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People, Places and Time in Research Design and Reporting: Responding to Commentaries on Particularism by Maris G. Martinsons and Robert M. Davison

We detect a remarkable consistency in the four commentaries on our original article. We are grateful to each commentator for a constructive and thought provoking contribution. We are pleased by their general agreement that our message is timely, important and reasonable while characterizing it as “deliciously provocative and well-argued”, as well as a breath of fresh air.

Each commentary focuses primarily on examining the relative value of particularism and universalism. This is commendable. As Urquhart (forthcoming) insists, creating a dichotomy between particularism and universalism is convenient yet false. As researchers or even casual observers, we tend to consider a continuum of states from the most specific particular to the most abstract universal, each shading imperceptibly into the next.

We are pleased that Pavlou et al. (forthcoming) agree with our basic assertion that “researchers are better off conducting context-specific research to avoid getting into the trap of universalism and trying to prove the generalizability of research findings in a futile fashion from their generally narrow context ...”. However, we worry that setting generalizability as “the ultimate goal for researchers” is unrealistic. It falsely implies that a complex world can eventually be simplified. Instead, as Sarker (forthcoming) has asserted, we believe in the need to find the right balance between particularism and universalism in our research endeavours.

While Fernandez (forthcoming) adds to our argument by noting that context also has agency power, Sarker (forthcoming) highlights the nebulous and multi-dimensional nature of context. Thus, it is useful to sub-divide ‘context’ into sub-categories. The division proposed by Johns (1996) to answer the questions of who, where, when and why and also identify the “levers that shape behaviour or attitudes” (p. 391) is sensible. This type of classification, theorisation and deep probing is an essential part of intensive methods like action research (Davison et al., 2012).

We are thankful for the reminder from Pavlou et al. (forthcoming) that Seddon and Scheepers (2012) provided guidance with several alternative logical pathways to justify generalizability. However, as they admit, while many authors in the IS discipline have called for generalization, very few have provided tangible recommendations. Thus, we welcome Pavlou’s identification of replication, triangulation, and inter-disciplinary studies as valuable paths to generalize context-specific findings. We agree that the thoughtful combination and replication of contextual studies “can help us to cautiously make (some) generalizable claims”.

Sarker (forthcoming) offers some more specific and potentially fruitful but also challenging approaches to achieve the delicate balance between abstractions incorporating contextual specificity and their generality. By iterating between adaptation, empirical examination, and a theoretical reformulation with new contextual elements, we do foresee the development of a context-sensitive theory. Significantly, we agree that this can not be accomplished in a single study. Instead, we recommend a linked series of studies that involve different instantiations and contexts. The cumulative findings from such a research agenda are likely to achieve two important outcomes. First, they should reveal the influence of the context on the phenomenon. Second, the inclusion of assorted societal contexts helps to counter the charge of IT colonialism.

The time dimension of context has been neglected to date in this debate. Not only do contexts vary by the ‘spirit of place’, but they also vary temporally. We are grateful to the JIT editors for encouraging us to highlight the importance of time as a contextual variable. For example, the (People’s Republic of) China that we study in 2016 is decidedly different from the same country in 1996, as it prepared to resume sovereignty over Hong Kong in the following year. It is legitimate to ask if the management information systems in the current Chinese business culture are still the same as those for which Martinsons and Westwood (1997) developed their explanatory theory. Even more so, today’s China is almost unrecognizable to those who last saw it (or lived there) in 1976, as China emerged from the Cultural Revolution. Thus, findings reported in the literature decades years ago have increasingly less relevance to either the current situation or studies undertaken recently. For instance, the relationship-based e-commerce that prevails in China was not easily predictable, partly due to its stark variance from models found in Western economies (Martinsons, 2008). Conversely, many technologies for information processing and particularly communication are applied in similar ways all around the world.

Consequently, some changes over time associated with IT are less particular in terms of space or place. For instance, resistance to the implementation of IT used to be a major theme of IS research. IT is now so ubiquitous that resistance is largely of historical interest. Nevertheless, we have documented a new form of resistance (Davison and Ou, forthcoming). Digitally literate employees insist on using digital apps that constitute orthotic extensions of their personae (Clarke, 2011). Unfortunately, some organisations discourage or even prohibit the use of social media in the workplace. Thus, a new form of resistance and conflict has emerged. This time it is the corporate management that is resisting what may be inevitable change.

We suggest that particularistic studies probing new phenomena will be most valuable in the early stages of research. We agree with Sarker that abstracting too close to the context can lead to “description” and “local truths” while limiting the transferability of findings. However, with proper care, researchers can identify and relate seed concepts in the emergent context of new phenomena. Here researchers seek to understand how the technology is applied, how it adds value, and why it is adopted. Action research and grounded theory work may be particularly valuable at this early stage as the initial tentative theories are formed. Conducting a variety of contextually specific studies will be essential if a broad appreciation of the phenomenon is to be achieved. Assuming that the phenomenon is not a fleeting fad and that a cumulative body of work can be assembled, a genuinely general theory should emerge from the findings of many particular studies. However, time does not stand still. Some phenomena survive the passage of time. Electronic mail is a remarkable example whose origins date back to the 1960s. Other phenomena fall by the wayside and are more or less gently consigned to oblivion. For example, the more extreme variants of Business Process Re-engineering are essentially extinct.

Our original thesis was developed by highlighting many contextual deficiencies in the existing literature. However, there are undeniably some well-designed studies that are sensitive to the context. We are grateful to Fernandez for citing Su (2015) as an IS study that thoroughly considers context in its design, execution and reporting. We suggest that a recently published

study of how green IS initiatives became part of a Nordic bank's overall strategy and sustainability process (Hedman and Henningson, 2016) represents another exemplar.

To summarize, a temporal as well as a cultural, institutional and spatial perspective of context is important. When designing a study we need to review prior work carefully. We should ensure that it is relevant for the purpose at hand before we build upon it. We also should not rush into universalism or generalizability. Our review mechanisms should also not demand universality from all studies, especially where no universality is intended. Claims towards generalizability must depend on the consistent synthesis of a sufficient amount of particular evidence.

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