Editorial  Location, location, location: contextualizing organizational research

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Introduction

‘Location, location, location’
(A realtor’s advice to a would-be home buyer)

Our goals in writing this editorial are to encourage more contextualization in organizational research and to signal that the Journal of Organizational Behavior gives a sympathetic reception to submissions incorporating context into their research methods and reporting. In this effort, we join with several articles in this issue of JOB: Chip Heath and Sim Sitkin’s critique regarding what is organizational about organizational behavior; Alice Gaudine and Alan Sak’s contextualized treatment of a hospital’s absenteeism intervention; and Gary Johns’s provocative commentary upon it. We offer some guidelines for writing scholarly articles that address context in a way that enhances our understanding of organizational behavior and the validity of our work.

The term ‘context’ comes from a Latin root meaning ‘to knit together’ or ‘to make a connection.’ Contextualizing entails linking observations to a set of relevant facts, events, or points of view that make possible research and theory that form part of a larger whole. Contextualization can occur in many stages of the research process, from question formulation, site selection, and measurement to data analysis, interpretation, and reporting. The need to contextualize is reinforced by the emergence of a worldwide community of organizational scholars adding ever-greater diversity in settings as well as perspectives.

Contextualization is more important in contemporary organizational behavior research than it has been in the past. Two reasons in particular motivate this editorial. First, the domain of organizational research is becoming more international, giving rise to challenges in transporting social science models from one society to another. Second, the rapidly diversifying nature of work and work settings can substantially alter the underlying causal dynamics of worker–organizational relations.

Research in OB is increasingly drawn from many nations, as the review board, authors, and readership of this journal indicate. Our research encompasses numerous settings (e.g. governmental...
organizations in highly socialistic countries; private-sector entrepreneurial firms in staunchly capitalistic ones), yet despite this diversity, OB researchers commonly use the same vocabulary to characterize organizational phenomena, though at times they have very different meanings. In Germany, for example, ‘participation’ refers to the practice of executives advising workers and their representatives, while in Canada the term relates to joint labour-management decision making. It often takes researchers years to realize that they are labelling different things in the same way (Heller et al., 1997). Even in laboratory research conducted by scholars in different countries, cultural frames of reference can alter the nature of instructions regarding ostensibly the same study treatment. In one example, Israeli goal-setting researchers assigned goals as ‘orders’ to subjects (a ‘tell’ strategy), while North American researchers used an instructional or ‘tell and sell’ strategy to pass on the same information. Not surprisingly, they produced two different sets of results (Latham et al., 1988).

It is apparent that the variety of contexts OB researchers encounter requires them to pay special attention when exporting scientific constructs and research methodologies across national borders. But we also argue that a good deal of the research conducted within countries is doing a poor job of modelling contextual effects. Samples often are drawn from one firm or many firms without considering the nature of the settings involved or any potential impact on the variables of interest. Consider how work roles can be narrow in one setting and broad in another. Is there sufficient variation in a single firm to observe how organizational factors impact different workers? It it realistic to assume that organizational citizenship behavior means the same thing in more than one place? Karl Weick (1996), building upon the work of Walter Mischel (1977) before him, made a case of the need to think differently about interactions between individuals and their surroundings depending on whether the situation is weak (new, having few norms, dynamic, or emergent) or strong (established, having elaborate behavioral controls, stable, or closed from external influences). Strong situations, such as those where performance pressure is high, limit the extent to which individual performance can be attributed to personality differences or individual predisposition (Mischel, 1977; Weick, 1996). To borrow the title from Bob Gephart’s upcoming special issue of JOB, the ‘brave new workplace’ takes many forms, some of which have no parallel in the experience of contemporary workers or business strategists. Differences within a country, and among the workers and firms located therein, can be as great as those observed between countries. Contextual differences can be a major source of conflicting findings, and teasing out underlying patterns requires us to pay more attention to research settings.

**Forces For and Against Contextualization**

The forces promoting contextualization are concerned with appropriate specification of constructs and generalizable results. From a scientific perspective, organizational behavior research requires contextualization because it makes our models more accurate and our interpretation of results more robust (Schneider, 1985). For example, having an awareness of cross-national differences in law and employment relations alerts us to differences in the facts underlying particular organizational practices. Research on the motivational implications of pay should take into account the fact that pay cuts are illegal in some countries and legal in other, providing important information for understanding how contingent pay impacts motivation. Similarly, varying cultural assumptions regarding workplace behaviors across settings (e.g. absenteeism can be shirking, self-expression, an entitlement, or a political act) alert us to shifts in the meaning of OB constructs in research ostensibly dealing with the same phenomena (Erez and Earley, 1993).
There are also forces that work against taking context seriously. First, there is a seeming parsimony to research and theory that focuses on the de-contextualized individual, group, or firm. This simplicity signals an apparent generalizability to a variety of settings, but does not provide evidence that such is the case. Simplicity and parsimony are not the same when that simplicity is achieved by misrepresenting the complexity of the underlying phenomena. In short, the common demands for clean (read: simple) models do not always fit with the messy reality of contemporary work and organizational life. Another force working against contextualization is its invisibility in the face of the scholar’s bounded rationality: One person’s context is another’s taken-for-granted assumption. (This is perhaps a variation on the academic truism, that one scholar’s error variance is another scholar’s career!) Because context is often invisible, making it visible requires greater attention to research setting and makes it less likely that effective organizational researchers can be at arm’s length from the places they study.

Features to Consider in Contextualizing Research

What’s so normal about distributions?

‘I feel like a fugitive from the law of averages.’
Bill Maudlin

Our choice of research settings shapes the variability that we can potentially observe. Firms that emphasize managerial development and invest in workforce training may have fewer differences in the quality of their worker–manager relationship than we might find in a broader sample for firms where some invest in development and others do not. Do we really known what ‘normal’ variation is, even in well-studied phenomena such as job characteristics, absenteeism, and innovation? What is the potential distribution of such variables? When we pay attention to context, we consider the theoretically possible distribution of variables, along with those forces that would enhance or constrain their observation. Contextualization is designed into research through the choice of research sites, firms, and people, where presumably representative variability exists in the phenomena under investigation. Note that the pursuit of representative variability does not automatically require a sample involving 100 organizations rather than one involving two or three. What matters is: (a) building variability into the study’s design consistent with the theoretical or known range of the primary variables studied; and (b) specifying conditions that reduce variability.

Range restriction is everywhere

‘She ran the whole gamut of emotions from A to B.’
Critic Dorothy Parker, commenting on the acting of Katharine Hepburn.

Range is the extent to which variation is possible. Any research study involves sampling, which inherently entails potential range restriction on the specified variables of study. Gary Johns (1991) makes a cogent case for the constraints range restriction induces on many of the traditional processes and variables studied by organizational researchers. The effect of range restriction on observed relationships among variables of interest is easily demonstrated: though height might be correlated with successful free throws in basketball in the general population, it is not correlated among the members of professional basketball teams, who typically are 6’6” or taller. Along these lines, have you ever noticed how difficult it is to find moderator effects in field research? Ben Schneider called attention to this in a
recent Society for Industrial/Organizational Psychology presentation (2000–New Orleans, April 14). As the pundit said, ‘silence is still noise,’ and as Johns (1991, 2001) has argued, range restriction is the likely culprit for many inconsistent findings across studies.

The classic source of range restriction is situational factors that suppress variability. For example, individual factors won’t correlate with performance if an individual’s job performance is not really under his or her personal control, as in the case of automated work (Herman, 1973). High-performing subunits can have less impact on the overall performance of the firm where organizational characteristics constrain their linkages with other subunits (Goodman, 2000). Virtually all organizational research is subject to range restriction because research settings select, adapt, suppress, and amplify a host of variables that are of interest to organizational researchers. The point is not that more variation is better, but that sustained attention to those factors contributing to observed variation is the essence of well-specified theory and research.

**Configuration: so what else was happening?**

‘A happy combination of fortuitous circumstances.’
Walter Scott

‘Fearful concatenation of circumstances.’
Daniel Webster

Whether circumstances intersect in ways that are fortuitous, fearful, or somewhat in between, a configuration of facts may be necessary to understand their meaning. A set of factors, when considered together, can sometimes yield a more interpretable and theoretically interesting pattern than any of the factors would show in isolation. All studies omit variables. But when neglected variables are causally significant, their omission creates problems in interpreting results. Consider, for example, the inconsistent effects of pay on worker response and motivation from study to study (Bloom and Milkovich, 1996). Pay satisfaction is shaped by the broader nature of the compensation package (itself a ‘bundle’ of diverse elements), the nature of the exchange relationship with an employer, and the economic condition of the worker (Bloom and Milkovich, 1996; Graham and Welbourne, 1999). Similarly, human resource practices have different effects when considered in combination (i.e., as a bundle of performance management practice supported by training and compensation systems – Pil and MacDuffie, 1996). Taking a richer slice of the organizational setting, its practices, and how people react to them is necessary to identify effects that derive from configurations – and more detailed descriptions of settings and their distinct features can help us identify what those configurations comprise.

**A horse of a different color is still a horse.**

‘Science arises from the discovery of identity amidst diversity.’
W. J. Jervous

A final point regarding meaning and context: phenomena sometimes go by different names depending on the point in their distribution at which they are observed. Consider the way that bureaucracy is conceptualized in much of modern organizational theory and pop culture. Structure and formality are increasingly conceptualized as something bad (e.g. red tape), but this was not the case in Max Weber’s original treatment, or even for the later scholars whose work preceded large-scale globalization (March and Simon, 1958). Previously, bureaucracy was viewed as a basis for collective action. Consider the meaning of bureaucracy or, specifically, bureaucratic practices such as role specification and rule
enforcement. In the former Soviet bloc countries, consistent procedures and sensible rules to build trust and community have been slow to develop. However, when they do so in firms, workers experience this bureaucracy as more procedurally just and fair than its alternative (Pearce et al., 1998).

In the developed world, the infrastructure provided by procedures, rules, and contracts is taken for granted and therefore discounted. The point of course is that some degree of bureaucracy, as specified by Weber, is at the heart of the stable relations and coordinated efforts that modern firms in the developed world enjoy. If we are looking at bureaucratic practices and their implications for firms and the people they impact, we need to consider their functionality in the particular setting studied (Adler and Borys, 1996). Organizational research is expanding the settings to which it engages in theory development and extension. In doing so, it may be uncovering parts of the distributions of organizational phenomena that we heretofore have not observed or recognized.

**It's in the timing**

‘Time is but the stream I go fishing in.’

Thoreau

Research is a product of its time. In their review of organizational behavior research since World War II, Goodman and Whetten (1998) observe that researchers’ focus shifts depending upon the issues of the day. Individual productivity dominated in the aftermath of the war, with a focus on the rebuilding of civilian economies. Over time, workers became more skilled, affluent, and educated. Research topics shifted to reflect the rise of team structures and growing concern over quality of work life. It is important that historical factors be taken into account in descriptions of research settings, including the timing of data gathering and events that might impact their meaning. With the passage of time, the meaning of various constructs and the factors giving rise to them can change.

Consistent with Goodman and Whetten’s notion of a shifting focus in organizational research across eras, it is important to acknowledge that our constructs themselves can change meanings over time. By this we mean that the meaning of the terms can shift, often unannounced. Thus, when we think of organizational commitment today, one has to ask what exactly the ‘organization’ is that either the individual or the researcher has in mind. Trends suggest this term can mean anything from the firm as a whole, to one’s local office (part of a larger parent firm), work group, clients or customers, or manager. Commitment increasing is multi-layered (or ‘multiplex,’ meaning more than simply bilateral or dual–Rousseau, in press). In more direct and public ways, established constructs also have picked up temporal qualifiers such as ‘swift’ trust (Meyerson et al., 1996) and even ‘temporary’ commitment.

Based on the issues raised in this section, Table 1 highlights some concerns associated with the choice of research setting and assessment strategies. It also provides some exemplars of research that addresses these issues.

So far in the present discussion, we have raised issues regarding the distributions underlying our observations, the inherent range restriction in our research, and the configuration of facts necessary to understand the meaning of organization-related behavior. Now we move to some ways of responding to these issues.

**Three Ways to Contextualize**

Contextualization, like California (according to the first author), is a state of mind. We are not saying that contextual factors must always be measured quantitatively for contextualization to occur or that
studies in a single firm don’t have value—far from it. Rather, contextualization is a way of approaching research where knowledge of the settings to be studied is brought to bear in design and implementation decisions. This can occur at all stages of the research process, from conceptualization to writing the research article. And at a minimum, contextualization essentially requires a thicker description of the setting(s) to help the reader and those researchers who would build upon a study understand the factors that gave rise to the researcher’s observations. There are, however, degrees of contextualization for

Table 1. Contextualizing the study

**Construct comparability:** Do constructs have the same meaning at this study site as in past research?

Exemplars: (1) Latham et al. (1988) identified differences in the way ‘assigned goals’ were implemented in goal-setting research conducted by Israelis (‘tell’) and North Americans (‘tell and sell’). (2) Worker participation takes different forms in Germany than it does in the United States or Canada and there is substantial within-country variation in the practices involved (Heller et al., 1997).

**Points of view:** On which frame(s) of reference does the study focus (workers, managers, customers/clients, others)? What efforts were taken to assess the impact of their points of view on research observations and results?

Exemplar: Buyers and suppliers react differently to the interaction styles of the other based upon different views of sales/purchasing strategies, and in-group/out-group pressures (Humphrey and Ashforth, 2000).

**Representativeness:** How do the samples involved compare with those used in previous studies of these constructs (Statistically: means, variance; Location: country, type of firm)? How does the sample impact the interpretation of results and the implications of study?

Exemplar: Kalleberg and Rognes (2000) describe how Norwegian law, cultural values, and work practices shape their observations of patterns in the employment relationship, employee commitment, and attitudes of Norwegian workers.

**Range restriction:** How have selection (e.g., types of people joining or remaining in setting) or situational effects (e.g., behavior or outcome constraints) affected variability?

Exemplars: (1) Range restriction is the likely explanation of the findings from 1960 to the 1980s that organizational commitment was caused by individual differences (see review by Mathieu and Zajac, 1990). Most of this research was conducted in only one firm at a time, but subsequent scholars recognized that commitment might be a two-way street and they began examining commitment levels among individuals in different firms, discovering that firm-related factors are often stronger than personal ones (Eisenberger et al., 1986). (2) Effects of individual differences are more likely to be observed in weak situations, characterized by fewer behavioral constraints, than in strong situations (Humphrey and Ashforth, 2000.)

**Time:** On a historical basis, when were data collected and what were the institutional factors operating then? What was the duration of the observations?

Exemplar: Canadian and American health-care workers based on a 1980s sample experience very different environmental and competitive pressures than would be the case in today, as described by Alice Gaudine and Alan Saks, this issue. Assessments made over different time intervals can reveal changes in the phenomenon studied, as in Goodman’s (1979) observation of initially successful quality of work life change at Rushton followed by a subsequent decline in observed effects.

**Levels:** What characteristics of workers, work units, and the larger setting can be useful in comparing this sample with those used by other researchers?

Exemplar: Interviews of human resource managers assessed how organizational and demographic factors impact worker mobility, using an array of contextual variables as both predictors and controls (e.g., worksite size, union involvement, technology, task variety, staffing difficulty, demography—Spell and Blum 2000).
researchers to choose from, depending upon the demands of their research question and the nature of
the settings themselves.

We propose a three-tiered approach to the contextualization of organizational research and actively
seek to publish research that fits into any one of the three tiers.

**Tier 1: rich description**

This level of contextualization provides detailed description and informed reflection on the role that
context plays in influencing the meaning, variation, and relationship among variables under study.
Rich description can apply in a single setting or in several and may involve aspects of context that
act as constants in a given setting (e.g. its history) or cannot be measured quantitatively (cf. Kalleberg
and Rognes, 2000; Mohr, 2000). Rich description leads to:

1. **Focusing upon the setting**
   This can include describing (even naming, if appropriate) the organizations under study, their geo-
   graphic location, the point in time under observation, and other contextual factors relevant to the phe-
   nomena studied. Note that this does not mean detailing minutia (‘The room was green, the researcher
   wore pink, and spring was in the air!’), but rather describing features that can impact or constrain what
   was studied. *JOB* has begun making use of ‘sidebar’ descriptions to highlight the context of empirical
   studies (see Gaudine and Saks, this issue, for an example). Use quotations from informants, docu-
   ments, logos, workplace diagrams, or whatever devices flesh out the setting for the reader. Describe
   the setting in which research is conducted, including individual, group, organizational, and environ-
   mental (e.g. economic, institutional) factors relevant to the phenomena studied. This description,
   which might appear in the Introduction or Method section, or in a sidebar-type format (see Table 2)
   provides specific contextual facts. Discussions of how facts associated with the people and the setting
   shape the issues being studied can appear as relevant in the Introduction, Methods, Results and/or
   Discussion sections.

2. **Drawing comparisons with prior research**
   It can be useful to examine previous research on the variable of interest, in order to evaluate the com-
   parability of those settings and participants to your research construct. Most empirical studies review
   previous research; however, these reviews often given little attention to context. Rather than assume
   that using the labels employed in previous studies make them comparable, finding evidence of com-
   monalities and differences enhances both the generalizability of new research and gives an apprecia-
   tion of its limitations (Locke, 1986).

3. **Establishing the meaning and effects of different frames of reference**
   How comparable the meanings ascribed to particular observations and the constructs they are pre-
   sumed to reflect requires attention to how those meanings might shift in different settings, roles, or
   cultural frames of reference (e.g. absenteeism among managers may not be construed the same way
   as that of clerical workers; absenteeism can be an expression of dissatisfaction in one culture and a
   political act in another). The role of cross-national differences of meaning is pertinent here, as
   described earlier. However, comparability of meaning also applies when an organization’s constitu-
   encies have different frames of reference. Jane Dutton’s (1998, unpublished manuscript) research on how
   lower-level workers view their contributions to the firm identified an array of ‘invisible work’ that
   faculty assistant contribute to their university settings and hospital custodians provide to patient care.
Comparability of meaning entails cultural differences, as well as differences in role and status, that influence the local meaning and interpretation of various issues pertinent to the research topic.

4. Identifying the potential variability in the underlying causal variables
Identifying the potential variability is important in reducing the effects of range restriction or assessing the degree to which it occurs. This means that in reviewing previous research, information citing the distributions (e.g. means and standard deviations) of the variables observed in previous research can be as pertinent as the findings these studies assert.

5. Evaluating the role that time plays
When a study takes place can influence both the relations among variables and their meaning. We have described some of the effects that history can have on the facts of a study (e.g. worker experiences during the downsizing of the 1980s or immediately after the fall of the former Soviet Union in the 1990s can reflect different dynamics than those of high-flying knowledge workers in Silicon Valley in 2000). Another temporal dimension is the time-frame associated with causal effects. Time lags in causal effects at the individual and firm levels probably differ, with changes at lower levels often

Table 2. Examples of sidebar information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational-factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Firm life cycle: whether new, established, acquired, restructured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure: Divisionalized/functional, decision making practices, participation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recent changes relevant to study: management turnover, planned change interventions, restructurings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In for-profits firms: current financial health, historical performance, performance indicators used, industry status, market share</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In non-profit or governmental organizations: mission, goals, key performance criteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of firm’s competitive environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment relationships(s) of focal workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour/management climate, history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current problems faced (how related to motivation behind research)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational cultural factors relevant to study: dominant culture/subgroups, norms/values</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Worker–job factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roles/jobs: routine/non-routine, broad/narrow, weak/strong setting characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance criteria: goals, incentives, performance criteria, how effectively implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career paths: internal/external, degree of mobility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographics: education, age, gender, race, prior work experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of relations with managers, peers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>External environment</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economy: national/local/regional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevant labour pool: alternative job opportunities, available labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location: region, urban/rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal/institutional: governmental or legal impact on variables studied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National culture: nomological issues raised if culture differs from that characteristic of previous research</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dates study was conducted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevant events contemporary with study</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Researchers generally know a good deal more about their field sites than typically conveyed in published reports. Here are some contextual factors to consider in reporting on a field study.

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4. Identifying the potential variability in the underlying causal variables
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5. Evaluating the role that time plays
When a study takes place can influence both the relations among variables and their meaning. We have described some of the effects that history can have on the facts of a study (e.g. worker experiences during the downsizing of the 1980s or immediately after the fall of the former Soviet Union in the 1990s can reflect different dynamics than those of high-flying knowledge workers in Silicon Valley in 2000). Another temporal dimension is the time-frame associated with causal effects. Time lags in causal effects at the individual and firm levels probably differ, with changes at lower levels often
having faster cycles than those at higher levels (Simon, 1973). Knowing how long a participation programme has been in place, for instance, is important because completely different answers to research questions can result if the data are gathered six months after the programme started or after four years. Further, very different answers can occur if outcome data are gathered at the individual level or at the business unit.

The Gaudine and Saks (2001) article in this issue illustrates several of these features. Where research focuses on the impact of a particular intervention, contextual effects are not necessarily central to the research question, but can be integral to the interpretation and generalizability of findings. In such a case, contextual effects can shape the meaning of the variables studied (e.g. norms regarding absenteeism) or influence variability in observed responses (e.g. sanctions for absenteeism or rewards for attendance). With these issues in mind, Gaudine and Saks provide detailed information regarding the setting, the meaning of the particular intervention in the cultural context of the organization, and facts regarding the broader institutional setting of Canadian health care. This contextual treatment helps us understand the intervention they introduce and its effects.

**Tier 2: Direct observation and analysis of contextual effects**

When contextual factors are an integral part of the theory and research method, organizational research can directly address the impact a setting has on the participants and the participants’ impact on the groups and firms of which they are a part. This research can be cross-level, dyadic, or multilevel. The vast majority of organizational research examining contextual effects entails at least one of the three following approaches:

1. **Direct assessment of contextual effects**
   Typically a cross-level approach, potential contextual variables that can impact results are accounted for via direct assessment of such factors as moderators or covariates (e.g. Young and Parker, 1999; Kalleberg and Rognes, 2000). Statistical controls for effects help rule out context as an explanatory factor or serve to highlight contextual dynamics.

2. **Focusing upon events**
   Typically a multilevel approach, event analysis takes advantage of opportunities to **study events with multilevel implications** (Peterson, 1998) from Y2K (though it is now a little late for that) to relocations (Eby and DeMatteo, 2000) to organizational change efforts (Gaudine and Saks, 2001; Rousseau and Tijoriwala, 1999). Such events are ‘on-goings,’ an intersection of an action with its context. Events associated with organizations are often multilevel in their causes and effects (Weick’s 1990 study of the Tenerife disaster is a classic illustration). Event studies typically specify the actors, roles, relationships, and setting characteristics (physical, social, and cultural).

3. **Examining configurations or bundles of practices**
   In this approach, co-occurring conditions are the focus of study. A configurational approach with multiple factors that are often (though not necessarily) at the same level of analysis, it takes advantage of opportunities to **study specific practices** (e.g. concurrent engineering or performance appraisal) implemented across settings; (Kozlowski and Klein, 2000). Bundles of practices are the subject of recent research on the tendency of certain human resource practices to co-occur (Huselid, 1995; Pil and MacDuffie, 1996). This research suggests that it may be difficult to interpret the connections between component practices, such as contingent pay or training, and worker and firm performance in isolation from other related practices.
Illustrations

To illustrate these three ways of directly focusing on contextual factors, let’s consider a frequent topic of study: worker mobility. Worker mobility can be defined as the voluntary turnover from one employer motivated by worker opportunity to accept a job with another. Because of the aforementioned globalization of OB research, we now have studies of worker mobility in many countries. One thing is apparent: understanding worker mobility requires contextual analysis because people, and labour markets, are linked to locations.

Let us contrast the dynamics of worker mobility in two contexts where research has been published in JOB – Singapore and the U.S. state of Georgia. Worker mobility in Singapore is among the highest in Asia, particularly among skilled workers. Evidence indicates that mobility in this country is shaped by traditional factors such as economic growth and opportunity, as well as by variations in worker commitment shaped by employer treatment (Chay and Aryee, 1999). But high mobility in Singapore can also be attributed to the relative ease and low cost of job change. Singapore is an island-based city-state where people can change jobs without changing their residence. This ease of mobility can itself encourage people to change employers, even when traditional turnover motivators (dissatisfaction or external opportunity) are less common than observed elsewhere. Ease of mobility has a different meaning when many people have it than when few do. Costs associated with leaving one’s employer, already lowered by the ability to retain one’s residence, can be further reduced when exiting becomes commonplace. Social networks are a major source of employment opportunity, and considerable investment in network ties can pay off over a lifetime in the same community, as well as creating a basis for comparing job quality (and ultimately, job satisfaction) with one’s peers. In sum, ease of mobility in Singapore promotes turnover through a host of contextual factors (Ang et al., 2000).

Now take the contrasting case of low-mobility regions such as rural Georgia. We would expect different thresholds for predictor variables—such as job dissatisfaction and opportunity for promoting turnover—in Georgia than in Singapore due to the distinct personal and social consequences associated with mobility in each setting (Spell and Blum, 2000). In Georgia, mobility can be relatively costly to workers, and employment opportunities can vary greatly depending on one’s location within the state.

To specify the underlying causal forces on worker mobility in Georgia or in Singapore requires consideration of what seem to be veritable constants (the ease or difficulty of mobility) as well as the variables (the abundance or lack of employment opportunity) within each setting. Accounting for the effects of context on mobility requires a focus on forces shaping the ease of mobility. At minimum, it entails specification of worker-level human capital factors, opportunities within the labour pool in which a worker participates (person–situation interaction), geographic location (which might be a polycategorical variable for the Georgia sample – rural/suburban/urban – and a constant for Singaporeans), mobility costs (limited to an issue of commuting time for Singaporeans, but more complex for Georgians depending on where they live), and norms regarding mobility (presumably high for Singaporeans and less so for Georgians). If our study assessed only Singaporeans, we might go so far as to omit mobility costs from the equation because the variability is so low, but we would probably take pains to correctly operationalize it in our Georgia sample, where the factor’s variation and likelihood of yielding a significant effect are higher. Nonetheless, ease of mobility is pertinent to understanding the mobility in both populations.

An event focus on mobility might examine how factory start-ups in Georgia or Singapore access workers. The research would consider the role of human capital, the ease of access to relevant labour pools, the resources associated with particular locations, and what practices are used to offset any mobility costs workers incur in joining the firm, in order to highlight the multilevel processes affecting worker mobility. A configurational approach might look at the sets of activities on the part of workers and/or of the firms engaged to assist with recruitment, and note the distributions of practices that promote recruitment and retention.
**Tier 3: comparative studies**

Comparative studies are an important means of advancing OB research by examining phenomena across settings that have powerful institutional and cultural differences. Much of this research focuses on cross-national issues such as cultural effects (Brett *et al.*, 1996) or organizational change (Walton, 1987). In doing comparative studies across institutions and cultures, a set of steps have been used to provide a basis for comparison. Research examining human resource practice bundles in factories across several nations has followed some of these practices (e.g. Pil and MacDuffie, 1996). The steps include:

1. Describe the phenomena in each setting that are to be compared (e.g. define ‘absence’ or job in the different contexts under study).
2. When comparing apparently similar phenomena, identify common core features that make up the phenomena originating in different settings (e.g. absenteeism might be conceptualized in each location as non-attendance in a pre-specified workplace, over some specified time interval, where the non-attendance is voluntary, and the social meanings associated with the behavior are similar).
3. Establish comparables for the functionality and significance of the phenomena in each setting (e.g. absences may be trivial among professionals who manage their own time but a significant deviation from standard for clerical workers who must obtain permission to be absent).
4. Specify an underlying causal model reflecting sensitivity to variations and commonalities across settings (represent individual and situational factors).
5. Establish the relevance or equivalence of variables to be observed (construct validity).
6. Develop appropriate assessment instruments and data collection methods consistent with the underlying dimensionality of the constructs across settings (e.g. back translation).
7. Articulate decision rules for interpreting data, quantitatively or qualitatively. Such work is likely to mix induction and deduction.

Alternatively, we note that Brett and her colleagues (1996) suggest that cultural differences may be so great as to necessitate wholly different concepts to address the same research question in different cultures. Doing so permits inclusion of ‘emic’ concepts (that is, those with meaning unique to the particular setting), as opposed to ‘etic’ concepts that have cross-setting generalizability. An essential focus of comparative research is the comparability of meanings attached to the phenomena studied. Comparative research in either etic or emic form is still relatively infrequent in organizational research, particularly in studies focused on the experiences of workers rather than firms. Clearly, there will be experimentation and innovation. *JOB* looks to encourage the publication of such work.

**In the Context of JOB**

So what are the implications of contextualization in the context of *Journal of Organizational Behavior*? We invite our colleagues to construct their research reports and theory development with greater attention to and discussion of the variability underlying the phenomena they study and how it links to the context of the study. The three levels of contextualization described specify some of the choices researchers have available for better specifying contextual factors in research.

Despite a long history of concern regarding contextual factors in OB, few norms exist regarding how to take these into account appropriately. In real estate, the mantra is ‘location, location, location,’ shaping the value of a property and the legal factors that affect its sale. In a social setting we might also
want to add ‘roles, roles, roles’ to the ‘location mantra.’ In organization research, where we conduct
our studies entails geographic, temporal and cultural factors that must be accounted for in designing,
assessing, implementing, and interpreting research. These factors also influence the roles of research
participants, from whom and about whom we gather information. The effects of organizational
context receive special attention in recent theory building (e.g. Chan, 1998; Goodman, 2000). We
wish to promote its extension to empirical as well as theoretical work. The editors and review board
at JOB recognize the need to explore and develop alternative ways for contextualizing organizational
research. We encourage researchers to use JOB as a supportive setting in which that learning can
occur.

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