

Selected Topics in Business Administration:

Global Management – Part B: Epistemology

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PART B Epistemology

1 Contextual research

§1 Methodologically speaking, to analyze and describe a context, one needs to identify and define “a finite set of entities, a finite set of properties for each entity, and the interweaving of the properties” (Wan, 2009: 33).

§2 Considering that a “context refers to a setting that is unique” (Online 1, §24), *contextual research* seeks to understand *and* describe this setting in terms of “its geography and actors” (ibid.).

Geography

§3 Geography and land morphology of a context defines the resources available, and therefore, negatively, those resources that are lacking, which in turn inform the terms of trade with other contexts.

§4 This contextual interdependence is aptly noted by Wan (2009: 35) stating that “different contexts, in general, are not independent of one another as the different perspectives are about the same world, and, as a consequence, the facts in a context are related to the facts in other contexts”.

§5 Yet one should not lose from sight the fact that if trade is predominantly analyzed and described by means of national data, in practice trade actors are attached to a region with its geographical idiosyncrasies.

§6 Geography shapes ways of thinking and doing, that is culture with its rituals – cultural geography (Online 2), and language in general (Sapir-Whorf hypothesis).

§7 With Giunchiglia (in Wan, 2009: 35) geography is related to knowledge production when claiming that “the notion of context formalizes the idea of localization of knowledge and reasoning” considering that a context is

a set of facts (expressed in a suitable language, usually different for each different set of facts) used locally to prove a given goal, plus the inference routines used to reason about them (which can be different for different sets of facts). (Ibid.)

§8 A context therefore “encodes a perspective about the world”, even though “it is an approximate perspective, ..., as we never describe the world in full detail” (Giunchiglia, in Wan, 2009: 35)

Actors

§9 Actors include individuals and communities which are domiciled (in the legal definitions e.g., Online 3, 4, 5) and therefore reside at one geographical setting, *the resident*

contextual actors; one can also include long term visitors who thus interact in a mutual manner that is, *relationally* with their surroundings.

2 Looking at the context

§10 How one 'looks at the context' plays a central role and thus is an issue worthy treating at this point of the discussion, since the study strategies and methods available and in use, are wholly dependent upon.

§11 Following the observation by Mostowlansky and Rota (Online 6, original emphasis) that

etic came to stand for ambitions to establish an objective, scientific approach to the study of culture, whereas emic refers to the goal of grasping the world according to one's interlocutors' particular points of view

one can look upon a context from outside the context (etic) or from within (emic) in the same manner as a domiciled actor (§9) would do.

§12 One quickly realises that there is a trade-off when one chooses to 'look at the context' from one or the other of the vantage points: if the etic viewpoint seems to be detached, whereas the emic intuitively biased and native, it lacks the information, and more importantly, the lived and "sedimented experience" (Zamaros, 2004: 29) that an insider has.

§13 The ideal approach then is to combine both vantage points (Online 7), if possible.

§14 Methodologically speaking then an etic-based study will be grounded upon other-directed principles and data collection tools (Zamaros, 2004: 55), whereas an emic-based study, additionally is self-directed (ibid: 38).

Other-directed studies

§15 The other-directed approach as its name suggests involves the other which means that (ibid: 55) "there is separation between the object and subject of the inquiry given that I am the searcher and the other the researched."

§16 Typical method of this approach is the survey (ibid: 56) yet all types of documentary resources, notably digital (e.g., websites) can be of use.

§17 The issue, however, with this approach is that one interprets statements and data produced by others (ibid: 58, original emphases) – the respondents (or the web managers):

There is, in other words, a possible distorted link between how the respondents experience a presentation, the empirical tool, a description that is constructed by *myself*, which is the result of *my* having experienced a description. Again, the other cannot be sure of whether the statements are the true presentation of *my* experience.

§18 Put simply, there is a difference between how one writes data (the respondent, the web manager) and how one reads data (the researcher).

Self-directed studies

§19 A self-directed approach “starts with everyday experience and is concerned with the development of living knowledge” (Reason & Bradbury in *ibid*: 38). The purpose of inquiry is none other than oneself, one’s proper context, or actor residing in that context.

§20 Typical data collection tools include the diary, narratives, and observations (*ibid*: 42-46), which brings to the fore the present moment of action, as opposed to the other-directed methods that are timed either in the past or the future.

Said simply

§21 An etic-based capturing of a context will be wholly description-laden via an other-directed study system whereas an emic-based capturing of the same context will certainly be description-laden yet closely grounded on living experience, an insight that the etic vantage point lacks, yet does not preclude it from arresting experience, at a distance, and therefore, incompletely.

3 Piecing the data into an image

§22 Having examined the contextual vantage points and context-experience-capturing systems, one can legitimately ask how is a global image, in the sense of universal (Online 1, §4) and made up of many contexts (*ibid.*, §29), constructed with the collected data at hand?

§23 A first observation to offer is that one assembles data from one’s home context – where one is domiciled – purposely or not; it is unavoidable.

§24 To construct a global image then, for one there must be a reason to do so, and for two, data are to be collected from additionally-studied non-home contexts – from at least one context.

§25 A quick note to say that the size or official type of the context (e.g., name of a nation-state or region) is irrelevant: one needs to have delimited a geographical locus and identified actors residing.

§26 A second observation concerns the relationship between oneself, as researcher or resident, and the additional contexts studied or encountered: each context is experienced *en suite*, one after the other and not at the same time!

§27 Meaning construction i.e., making sense of the various contexts, varies according to how one relates as researcher or resident with each and every context. *The relationship is unique* and therefore the intensity of the experience is varied.

§29 The resulting image of what one can term ‘global’ is the *totality by juxtaposition* i.e., one context co-exists with another as a mental construct – and not merely the sum of all the

experienced contexts, and some contexts will be more intensely experienced and studied than others.

§30 The mental construct can be represented quantitatively i.e., with figures (e.g., market share, sales, revenue, profit ...), yet numbers cannot replace the *in-situ* experience with the resident actors: *getting to know a people occurs with relating with these people and not with the numbers supposedly representing them!*

§31 Since meaning construction with a context is unique (§27) and different from another, the factors/causes for such variability include culture (ways of doing), power (politics), and structure (law).

§32 These variables are *causes* determining and defining the nature of the relationship between oneself as researcher or resident and the context studied; moreover, are *factors* because they shape the dynamics and intensity of this relationship.

4 The elements of the study

§33 Let us now put in place a method for studying a context, applicable to both vantage points taken.

§34 The first step is to define the context to be studied geographically. Typical definitions will include international regions (e.g., western Europe; Middle East and its subregions – Online 8), national (e.g., Switzerland), regional (e.g., canton de Vaud), proximate (e.g., the city of Yverdon; Lavaux wine producing zone as UNESCO heritage – Online 9; the industrial zone of Prilly).

§35 The second step is to define the unit to be studied that is, the resident contextual actors. This will include individuals and any legally defined community that is geographically established in the context under study including family, business, non-profit organisation, political party.

§36 Third, the contextual structure that is, the legal architecture that serves as the backbone to a context. The elements to be studied include the legal classification and organisation of legal texts; legal texts empowering contextual actors, individuals and communities (e.g., legal statutes pertaining to businesses); legal texts allowing for the formal relationships between contexts (e.g., public international law) making room for regimes (e.g., EU law, WTO law ...).

§37 If there is generally speaking a one-to-one relationship between context and structure, there could be legal voids where law is non-existent (e.g., if the Middle East and North Africa – MENA – are well defined as a context, they are less so legally as there is no trade integration mechanism in place – Online 10). One can also find situations where laws conflict one with another (e.g., conflict of laws in private international law – Online 11). These are situations that are to be accounted for.

§38 Fourth, the contextual power derived from constitutional texts delimiting the nation-state bodies, the democratic system (e.g., federation, republic), and political environment.

§39 One should note that contextual structure and power stratify a context socially, yet society can be historically stratified (e.g., the caste system).

§40 Last comes culture, that is the historically seated ways of thinking and doing or the resident contextual actors in terms of the values, beliefs, ethics, rituals, means of communication, and language they use.

§41 One should also note that resident actors are defined and empowered by law informing a social capacity as knowledge of social and legal practice, or put simply, how to go about living in a given context. This is their social power. At the same time such power allows and enhances cultural practices since social power is historically informed by cultural values. At other times however, social power disallows and restricts cultural practices. Such instances are to be accounted for, as they are source for social unrest and conflict.

5 Issue at hand

§42 Having defined the major concepts and elements of contextual research, the issue at hand is the following: if one decides to carry out a contextual study, a purpose is presupposed; thus, what is the purpose for carrying out a contextual study?

§43 If the discussion thus far assumed such an aim, it is now time to disclose it.

Aim

§44 The aim pertains to the use and usefulness of contextual studies. That is, who benefits from such endeavors? One can highlight two instances which are dependent on the type of instrumentation at hand.

§45 First, the *business prerogative*. Analysis of a context via research plays a functional role as it helps organizations plan and carry out their strategic, production and supply operations.

§46 Second, the *social prerogative*. Research aims at understanding the web of relations in a context; one can study a people independently of a business for personal motives (e.g., marriage) or for building up a critique relative to a social issue.

§47 The two are related in that when a business lands in a context, the question is for what aim and how. Purpose and process are dictated by the business prerogative and the landing can be smooth, or rough, depending on the social prerogative, the study of the impact the business has on a society hitherto foreign.

How

§48 Under the business prerogative contextual research will seek to yield data pertaining to 'global management' in the 'transitive view' (Online 1, §25, 28), that is, the handling of an organization globally in those contexts the business is present in terms of the means the

production processes, resources acquisition, sales, transportation, and finance. Given the focus on management, the study is about *contextual management research*.

§49 It is to be reminded that the ‘intransitive view’ of management (Online 1, §17) puts emphasis on the web of relations and events that befall these relations that a business has little or no control despite itself.

§50 The intransitive view is not to be confused with the social prerogative as research under the intransitive view will seek to understand what aspects the business has no control over: these are sources of risk.

§51 Hence the paramount purpose of any contextual study under the business prerogative: establish the degree of success of management-related processes and decisions as well as identify the causes and factors responsible for destabilising the organisation.

§52 Simultaneously it will reveal the extent to which culture, power and structure are allies contextual management. Put simply, it will show the impact of law and its application by politics in the workings of managerial action. And if law and politics are disfavoured, it will show whether the organisation will have to tap on cultural practices and norms to do business – typical case with corruption.

4 Paradigms

§53 And to close this brief, we need to establish the research paradigm that contextual research fits best. In this respect, Romani et al. (2018) present four paradigms that include, positive, interpretive, postmodern, and critical studies.

§54 *Positive studies* seek to universalise concepts in a way to operationalise them in measurable variables that are universal and universally applicable. Thus, with culture (e.g., Hofstede in *ibid.*, Trompenaars) and comparative management modes (e.g., Sackmann and Phillips in *ibid.*) including Thomas’ “*Kulturstandard* method” (*ibid.*). Based on what Gupta and Govindarajan (*ibid.*) perceive as a global mind-set, the positivist research focus is on the effects of diversity at a team level in terms of perceptions of trust, communication and leadership, virtual team management, as well as how individuals essentially operate in cross-cultural environments.

§55 With Berger & Luckman or Geertz (*ibid.*), “*interpretive studies* focus on interpretive frameworks that are shared, within a group, by those with a common socialization” (*ibid.* added emphasis). Research emphasis is on shared meanings relative to management and the “importance of diverse meanings and interpretations of alleged universal concepts such as leadership, empowerment, or quality” (*ibid.*) in interpersonal interactions.

§56 Local understanding with an emphasis on text and language characterises *postmodern studies* and are very often an attack on positive claims (e.g., Vaara in *ibid.*) showing how “power and inequalities are hidden behind many of the seemingly neutral positivist presentations of cultural framework models” (*ibid.*). Thus, research emphasises what is local and the organisational realities at a proximate scale and level and highlights narratives and discourses that make up organisational identities, which are factually hybrid and multiple.

§57 Close to the latter paradigm, *critical studies* explore “power dichotomies, oppression, and reproduction of the status quo” (ibid.) and how power structures influence management. Research focuses then on “how low power actors gain influence and centrality in organizations” (ibid.) via communication, discourse, and knowledge, or via open industrial struggles.

§58 Given these insights, because a contextual study puts emphasis on the local, that is, the resident contextual actors, including the site where a company is domiciled, and geography, the postmodern stance seems to be at work. Therefore, the positive paradigm does not seem to find fit, unless one considers the universal appeal of contextual studies. The importance of power in relationships of contractual actors and in between contexts, as well as the impacting role the couple structure/power plays on management, are elements that fit the critical paradigm.

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