Journal of Management & Organization, 20:1 (2014), pp. 1–5

doi:10.1017/jmo.2014.28

EDITORIAL

A new vision for the Journal of Management & Organization: The role of context

The move by the *Journal of Management & Organization* (*JMO*) to Cambridge University Press is significant in a number of ways. It clearly sets *JMO* on a path of being a significant internationally recognised journal. The number of submissions being received from outside Australia and New Zealand has grown enormously over the past 5 years (to now exceed 80% of all submissions), and along with the internationalisation of the Editorial Board, moving to a leading international publisher sends a very clear signal that *JMO* is an established international journal with clear growth and reputation oriented ambitions.

Perhaps most significantly, the move to Cambridge has coincided with an exciting new focus for 2014 onwards. From this point, the focus for *JMO* is on context-specific research, recognising the pressing need for outlets for scholarly dialogue from the perspective that 'context matters'. Tsui (2006: 2) defines contextualisation as 'incorporating the context in describing, understanding, and theorising about phenomena within it' and highlights that 'the need for contextualisation is well accepted'. Nonwithstanding, this recognition, the outlets for research emphasising a contextualisation approach are less clear and hitherto now no dedicated outlet for such research existed.

Some globalisation scholars may take the view that the world in becoming more homogeneous, however, I would posit that the world remains close to as heterogeneous as ever, and that it is the level of interconnectedness that is increasing. The growth of economies outside North America and Western Europe has actually reinforced our understanding of this heterogeneity as large multinationals from other regions are increasingly visible on the global stage and are now moving into traditional 'Western' markets either directly or through mergers and acquisitions. The economic rise of China, and Asia more generally, and the corresponding shift of economic power away from the West to the East provides just one logic for our need to account for contextual factors to an ever greater extent. More generally, greater scrutiny of so-called universal theories will be required to ascertain which may require replacement by more specific 'mid-range' theories that address the particular contextual factors pertinent to organisational phenomena. Further, theories and practices that accommodate different contexts will be essential to underpin the future of management education and practice in a globalised world.

THE NEED FOR CONTEXT-SPECIFIC RESEARCH

The recognition of the need for more context-specific or context-rich research is nothing new. As Bamberger (2008: 839) stated, 'Over the past 30 years, numerous appeals for the greater consideration of context in management theory have appeared in the literature (e.g., Roberts, Hulin, & Rousseau, 1978; Cappelli & Sherer, 1991; Johns, 2006)'. In this same *Academy of Management Journal* editorial, he goes on to suggest that the first real signs of life in respect of context theorising is 'beginning to generate nothing short of a revolution in management theory, one based on the simple notion that *context counts* and, where possible, should be given theoretical consideration' (Bamberger, 2008: 839). Anne Tsui (2007) made a similar call for more context-specific research in her *Academy of Management Journal* summary paper but from a less optimistic perspective given the extremely limited number of context-specific papers published in top journals.

The call for context-specific research has been mirrored in various management sub-disciplines – most notably international business. For example, Meyer (2006: 119) in discussing the paucity of Asian-specific research, stated that 'such research should be able to make major contributions, for instance, by explaining context-specific variables and effects and by drawing on traditional Asian thought in developing new theories'. In a follow-up piece by Puffer and McCarthy (2007: 510), the authors suggest that researchers outside the Western centres of research would benefit from a 'more "confident" approach of conducting context-specific research in their indigenous environments, the latter having the potential to add to global management knowledge as well as help indigenous managers'. In summary, there is a longstanding recognition of the need for context-specific research, however, top journals with their existing trajectories and the dominance of a North American focus have often struggled to offer a home for such research.

WHAT CONSTITUTES CONTEXT-SPECIFIC RESEARCH?

If the calls for context-driven research have been significant, but have largely fallen upon deaf ears, then one possible explanation for this outcome is the lack of a common understanding of what might constitute context-specific research. At the heart of any context-specific research is an appreciation of heterogeneity at some level. For researchers operating outside of North America (or with interests that lie outside of this region), this is only too obvious in the world that we see and the management activities observed on an almost daily basis. But a quick discussion with international colleagues on recent paper rejections is almost guaranteed to bring forth some tales of reviewer comments asking why US data were not used, or how can we generalise such conclusions if the results were not based on North American data. I would like to think that these comments are ignored by relevant decision makers in editorial roles, but perhaps the need for context driven research and the benefits of living in a heterogeneous world are not as obvious for many scholars as I would like to think.

Heterogeneity exists at many levels. We see it across political, legal, economic, social, and cultural institutions. But it does not just exist between countries and regions. We can see heterogeneity for example across industries (e.g., different industries have different architectures, 'recipes' and structures), across organisations (e.g., public vs. private sector, or mechanistic vs. organic organisations), across employees (e.g., part-time vs. full-time, or leaders vs. subordinates), and across the psychological characteristics of otherwise similar employees (e.g., those with Type A behavioural patterns, or introverts vs. extroverts). In many cases heterogeneity may not be important across numerous dimensions in a particular piece of research, however, there are too many cases where such an assumption is made without any consideration of the potential role of context.

If context-driven research is concerned with the recognition of heterogeneity, then this provides numerous avenues for fruitful research. Perhaps the simplest and most obvious is the comparison study where one sample may be from a traditionally studied group and is compared against data from an 'alternative' setting. This may be potentially insightful, but the key here is to understand and build the theoretical case for why the results may be different based on contextual issues. Simply undertaking a study in two regions, across two types of organisations or in respect of two distinct groups of employees by itself does not generate new knowledge. Too often a paper will suggest that the research contained within it is important simply because it has not been tested in a particular country or with a particular group. It may be important, but it will only be *interesting* for readers if it provides new insights concerning particular phenomena. For example, servant leadership studies may be appropriately tested in a Western and a Confucian setting as the idea of 'servant leadership' has its roots in Christian values and subsequent cultural norms (Greenleaf, 1977; Graham, 1991). The key is to build theory to explain why differences are expected in the 'alternative' context such that we develop a more nuanced understanding of the relevant theory.

As an alternative to the comparison study, context driven research may take the form of what Tsui (2006) refers to as the 'outside in' or the 'inside out' approach. In both cases there is no direct comparison point in terms of data, but rather an extension of relevant theory on the basis of the context. The 'outside in' approach is where the researcher takes an existing theory and applies it to a new context. The key is understanding why this alternative context may not align with existing 'universal' theory. For example, some governance principles may require rethinking in respect of fundamentally different institutional or cultural environments. Such research is likely to create boundaries to the limits of the existing theory. Or it may help to introduce new variables into our existing theoretical models that may then assist in the refinement of the theory through the introduction of these new (contextual) variables. Whetten (2009) refers to this principle as 'systematic borrowing' whereby a theory developed in one context is applied in another context, with theory building occurring to appreciate the relevance of the contextual differences. But he suggests that the best outcome is when the borrower returns something to the literature such that the theory is extended or refined.

The 'inside out' approach is where the research focuses upon an issue that is particularly relevant to a specific context. The 'inside out' approach requires an in-depth knowledge of the context. Understanding the transition from a planned economy to a more market-based economy in China and its effect on a range of variables may allow for the development of theory that is unique to this context. At a more micro level, Bacharach and Bamberger (2007) and Bacharach, Bamberger, and Doveh (2008) considered specific issues in the context of the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York. Here, the context is a central part of the story and the subsequent theory building. Over time, the theory emerging from the context-specific research may be able to be generalised and applied more broadly, but this is not the driving force of the 'inside out' approach.

The 'outside in' and the 'inside out' approaches tend to be about the context in terms of the data, that is, testing the boundaries of existing theory on the basis of an alternative context, or building new theory that is context driven. There is also the potential for context driven research to occur at a theoretical level first. The introduction of moderating and mediating variables is a classic example of such an approach. This is especially relevant where previous empirical results concerning a particular relationship have been mixed. The relationship between corporate social responsibility and performance may be an example of how our understanding of the relationship has been enhanced by both the use of alternative methods, but also the addition of contextual variables in some studies (e.g., Orlitzky, Schmidt, & Rynes, 2003; Barnett & Salomon, 2006)

Finally, context-specific research can occur at the methodological level such as through measurement, the nature of the data, or the way the data is collected. Scales developed in a Western context, for example, may not easily translate to other contexts, and not just due to differences in language. The process of translation and back translation procedure is relatively well accepted, however, the relevance of some dimensions of certain scales may be questionable. For example, trust or leadership as constructs may be conceptualised quite differently by employees in certain non-Western countries. Thus developing appropriate new scales to measure certain constructs may be an apt path to take in context driven research. A significant contribution may also be derived in respect of the data. The strategy field seems to rely more and more upon large secondary data sets with proxies being used to test certain theoretical propositions. For example, industry concentration is used as a proxy for industry attractiveness, marketing expenditure as a proxy for marketing capabilities and patents as a proxy for level of innovativeness. Thus a study such as that by Galbreath and Galvin (2008) that was the first to test the importance of industry structure relative to key resources using primary data rather than proxies from large secondary data sets may provide context to the variables in a way that builds our understanding of relevant phenomena. Finally, the methods used for collecting primary data may need to be contextualised. Focus groups for example in societies that value 'face' may be inappropriate and even surveys may be subject to extreme versions of central tendency in such cultures. Thus we may wish to contextualise the data collection process to avoid these limitations.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jmo.2014.28 Published online by Cambridge University Press

BUILDING CONTEXT-SPECIFIC RESEARCH

The approaches suggested above to create context-specific research are unlikely to be the only pathways through which scholars can add to their respective fields via a recognition of the relevance of context. If the presence of heterogeneity is the ultimate source of the need for context-specific research then this heterogeneity may manifest itself in numerous ways and at numerous levels – creating a rich vein of potential research. I have suggested some potential approaches to undertaking context-specific research, but whether the context dimension is addressed via the source of empirical data, via the building of more detailed theory that incorporates context, or via alternative approaches at the methodological level will be very much dependent upon the sub-field of management, the dominant theoretical perspective(s) and of course the questions being posed. However, the suggestions made here will hopefully at least provide a starting point for thinking about the potential for context-specific research and how it might be achieved.

There will continue to be opportunities for researchers to ask the big questions and develop universal theory, but for every big idea, there is a need for testing, refinement, understanding the limits of proposed theory and refinement of the theory – all of which may take place through context-specific research. Furthermore, context-specific research does not preclude asking or answering big questions. In fact, an alternative perspective through which to view a phenomenon may actually provide the catalyst to address big questions in a manner that had not previously been conceptualised. The context thus not only shapes our world, but it also shapes our view of it such that the very act of undertaking context-specific research may give us a novel lens with which to provide new and potentially significant insight into existing issues.

In reading some of the different calls for more context-specific research, it struck me how common and consistent these 'call to arms' have been. Yet beyond some notable special issues around this and related topics, context-specific research does not seem to have taken hold – even in international management where there must surely be at least an implicit recognition of some dimensions of heterogeneity. *JMO*, with its specific focus on context-specific research, is poised to turn this situation around. The *JMO* as a dedicated outlet for context-specific research backed up by the prestige and experience of international publisher Cambridge University Press, provides the vehicle needed for the idea that context matters to gain significant traction across the various sub-disciplines of management. With *JMO*'s historical roots being in Australia and New Zealand, and with over 50% of submissions coming from the Asian region (including Australasia), *JMO* is uniquely positioned to pursue the context angle. In my time as first an Associate Editor and more recently as Editor-in-Chief of *JMO*, I have been heartened by the flow of papers that explicitly address context in various forms. As of this first issue of 2014, *JMO*'s formalised focus is on context-specific research and the Editorial team looks forward to receiving many more papers to review that explicitly recognise that *context matters*.

Peter Galvin
Editor-in-Chief
Journal of Management & Organization
Curtin Graduate School of Business, Curtin University,
78 Murray St., Perth WA 6000, Australia

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I wish to thank Charmine Hartel for her helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper.

References

Bacharach, S. B., & Bamberger, P. A. (2007). 9/11 and New York City firefighters' post hoc unit support and control climates: A context theory of the consequences of involvement in traumatic work-related events. *Academy of Management Journal*, *50*, 849–868.

Bacharach, S. B., Bamberger, P. A., & Doveh, E. (2008). Firefighters, critical incidents, and drinking to cope: The adequacy of unit-level performance resources as a source of vulnerability and protection. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *93*, 155–169.

Bamberger, P. A. (2008). Beyond contextualization: Using context theories to narrow the micro-macro gap in management research. *Academy of Management Journal*, *51*, 839–846.

Barnett, M. L., & Salomon, R. M. (2006). Beyond dichotomy: The curvilinear relationship between social responsibility and financial performance. *Strategic Management Journal*, *27*, 1101–1122.

Galbreath, J., & Galvin, P. (2008). Firm factors, industry structure and performance variation: New empirical evidence to a classic debate. *Journal of Business Research*, *61*, 109–117.

Graham, J. W. (1991). Servant leadership in organizations: Inspirational and moral. *Leadership Quarterly*, *2*, 105–119.

Greenleaf, R. K. (1977). *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. New York, NY: Paulist Press.

Meyer, K. E. (2006). Asian management research needs more self-confidence. *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, *23*, 119–137.

Orlitzky, M., Schmidt, F. L., & Rynes, S. (2003). Corporate social responsibility and financial performance: A meta-analysis. *Organization Studies*, *24*, 403–411.

Puffer, S. M., & McCarthy, D. J. (2007). Does Asian management research need more self-confidence? Reflections from Russia. *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, *24*, 509–517.

Tsui, A. S. (2006). Contextualization in Chinese management research. *Management and Organization Review*, *2*, 1–13.

Tsui, A. S. (2007). From homogenization to pluralism: International management research in the academy and beyond. *Academy of Management Journal*, *50*, 1353–1364.

Whetten, D. A. (2009). An examination of the interface between context and theory applied to the study of Chinese organizations. *Management and Organization Review*, *5*, 29–55.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jmo.2014.28 Published online by Cambridge University Press