

“A Servant of Many Masters”: Unpacking the theorising diversity of the single case study

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ABSTRACT

Single cases are a source of rich contextualised insights in management and organisation studies, but their value as a research design and theorising tool has also been the subject of considerable debate as they are accused of an inability to produce abstract constructs and generalisable theory. Against the backdrop of this divisive debate between ‘better stories’ and ‘better constructs’, we set out to explore how theorising is actually performed in single case studies. Our analysis of all single case studies (N=117) published between 2017 and 2021 in *Academy of Management Journal*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Organization Science*, *Organization Studies*, and *Strategic Management Journal* reveals a remarkable versatility of theorising practices and analytical moves. We outline how these strategies are used individually and in conjunction along the individual stages of the research process in an attempt to contribute to methodological pluralism and ultimately help authors make best use of the single case.

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Introduction

Since single case studies allow for contextualised theorising (Welch et al., 2011, 2022), they are recognised as a powerful theorising tool in management and organisation studies (Siggelkow, 2007) for establishing new theoretical relationships and challenging existing theory (Dyer and Wilkins, 1991). They are well suited for handling uniqueness and dynamism (Siggelkow, 2007) as well as complexity (Flyvbjerg, 2006), because they can provide detailed, holistic accounts of human social life and capture the operation of multiple factors on an existing situation (Dyer and Wilkins, 1991; Yin, 2014). It is not surprising, then, that many influential studies in the field are based on investigations of single cases (for classic case studies, see e.g., Burgelman, 1983; Penrose, 1960; Pettigrew, 1973; for more recent award-winning single case studies, see e.g., Chan and Anteby, 2016; Claus and Tracey, 2020).

Despite the many virtues of single case studies for theorising, some authors have (somewhat ironically) expressed doubts regarding the suitability of single case study research for scientific advancement (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Gerring, 2004; Gerring, 2007; Goldthorpe, 1997; King, Keohane and Verba, 1994; Miles and Huberman, 1994); and several methodologists are sceptical about the intrinsic value (and even rigour) of single case study research, advocating multiple case study research as a remedy (Gerring, 2004; Eisenhardt, 1991; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). These criticisms of single cases reflect a broader paradigmatic divide in case study research, which also manifests in the field of management, more specifically it goes back to the classical debate between Dyer and Wilkins (1991), and Eisenhardt (1989, 1991).

We argue that the dichotomous view of single case studies created by this paradigmatic divide obscures the true complexity of the single case study and hinders its theorising potential. Against the background of the divisive debate, we set out to explore empirically how theorising is performed in practice in single case studies. Our aim is very explorative, i.e. to look beyond apparent divisions and to unpack the diversity of this misconceived research design. In so doing, we pay particular attention to the various ways in which context can contribute to the theorising process.

One of the greatest strengths of single case study research is that it helps understand phenomena within their contexts (Stake, 1995; Dyer and Wilkins, 1991). Since context is recognised as fundamental for explaining organisational phenomena (George, 2014), calls for more contextualisation of management and organisation research have been spreading rapidly in recent years (Bamberger, 2008; Filatotchev et al., 2022; Galvin, 2014; George, 2014; Halme et al., 2022; Maloney et al., 2016; Rousseau and Fried, 2001; Tsui, 2006; Zahra, 2007). Yet, the concept of context itself has been considered ‘amorphous’ (Bamberger, 2008), and a ‘catchall’ (McLaren and Durepos, 2021), as it may be harnessed to serve many different roles, each associated with a different form of contextualisation. By exploring theorising from single cases through the treatment of context, we seek to illustrate both the versatility of single cases as a theorising tool, and the plurality of context treatments within this research approach. To this end, we collect an review 117 empirical single case studies published between 2017 and 2021 in *Academy of Management Journal*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Organization Science*, *Organization Studies*, and *Strategic Management Journal*.

By focusing on the individual ‘analytical moves’ (Pratt et al., 2022) the authors use at each stage of the research process (from case selection via data collection and analysis all the way to crafting theoretical contributions and considering limitations) we discover that authors’ engagement with

context – far from being only a *matter of degree* – can more fittingly be described as a *matter of kind*, with a variety of different analytical moves used at different stages of the research process to extract theoretical insights from single cases. These findings lead us to suggest that the true merit of single cases stems precisely from their flexibility which leads to a tremendous versatility when it comes to theorising practices available to researchers within this one single method. We suggest that embracing this richness will help researchers move beyond counter-productive tensions between theorising camps, and truly embrace methodological pluralism.

Theoretical background

In this section, we review the literature on single case study research, illustrate the versatility of single cases as a theorising tool, explore different theorising styles and treatments of context across the different single case study research approaches.

The many faces and uses of single cases

Case study research is widely used in organization and management studies (Eisenhardt, 2007; Hartley, 2004; Welch, et al., 2013). It is a powerful tool for confronting the empirical world with theory (Dubois and Gadde, 2002), because it enables the researcher to move flexibly between different steps of the research process, and between theory and empirical observation (Dubois and Gadde, 2002; Easton, 2010). It also enables the researcher to get “closer to theoretical constructs” and as a result “provide a much more persuasive argument about causal forces than broad empirical research” (Siggelkow, 2007, pp. 22-23). Since the case is the main unit of analysis (Gephart, 2004; Fletcher and Plakoyiannaki, 2011), case study research allows for a more nuanced contextualised understanding of the phenomenon (Yin, 2014; Welch, et al., 2011) leading to rich and ‘thick’ empirical descriptions (Geertz, 1973), especially when it comes to single cases. The single case study is also a very versatile theorising tool, as it accommodates a variety of research designs, analytical strategies, and theorising goals, each representing a different way to extract theoretical insights from rich case contexts.

For Dyer and Wilkins (1991), single case studies are in-depth explorations of a single setting which seek to reveal “the *deep structure* of social behaviour” by engaging in the in-depth exploration of a single setting and describing in rich detail the “social scene” and “context in which events occur” (Dyer and Wilkins, 1991, p. 615). For them, it is this ability to capture and convey rich contextualised stories to the reader which set single cases apart from multiple case studies, where a similar level of attention to detail is not possible.

Yet single case studies can also take forms that are very similar to multiple case studies. Yin (2014) divides single cases according to research design into ‘single holistic’ and ‘single embedded’ cases. While holistic cases focus on “only the global nature of an organization or of a program”, embedded cases “involve units of analysis at more than one level” (Yin, 2014, p. 177), creating “several mini-cases” (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 545) within the single case. The presence of embedded units enables the use of a ‘replication’ logic (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2014) where comparative analysis is undertaken either by using similar cases to compare empirical results, or by using dissimilar cases for variational purposes to predict contrasting results. Both ‘holistic’ and ‘embedded’ cases explore the contextual conditions surrounding the case, but are more focused on concepts and constructs.

Another way to divide single cases is by research aim. Depending on whether a single case is studied for its own sake, or to illuminate a more abstract phenomenon, Stake (1995) distinguishes between ‘intrinsic’ and ‘instrumental’ cases. The intrinsic case is of interest in its own right: its objective is not that of “teasing out relationships” or “probing issues”, but “to come to understand the case” (Stake 1995, p. 77) and capture its ‘uniqueness’ and ‘complexity’ “within important circumstances” (Stake, 1995, xii). As such, the intrinsic case study treats the case as embedded in and inseparable from its context(s). In instrumental case studies, on the other hand, the case serves to “understand phenomena or relationships within it” and the researcher will “forego attention to the complexity of the case” to focus on the relationships of interest (Stake, 1995, p. 77). Accordingly, attention will be paid only to those contexts which are of interest to the study (Stake, 1995)

Regarding the different uses of single cases beyond understanding the case itself, in additions to comparisons across embedded units, they may be used, for instance, for tracking the evolution of events and processes over time. Engaging in what Langley (1999) calls ‘temporal decomposition’, a longitudinal single case can serve to make comparisons over time for the “exploration and replication of theoretical ideas” across time periods. This allows the researcher to examine “how actions of one period lead to changes in the context that will affect action in subsequent periods” (Langley 1999, p. 703), capturing not only how context shapes events, but how events, in turn, shape future contexts.

Single cases are also seen as appropriate for comparing different causal explanations to identify “mechanisms that explain what caused particular events to occur”, using data from the single case as ‘evidence’ (Easton, 2010, p. 124). Thanks to their ability to move between data and theory, and to study phenomena in depth, single cases are ideally placed for “uncovering the structure of underlying reality” (Easton, 2010, p. 127), “identifying the deep causal processes” (Easton, 2010, p. 126) and separating out the ‘necessary’ and ‘contingent’ conditions that comprise causal mechanisms from the more general ‘circumstances’ that make up the context (Easton, 2010).

In addition, to compare existing theories, a researcher can follow the ‘alternate templates strategy’, where different types of data from a single case are used to compare “alternative interpretations of the same events” and to assess “the extent to which each theoretical template contributes to a satisfactory explanation” (Langley 1999, p. 698). Alternatively, ‘congruence analysis’ (Blatter and Haverland, 2012; George and Bennett, 2005) can be used to compare the “implications” (Blatter and Haverland, 2012) or “predicted outcomes” (George and Bennett, 2005) of multiple theories with empirical observations on the ground.

Finally, in testing and challenging existing theory, single cases are particularly useful for identifying so-called ‘black swans’, because the immersion in ‘real-life situations’ due to their in-depth nature, enables them to expose situations where “what appears to be ‘white’ often turns out on closer examination to be ‘black.’” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 11).

Theorising styles from single cases

Broadly speaking, when single cases are used for theorising, the different research approaches can be divided according to whether they rely on a variance-, process- or narrative-based approach.

Narrative theorising styles capture ‘unique’ and ‘complex’ stories (Stake, 1995) that enable the researcher to provide a rich contextualized understanding of the phenomenon (Dyer and Wilkins, 1991; Siggelkow, 2007), such as in Stake’s (1995) intrinsic case or Dyer and Wilkins’ (1991)

rich stories. They can provide insights into challenging aspects, including “organizational politics”, “culture”, “hidden agendas”, “taboos”, and reveal “what people believe or want to believe happened” (Gabriel, 2004: p. 23). This is because they enable the movement from surface-level data to deeper levels of analysis, which allows for a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Dyer and Wilkins, 1991; Büthe, 2002; Langley, 2013; Pentland, 1999; Stake, 1995). It, therefore, leads to “deeper and denser insights” (Blatter and Blume, 2008, p. 317). In line with the goal “to preserve the *multiple realities*, the different and even contradictory views of what is happening” (Stake, 1995, p. 12), they are thus well placed to capture phenomena *in context*.

Studies that adopt a process lens (Pentland, 1999) like those advocated by Langley (1999) and Easton (2010) can have several aims which include establishing the sequence of events, identifying mechanisms that explain how the sequence of events unfolded over time, understanding why the process progresses towards a particular outcome, and identifying broad patterns (Abbott, 1990; Langley, 1999; Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, and Van de Ven, 2013; Van de Ven and Poole, 1995; Delbridge, et al 2013; Langley and Abdallah, 2016). Processes are studied in context (Pettigrew, 1990). In capturing sequences and patterns, ‘messiness’ is welcomed, and in the words of Langley, the idea is “to include as much richness as possible in your account, so that the readers themselves can see to what degree the story you are telling finds resonance” (Gehman, et al., 2017, p. 295). However, eventually the researcher has to choose how much depth to retain, so as not to overly complicate the theorising process (Cloutier and Langley, 2020).

Where variation is used, as Eisenhardt explains, the researcher’s aim is to “on one hand, control the extraneous variation, and on the other hand, focus attention on the variation of interest” (Gehman, et al., 2017, p. 5), in other words, to see how a change in the independent variable explains the variance of the dependent variable (Cloutier and Langley, 2020; Blatter and Haverland, 2012; Langley, 1999; Van de Ven, 1992). This approach to theorising is applied by Yin (2014), and is also known as variable-oriented, co-variational or as the variance model approach to case study research (Blatter and Haverland, 2012; Blatter and Blume, 2008; Gerring, 2004; Langley, 1999; Ragin and Robinson, 2009; Ragin and Schneider, 2011). The aim here is to generate theories that would be generalisable (Blatter and Blume, 2008; Gehman, et al., 2017) by abstracting away from context. Consequently, the focus is on variables rather than social actors, making “stories disappear” (Abbott, 1992, p. 428).

Given the range of possibilities for theorising from single cases, we set out to explore how theorising is actually practiced in empirical single case study research and ask the research question “How are single cases used for theorising?”. In embarking on this exploration, we hope not only to illuminate these heretofore little-studied theorising practices but capture the diversity of ways that the rich context of single cases can aid authors in the theorising process. In a recent essay, McLaren and Durepos (2021) aptly noted that “all researchers use context” (McLaren and Durepos, 2021, p. 75). We aim to find out *where* and *how* it is used *for theorising* in what is arguably the most context-sensitive of research designs - the qualitative single case study.

Methodology

To explore the practice of theorising from single case studies, we collected a sample of qualitative single cases published over the last five years (2017-2021) in five management journals: *Academy of Management Journal*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Organization Science*, *Organization Studies*, and *Strategic Management Journal*. We used purposeful

sampling in making this selection, focusing on top tier journals which, as leaders in the field, can be expected to represent the best practices in management and organisations scholarship, and selecting a sample of both American and European journals to account for diversity in publishing practices.

To collect the sample, we conducted a keyword search for “case study” on EBSCOhost Business Source Premier and Informs for each of the five journals. To narrow the sample down to empirical single case studies only, we manually checked all the resulting papers, and included only those that were explicitly engaging in single case study research, excluding any papers that were multiple case studies, that were conceptual, methodological or review papers, or where the term ‘case study’ only appeared in the references. As our goal was to explore how theorizing is done in the single case study research, we also excluded papers where cases were used for illustrating purposes only. Following this manual inspection, we were left with a sample of 117 papers. The division of the sample by journal and year is illustrated in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Analysis

To analyse our sample, we used qualitative content analysis (Kracauer, 1952; Kuckartz, 2014), which can be used to classify large amount of textual data into meaningful and manageable categories (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Weber, 1990). Identifying common themes and patterns requires a close reading of the text (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Krippendorff, 2004; Patton, 2002), allowing for deep understanding through an interpretivist analysis of content (Kuckartz, 2014). This deep analysis also led us to our research question. The focus of our research was not established *a priori* but emerged inductively from the research process. We initially set out with a broad aim to explore the research design and theorising strategies of single case studies. As we started analysing the first few papers via open coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Patton, 2002) and compared our notes and memos, we quickly realised that the authors in our sample adopted a wide variety of theorising practices and came up with the research question “How are single cases used for theorising?”.

Guided by this research question, we returned to our sample. To better capture the diversity of theorising practices, we broke down our analysis into individual steps of the research process, exploring how authors in our sample approached case selection, data collection, research design and analysis, theorising outputs, and bounding and generalising. While collecting information on each of these steps, we increasingly noticed the diversity of ways that context was treated in the papers in our sample, sometimes appearing at one step of the research process, sometimes at another, and seemingly taking on a variety of roles. For instance, in one of the first papers we analysed, the collection of contextual data was described as an aid for comprehending interview responses:

“Our interview data were also supplemented with archival documents, including historical texts about the organization, news articles, as well as Lehman Brothers’ annual reports. These documents offered additional information that helped us better understand the broader organizational and macro-economic contexts once common to all of our interviewees. These materials provided background information to contextualize our interviewees’ responses. They

were not, however, subject to formal analysis because the focus of our theorizing was on members' experiences." (Crosina and Pratt, 2019, p. 73)

In another, the authors discussed the need for tailored theory for creative contexts:

"We believe that it is a strength of our approach that we explicitly take into account the distinctive features of creative work in developing our theoretical framework, and that we intentionally draw inspiration for our theorizing from the realm of the arts. We suggest, conversely, that certain weaknesses in existing research derive specifically from their inclination to do the opposite: to apply (we might say "shoe-horn in") more general management thinking in a creative context. Because management thinking has traditionally been oriented toward the rational and analytical (Strati, 1999), it has trouble describing certain elements of creative work." (Austin et al. 2018, pp. 1514-1515)

Curious about this diversity, we started systematically recording passages where authors discussed context. It is worth noting, here, that occasionally the papers in our sample used alternative terms such as 'environment' and 'setting' instead of 'context'. As these are considered to be synonyms of context (Scharfstein, 1989), we treated them as such. We also included discussions where authors address forces such as socio-economic background, culture, organisational structure or historical period that are generally classified as contextual factors (for reviews of contextual factors, see e.g., Joshi and Roh, 2007; Athanasopoulou and Selsky, 2015).

To help make sense of the diverse treatments of context we found in our sample and how they contribute to the theorising process, we drew on recent literature on contextualisation. In this literature, authors distinguish between a variety of ways to integrate context in the research process, including contextualising the research subject (see e.g., Bamberger, 2008; Tsui, 2006; Rousseau and Fried, 2001; Whetten, 2009); contextualising the researcher (see e.g., Filatotchev et al., 2022; McLaren and Durepos, 2021; Halme et al., 2022); contextualising the research process (see e.g., Galvin, 2014; Reuber et al., 2022; Shapiro et al., 2007; Tsui, 2006; Reuber and Fischer, 2022); and studying the effects of specific contextual factors (see e.g., George and Jones, 1997; Bamberger, 2008; Tsui, 2007; Maloney et al., 2016; Whetten, 2009; Griffin, 2007). While we found evidence of all of these practices in our dataset, we also noted that a single type of contextualisation might correspond to several distinct actions at different stages of the research process. For example, what we interpret as contextualising the research subject would sometimes occur in the discussion of limitations, e.g.:

"New Zealand has a unique economic history and culture that affected the reprioritization and scope modification of guideposts at Gallagher. Different organizations from countries that played a different role in the global economy might develop different guideposts and rhetorical processes to manage them." (Sinha et al. 2019, p. 584)

In other instances, concepts central to the analysis would be presented as what we called context-dependent, e.g.:

"We deliberately refer to 'ideals of organizational openness' in the plural for two reasons. First, various concepts of organizational openness rest upon different motivations, ranging from functional rationales such as potential gains in innovation and efficiency (e.g. Bauer & Gegenhuber, 2015; Jeppesen & Lakhani, 2010) to principled attempts at establishing more transparent and participatory forms of organizing (e.g. Tkacz, 2012, 2015; Turco, 2016). Second, organizations adopting and applying the label of openness are therefore both free and forced to develop their own understanding – ideal – of what 'open' should mean in their particular empirical context." (Dobusch et al. 2019, p.344)

To capture such nuances in existing practices, we identified distinct treatments of context at each stage of the research process, interpreted them as individual *analytical moves* (Pratt et al., 2022), and linked them to specific theorising aims. This approach enabled us to move from mapping where context *appears* throughout the research process to what it *does* i.e. to capture the variety of functions it can serve. An overview of all the individual moves found in our sample is provided in Table 2. In the following sections, we will explain and illustrate our findings, and conclude with some remarks on their implications for single case study research.

Findings

In our analysis of 117 single case studies published between 2017 and 2021 in *Academy of Management Journal*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Organization Science*, *Organization Studies*, and *Strategic Management Journal*, we were confronted with a great variety of analytical moves relating to the treatment of context, all of which contributed in unique ways to the theorising process. To showcase the diversity of moves available to authors undertaking single case research, we present them here for each research step in the order that they usually appear in published papers: case selection, data collection, data analysis, theorising output, and bounding and generalising. The different moves are outlined using exemplars from our sample of empirical papers. Illustrative quotations for each of the cited papers can be found in Table 2, along with additional examples.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Case selection

We find that in our sample, context serves one of three functions in case selection: (i) demonstrating representativeness, (ii) to demonstrating uniqueness, (iii) demonstrating need for new theory. A single paper may also combine several of these moves, or not evoke context at all, focusing instead on variance, constructs, or access.

Demonstrating representativeness. Papers where context is used to demonstrate representativeness argue that the case chosen for study is representative of a broader class of cases either because it captures the dominant characteristics of a broader class of cases, such as an industry or field, or else because the chosen context possesses a set of features commonly associated with the particular phenomenon that the authors are interested in studying. In line with the former approach, Alaimo and Kallinikos (2021) choose the online music platform Last.fm as the focus of their study on the role of data in the creation of organisational facts because, as the explain “it represents a typical example of data-driven organization that has been explicitly established to disrupt existing expert categories in the field of music consumption.” (Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2021, p. 1390). In an example of the latter, Howard-Grenville et al. (2017) cite characteristics of the broader field of chemistry such as common understandings and practices, and specialised training as features that make the emergence of Green Chemistry an apt case for studying occupational change.

Demonstrating uniqueness. Papers where context is used to demonstrate uniqueness draw on the broader industry context for comparison and highlight ways in which the selected case is

unusual, exceptional, extreme, unique, or particularly successful. In some of these papers, the comparison is explicit, contrasting the chosen case with the broader industry along a set of dimensions. For instance, in their study of ambidexterity in buyer-supplier relations, Aoki and Wilhelm (2017) justify focusing on the Toyota Motor Corporation by highlighting ways in which it stands out from its rivals, noting in particular how it “simultaneously achieves higher customer value, e.g., higher product quality (Fujimoto 1999) and higher operational efficiency, e.g., lower work in progress/sales ratio (Lieberman and Dhawan 2005) than competitors” (Aoki and Wilhelm, 2017, pp.1080-1081), taken to be indicative of a competitive advantage. By comparing Toyota’s performance to its rivals, they are able to display the case as particularly successful. On other occasions, comparison is limited to a demonstration of the uniqueness of specific features to the chosen research context, such as in Carton’s (2018) study of the NASA Moon Landing mission. In justifying his interest in the case, Carton mentions reading statements from NASA employees who describe their experience of sharing a common goal with other members of the organisation as uniquely manifesting in the context of the Moon Landing mission.

Demonstrating need for new theory. In papers where context is used to demonstrate lack of fit with existing theory, the discussion of case selection focuses on the broader field- or industry context and, by comparison to existing literature, either argues that the given context is not adequately covered by existing theory because it is new and emergent or because it has so far been understudied, or else demonstrate how the development of the phenomenon of interest does not follow the expected patterns established by existing studies of similar contexts. In an instance of the former, Curchod et al. (2018) explain how the theories of power that explain seller-customer relationships in offline settings do not hold in the context of online sales where “individuals’ capacity to circumvent power asymmetries might be affected by the anonymity of customer reviews, the concealment of the platform owner behind the algorithm, and the algorithm itself, which reduces spaces of uncertainty through the ongoing monitoring of interactions on the platform.” (Curchod et al., 2020, p. 648). In an example of the latter, Audebrand and Barros (2018) note that the success of the Quebec funeral co-op at the centre of their study in conditions of a hostile industry environment goes against previous findings established in the literature on such environments.

Combining multiple strategies for case selection. It is worth noting that a single paper may combine several different moves in justifying case choice. For instance, they might argue for the need for new theory to address a specific industry, thus evoking field-level context, and also explain how the specific case they have chosen is representative of that industry. Curchod et al. (2020) do just this in their study of a group of sellers on eBay arguing both that we need new theory to make sense of power relations in online settings, and suggest that eBay sellers are well suited to the exploration of such asymmetries due to the pervasive role of algorithms in regulating buyer-seller relations.

Though most of the papers in our sample engage with context in case selection, there were a few that made no reference to it. Gagnon and Collinson’s (2017) study of an elite international training programme focused on within-case diversity when choosing their research site. Jalonen et al.’s (2018) study of strategic sensemaking focused on a Finnish municipality, because the phenomena of interest were particularly visible, and the researchers had privileged access to the organisation. In other instances, again, the case was born out of a larger research project (e.g. Hampel and Tracey, 2017, Kern et al., 2018, Wiedner and Mantere, 2019). Interestingly, papers that use context to justify case selection frequently pick up on the same contextual features later to discuss their implications for the generalisability of findings.

Data collection

In our sample, we identify three different motivations for invoking context in data collection: (i) to improve the quality of data and interpretation, (ii) to gain a general understanding of the context itself through targeted data collection efforts, and (iii) to target specific contextual features.

Improving data collection and interpretation. When context is used to improve the quality of data collection and interpretation, rich contextual data is collected either from primary or secondary sources, but not used for theorising. Instead, it serves a reinforcing role where the insights gained from the contextual data are used to enhance the interpretation of a principal corpus of data i.e. the one actually relied on for theorising. On this approach, the same case study may use some data sources and contextual insights exclusively for reinforcement purposes and others for analysis and theorising. This is the strategy adopted by Crosina and Pratt (2019), whose study of the demise of Lehman Brothers includes rich archival material including news articles and annual reports, but these data are deliberately excluded from formal analysis, and used exclusively for ‘contextualising’ interview responses, as the authors are principally interested in the experiences of former employees. Baumann, Becker, and Horrmann (2020) follow a similar approach in their study of Airbus where information on industry best practices is collected to better understand interview responses.

Gaining a general understanding of context. Papers in this category explicitly describe the efforts undertaken by the research team to familiarise themselves with the case context via the collection of primary or secondary data, but do not point out specific features of the context which might be of theoretical interest. Where context is studied before entering the field, it may serve only to gain a better understanding of the case or its boundaries as a preliminary research move, but authors may also seek to immerse themselves in the case context, as is done by Cappelen and Pedersen (2021) whose study of a Turkish culinary movement incorporates tasting the dishes at participating restaurants alongside more prevalent data collection methods.

Targeting specific contextual features. Papers in this category, instead of seeking a general understanding of the case context, focus on the systematic collection of information regarding specific contextual features which are subsequently explored in theorising. For instance, in Gagnon and Collinson’s (2017) study of an international leadership programme interview questions “focused on participants’ accounts of personal and team-level learning, selection and evaluation processes, impact of national backgrounds, interpersonal dynamics, peer learning and dynamics involving team members varying national backgrounds, expectations of participation, careers and future plans, and connections to regular jobs” (Gagnon & Collinson, 2017, p. 1259) to theorise the way in which participants’ experience of the programme was influenced by locally constructed status differences.

It is worth noting that though only half of the papers in our sample explicitly discussed the collection of contextual data, all papers discussed data collection more generally, and many papers that did not explicitly state and interest in context at the data collection phase later engaged with it in analysis or theorising.

Data analysis

When it comes to research design and analysis, context is employed in our sample (i) to strengthen the understanding of case and constructs, (ii) to explore the influence of specific contextual features, (iii) to compare different contexts, or (iv) to acknowledge researcher context.

Strengthening understanding of case and constructs. Authors who employ context in their analysis to strengthen their understanding of the case findings and/or constructs aim to capture the phenomena of interest in context, rather than removed from it. As such, an understanding of context is seen as crucial for the interpretation of phenomena, though it may be abstracted away later in theorising. For instance, Jalonen, Schildt, and Vaara's (2018) study of meaning-making in a Finnish city organization treats strategic concepts as embedded in local systems of meaning, and use their contextualised analysis to propose a theoretical model capturing the use of strategic concepts in strategic sensemaking.

Exploring influence of specific contextual features. Instead of approaching context monolithically, authors in this category tease out and explore specific contextual factors that may have an explanatory role in understanding the phenomena of interest. Thus, Hampel and Tracey's (2017) work on the vilification and subsequent acceptance of the Thomas Cook travel agency in Victorian Britain extensively analyses the role of class structure in determining attitudes towards the kind of relatively affordable organised travel offered by the agency noting that "While the working class and lower middle class supported Cook's enterprise, the more privileged members of society—the upper middle class and the upper class—strongly disapproved of it." (Hampel and Tracey, 2017, p. 2179)

Comparing different contexts. Another strategy authors in our sample used to identify relevant contextual features was to exploit the variance between different contexts. Such comparison can be done both internally and externally. Where it is done internally, the single case is split into multiple contexts as a way to add nuance to the case analysis. Breaking down the case analysis into several sub-units and so exploring the phenomenon of interest in several sub-contexts enables authors to engage in more nuanced analysis, potentially also leading to more nuanced theorizing, but not necessarily so. Using multiple sub-contexts is similar to employing embedded units in the case study design, but the distinguishing feature is that here, rather than analysing several analytical units in the same overarching (e.g. organisational) context, each unit is seen as operating in its own context, and special attention is paid to the way in which differences in context influence outcomes. For instance, Aoki and Wilhelm's (2017) study of buyer-supplier relations at the Toyota corporation treats mass-production and product development as two different settings, and demonstrates how the mechanisms for relation management function differently in each phase.

Where comparison is done externally, confrontations with alternative contexts serve to better understand the case context itself and its relationship to the case. An example of this strategy can be found in Kudesia's (2021) exploration of the aftermath of the Ferguson shooting. In order to better understand the police response and dynamics between law enforcement representatives and other stakeholders following the shooting, the procedures and training of local officers were compared to those of other police departments.

As a further sub-species of this type of comparison, a handful of papers in our sample are specifically interested in the translation between contexts. Thus, Tracey, Dalpiaz, and Phillips' (2018) analysis of H-Farm, an early Italian startup accelerator, focuses heavily on the differences between the Veneto region where the accelerator is founded, and Silicon Valley, where such enterprises initially sprung up, finding that "several features of Veneto were unfavorable to

digital incubation, such as a system of entrepreneurship that was focused on family ownership and hostile to equity investment, a lack of systematic investment in innovation, and limited use of digital technology (Marini, 2011)” (Tracey, Dalpiaz, and Phillips, 2018, p.1633).

Acknowledging the role of researcher context. Though rarely addressed - we only found a few papers that explore context in this way - a few of the authors in our sample delve on their own personal context(s) and the ways in which it may influence their research experience and outcomes. Jakob Sadeh and Zilber’s (2019) study of a Jewish-Palestinian organisation in Israel carefully unpicks the ways in which the authors’ Israeli Jewish identity and limited knowledge of Arabic influenced their ability to build contacts and elicit information from the Palestinian members of the organisation.

Where context is not engaged with in the analysis, authors tend to abstract away from the context at the start of the analysis, much as in the ‘better constructs’ approach, and focus, instead, on e.g. ‘aggregate dimensions’ and ‘second-order codes’ (Baumann et al., 2020). Less congruently with the ‘better constructs’ approach, the same analytical strategy of abstracting away is sometimes adopted also by those authors that do engage with context at the start of the analysis. A case in point is Müller’s (2017) study of the staff at an IKEA store in Germany, where the first stages of the analysis consist in getting a sense of the shop’s organisational culture insofar as it is seen as the context for employees’ brand perceptions, and only subsequently does the paper focus on more abstract concepts. We can see, then, that even in papers where the aim is to theorise ‘better constructs’, context may have a role to play in bolstering up those constructs.

Theorising

Only a minority of the papers in our sample invoke context in theorising. In these instances, context serves either to (i) drive the theorising process, or (ii) to address alternative explanations.

Driving the theorising process. Papers where context serves as a driver for the theorising process engage with context in a couple of different ways. For instance, they theorise central concepts, constructs or processes as embedded in context, and as a result are interested in theorising *in* context rather than abstracting away from it. As Gagnon and Collinson (2017) note in their discussion of social differences in an international leadership programme, the failure to get along, which they documented within the studied teams, did not occur in a ‘decontextualised sense’, but was the result of social differences ‘constructed in situ’. Alternatively, they may seek to explain the theoretical relevance of specific contextual features and thereby build theory about context. This is done by Dobusch, Dobusch, and Müller-Seitz (2019) whose study of openness in Wikimedia’s open strategy explains how “the unequal distribution of technological conditions may partly explain the dominance of US-American and Western European contributions to the strategy-making process.” (Dobusch, Dobusch, & Müller-Seitz, 2019, p. 362)

Addressing alternative explanations. In addition to driving theorising, context can play a role in addressing alternative explanations in at least two ways — the case context itself can be a source of alternative explanations, or else, similar external contexts can be evoked to rule out alternative explanations. An example of the former can be found in Gupta and Khanna’s (2019) study recognizes that “hospital performance could also have been influenced by other factors, like the Cayman government’s support, NH senior management’s leadership, ongoing localized trial-and-error learning, Ascension’s involvement, and the specificities of the Cayman context.” (Gupta & Khanna, 2019, p.423), but conclude that these may support the organisational recombination which they identify as the key to the successful translation of care provision practices from India to the Cayman Islands. An example of the latter is provided by Satterstrom,

Kerrissey, and DiBenigno (2021) whose study of the collective process of voice in a healthcare team demonstrates that failed voiced ideas were not simply bad ideas by evoking examples of the successful voicing of the same ideas at other similar clinics.

Some of the papers in our sample may engage with context earlier (or later) on in the research process, but do not do so when theorising. Their theorising is driven, instead, by constructs. They may still engage with narratives, however. Often relying on grounded theory, these papers first abstract away from the context, and then build a narrative around the concepts identified as the result of the abstraction process (e.g., Curchod et al., 2020).

Bounding and generalising

When context is invoked in the discussion of boundary conditions and the generalisability of findings, it serves (i) to explore additional application contexts, and (ii) to identify boundary conditions; but it can also be invoked (iii) to acknowledge and embrace the limitations of single case studies.

Exploring additional application contexts. Instead of seeing rich contextual detail as a deterrent for generalisation, papers that make use of this move tap into the case context as a way to enhance generalisability. After carefully unpicking specific features of the case context, they identify other contexts with similar features, often such that, at first sight, are very dissimilar from the case context, and so diversify the possibilities for the generalisation of their findings. In this vein, Wright, Zammuto, and Liesch (2017) note at the close of their study that the relationships they theorised between emergency-department physicians and specialists from other hospital departments are generalisable to other settings where actors are strongly committed to the values, including “not only professions, but also other institutions such as political, religious, and cultural organizations with entrenched ideological values, social movements such as the Occupy movement, and government agencies responsible for administering standards for values achievement” (Wright, Zammuto, Liesch, 2017, pp. 233-234). Beyond identifying alternative application contexts for their findings, authors in this category may also theorise ways in which outcomes might vary in the presence of different contextual features. Thus, Carton (2018) notes that compared to the NASA moon landing drive that his analysis focused on, other organisations that do not have the benefit of a highly symbolic and visual target or a motivating competitive setting to spur them on (in this case the space race with the Soviet Union) may find it more difficult to unify their workforce behind a single goal.

Identifying boundary conditions. Instead of (and sometimes in addition to) explicitly listing alternative contexts where their findings might apply, some authors leave it to the reader to explore ways in which their theories would fare in alternative settings but provide a starting point for further study by signalling those features of the case context which might prove to be boundary conditions for their theories. Thus, Audebrand and Barros (2018) note that the dynamics of collective action they witnessed in funeral co-ops in Québec may depend partly on “specific elements typical only of Québec, such as the important presence of co-ops and the nationalist perspective favouring local solutions” (Audebrand and Barros, 2018, p.1339) and call for research in other regions.

Embracing limitations. In a few of the papers in our sample, the authors see the generalisability of their findings as being limited by their context-specificity. Yet, they do not necessarily see this specificity as a problem. Instead, they may note that the relevance of their findings is like to increase over time, as Jenkins and Delbridge (2017) do when noting that their unusual case of a virtual reception company is likely to become far more common if current globalisation and

digitisation trends continue. They may also simply note that the loss in generalisability is offset by the richness of the insights gained, as in Kern, Laguecir, and Leca's (2018) exploration of the minutiae of relations between surgeons, cardiologists, and external stakeholders in a French hospital.

Insofar as generalisability is concerned with translating research findings to other context, it is difficult to imagine how it could be discussed without reference to context. Indeed, while there are papers in our sample that do not discuss generalisability at all, we have found none that do broach the subject, but with no reference either to context-specificity or other application contexts. We note, moreover, that the discussion on generalisability often picks up where the discussion of case selection left off. For instance, Livne-Tarandach and Jazaieri's (2021) study of a 5-day summer camp for children of parents affected by cancer initially focused on the ways in which the camp is similar to other temporary organisations in terms of its structure, hierarchy, duration, and routines. These similarities are emphasised again in the generalisation discussion, this time going into more detail, and also highlighting ways in which other temporary organisations may differ. Thus, the presence of a strong element of care, while not typical of all temporary organisations, is found to be equally characteristic of emergency refugee aid, and temporary rescue teams, for instance.

Conclusions

To unpack how single case study research is used for theorising, we reviewed recently published empirical papers, focusing on qualitative single case studies, and systematically documented their theorising practices, and *where* and *how* context is used throughout the research process. Our findings reveal a rich diversity of theorising strategies and capture the myriad nuanced roles context plays in this process. These findings are in line with recent suggestions that contextualisation occurs at multiple stages of the research process (e.g. Poulis, Poulis, and Plakoyiannaki, 2013), but expose in more detail the rich diversity of possible moves to integrate context. Given this richness, we suggest that rather than talking of *degrees* of engagement with context *tout court*, our understanding of context would be enriched by distinguishing between different *kinds of context*, according to the specific function it serves. Moving from *degrees* of context to *kinds* of context would enable us to better capture what happens in cases where relaying rich contextual detail is not a central aim of theorising, but where context may still play an important role in interpreting data and building better constructs.

We further surmise that though our analysis already revealed a very high number of different analytical moves, further investigation may find many more not covered here. For instance, we focused on the role of context in theorising, but other elements of single cases such as level of analysis would be equally worthy of exploration.

More fundamentally, we hope our findings will help authors make the most of the single case study method in their research. Our fine-grained analysis of recent empirical published papers demonstrates that, far from abiding by the dichotomous view created by existing paradigmatic divides, authors already approach single case study as a versatile and flexible method able to accommodate a variety of analytical moves and theorising practices. We strongly recommend embracing this versatility in order to contribute to methodological pluralism and truly harness the singular richness of the single case study method.

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TABLE 1

Distribution of papers in sample by journal

Journal	Number of papers
Academy of Management Journal	28
Administrative Science Quarterly	16
Organization Science	10
Organization Studies	57
Strategic Management Journal	6
TOTAL	117

TABLE 2

Context treatments in single cases

Research step	Analytical move and aims	Illustrative examples
CASE SELECTION	Demonstrating representativeness Case established as representative of a broader set of phenomena either because the case context is rich in features commonly associated with the phenomenon of interest or because the case is seen as representing in miniature the characteristics of a larger field or industry. Comparison between case and industry or broader class of cases may be used to highlight similarities.	"Our empirical investigation is a single case study of Last.fm that focuses on the mechanisms and operations through which the platform automatically sorts out online music experience by aggregating data, deriving from the listening preferences and other behaviours of its users. Last.fm has been selected because it represents a typical example of data-driven organization that has been explicitly established to disrupt existing expert categories in the field of music consumption." (Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2021, p. 1390) "The emergence of green chemistry offers an excellent setting for exploring how occupational members seek to trigger and sustain a change in how their peers think about and do their work. Chemists share a common understanding of basic principles underlying the composition and properties of matter, and they engage in common practices to accomplish chemical synthesis or design. Their work also has other hallmarks of an occupation, including common "job training, peer relations, [and] career patterns" (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984: 291), specialized higher education, and regular interaction through conferences, publications, and society membership (e.g., the American Chemical Society). Finally, chemists "share with one another a set of values, norms and perspectives" (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984: 294–295), such as a commitment to the scientific method, peer review, objectivity, an apolitical perspective on knowledge, and an assumption of a cumulative knowledge base to which any chemist can contribute if her or his work meets the appropriate standards of rigor." (Howard-Grenville et al., 2017, p. 529) "...we studied a group of business sellers on the eBay platform. This is a representative setting in which sellers are evaluated by their buyers within a higher-level algorithmic system of sanctions and rewards designed and enforced by the platform owner" (Curchod, Patriotta, Cohen, & Neysen, 2020: 645) "Camp Magic represents an extreme case (Pettigrew, 1990) that we believe to be an appropriate setting for the exploration of the emergence of swift SOCin temporary organizations. First, it represents a temporary organization, in that its activities are seasonal and timebound (e.g., this camp only offers five days of programming per year). As is common in seasonal temporary organizations, our context reflects a transient work arrangement characterized by intentionally high levels of turnover, coworker variety, and limited tenure (Birnholtz, Cohen,&Hoch,2007).CampMagic is marked by deliberate short tenure at all organizational levels [...] This organizational arrangement breeds conditions of low familiarity, common in temporary organizations characterized by few repeated projects (Van Emmerik & Sanders, 2004)" (Livne-Tarandach & Jazaieri, 2021, p. 1132)

Demonstrating uniqueness

Case context presented as extreme or exceptional, and the phenomenon of interest is presented as uniquely manifesting in the context, or case is compared to broader industry context to highlight ways in which it stands out.

“Toyota provides a valuable empirical context as it systematically embeds paradoxical thinking in its strategies and practices (Osono et al. 2008, Spear and Bowen 1999) and simultaneously achieves higher customer value, e.g., higher product quality (Fujimoto 1999) and higher operational efficiency, e.g., lower work in progress/sales ratio (Lieberman and Dhawan 2005) than competitors. Toyota, thus, occupies what Porter (1996) termed the productivity frontier position, which represents sustained competitive advantage in a given industry.” (Aoki & Wilhelm, 2017, pp. 1080-1081)

“I was drawn to this case after reading a book (Chaiken, 2007) in which several NASA employees attested to feeling strongly connected to the organization’s goals and aspirations—a perception many said they had never experienced outside of this period at NASA.” (Carton, 2018, pp. 329)

“Digital Divide Data (DDD) is an “unusually revelatory” context that enables us to gain insights that might not be as visible in more-typical cases (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007: 27; Siggelkow, 2007; Eisenhardt, Graebner, and Sonenshein, 2016). DDD’s social and business missions were both core to the organization yet seemingly incompatible, a form of hybridity that usually fosters extreme conflict and can lead to mission drift or organizational demise (Besharov and Smith, 2014). But defying expectations, DDD sustained its dual missions over the entire ten-year period of our study and continued to thrive as a hybrid after our investigation ended.” (Smith & Besharov, 2019, pp. 4-5)

Demonstrating need for new theory

Field/industry level context is presented as new and under-researched and as such incommensurate with existing theories or case is presented as contradicting previous knowledge from similar contexts, and so meriting research for the sake of improving existing theory.

"In online settings, individuals’ capacity to circumvent power asymmetries might be affected by the anonymity of customer reviews, the concealment of the platform owner behind the algorithm, and the algorithm itself, which reduces spaces of uncertainty through the ongoing monitoring of interactions on the platform. Current theories of power, because they rely on assumptions of dyadic relationships and hierarchical monitoring, do not hold in this new context. Hence there is a need to develop a fresh understanding of power that accounts for the significant transformations taking place in contemporary work settings.” (Curchod, Patriotta, Cohen, & Neysen, 2020, p. 648)

"the literature on both social movements and co-ops suggests that co-ops cannot change an allegedly unfair institutional framework without the support of a broader social movement. However, the success of Québec’s funeral co-ops in fighting MNCs’ domination invites us to reconsider this assertion. Thus, we believe that studying how co-ops can independently extend their reach and impact their institutional framework is worthwhile, and may provide valuable information on the potential for collective social action by alternative economic organizations" (Audebrand & Barros, 2018, p. 1326)

“It is important to study the globalization of firms from lesser-known economies, such as New Zealand, because little is known about how actors from the periphery compete with and challenge actors from larger economies.” (Sinha et al. 2019, p. 562)

**DATA
COLLECTION****Improving data collection and interpretation**

Information about context used to ensure sound interpretation of primary corpus of data

"Our interview data were also supplemented with archival documents, including historical texts about the organization, news articles, as well as Lehman Brothers' annual reports. These documents offered additional information that helped us better understand the broader organizational and macro-economic contexts once common to all of our interviewees. These materials provided background information to contextualize our interviewees' responses. They were not, however, subject to formal analysis because the focus of our theorizing was on members' experiences." (Crosina & Pratt, 2019, p. 73)

"Finally, using a systematic internet search for topics relating to Airbus and the aircraft industry (e.g., in discussion boards such as Flightglobal or Airframer, industry associations, and specialized consultancies), we collected external information regarding industry best practices, technical reports, or coverage of the A350 program to further cross-check our analyses. This information helped us triangulate our understanding of the interview data, as well as corroborate relevant events and developments." (Baumann, Becker, & Horrmann, 2020, p. 1182)

Gaining a general understanding of context

Use of secondary data sources or prolonged presence in field, including collection of many types of primary data, possibly including sensory data, used to enhance understanding of context. Possibly leading to theorising context.

"We conducted direct on-site observation (approximately 50 hours) of how the movement was enacted and performed. On-site observation allowed us to take photos and record field notes, which helped us to recall key details and develop contextual understanding of the case. Visiting and dining at several of the restaurants associated with the movement allowed us to engage in sensory experiences whereby the dishes served as a medium to stimulate conversation and supplemented the information from the interviews (Pink, 2015)." (Cappelen & Pedersen, 2021, p. 228)

"We also collected observational data during key events of the anti-racket movement in Sicily and the evolution of AT. One of the authors participated periodically in anti-racket movement events and meetings in Sicily beginning in the early 2000s, and, prior to the founding of AT, attended formal and informal meetings with the entrepreneurs who were discussing whether to establish the organization and its provisional strategy. After AT's founding in 2009, two of the authors observed AT activities during board meetings, office hours, and tours. These observations provided us with a richer understanding of the context for the evolution of AT." (Lee, Ramus, & Vaccaro, 2018, p. 2136)

Targeting specific contextual features

Information on specific background features is collected as preparation for their analysis and/or theorising

"Questions focused on participants' accounts of personal and team-level learning, selection and evaluation processes, impact of national backgrounds, interpersonal dynamics, peer learning and dynamics involving team members varying national backgrounds, expectations of participation, careers and future plans, and connections to regular jobs. We probed for more detailed accounts of team processes as they emerged. Interviews with the director and coaches focused on programme design, history and purposes, the relationship to corporate objectives, programme selection, evaluation and outcomes, team development and perceptions of the teams' functioning." (Gagnon & Collinson, 2017, p. 1259)

DATA ANALYSIS**Strengthening understanding of case and concepts**

Capturing rich context and analysing case IN context as a way to enhance the quality of analysis and strengthen the understanding of case findings and/or the resulting constructs. Context is seen as shaping processes and phenomena.

"During the analysis, we noticed that the partially shared meanings were developed in a process of (re)negotiation and (re)definition, which shaped both the meanings of the strategic concept and the shared understanding of change created through strategic sensemaking. Instead of merely creating new meanings, the concepts were used to challenge meanings held or promoted by others and to maintain certain meanings. In addition, we realized that a key part of meaning-making was how self-responsibility was linked with the embedding of the concept in broader systems of meaning through being connected with emerging vocabularies (Loewenstein et al., 2012)." (Jalonen, Schildt, & Vaara, 2018,, pp. 2801-2802)

"We analyzed experienced emotions (shared with us during interviews or with others in daily interaction); overt emotional displays, such as laughter, crying, speech rate, tone of voice, and emotional trajectories within interactions (Godbold, 2015; Samra-Fredericks, 2004); covert emotional expressions including emotionally charged metaphors (Boudens, 2005), nonverbal communication (e.g., gestures, gazes, and body postures), and what was not said (Rogers et al., 1999). We interpreted these markers by situating them in their context, examining their related content, the object (person, issue), the interactional sequence that led to or stemmed from the emotional display (Sawyer, 2003), and the logics that emotions were related to. This analysis resulted in an understanding of the ways emotions were elicited and controlled to promote universalism, and erupted, manifesting ethno nationalism." (Jakob Sadeh & Zilber, 2019, pp. 1418-1419)

"We examined how organisational actors sought to construct historical (dis)continuity in their narratives (Zerubavel, 2003), while simultaneously noting elements that were purposely left out or forgotten. Throughout the process, we continually reflected on how these narratives could be interpreted in light of current conditions in the broader culinary and local Turkish contexts (i.e. the Turkish political climate)." (Cappelen & Pedersen, 2021, p. 229)

Exploring influence of specific features of context

Identifying specific contextual features which are relevant to explaining outcomes on interest and determining exploring their influence on the phenomena studied.

"The establishment newspapers, such as The Times and The Pall Mall Gazette, wrote about the travel agency "as if those who composed it ought to be ashamed of themselves, and he who headed it ought to be punished" (Rae, 1891: 59). To appreciate why the travel agency developed by Cook was vilified in this way it is important to consider the class structure of Victorian Britain." /.../ "While the working class and lower middle class supported Cook's enterprise, the more privileged members of society—the upper middle class and the upper class—strongly disapproved of it. This elite group saw the travel agency as morally abject and called for an end to its "excursion mania" (The Times, 1861: 6). The establishment newspapers, which both reflected and influenced the attitudes of the elite, stigmatized Cook's travel agency and campaigned against its existence" (Hampel & Tracey, 2017, p. 2179)

Comparing different contexts

Done either internally by splitting the case in multiple context and tracing variance across these contexts or by comparing the case context to other external contexts to identify salient features.

As a variation, the phenomenon of interest is explored as it is translated from one context to another in a kind of natural experiment.

“... we identified two analytical units of Toyota supplier management: (1) mass-production (MP) where both buying firms and suppliers mainly conduct routinized activities for exploitative purposes; (2) product development (PD) where nonroutinized exploratory activities play a central role both for buying firms and suppliers. [...] we searched for patterns across the two analytical units to create generalizable observations on ambidexterity at the buyer-supplier relationship level by taking into consideration the different settings and boundary conditions between the two polar phases. We compared the results of the two analytical units based on our two dimensions, supplier management practices and organizational systems, as well as “requisite security” as a newly emerged category.” (Aoki & Wilhelm, 2017, p. 1084)

“I then zoomed out to trace the local activities and interactions among police officers, civil rights organizations, and protest crowds back to their broader context. For the police officers, this entailed identifying the procedures and plans instantiated in Ferguson and nearby St. Louis county municipalities and comparing them with those of other police departments (e.g., 470000, 020816, 130100, 150903) and with the crowd psychology perspective institutionalized in police trainings (Schweingruber 2000, Reicher et al. 2004).” (Kudesia, 2021, p. 1216)

“However, several features of Veneto were unfavorable to digital incubation, such as a system of entrepreneurship that was focused on family ownership and hostile to equity investment, a lack of systematic investment in innovation, and limited use of digital technology (Marini, 2011). Crucially, Italy lacked the large and competitive VC sector that was (and is) a central characteristic of U.S. technology regions (Crunchbase, 2017), which meant that it was a challenge for H-Farm to support the exit of its graduate firms. The Italian VC sector was also dwarfed by the main European innovation hubs—that is, London, Berlin, and Paris (Crunchbase, 2017).” (Tracey, Dalpiaz, & Phillips, 2018, p. 1633)

Acknowledging the role of researcher context

The researcher’s own personal contexts (background, language skills, etc) are explored with regard to their potential impact on the researcher’s relationship with researcher subjects, and understanding of data, actors, and phenomena.

“During both data collection and analysis, we attempted to take our identities as Israeli Jews into account, and be reflective about the political and national context of inequality within which the data were gathered and interpreted. Most of the interviews took place in English or Hebrew, and only two were in Arabic due to the first author’s limited knowledge of the language. During observations, this limitation hindered her understanding of what went on and restricted her communication with the people in the organization who spoke solely or mainly Arabic. The first author’s exposure to Palestinians’ emotions during routine times and intense events was especially hindered by her Jewish identity, which is part of the fabric of the societal-level power relations, and of the conflict between the nations.” (Jakob Sadeh & Zilber, 2019, p. 1419)

THEORISING

Driving the theorising process

Phenomena of interest are theorised in context, constructs and processes are seen as context-dependent. In some cases, the interaction between case and context, or the effects of specific contextual features are theorised.

"...our analysis underlines that, from a power perspective, it is rarely helpful to see teams simply as socially differentiated. Conditions of control are critically important to examine, to understand how differences are constructed in situ and reproduced in particular practices. Control can reinforce status differences through privileging certain selves over others. The majority of teams in this study conformed to such controls, not merely 'failing to get along' in a decontextualized sense (relating only to some notion of a priori differences in culture, language and race/ethnicity). Rather, difference was given meaning by the context and the power imbalances that were reproduced as part of the programme's normalizing and homogenizing practices." (Gagnon & Collinson, 2017, p. 1272)

"Regarding the general challenges of openness as an organizing principle, two factors seem particularly relevant in the context of Wikimedia's strategy-making process: the knowledge and application of the 'wiki language' as well as good English language skills and, on the other hand, the socioeconomic status of the contributors. [...] There are major disparities between core (e.g. North America, Western Europe) and peripheral (e.g. most African countries, Eastern Europe) countries regarding the number of people who have access to the internet at home (81.3 percent compared to 34.1 percent) or the availability of mobile broadband (86.7 percent compared to 39.1 percent; see ITU, 2015). Against this background, the unequal distribution of technological conditions may partly explain the dominance of US-American and Western European contributions to the strategy-making process." (Dobusch, Dobusch, & Müller-Seitz, 2019, pp. 361-362)

Context as source of alternative explanations

Context is called upon in the theorising process either as a source of alternative explanations or in order to dispel alternative explanations.

"we recognize that the hospital performance could also have been influenced by other factors, like the Cayman government's support, NH senior management's leadership, ongoing localized trial-and-error learning, Ascension's involvement, and the specificities of the Cayman context. On the basis of a careful consideration of these additional factors as possible explanations of the hospital performance, we conjecture that these are likely complements to, rather than substitutes for, our candidate explanation of organizational recombination." (Gupta & Khanna, 2019, p. 423)

"Consider Nurse2's failed voiced idea to have a non-doctor clinician dedicated to serving the increasing number of walk-in patients who came in with urgent needs but did not have appointments. This idea never reached implementation, but we know it was not simply a bad idea because other clinics in their network successfully implemented it and the larger PeopleHealth organization eventually mandated that all clinics create walk-in clinician appointments.".... "See Online Appendix B for descriptions of a subset of failed ideas otherwise similar to successful ones, including evidence of their potential value." (Satterstrom, Kerrissey, & DiBenigno, 2021, p. 409)

**BOUNDING &
GENERALISING****Exploring additional application contexts**

Additional application contexts for findings are identified via a discussion of the similarity of features or conditions of these alternatives contexts. In some cases, potential adjustments to findings in other contexts or under different conditions are discussed.

“Our data were generated in a profession with a long history of traditional values as social trustees and in a public sector organizational context. This suggests two boundary conditions on the generalizability of the relationships we uncovered between value-and-practice misalignment --> problem perceptions --> moral emotions --> value maintenance work. First, these relationships are generalizable to settings in which actors are closely committed to the values of an institution. This includes not only professions, but also other institutions such as political, religious, and cultural organizations with entrenched ideological values, social movements such as the Occupy movement, and government agencies responsible for administering standards for values achievement. Commitment to values is a boundary condition because commitment is necessary to elicit moral emotions of sufficient strength to motivate action. Second, these relationships are generalizable to settings in which resources are constrained, as they were in our public hospital context. Resource constraints are a boundary condition because they prevent values being implemented to the levels that committed actors might prefer, seeding the possibility for value interpretations to diverge and for values to misalign with practices. Future research could explore our model’s relationships in settings that meet these boundary conditions.” (Wright, Zammuto, Liesch, 2017, pp. 233-234)

“Kennedy had the advantage of leading a young organization that was working through the nascent stages of identity construction and a rival (the Soviet Union) that helped galvanize collective energy. This suggests that it may be easier for leaders to narrow attention to a single end if they have the latitude to shape the organization’s identity and can draw attention to salient competitors. NASA’s leaders also had a built-in advantage when constructing milestones because landing on the moon required traversing an actual physical distance (e.g., reaching Earth’s orbit, breaking Earth’s orbit, reaching lunar orbit).” (Carton, 2018, p. 257)

“Like all studies, this study is not without limitations. Although the present context may be similar to that of other temporary organizations, it may qualitatively differ from other settings, thus pointing to a number of possible limitations as well as illuminating future avenues for research. One concern might be that, while this setting may represent a seasonal organization characterized by limited repeated work, it was also characterized by a caring ecology (Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012), whereby care and human connection were enabled rather than disabled (Frost, Dutton, Worline, & Wilson, 2000). It is worth noting that a focus on care is also pronounced in crisis-based temporary organizations such as grief summer camps, emergency refugee aid, or temporary emergency rescue teams. Future research may consider less extreme contexts(e.g., contexts where the caring ecology is less pronounced, such as those working on movie sets, seasonal festivals, construction sites, etc.), as the emergence of a swift SOC might look different in these alternative contexts. Importantly, this work may also be relevant in professional development in temporary organizations such as professional retreats and developmental workshops that are centered around personal growth.” (Livne-Tarandach & Jazaieri, 2021, p. 1158)

Identifying boundary conditions for further study

Specific features of context are identified as potential boundary conditions, and further exploration is recommended.

"Our study, while indicating some general results about inequality-inspired collective action and social innovation, has specific elements typical only of Québec, such as the important presence of co-ops and the nationalist perspective favouring local solutions. We thus suggest analysing similar processes for alternative economic organizations in other regions and contexts." (Audebrand & Barros, 2018: 1339)
"Some of the limitations of our study also point to avenues for future research. First, while we recognize sociomateriality as an important aspect concerning openness, particularly in the realm of technology-enabled forms of openness, the scope of our analysis made it impossible to dive deeper into the relationship between specific sociomaterial conditions and corresponding effects of inclusion and exclusion. Given that many forms of organizational openness in innovation, strategy making and beyond are technology-driven, explicitly focusing on this issue from an inclusion and exclusion angle might be promising in order to assess the role of sociomateriality for reinforcing or mitigating preexisting social biases (Leonardi & Barley, 2008)." (Dobusch et al., 2019, p. 366)

Embracing limitations of findings

Generalisability of findings is seen as potentially limited due to context-specificity, but limitations in generalisability are seen as compensated for by richness in detail and salience of the case itself

"The specific features of this case do not support the simple transferability of our findings to other contexts. However, when considering future research and the relevance of our study, it is important to observe that the phenomenon of organizations that operate 'strategic deception' is not just limited to virtual reception services [...] in an increasingly globalized and virtual world, we might expect to witness more organizations practising strategic deception. Additionally, even if businesses founded so directly on strategic deception are empirically rare, many service organizations offer customers what might be considered 'false' aspirations about the particular service or entertainment experience being sold. As such, we could speculate that an increasing number and range of employees are likely to engage in deception in a more or less strategic manner. Hence, our model of the normalization of deception could be developed further to assess how other types of organizations encourage their employees to engage in deception." (Jenkins & Delbridge, 2017, p. 74)

"Our study has several limitations. The first one is the uniqueness of our case study. Other case studies examining other power relations and institutional contexts (e.g., contexts where surgeons have no access to private practice) would certainly provide alternative results. Despite the limited generality of our empirical data, their richness allows an in-depth examination of the different mechanisms present, particularly the power relations, thus confronting discourses with actions." (Kern, Laguecir, & Leca, 2018, p. 561)
