

INVITED ARTICLE

Contextualizing research: Putting context back into organizational behavior research

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Abstract

Contextualizing organizational behavior research means considering the influence of context and illuminating how context influences organizational behavior. In this article, we examine the field of organizational behavior against the criteria of contextualized research, finding it comes up short. We discuss the influences of context and contextual influences and identify ways to contextualize organizational behavior research. We provide examples of contextualized research and outline future directions for contextualized organizational behavior research. Lastly, we issue a call and urge scholars to take up the challenge of putting context back into their organizational behavior research and opening new research pathways and innovative theory for examining organization behavior.

Keywords: contextualization, organizational context, trends in organizational behavior, comparative research, culture social context

In everyday life we realize the importance of ‘putting things into context’ in order to gain a more thorough understanding of something within our worldview. Despite this form of common knowledge, work contexts are generally underappreciated and often ignored in research unless credited as substantive to the particular research study (Johns, 2001). Indeed, it has been lamented by a number of scholars the paucity of exemplary systematic contextualized research within organizational behavior scholarship (e.g., Rousseau & Fried, 2001; Johns, 2006). A number of explanations have been offered for this state of affairs. In 1993, Mowday and Sutton claimed that as organizational behavior moved increasingly to a focus on theory and methods it simultaneously moved toward giving less emphasis to context in organizational life. Johns (2006) is supportive of this view in his statement that there is a tendency to view context-free research as more scientific compared with those featuring context.

Contextualizing research is more than the examination of contextual features, which Johns (2006) acknowledges. Contextualizing organizational behavior research means considering the influence of context and illuminating how context influences organizational behavior (Johns, 2006). Even those undertaking comparative research within and across countries regularly inadequately model contextual effects (Rousseau & Fried, 2001). Johns (2006) surmises that the dearth of contextualized research is due to an absence of a robust taxonomy of situations and a lack of refined systematic language for expressing context.

In their review of exemplary organizational behavior research, Mowday and Sutton (1993) identify that the most compelling research focuses on organizational phenomena. At the same time, they point out that producing such research is increasingly rare as researchers become more removed from organizations and organizational phenomena. Depth of understanding of organizational behavior

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requires immersion within organizational context. If organizational behavior is to progress, researchers need to return their focus to organizational phenomena by becoming more immersed in organizational context (Mowday & Sutton, 1993).

Conveying context and contextual influences within research contributes to a deeper appreciation of effects and relationships to understand why and how certain behaviors exist in different organizational settings (Johns, 2001). A deeper appreciation of context can elicit innovative perspectives and provide solutions to existing questions or issues by offering different interpretations and new insight (Mowday & Sutton, 1993; Rousseau & Fried, 2001; Johns, 2006).

INFLUENCES OF CONTEXT

Mowday and Sutton explain context as 'stimuli and phenomena that surround and thus exist in the environment external to the individual, most often at a different level of analysis' (1993: 198). Griffin (2007) extends Mowday and Sutton's (1993) view, drawing from Capelli and Sherer (1991) to explain organization context as:

the set of circumstances in which phenomena (e.g. events, processes or entities) are situated. The context typically exists at a unit of analysis above the phenomena being investigated (Mowday & Sutton, 1993) and the context can explain some salient aspect of the phenomena (Capelli & Sherer, 1991) (Griffin, 2007: 860).

Context covers a broad range of possible dimensional structures that differ considerably across domains, levels of analysis and effects on interactions (Johns, 2006; Griffin, 2007). Approaches to investigating context reflect different needs and orientations of the research focus and the nature of enquiry into how context influences individual and organizational behavior (Griffin, 2007). Substantive approaches may be concerned with a variety of dimensions, from micro-level contexts of human resource practices to macro-level contexts of culture or ways of working (Mowday & Sutton, 1993; Griffin, 2007).

Influences of context can be viewed in varying terms of constraints and opportunities, distal and proximal influences, and similarity versus dissimilarity (Mowday & Sutton, 1993). Johns (2001, 2006) further emphasizes that context functions by shaping opportunities and constraints that influence the functional relationships between variables that affect the meaning and occurrence of organizational behavior. For a heightened appreciation of contextual influences on organizational behavior, it is beneficial to consider how context manifests and to acknowledge that facets of context act relationally rather than independently (Johns, 2006).

Facets of contextual influence that require particular attention in organizational behavior research are clearly delineated by Johns (2006). Namely, the salience of situational features, a situational strength, a cross-level effect, a configuration or bundle of stimuli, an event, a shaper of meaning, and a constant. In addition, he proposes a framework that differentiates omnibus and discrete contexts, classifying omnibus contexts as occupation, location, time and relational contexts, and discrete contexts as explicit situational variables that constitute the salient features of a task, social or physical context. This framework provides useful guidance for identifying the relationships among discrete variables when explaining the associations between omnibus contexts and organizational behavior (Johns, 2006).

CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES

The emergence of globalization has transformed the nature of organizations in ways that have transpired into new ways of working. These evolutionary developments reinforce the need for more contextualized perspectives in organizational behavior research to account for variations in diverse organizational contexts and to reveal untapped phenomena (Rousseau & Fried, 2001; O'Leary &

Almond, 2009). Societal changes that are reflected in new ways of working and organizing require theories to account for the contemporary variance in context relating to a more diversified workforce; new and different modes of work, technologies, business systems and structures; and changed industries, economies, and cultures. These factors highlight the need to study and report on context as a central component of organizational behavior and more thoroughly understand person-situation interactions (Johns, 2006). Gaining deeper insight into how context shapes organizational behavior extends our knowledge of how phenomena manifest within organizational life (Mowday & Sutton, 1993; Johns, 2001).

Contexts of work and dimensions of context within organizations form a complex interplay of relationships that shape both individuals' experiences and organizational outcomes (Mowday & Sutton, 1993; Griffin, 2007). The complexity of context can be better understood by considering that individuals can both shape and be shaped by contexts within organizations and vice versa (Mowday & Sutton, 1993). Further appreciation to influences of context is important to research, as the outcomes of the main variables and constructs under observation may present different magnitudes and causal directions depending on contextual circumstances (Johns, 2006).

Context can create main effects, interact with other variables and/or moderate relationships at differing levels of analysis, which may have both subtle and dominant effects on research findings (Johns 2001, 2006). It is therefore necessary to acknowledge the powerful influences of context and the levels of contextual interrelationships, between individuals, groups and their organizations to capture the nature and magnitude of contextual dynamics that influence organization behavior (Mowday & Sutton, 1993; O'Leary & Almond, 2009). As contextual effects are not independent, dimensions of context can affect scientific inferences about phenomena. It is therefore necessary to be aware that context can restrict range, affect base rates, prompt curvilinear effects, reverse signs, change causal direction, tip precarious relationships, and threaten validity (Johns, 2006). Owing to the nature of context varying across and within environments, it is beneficial to contextualize research to further explain what, when, where, why and how variation exists (Johns, 2006). Contextualizing research allows for greater detection of phenomena that manifests within micro-level dynamics and macro-level outcomes or through multiple-levels interrelationships.

CONTEXTUALIZING RESEARCH

Contextualizing research has the capacity to significantly progress contemporary research by integrating context into approaches, methodologies and theories at different levels of analysis to develop more salient perspectives and comprehensive scholarly contributions to the field (Mowday & Sutton, 1993). Rigorous research designs can illuminate contextual effects to enable greater insight into the nature of factors, dynamics, and processes influencing behavior (Johns, 2006). To effectively capture effects of context within research, a number of scholars (Mowday & Sutton, 1993; Johns, 2001, 2006; Rousseau & Fried, 2001) have provided valuable frameworks and methodological approaches for contextualizing organizational behavior research and theory.

Incorporating dimensions of context directly into research designs allows for effects and relationships to emerge that may otherwise remain undetected or be misinterpreted (Johns, 2001; Griffin 2007). According to Rousseau and Fried (2001), contextualization constitutes an approach that integrates knowledge of the study setting into the research design by linking factors, events and viewpoints into the application and conceptualization of theory. Contextualization can be incorporated at different stages of the research process and vary depending on the nature and requirements of enquiry (Rousseau & Fried, 2001). Rousseau and Fried (2001) provide a three-tier approach for applying levels of contextualization into the research process: Tier 1 illustrates *rich description* and information about the role context plays in the study. At this level researchers are encouraged to focus on description that

relates to the setting, comparisons with prior research, meaning and effect of different frames of reference, potential variables in underlying causal variables and influences of temporal dimensions. Contextualizing research at Tier 2 incorporates *direct observation and analysis of contextual effects*. This involves cross-level, dyadic and multi-level research designs that integrate approaches for directly assessing types of effect, focusing on events, or examining configurations and bundles of practice. Tier 3 recommends steps for *comparative studies* that explore phenomena across different settings (Rousseau & Fried, 2001).

Aligned with Tier 2, Griffin (2007) advocates fostering more systematic approaches whereby context is conceptually theorized as a construct that is directly operationalized as a variable and integrated within the data analysis. Systematic approaches integrate variability and specify conditional boundaries into the research design that are consistent with the theories and variables under study (Rousseau & Fried, 2001; Griffin, 2007). Organizational behavior researchers are urged to develop theories that integrate variables of context and to test their theories using comparative, cross-level, or person \times situation research designs (Johns, 2001). Robust contextualization can be achieved by integrating systematic approaches for conceptualizing, observing, and analyzing contextual effects in work and organizational environments (Rousseau & Fried, 2001; Griffin, 2007). Researchers are encouraged to become more immersed in organizational settings and to investigate context by predicting, sampling and measuring situational effects in these environments (Mowday & Sutton, 1993).

Mowday and Sutton (1993) heed attention to measurement error, stemming from collecting only perceptual measures or data from a single source. They suggest a more appropriate strategy is to incorporate multiple sources of data and collect more objective measures of context (Mowday & Sutton, 1993). Incorporating objective and subjective measures of context enables the detection of links between dynamics, processes, relationships, and experiences in organizational life (Griffin, 2007). Qualitative methods and data that elicit features rich in contextual information from field research are useful means for developing and evaluating theories (Mowday & Sutton, 1993; Johns, 2001). Scholars are advised to construct research reports that give greater attention to contextual information and variability underlying the phenomena of study, linking context that has theoretical bearing on results into the study (Johns, 2001, 2006). Rigorous research designs that incorporate contextual measures to identify effects, complex interrelationships and underlying dynamics between work life and organizational outcomes, enable deeper understanding and broaden the scope of knowledge development in organizational behavior scholarship.

EXAMPLES OF CONTEXTUALIZED ORGANIZATION RESEARCH

O'Leary and Almond (2009) conducted macro-level enquiry into the distribution of industry contexts used for leading organizational research. They assess economic and non-economic factors that affect the distribution of research settings, in relation to industry composition of the US economy. An analysis of 15 years of empirical research from four leading journals revealed a field-wide literature-economy disconnect. Findings showed that the number of articles set within a particular industry could be predicted by the percentage of recent MBA graduates and employees with doctoral degrees within the industry. In addition, employees per industry sector and establishment size had a significant bearing on organizational research settings. This 'research-economy gap' reveals that certain industry contexts are understudied and industry populations underrepresented in current research. These underrepresented contexts also provide grounds for developing future research to diversify contextualized research in the field.

A parallel cross-cultural study undertaken by Nouri, Erez, Lee, Liang, Bannister, and Chiu (2014) examined the nature of inter-relationships between culture, context, and creativity. Chinese and American subjects were assessed on various components of creativity: originality, fluency and

elaboration; and assigned to three social work contexts: working alone, in the presence of peers and under supervision. Chinese participants presented lower levels of originality when working under supervision than when working alone. In comparison, American participants generated fewer ideas and elaborations while working with peers, whether working under supervision or not. This study captures complex contextual dynamics, demonstrating how influences of social context moderate effects of the culture–creativity relationship by either activating or suppressing cultural norms, which have varying effects on components of creativity.

Zhou, Hirst, and Shipton (2012) conducted a multi-context comparative study on creativity, examining individual and combined interactive effects of two contexts – participation and intellectual stimulation, and promotion focus on creativity. They incorporated trait activation theory to assess how context affects the association between employee regulatory focus and creativity. Using multiple-data sources from employees and managers, from multi-organization samples of three Chinese companies, their findings exposed a contextual interplay showing that promotion focus was positively associated with creativity. Further, they found that when the combined influences of participation and leader intellectual stimulation were high, the relationship between promotion focus and creativity was the most significant. These findings provide insight into how multiple contextual influences interact independently and collectively, and in so doing, provide a new perspective on previously inconsistent findings.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR CONTEXTUALIZED ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR RESEARCH

Early influences of research in organizational behavior were rooted in phenomenological interests, and based on observing phenomena and experiences in organizations, however, contemporary research is often undertaken without entering an organization or interacting with members of its workforce (Mowday & Sutton, 1993; Johns, 2006). To enhance organizational behavior research, Mowday and Sutton (1993) advocate a need for researchers to become more immersed in organizational context by investing time in the research setting to enable a comprehensive understanding of the context and phenomena being studied; this is especially pertinent for comparative and cross-cultural research.

Organizational behavior scholars are encouraged to foster better appreciation of context, and to integrate contextualization into their research and its reporting (Johns, 2001). Researchers are encouraged to apply more systematic approaches to investigating context that enable a greater understanding of the role context plays in organizational situations (Mowday & Sutton, 1993; Johns, 2006). An enhanced appreciation for context allows for meso-level person \times situation interactions to be examined and understood (Johns, 2001). Researchers need to systematically weave context into traditional areas of research to reveal new theory and more useful directions of research that are relevant for organizations and their members (Mowday & Sutton, 1993). Scholars are urged to explore alternative approaches for contextualizing research and to further consider introducing interdisciplinary knowledge, integrating qualitative and mixed method approaches, use multiple measurement systems and multilevel analytical approaches for incorporating context into their research (Mowday & Sutton, 1993; Rousseau & Fried, 2001; Griffin, 2007).

In light of the research-economy gap (O’Leary & Almond, 2009), paying greater attention to context by studying phenomena and environments that are perceived by managers and practitioners as current and representative will make organizational behavior research more interesting and more likely to be useful and used in practice (Johns, 2001; O’Leary & Almond, 2009). The call for moving into uncharted territories of organizational behavior context is urgent. We can answer the call by including more explicit boundary and context specifications, exploring different organizational dynamics, expanding data sets, investigating new micro-, meso-, macro-level patterns and contexts, and by

creating more opportunity for editorial and institutional initiatives (O'Leary & Almond, 2009). Reporting on the application of research that conveys relevant and reliable perspectives has the capacity to gain respect from industry practitioners and those who deal with real benchmarks of organizational dynamics and contexts, permitting valuable and authentic communication of organizational behavior research to a wider audience (Johns, 2001). Let us all take up this challenge.

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