort to disguise such importance? These are important issues and debating them more extensively in the pages of our journals is not a bad idea. Our colleagues in the broader field of Management (and other social science disciplines) do and so should we.

To be clear, the point I will try to make is not that context is never accounted for in IB or that we do not have wonderful examples of studies that are brilliantly contextualized. My argument is rather that (1) the influence of context is often not recognized (or addressed in a somewhat *ad hoc* fashion) and under-appreciated and contextual features are often studied in a piecemeal fashion and in isolation from each other; (2) this is an unsatisfactory state of affairs; and (3) there are well-established career progression and incentive systems in our universities and institutionalized practices and politics of academic publishing which perpetuate this state of affairs. A subsequent, and probably my ultimate, aim is to encourage more contextualization when and where it is meaningful and important to the IB research we design and conduct. We can be much better at accounting for, problematizing or otherwise discussing context-related issues in our writings than simply ignoring them or vaguely indicating, sometimes in footnotes, their existence and role.

## Why is it relevant and interesting to discuss context(ualization) in IB research?

### Relevance

One reason why it is important to discuss context(ualization) in IB research is that there seems to be a clear discrepancy between what we claim IB research to be and how we actually go about doing it. Consider the following two statements: “[...] The International Management field,<sup>2</sup> by definition, has different populations, and therefore contexts, which demand higher levels of contextualization for accuracy in empirical generalization” (Tsui, 2004, emphasis added) and “[...] Explicitly reflecting on contextualization of theory is a natural ingredient of IB” (Tung & Witteloostuijn, 2008,

<sup>2</sup> While this observation is made in relation to International Management research, it also applies fully to the broader field of IB.

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