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

Snejina Michailova*

Department of Management and International Business, The University of Auckland Business School, Owen G. Glenn Building, 12 Grafton Road, Auckland, New Zealand

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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

* Tel.: +64 9 373 7599.

E-mail address: s.michailova@auckland.ac.nz.

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 we¹ 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?

¹ 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,² 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,

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



p. 181, emphasis added). I argue there is a distinction between dealing with different contexts “*per definitionem*” and addressing “*explicitly*” those contexts in theorizing, in applying methods, in conducting analyses and in articulating findings. **The fact that IB research by definition transcends national contexts does not necessarily mean that IB scholars do a good job in explicating the importance of context and integrating contextual effects into their theorizing, methodologies and analyses. This argument is in line with Martínez and Toyne’s (2000) observation that most of the knowledge we produce is indeed internationalized (management or more broadly business) knowledge which merely transfers context-bound theories across contexts.**

Nearly 20 years after Boyacigiller and Adler (1991) voiced their call to move away from and beyond what they called “contextual parochialism”, cross-cultural research in particular and IB research in general still suffer from a general failure to capture the subtle nuances of differences and similarities, both across and within contexts. The “parochial dinosaur” refers to the deep entrenchment in an Anglo-North American paradigm that represents various contextual, theoretical, methodological and presentational biases. Despite the fact that the reality in which we now live and work can no longer be confined to examination through Anglo-North American lenses, the preponderance of research questions, their accompanying theories, the chosen methods and means of articulating research findings still have roots in a distinctly Western, if not US-based, tradition (Lo & Michailova, 2010; Michailova, 2011; Thomas, Tienari, Davies, & Meriläinen, 2009). Such a situation leads to homogenization and lack of innovation (for recent examples see Adler & Harzing, 2009; Michailova, 2011; Özbilgin, 2009), and yet the movement away from it is not particularly evident (Easterby-Smith & Malina, 1999; Tsui, 2007; Tung, 2006; Tung & Michailova, 2008). Under-appreciating the role of context is part of the reason for this. A more holistic approach to research in general, and IB research in particular, implies that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts and hence, “any serious discussion of a phenomenon can happen only if its contexts (of occurrence) are carefully described and studied” (Das, 1983, p. 393).

Interestingness

If I have managed to persuade you that it is relevant to talk about context and contextualization, let me now explain why I think this discussion is also an interesting one. To start with, work and organizations are nowadays of a diverse nature and progressively more complex and complicated, and this substantially modifies the underlying causal dynamics of the processes and relations we examine. Even more so when the work and the organizations transcend geographical, cultural, institutional, social, political or other kind of borders on top of borders and boundaries existing in domestic environments.

Additionally, there are numerous contextual challenges of “transporting” social science models across societies and across the intellectual and academic spaces embedded in these societies. Such “transportation” is likely to question the logic and direction of causality established in one such space and reverse it in another. Another serious challenge for contextualization in IB research is that the field is at a

relatively early stage of paradigmatic development. Also, it has defined its disciplinary identity as inter- and trans-disciplinarity (Caves, 1998; Dunning, 1989; Shenkar, 2004). Wilkins (1997) noted the field’s insufficient coherence in key domains and modes of inquiry and Seno-Alday (2010) emphasized its theoretical heterogeneity and pluralism. Borrowing from other disciplines is justified, yet one needs to realize that different disciplines have different assumptions about and understanding of context. Dealing with such challenges is, in itself, fascinating.

Another feature which makes examining context interesting is that context is somewhat paradoxical: while it is not “given” or “just there” as a static entity, it is neither entirely unpredictable. Contexts vary more than individual differences across research sites and so, whereas well-defined taxonomies exist to describe human abilities, the same cannot be said for contextual factors. This side of the Janus face of context is well articulated by Gummesson (2006): “Change the context and the entity itself is different, it realizes another of its infinite potentialities. It becomes something different. Something more.” This could be a possible reason for why little is empirically known about how contexts influence behavior despite the many arguments that the context is all important (Funder, 2001). The other side of the Janus face of context, the more predictable one, reveals that **individuals and organizations actually indeed define their contexts, construct them socially, shape and share them. This implies that context possesses continuity and is therefore not entirely unpredictable.** As noted by Calás, Smircich, Tienari, and Ellehave (2010, p. 243), “while we each view and articulate our experiences from the vantage point of our particular place, we are all also traversed by shared social and economic conditions fuelled by powerful ideological and political apparatuses”. The fact that context illuminates particularity and specificity while also retaining a certain level of comparability makes it paradoxical, difficult to approach and hence, interesting to study.

The challenges in approaching context are reflected in the fact that there are numerous definitions, dimensions and typologies of context and contextualization proposed in the literature. In the next section I address the question what is context in order not to summarize what is already known, but to establish the foundation on which I build my subsequent arguments. I then offer my own interpretation of the *status quo* of contextualization in IB research combined with suggestions in terms of what, I think, we as IB scholars need to be better at and how we can achieve that.

Once again: what is context?

The word *contextus* is of Latin origin and means “to join together”, “to knit together” or “to make a connection” (Rousseau & Fried, 2001). **The Oxford English Dictionary (2008) defines the term as (1) the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea; (2) the parts that precede and follow a word or passage and fix its precise meaning.** To take something ‘out of context’ leads to misunderstanding. In linguistics, context refers to how readers can infer the meaning of a passage by referring to its intra-textual clues; something which transcends the text itself (Chin, 1994). In other words, trying to make sense of a single word in a sentence or of a sentence in a paragraph by looking

only at the specific word or sentence and isolating them from the rest of the text in which they are used can be problematic, even if one knows technically their various linguistic meanings. For instance, a question in an interview guide asking “How does sex impact on your everyday work?” is clearly understood in Finland and using “gender” instead of “sex” would sound artificial whereas the same question in the UK might raise a few dirty laughs (Thomas et al., 2009). “I am attached to you” has very different meanings to a person in love and to a hand-cuffed prisoner. So, there is no meaning without context. On the other hand, even if one is not familiar with the specific meaning(s) of a word or sentence, one can infer their correct meaning by situating them in the greater text and connecting them with the rest of the text.

Approaches to context and contextual dimensions range widely, reflecting different philosophical stances and practical orientations. Looking at context in practical terms may take a macro (broad features that differentiate countries) or a micro (differences in particular management practices among local work units) view. The philosophical spectrum, on the other hand, ranges from a view of context as a distinct and measurable entity to a consideration of it rather as something enacting the studied phenomenon and being enacted by this phenomenon (Griffin, 2007). A philosophical view of context as a distinct entity implies treating context as something that is definable and measurable, and external to the phenomenon under investigation. This underlying position seems to dominate many existing definitions of context as is evident below. In contrast, **viewing context as a dynamic set of processes and features which shape and are shaped by the studied phenomenon implies treating context as a social construct.** In this view, context has a “social life”, and this life is susceptible to analysis. In other words, context is linked to interpretation, meaning of context is the most important framework being sought (Harvey & Myers, 1995) and context is an essential element in classifying the relevance of phenomena to the study (Dilley, 2002).

Organizational behavior theorists Rousseau and Fried (2001) broadly define context as a set of factors which, when considered together, can sometimes yield a more readily interpretable and theoretically interesting pattern than any of the factors would show in isolation. Other definitions explicitly emphasize links between phenomena at different levels. For instance, two other organizational behavior researchers, Mowday and Sutton (1993, p. 198) point out that context is “stimuli and phenomena that surround and thus exist in the environment external to the individual, most often at a different level of analysis”. Yet another prominent organizational behavior theorist, Johns (2001, p. 32) refers to context as “a stimulus or phenomenon at one level or unit of analysis having an impact on another level or unit of analysis” and points out that context can have a direct impact or a moderating effect on the phenomenon under investigation. In a later piece Johns (2006, p. 386) highlights that the nature of context is constituted by “situational opportunities and constraints that affect the occurrence and meaning of organizational behavior as well as functional relationships between variables”.

Yet another cluster of definitions highlights not only links, but also implies hierarchical subordination between phenomena. One such definition of context is “surroundings associated with phenomena which help to illuminate that

phenomena, typically factors associated with units of analysis above those expressly under investigation (Cappelli & Sherer, 1991, p. 56, emphasis added). A similar definition is offered by George and Johns (1997, p. 156) according to which context is “environmental forces or organizational characteristics at a higher level of analysis that affect a focal behavior in question” (emphasis added).

Contexts are seldom uniform; instead, they are multidimensional and dynamic. The multifaceted nature of context refers to the fact that it can make certain situational features salient (e.g. focus on a particular area may invite and even predispose research to be highly contextual), it can have a cross-level effect (situational variables at one level of analysis affect variables at another level), it can shape meaning by explicitly recognizing that different contexts lead to different meanings, or it can in itself constitute a bundle of variables showing results which one variable alone would not depict (Johns, 2006). A single event may also provide a meaningful context for studying certain phenomena in the sense that one can study an event with the objective of establishing links with other variables. The latest global financial crisis is a contemporary example of such an event – it provides a meaningful and appropriate context to re-examine well established theories and truths that have dominated the fields of Corporate Governance, International Finance, and Accounting, to mention but a few, and to potentially develop new theoretical insights in these fields.

Johns (2006) distinguishes between omnibus and discrete context, the former considering broad issues – who, what, where and why – and the latter focusing on specific situational variables that directly influence behavior or moderate relationships between variables. Discrete contexts can establish explanatory links between the omnibus context and specific individual, organizational, industrial and national attitudes and behaviors. Pettigrew (1997) distinguishes between outer and inner context and points out that their simultaneous consideration helps in determining the features of a practice. **In terms of organizations, the inner context embraces organizational politics, economics and social factors that contribute to the use of processes, practices, and philosophies, whereas the outer context refers to political, economic, social, technological, and legal organizational environment.**

Tsui (2004) classifies global management models into three types: context-free, context-sensitive and context-embedded research. Context-free research tends to produce universal knowledge which is only practical and applicable if the world is considered to be a linear variable space where time and place do not matter (Buckley & Lessard, 2006). Social science, in general, is dominated by “context-excluded” universal knowledge (Cheng, 2007). Context-free knowledge is often assumed to be superior to localized knowledge and this has resulted in decreased attention being paid to context. Context-sensitive research can either be context-specific (information that is applicable to only one context, be it social, economic, cultural or political), or context-bounded (“when the relationship between variables differs from one context to the next”) (Tsui, 2004, p. 498). Context-sensitive research relates to high-quality indigenous research which produces contextualized knowledge and contributes to global knowledge. Tsui (2004) points out that highly contextualized indigenous research in the field of



International Management is concerned with exploratory research (rather than research based on previous knowledge). Contextualized indigenous research focuses not so much on the sample itself but on the sample's qualities, and whether the measures used are appropriate in the context. In this type of research, only one context is taken into account. Context-embedded research, on the other hand, links societal level variables with organizational level variables and is therefore preferred as compared to simple replication of existing studies³ in different locations.

While context is typically viewed as a setting, contextualization is a process which links observations to a set of relevant facts, events, or points of view, thus facilitating research and theory that form part of a larger whole (Rousseau & Fried, 2001). Exploiting context refers to "what you must do to make sense of data you observe or behavior in which you participate" (Edmondson, 1999, p. 5). Contextualization can occur in different stages of the research process, from question formulation, site selection, and measurement to data analysis, interpretation, and reporting" (Rousseau & Fried, 2001, p. 1), but it is typically a *post hoc*, descriptive exercise (Bamberger, 2008). Re-contextualization, on the other hand, is the process of extracting knowledge from one context to be converted and adapted to another context (Thompson, Warhurst, & Callaghan, 2001).

IB research and context(ualization): *status quo* and suggestions for improvement

I now turn to a discussion of the *status quo* of contextualization in IB research. I start with two more general questions, namely what kind of contextualization we practice in IB research and what and when we actually contextualize in our field. Subsequently, I engage in a more specific discussion of how we contextualize in relation to (a) formulating research questions, theorising and analyzing; (b) choosing and explaining out methodologies; (c) conducting research in teams that transcend national boundaries and (d) reporting research. Towards the end of each subsection I propose guidelines for how to improve the *status quo*.

What kind of contextualization do we practice in IB research and is it good enough?

Much IB research can be classified as adopting "context-excluded" approaches. This is to a great extent associated with the dominance of positivistic assumptions in the field (Brannen & Doz, 2010; Redding, 2005). Such research findings are presented as invariant across national boundaries and do not consider country context as a source of variation in the dependent phenomenon under study. Instead, the universality of the postulated relationship is assumed, and the country context is treated as a boundary condition that is

³ This should not be interpreted in the sense that I argue that we do not need to replicate existing studies. Quite the contrary: it is problematic that "the vast majority of published studies [in social sciences] present results that are never reproduced (Starbuck, 2006, p. 1)". The argument is rather that even simple replication/reproduction needs a careful consideration of context.

considered only when contradictions arise from empirical evidence.

When IB researchers consider context, they tend to refer to different contextual categories and dimensions and to define context in various ways. For instance, in relation to multinational corporations Kostova (1999) distinguishes between three types of context: social (regulatory, normative, cognitive), organizational (compatibility of organizational cultures and compatibility of practices) and relational (commitment, identity, trust and power/dependence relationships). Geppert, Williams, and Matten (2003) consider a different set of contexts. They analyze subsidiary managers as interacting with differing contextual rationalities: their local organizational contexts, the host country where the subsidiary is located and the national contexts of the parent company home country. Some of the IB literature on knowledge flows and knowledge transfer has also taken context seriously, but again, it is fluid and far from definitive in terms of what context is and how it is constituted (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Inkpen & Dinur, 1998).

The importance of context in IB has been primarily seen in two similar, but distinct areas – the generalizability of results to different cultures and nations and the context which influences the perception of authors (and to a lesser extent, the reader) (Nevis, 1983) – with the first stream dominating the field. A common form of contextualization in IB research is studying a phenomenon across different, typically national and/or cultural, contexts. Another form of contextualization widely seen in IB research is using differences in national level attributes to predict differences in organizational and individual phenomena. In IB research there has been a tendency to study the impact of context primarily in terms of the influence of culture and cultural values on business processes and the economic behavior of economic agents at different levels of analysis (Gerhart & Fang, 2005; Tsui, Nafidkar, & Yi, 2007). The question is whether these two common forms of contextualization in IB research (with their respective variances and nuances) constitute deep contextualization. If we follow the criteria of what constitutes deep contextualization – namely relevance, validity, inductive research and context-specific methodology (Tsui, 2007) – then the answer is no. I therefore put forward the following, more comprehensive,

Suggestion 1: Let us not pretend that we engage in deep contextualization when we merely study processes and phenomena across contexts and/or when we use differences in attributes at a higher, typically national, level of analysis to explain and/or predict differences in lower, typically organizational phenomena. We are already well equipped to move beyond basic concerns about generalizing results from one setting to another.

Lo and Michailova (2010) analyze three specific theoretical contributions by researchers from China to reveal how culturally contextual specificities have eluded explanation by some of the most well known cross-cultural studies. These authors show how Chinese researchers adjusted Western-based scales to make them reliable in the Chinese cultural context, using as powerful examples the Chinese Culture Connection (1987) on Confucian Dynamism, Cheung et al.'s (1996) study on the Chinese Personality Assessment Inventory and Farh, Earley, and Lin (1997) examination of a Chinese



version of an organizational citizenship behavior scale. On the basis of these three contributions Lo and Michailova (2010) suggest that three particular issues deserve much more serious attention by researchers: identifying emics, aiming at cultural completeness (i.e. examining emics of multiple cultures so that models, theories, and constructs are truly generalizable in a cross-cultural sense), and incorporating meaningfully indigenous thought and knowledge. The authors also advocate the importance of not merely taking into account, but conceptualizing as a focal construct intra-cultural variation which, unlike aggregate notions of culture and cultural similarities and differences, rather refers to the distribution of an attribute of individuals within a culture. While IB research has provided numerous examples of the former, examinations of the latter are still rare. I therefore recommend

Suggestion 2: Examining cultural contexts as aggregate constructs to investigate how these contexts differ across borders, or how cultural similarities and differences explain/predict what we investigate, does not any longer (if it ever has) bring us far in terms of contextualizing our studies. We will be better served if we strive towards identifying relevant context-distinguishing features at lower levels of analysis and examining dimensions that can result in more robust conceptions of the aggregate notions and processes we study.

After these initial thoughts and introductory suggestions, I now turn to a more detailed discussion regarding what and when exactly we can and should contextualize in IB research.

Contextualizing what and when in IB research?

I will now follow a somewhat sequential logic and address the issue of contextualization in relation to formulating research questions, theorizing, designing research, generating and analyzing empirical data and reporting findings in the field of IB.⁴

Contextualizing our research questions, theories and analyses

Often the choice of research question(s) is shaped not so much by the importance of the phenomenon under investigation, but the importance of the context. The context itself can trigger research questions we might not have considered prior to entering the research site. It can also make familiar processes and phenomena appear very different and indeed sometimes novel (Tsui, 2004). Context specific studies (i.e. studies producing knowledge that stems from a particular context, and where it is not (yet) known if the knowledge is transferable) are open to such possibilities, and can take them on board and utilize them. The nature of the study, too, may be seriously influenced by context in the sense that not accounting for context is likely

to lead to “thin description” which is not particularly conducive to new insights.

The provision of an exploration of contextual elements appears to be taken more seriously in IB research that focuses on national level effects; contextual influences seem to receive less attention in research where the level of analysis is the firm or lower. At firm/organizational level, context seems to matter more to multinational enterprises (“an enterprise which owns and controls producing facilities in more than one country”, Dunning, 1971, p. 16) than to domestic firms, probably because of the greater relative ease in identifying a larger number of influencing contextual factors for multinationals. **These enterprises are contextually rich organizations in the sense that they are associated with issues and processes that effectively do not exist in other types of organizations – or the phenomena observed therein are more visible, intense or critical.** In a review of research published from 1992 to 2002 in leading Management and IB journals Roth and Kostova (2003) identified three main purposes for which the multinational corporation is employed as a research context: (a) study of phenomena specific to these corporations; (b) validation and expansion of existing theories; and (c) development of new theories. The authors concluded that while this last represents the highest potential contribution to IB research, it is in fact the least utilized.

IB phenomena are often embedded in more than a single context. For instance, a focal subsidiary is embedded in the internal network of the multinational firm of which it is a part, in a particular industry, in a particular host country with specific institutional, economic, social and other specificities, etc. – all at the same time. I emphasize that IB researchers should be more reflective in addressing this simultaneity. It is worth investing the effort to study in a theoretical way how multiple contexts are nested in and intertwined with each other, how they interact and how such interactions impact on the phenomena under examination. Time, too, is an important contextual feature (Cheng, 1994; Meyer, 2007). **The inclusion of temporality, together with other contextual factors, reinforces the dynamic nature of context. The context in which a subject exists will evolve both through the influences changing over time and through the actions undertaken by the subject, which expose it to a new set of influences (Cheng, 1994).**

As already mentioned, the nature of the arguments and data analysis in IB research is often US-centric. This in itself is not a problem – after all, IB as a discipline has its historical, intellectual and institutional origins in the US. It is, however, problematic that this hegemonic US-centricity is seldom acknowledged and even more rarely discussed when it is necessary to do so. Some reviews (e.g. Bhagat & McQuaid, 1982) conclude that findings of US based studies do not replicate in alternative settings. Although some theories and tools have been tested outside the US, there remains an unhealthy reliance on US-developed theories (Frese, 2005; Michailova, 2011; Shenkar, 2004; Starbuck, 2002). Whether it is because of who generates IB knowledge and where IB knowledge is generated or because of the politics of publishing (Starbuck, 2006), or both, we seem to blindly follow a US-centric or Anglo-Saxon perspective. We somehow seem to learn from US and UK firms, but not really from Algerian, Bulgarian or Colombian firms (just to take the 1st three letters of the Latin alphabet) – the latter do not seem

⁴ I by no means imply that conducting research in general and IB research in particular follows such a linear cycle. I rather take these components of doing research as ones where contextualization issues are (or can be) crucial and list them in this sequence in order to structure the arguments.



to be of much interest. In other words, some contexts appear to be superior to others in relation to knowledge generation (Prasad, Pisani, & Prasad, 2008; Youssef, Badran, & Hatem, 1997). The fact that knowledge production and dissemination occur increasingly, almost exclusively, through the English language perpetuates the hegemonic patterns of knowledge generation (Tietze & Dick, 2009) and intensifies the tendency of research to focus on extending existing literature rather than developing context-specific knowledge, and the proportion of authors opting for what Johns (2001) refers to as “controlling away context”.

Context can be of great help in shedding light on the limitations of existing theories and in explaining local phenomena (Tsui, 2004) and it is able to add new concepts into existing theories (Lo & Michailova, 2010; Rousseau & Fried, 2001). In other words, new knowledge can be derived from context: it drives the way phenomena are perceived and abstracted by researchers at a conceptual level, a process that results in different categories and relationships (Cai, 2007). As observed by Feyerabend (1975, p. 19), “science knows no ‘are facts’ at all, but the facts that enter our knowledge are already viewed in a certain way and are, therefore, essentially ideational”.

Recently some authors have argued for the development of context theory and context theorizing. Griffin (2007, p. 859) advises that “the context of the study is theorized as a conceptual construct, operationalized as a variable in the study and that the variance associated with the context is directly incorporated in the analysis”. Bamberger (2008, p. 839) points out “the need to accelerate the transition from the contextualization of research findings to the generation and testing of context theories of management”, and argues that such bottom-up theories “truly break paradigmatic boundaries” (p. 842). He advocates context theorizing which “goes beyond the sensitization of theory to possible situational or temporal constraints or boundary conditions by directly specifying the nature and form of influence such factors are likely to have on the phenomenon under investigation” (ibid.: 841, emphasis added). Whetten (2009), too, distinguishes between contextualizing theory (i.e. the validity of the theory is to a large extent a function of its contextual sensitivity) and theorizing about context (where context effects are studied in their own right and are used as theories). An example of a context theory is Sorenson and Stuart’s (2008) study which explained the formation of distant ties in networks. The authors proposed a theory of relationship formation based on the characteristics of “settings” and posited that organizations form relations with distant partners when they participate in two types of settings: unusually faddish ones and ones with limited risks to participants. In this way the authors expanded the analysis of relationship formation “to include attributes of the setting, or the context within which those relationships form” (p. 270). In other words, they focused on the role of context itself in shaping patterns of inter-organizational affiliations.

Welch, Piekari, Plakoyiannaki, and Paavilainen-Mäntymäki (2011) argue that contextualized explanation, while rarely found in published (case study based) IB research, offers a high degree of contextualization without sacrificing the goal of causal explanation. They point out that the value of this approach lies, amongst other things, in treating context as an essential component of, rather than a hindrance

to, explanation. Such a view implies that contextualized explanation is a way of reconciling context and explanation. The possibility of such a reconciliation, Welch et al. (2011) argue, is an abiding theme in IB, given that as a field its *raison d’être* is to explain phenomena in diverse national, cultural and institutional contexts. The authors also conclude that the most interesting IB studies are those that intertwine context with research evidence to explain the phenomena under investigation.

On the basis of the above arguments I propose

Suggestion 3: We can try more often to include contextual attributes in our theorizing and analyses in a more direct manner, without sacrificing causal explanations. When and where meaningful, we can examine the role of context in its own right rather than viewing it merely as an external “setting” that influences what we study. Instead of controlling away context, we can employ context-rich approaches, specify exactly what role context plays in our theorizing and analyses, and develop and utilize context theories.

Contextualizing methods

Buchanan and Bryman (2007) demonstrate how “choice of method is shaped not only by research aims, norms of practice, and epistemological concerns but also by a combination of organizational, historical, political, ethical, evidential and personally significant characteristics of the field of research” (p. 483). The authors argue that instead of acknowledging these factors as “difficulties facing the field researcher” or “just unwelcome destructions”, “[...] they are core components of the data stream, reflecting generic and specific properties of the research setting, central to the analysis and interpretation of results and to the development of theoretical and practical outcomes” (pp. 483–484). Shapiro, Von Glinow, and Xiao (2007, p. 129) recommend “the polycontextual sensitive research method to supplement the scientific deductive research typically designed to study observable phenomena based on a singular context that are controllable by the researcher’s stimuli and/or measures”.

Not being able to unveil aspects that are unique to a particular research situation hinders accumulation of knowledge. This applies to both qualitative and quantitative research fieldwork. Contextualization, as I have argued elsewhere, is not an external construct within which qualitative fieldwork takes place; it is internalized and constitutes the very nature of fieldwork (Michailova, 2004; Michailova & Clark, 2004). In that sense contextual and methodological issues need to be considered jointly rather than as two distinct categories in which the former obstructs the latter. It is more demanding and painstaking, but also more meaningful and rewarding to treat contextualization as an important methodological issue instead of implicitly assuming that context is a natural part of qualitative fieldwork (Michailova, 2004). Taking something as implicit suppresses the discussion or problematization of context and this is to the detriment of the quality of the fieldwork, of the researcher conducting it and of the reader consuming it. Contextualizing implies taking subjectivity seriously, utilizing, valuing and learning from it, rather than criticizing, avoiding, excusing and attempting to overcome it. Viewing context as inseparable from fieldwork means that the researcher consciously and

responsibly accepts contextualization as a core responsibility in conducting qualitative fieldwork.

Quantitative researchers seldom recognize the problem of not taking context issues on board when conducting their studies. Yet quantitative studies are not immune to contextualization issues. It is difficult to argue that quantitative researchers are or should be less engaged in serious contextualization. The way questionnaires are designed and surveys are administered, for instance, is heavily dependent on the particular context where they are developed and where they are intended to be used. The very questions included in the questionnaire are intended to be answered by certain respondents and the context in which they act needs to be respected. The questions we include in our surveys contain specific meanings and imply specific interpretations and these are never context-free. The issue becomes a potential danger when survey data are collected in settings embedded in different contexts. Sometimes we are a bit too easy-going in relation to such challenges.

In more traditional quantitative techniques, context is treated as "either a set of interfering variables that need controlling, known as noise in the data, or other controlled variables which are experimentally set up in order to seek for cause and effect relationships (Harvey & Myers, 1995, p. 17). Colleagues conducting quantitative research are keen to hypothesize and measure. Since their measurements need to reflect what actually happens in real organizations and with real organizational members (the "subjects" in traditional jargon), context becomes immediately important. This means that efforts to mask context are meaningless and indeed sometimes destructive. The "subjects" cannot be extricated from interactions with situations and contexts and so, context is not "noise". Relying on conceptualizations that constitute an "absolute" world of external ("objective") realities and that are disentangled from real contexts and situations does not help handling the issues of validity and reliability that preoccupy our quantitative IB colleagues. Finally, as Gusfield (1976) observed, even scholars for whom numbers mean everything need to persuade their audiences, and persuasion and rhetoric are situationally specific and context-related. It is therefore useful to propose

Suggestion 4: We, as IB scholars, as well as the audiences with whom we converse, will benefit from our presenting and discussing our methodological choices as tough decisions based on multiple criteria and involving interrelated considerations, many of which are context-related. There is not much that is 'smooth' or 'clean' about making these choices and there is no need to sanitize the final product, whitewashing the complexity and messiness we experience when generating our data, qualitative as well as quantitative. Reflecting on and voicing context can help us to be stronger in selecting, employing and justifying our methodologies.

Contextualizing our team research

Much IB research is conducted in research teams whose members are based in different countries and who study the same phenomenon in these countries. Examining issues in relation to the countries/societies to which they belong may, at first glance, diminish the importance of making important decisions that are inseparable from context issues,

as the team members tend to have an in-depth understanding of their respective societies. However, as noted by Hantrais (1999, p. 101), even if this is the case, the team members "still need to select the most appropriate contexts for analysis within those societies in relation to the social phenomena under investigation. [...] The contextual factors to be examined are likely to be determined, in the first instance, by the topic of the research, the disciplinary perspective(s) inherent in the research design and the financial, temporal and human resources available."

Members of research teams that transcend geographical borders often cross social, linguistic and semantic boundaries, are comfortable with different intellectual traditions, subscribe to different ideologies and have different academic conventions and theoretical preferences. This poses a number of challenges which typically remain unspoken in the final writings of the teams (or of their individual members) (Salmi, 2010; Thomas et al., 2009). Even if the team members define themselves as "polycontextual" researchers, meaning they realize that there are multiple and qualitatively different sources of potential meaning in a context (Shapiro et al., 2007), the challenges these research team members experience remain largely unexplored and unproblematized and are, as Salmi (2010, p. 43) notes, "limited to brief comments on language". This results in silencing and suppressing context which is indeed unfortunate and problematic. The audience for our research can learn a great deal from knowing what we have decided to silence or marginalize, and why, as well as what we have decided to privilege and emphasize and how the team's cross-contextual composition and dynamics has influenced these decisions. I therefore propose

Suggestion 5: Conducting IB research in research teams that transcend countries (and other contexts) does not in itself guarantee that the research conducted is context-sensitive. On the contrary, when we conduct research in such teams, we need to be especially careful and vocal about when and how we have taken on board contextual issues and how we have integrated them into our team research and final writings. Reflecting on difficulties, tensions and mistakes in our teams is important to us and our audiences.

Contextualizing our research findings and their articulation

Context can have both subtle and powerful influence on research results. If and when we study causes and consequences, we often implicitly infer a logic of what leads to what. However, important contextual exceptions can reverse the direction of well established causal relationships. Context is also implicated in explaining "exceptions to the rule" (Hackman, 2003), "missing linkages" (Goodman, 2000) and contradictory findings of similar studies (Tsui, 2004). This invites increasingly serious attention to context. As Schneider (1985) points out, contextualization helps to make models more precise, research results more sufficient and the interpretation of results more robust.

Reporting context helps researchers articulate the applications of their research better and with sufficient richness (Johns, 2006). If we do not explicate how we contextualize our research, we limit the possibilities for later research to build upon our prior findings. In this way we invite for

unnecessary fragmentation in our field rather than producing and accumulating knowledge (which is different from producing papers). Additionally, we typically study what has already happened, or at best, what is happening, rather than predicting and advising what could, should or will happen (Starbuck, 2006; Tung & Michailova, 2008). **I have argued that the IB research community is not at the forefront of IB practice partly because we do not take context seriously (Michailova, 2011): our weak accounts of context results in practitioners' ignorance of our context-free models.** If we are to properly serve managers, organizational members in general and other consumers of our research and win them as audiences for our work, we should pay close attention to the fact that, besides (and despite) appreciating universal tools and models, they are highly sensitive to context. Theories incorporating contextual elements tend to be more appealing to practicing managers who tend to prefer group-focused over individual-centered interventions (Bliese & Jex, 2002). It is our task to describe context in a way that can either help our audiences identify with it or assist them deciding which aspects and dimensions of it they should not take on board. Practitioners are well positioned to make these decisions once we have clarified the important contextual features of the phenomena we study and of the findings we come up with.

Finally, reporting context allows more authentic and realistic communication. Articulating contextual details in a genuine and open manner can increase the reliability of our research. Unfortunately there are considerably more examples of studies where we do not explicitly recognize the contextual features and implications, including the limitations, of our findings as compared to studies in which we do. Voicing context is of utmost importance when context is understood in social construction terms, namely not as a kind of a static external entity in which phenomena are embedded, but rather as a shaper and enacter of situations in which it is in a constant and continuous interaction with consciousness, experience, intention, meaning and interpretation. Of all the issues discussed above, articulating context in research writings is the area where IB researchers are most clearly prisoners of the politicking and squeezing game of the academic publishing empire and the current journal ranking madness. Hence my final

Suggestion 6: **It is meaningful and responsible to report context in an authentic and genuine manner.** This helps provide details that are of utmost relevance to understanding and trusting our studies and findings although it does not, in general, help to win the academic publishing race.

In conclusion

My purpose in writing this paper was to join the academic conversation on context-related issues in organizational and management research (Bamberger, 2008; Johns, 2001, 2006; Tsui, 2004; Whetten, 2009) and in IB research (Cheng, 2007; Michailova, 2011; Tsui, 2007; Tung, 2006). The arguments I have developed are partly a response to some of my personal frustration about the fact 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 have argued that as IB scholars we are much too often context-blind or

indeed that we intentionally and skilfully blindfold ourselves against context.

I have advocated that there is no justification for this state of affairs. More specifically, I proposed that we are well equipped to move beyond basic concerns about generalizing results from one setting to another, and so we should not pretend to conduct deep contextualization when we merely study processes and phenomena across contexts. I then discussed contextualization in relation to theorizing, methodology and reporting IB research. I argued that we can try to include contextual attributes in our theorizing and analyses more often and in a more direct manner, without fearing that causal explanation suffers from contextualization. I made 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 assist us in being stronger in selecting, employing and justifying our methodologies. I took issue with the fact that conducting IB research in research teams that transcend countries (and other contexts) does not *per se* guarantee that the research conducted is context-sensitive. Finally, I emphasized that it is meaningful and responsible to report context in an authentic and genuine manner as this helps to provide details relevant to understanding and trusting our studies and findings although it does not, in general, help in winning the academic publishing race.

In general, we tend to be focused too much on what we study and are too busy to report what we have found about the "objects" of our investigations. We have increasingly distanced these "objects" from their very particular contexts and from ourselves as researchers, and in this way imposed a fragmentation which often does not make sense. **We need more thinking, writing and discussion on how and why we do or not contextualize.** If the views I have expressed in this paper sound extreme and polarized, it is because, as stated in the introduction, we need more debate around context and contextualization in IB research. And I do not mind if the debate is heated.

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