

Special Issue CALL FOR PAPERS

**Positioning Context Front and Center in
International Human Resource Management Research**

Guest Editors:

Elaine Farndale (Penn State University)
Jaime Bonache (Carlos III University of Madrid)
Anthony McDonnell (University College Cork)
Bora Kwon (Penn State University)

Schuler and Tarique (2007: 718) described the international human resource management (IHRM) field as being about “understanding, researching, applying and revising all human resource activities in their internal and external contexts as they impact the processes of managing human resources in organizations throughout the global environment to enhance the experience of multiple stakeholders”. Despite such a clear statement in which internal and external contexts are literally central, IHRM research has still not fully explored the opportunities that bringing context to the front and center of our contributions can offer. In line with Cooke’s (2018) plea for greater attention to context in HRM studies in general, it is timely to highlight and nuance the fundamental importance of context to our IHRM research through this call for papers for a special issue of *Human Resource Management Journal*.

Evidence is increasing that context is not only interesting but a highly relevant variable to include in IHRM research (see, for example: Budhwar, Varma, & Patel, 2016; Farndale, Brewster, Ligthart, & Poutsma, 2017a; Geary & Aguzzoli, 2016). Farndale et al. (2017b) make compelling arguments for developing a stronger focus on context in IHRM studies, which receives support from other management fields too. For example, Benner and Tushman (2015: 502) writing on process management research warn against the “continued false promise of universal best practice”. They argue that research needs to pay more attention to the “organizational and industry contexts where each of these new practices are relevant, or, conversely, the conditions under which such practices may have unexpected outcomes or even be harmful for organizations” (Benner & Tushman, 2015: 502).

There is a clear tradition of the importance of context in IHRM research based in the contextual paradigm (Dewettinck & Remue, 2011). This paradigm posits that HRM practice outcomes are strongly related to the context in which they occur, i.e. best practice HRM is more of a myth than a reality (Mayrhofer, Brewster, & Farndale, 2018). Comparative HRM as a field of study based in this paradigm is also fundamentally focused on context: comparing HRM practices in one context to another. Nevertheless, context often comes across more as an afterthought than a key driver for undertaking a piece of research. As a result, the Comparative HRM field has been slow to develop new context-driven theory, instead focusing on describing rather than explaining similarities and differences.

Incorporating context into a research model does not simply mean adding a few national or organizational level control variables. This is controlling away context (Johns, 2017). Instead, research should explore the interaction between the context and the independent or dependent variables. An example of research that puts context front and central is Kaufman's (2015) detailed critique of how to incorporate contextual determinants at multiple levels of analysis in studies of employee voice. In brief, we argue that IHRM research should go beyond exploring a one- or two-dimensional phenomenon or model, and instead emphasize the relevance of the three-dimensional context that applies to all observations (Al Ariss & Sidani, 2016).

To achieve this, however, we need to question whether our theories allow us to explore context fully or whether we need new theory to move us forward. This is best explored through Whetten's (2009) distinction between 'theories in context' and 'theories of context'. The former involves testing existing theories in a novel cultural or institutional context by discovering moderating variables or boundary conditions that refine or extend existing theories. The latter uses context itself as a source for novel theorizing. Both are valid ways of taking the field forward, yet few attempts have been made to develop 'theories of context' in particular.

Moreover, the call for greater contextualization of HRM research might also force us to consider our methodological choices and assumptions. As some authors have observed (e.g. Blair and Hunt, 1986; Bamberger, 2008), there is a widespread belief within the management scholarly community in the superiority of universalist knowledge over localized knowledge. Such a belief views context as a limitation and favors the deployment of research strategies aimed at developing and testing decontextualized hypotheses and theory that are generalizable across settings. Greater contextualization of HRM research may thus require us to question our methodological assumptions and explore innovative and alternative solutions.

Despite these strong arguments for increasing our emphasis on context in IHRM studies, there are those who argue that the relevance of context is diminishing with the advent of globalization and the transfer of standardized practices across borders in multinational firms (e.g. Liu, Van Jaarsveld, Batt, & Frost, 2014). Nevertheless, this is countered by a strong and persistent belief that the institutionalization of nations directly effects how organizations operate to such an extent that context-free practice has limited relevance (Kaufman, 2016). As Gerhart (2005: 178) notes, "it seems unlikely that one set of HRM practices will work equally well no matter what the context".

To further this debate on the relevance of context to IHRM research and how it might facilitate moving the field forward, we encourage submissions to this special issue that tackle the debates raised here. We define 'context' in its broadest sense, including but not limited to such factors as the labor market, legislation, business conditions, management philosophy, workforce characteristics, unions and societal values. We invite papers that expand theory and empirical evidence on the following and related topics:

- How institutional or cultural contexts promote or constrain managerial autonomy
- How the context of time changes our views on HRM practice across countries, raising issues of convergence and divergence
- Context as an integrator as well as a differentiator: setting boundaries to theory
- Demonstrating the effect of context at multiple levels of analysis, e.g. global, regional, or national plus industry, organization, or business unit
- IHRM research on organizations other than large multinationals so that this might provide more nuanced contexts for analysis

- Novel methodologies or research designs that allow us to unearth better new context driven theory in comparative and international HRM

In summary, there is scope to develop a better understanding of the role and impact of context in IHRM research. The papers published in this special issue will contribute to our understanding of the centrality of context to moving the field forward.

Full papers should be submitted between 1 – 31 August 2019 at <https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/hrmj>, indicating “Positioning Context Front and Center in International Human Resource Management Research” as the Special Issue. Please note that papers may not be submitted until 1 August 2019 and HRMJ will not be able to consider late submissions. The Special Issue will be published in 2021.

Enquiries related to the call for papers should be directed to Elaine Farndale (euf3@psu.edu), Jaime Bonache (bonache@emp.uc3m.es), Anthony McDonnell (anthony.mcdonnell@ucc.ie), or Bora Kwon (bxk268@psu.edu).

Enquiries related to the online submission process should be directed to: HRMJ.journal@wiley.com.

References

- Al Ariss, A., & Sidani, Y. (2016). Comparative international human resource management: Future research directions. *Human Resource Management Review*, 26(4), 352-358.
- Bamberger, P. (2008). Beyond contextualization: Using context theories to narrow the micro-macro gap in management research. *Academy of Management Journal*, 51(5), 839-846.
- Benner, M. J., & Tushman, M. L. (2015). Reflections on the 2013 Decade Award - “Exploitation, exploration, and process management: The productivity dilemma revisited” ten years later. *Academy of Management Review*, 40(4), 497-514.
- Björkman, I., Fey, C. F., & Park, H. J. (2007). Institutional theory and MNC subsidiary HRM practices: Evidence from a three-country study. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 38(3), 430-446.
- Blair, J. D., & Hunt, J. G. (1986). Getting inside the head of the management researcher one more time: Context-free and context-specific orientations in research. *Journal of Management*, 12(2), 147-166.
- Budhwar, P. S., Varma, A., & Patel, C. (2016). Convergence-divergence of HRM in the Asia-Pacific: Context-specific analysis and future research agenda. *Human Resource Management Review*, 26(4), 311-326.
- Cooke, F. L. (2018). Concepts, contexts, and mindsets: Putting human resource management research in perspectives. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 28(1), 1-13.
- Dewettinck, K., & Remue, J. (2011). Contextualizing HRM in comparative research: The role of the Cranet network. *Human Resource Management Review*, 21(1), 37-49.
- Farndale, E., Ligthart, P., Poutsma, E., & Brewster, C. J. (2017a). The effects of market economy type and foreign MNE subsidiaries on the convergence and divergence of HRM. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 48(9), 1065–1086.
- Farndale, E., Raghuram, S., Gully, S., Liu, H., Phillips, J., & Vidovic, M. (2017b). A Vision of International Human Resource Management Research. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 28(12), 1625-1639.
- Geary, J., & Aguzzoli, R. (2016). Miners, politics and institutional caryatids: Accounting for the transfer of HRM practices in the Brazilian multinational enterprise. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 47(8), 968–996.

- Johns, G. (2017). Reflections on the 2016 decade award: incorporating context in organizational research. *Academy of Management Review*, 42(4), 577-595.
- Kaufman, B. E. (2015). Theorising determinants of employee voice: An integrative model across disciplines and levels of analysis. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 25(1), 19-40.
- Liu, X., Van Jaarsveld, D. D., Batt, R., & Frost, A. C. (2014). The influence of capital structure on strategic human capital evidence from US and Canadian firms. *Journal of Management*, 40(2), 422-448.
- Mayrhofer, W., Brewster, C., & Farndale, E. (2018). Future avenues for comparative human resource management. *Handbook of Research in Comparative Human Resource Management*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Schuler, R. S., & Tarique, I. (2007). International human resource management: A North American perspective, a thematic update and suggestions for future research. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 18(5), 717-744.
- Whetten, D. (2009). An examination of the interface between context and theory applied to the study of Chinese organizations. *Management Organization Review*, 5(1), 29-55.