

PROVOCATION PAPER

Concepts, contexts, and mindsets: Putting human resource management research in perspectives

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Abstract

Why is context important in human resource management (HRM) research? What and how contextual factors may be studied when investigating an organisational phenomenon? Against a positivist trend of decontextualisation in HRM research, this paper addresses these questions by situating them in an international context. It argues that context is important in making sense of what is happening at workplaces in order to provide relevant solutions. It also outlines three layers of context and draws on an empirical story to illustrate how the utilisation and conceptualisation of context may be underpinned by the researcher's intellectual and social upbringing and theoretical orientation. The paper calls for more qualitative studies to redress the imbalance in HRM research. It also calls for a more open-minded, inductive, and inclusive approach to indigenous research that may present very different contexts, ways of contextualising, and knowledge paradigms from the dominant discourses prevailing in HRM research.

KEYWORDS

Asia, context, corporate social responsibility, international HRM, multinational company, work-life balance

1 | INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, management scholars have become more like hedgehogs: focused on narrowly specified research questions, and applying a clearly defined, highly sophisticated research methodology (Meyer, 2014: 374).

The trend of decontextualisation in research on organisational behaviour (OB) and human resource management (HRM) at the firm and individual level in the past two decades is undoubtedly discernible (e.g., Jackson, Schuler, & Jiang, 2014; Kaufman, 2015). This is perhaps not surprising given the dominance of the U.S. paradigm in management and organisation research, which has been traditionally biased toward the generation of universal, general, or context-free knowledge (Rousseau & Fried, 2001). Although micro-level HRM studies that are increasingly having an OB focus might have become less sensitive to context as critics have observed, research in the international

HRM field, for example, HRM of multinational companies (MNCs) and cross-country comparative studies of HRM, has remained sensitive to context (c.f. Brewster, Mayrhofer, & Smale, 2016; Cooke, Veen, & Wood, 2017). However, in both domestic and international HRM research, context is often projected as a descriptive given or an analytical framework, which presumes/implies an objective nature of the context.

Although acknowledging the importance of having a set of (objective) contextual factors to frame one's research, and indeed, this may be a prerequisite for some studies, this paper takes one step further by highlighting the subjective nature of HRM research that may influence not only what researchers choose to include as contextual factors but also how to conceptualise them. The active role of researchers in conceptualising organisational phenomenon has been observed. For example, Porter (1962) illustrated that each social scientist, when analysing the same scenario, sees a different problem from their own disciplinary perspective and offers a different solution and in fact both the problem and solution may lie elsewhere. Sackmann and Phillips (2004) also demonstrated how the conceptualisation of culture may be influenced by societal-specific context and researchers' disciplinary background and methodological paradigm.

Interpreting organisational phenomenon might become an even more intellectually challenging, though no less rewarding, undertaking in an international HRM setting. This is in part because the globalised economy has not only created a global (labour) supply chain of production and service activities but also led to the diffusion, albeit partial, and often with adaptation, of various western-originated management concepts and techniques in (less developed) host countries with different institutional environment and cultural traditions (e.g., Rubery & Grimshaw, 2003; Wise, 2013). However, there remains an "overwhelming dominance of US values, interests, and theoretical perspectives in the development of global management knowledge (Tsui, 2007)" (Jack et al., 2013: 148). Such dominance, often in the guise of management theorising, "left 'non-Western' or 'southern' knowledge at the margins" of the international management discipline (Jack et al., 2013: 148). Furthermore, Jack and Westwood (2006) have pointed out the political nature of qualitative research in not only the methodological choice but also the way data are conceptualised as a continuation of postcolonialism in international business research. As Westwood and Jack (2007: 262) critiqued: International business and management research "has persisted with a limited and limiting paradigmatic location within structural functionalism and with attendant conservative commitments in terms of ontology, epistemology, methodology, ethics and the politics of research practice."

The aim of this paper is threefold: (a) to argue for reinserting context more firmly in the study of HRM phenomena through in-depth qualitative studies; (b) to exemplify how context may be interpreted from different disciplinary perspectives; and (c) to call for a more open-minded, inductive, and inclusive approach to indigenous research, particularly from less developed and less well-researched countries that may present very different contexts, ways of contextualising, and knowledge paradigms from existing dominant discourses in the HRM literature. Drawing data from fieldwork of an MNC conducted in Sri Lanka, this paper illustrates how the utilisation and conceptualisation of context in HRM research may be underpinned by the researcher's intellectual and social upbringing and theoretical orientation. It demonstrates how context may be operationalised from different perspectives and examined at different levels, each focusing on particular aspects of the phenomenon under investigation.

Although some of the arguments I make in this paper are not new in management literature, these arguments have received relatively limited attention in the HRM field, which is increasingly OB and quantitative oriented (Kaufman, 2015). The intention of this paper is thus to encourage researchers in the HRM field to re-engage with qualitative studies to examine HRM phenomena against a popular trend of sophisticated quantitative studies that often decontextualise the study from the rich world of reality. It is also the intention of this paper to encourage (western-trained) researchers to expose themselves to new research sites, new phenomena, and new ways of conceptualisation to redress the imbalance of a western-centric state of affairs in the field of HRM research. A western-centric approach to studying an Asian HRM phenomenon, for example, will constrain not only how research questions are framed and what questions are asked or not asked but also how they are asked, what solutions are proposed, and how the phenomenon is conceptualised, on some occasions, ignoring, contrary to/distorting the empirical evidence that exists. Indeed, a number of influential authors (e.g., Meyer, 2006; Tsui,

2004, 2009; Whetten, 2009) have cogently argued for more Asia-oriented management research and theorisation and highlighted challenges to do so. This paper reiterates this argument more specifically for the HRM field.

2 | CONTEXT AND DECONTEXTUALISATION IN HRM RESEARCH

The field of HRM research has proliferated with new concepts and increasingly sophisticated instruments, models, and analytical techniques in the last three decades (e.g., Paauwe, Guest, & Wright, 2013). However, critics have observed that the burgeoning number of HRM studies has neither proved the causal link between certain types of HRM practices and organisational performance nor has this body of increasingly positivist-oriented research brought significant advancement in our understanding of the complexity of organisational life to make our research relevant to management practices (e.g., Alvesson, 2009; Jackson et al., 2014; Kaufman, 2015). As Kaufman (2015: 396) observed in his 30-year anniversary review of HRM, the basic conceptualisation of strategic HRM "has remained the same over the three decades."

Boxall and Macky (2009) argued that the very concept of a high-performance work systems is ethnocentric because some practices defined as a high-performance work practice (HPWP) in a North American context are legally mandated or institutionally impossible in other national contexts. Similarly, other authors (e.g., Edwards, 2009; Thompson, 2011) critiqued that mainstream HR research mostly omits higher level political economy considerations and context, such as individualist/collectivist cultural differences, liberal/coordinated state economic direction, and low/high unemployment in labour markets. In their comprehensive review of 154 studies of strategic HRM, Jackson et al. (2014) revealed that extant research on HRM and performance tends to provide only superficial treatment of organisational culture, often as a mediator or moderator. Jackson et al. (2014: 14) pointed out an "organisation's culture reflects deeply embedded values and beliefs, which are conceptually related to HRM philosophies, but such philosophies are a poorly understood element of HRM systems (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004)." Jackson et al.'s (2014) review further found that unlike earlier models of strategic HRM that emphasised the importance of both internal and external environments, recent models have become internally focused and preoccupied with identifying the "best way." As such, "empirical research usually relegated contextual characteristics to the status of mere 'control variables'" (Jackson et al., 2014: 16). For example, of the 154 studies included in Jackson et al.'s (2014: 16) review, "only 30 examined environmental characteristics as antecedents of HRM systems." In highlighting this research limitation, Jackson et al. (2014) argued that in assessing a firm's strategic HRM, it is important to examine a firm's external environment, including, amongst other important dimensions, national and regional cultures (see also Schuler and Jackson (2005: 15) on a contextual and dynamic framework for strategic HRM).

What these authors accentuated is the significance of context in making sense of HRM practices and their likely effect. Indeed, a number of authors have, against a growing trend of decontextualisation of organisational/management research, called for more attention to context in organisational/management research for intellectual and practical reasons (e.g., Child & Marinova, 2014; Johns, 2006; Schuler & Jackson, 2005; Shapiro, Von Glinow, & Xiao, 2007). Johns (2006: 386) defines "context as situational opportunities and constraints that affect the occurrence and meaning of organizational behavior as well as functional relationships between variables." Johns (2006) contends "that the impact of context on organizational behavior is not sufficiently recognized or appreciated by researchers" (p. 386) "The point being made here is not that context is never studied. Rather, it is that its influence is often unrecognized or underappreciated" (p. 389).

Child and Marinova (2014) argue that powerful theory comes from understanding details of a contextual setting. Context is important in understanding the real world because it provides insightful information about the organisational and environmental setting, the climate of the organisation or setting, history or conditions influencing the situation, and the broader current concerns or issues within which a particular organisational phenomenon is being examined. In other words, context affects organisational behaviour (Johns, 2006). The need to understand context is even more paramount in the international context, as Schuler and Jackson (2005) argued in the context

of MNCs, in part to bridge the cognitive gap derived from societal differences. For example, Shapiro et al. (2007: 133) “use the term ‘polycontextuality’ to sensitize [indigenous scholars] to the fact that contexts can include verbal- and non-verbal-nuances that [may be] difficult to observe” but are critically important nonetheless in the conduct of research. The North American dominance has been attributed to the neglect of context in management research. For example, Shapiro et al. (2007: 147) maintain “North Americans rarely look to ‘historical’ interpretations of context, given our short ‘history’; however, this is clearly not the case in China. The polycontextualisation method is like a ‘kaleidoscopic’ approach to viewing China with multiple and different lenses.” In short, there is a consensus that management concepts and issues need to be studied in specific contexts to understand the nuances.

3 | HOW IS CONTEXT OPERATIONALISED? MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF CONTEXT

But how is context operationalised? A stock taking of the literature suggests that context has been viewed through many lenses and at multiple levels of analysis (e.g., Cooke, 2016; Cooke et al., 2017; Jia, You, & Du, 2012). For example, Johns (2006) identifies multiple facets of contexts as follows:

- context as the salience of situational features;
- context as situational strength;
- context as a cross-level effect;
- context as a configuration or bundle of stimuli;
- context as an event;
- context as a shaper of meaning; and
- context as a constant.

Similarly, Shapiro et al. (2007) proposed a number of categories of contextual variable, ranging from environmental/external to cognitive/internal dimensions (see Table 1). The comprehensive literature review of studies of HRM in MNCs by Cooke (2016) and of cross-country comparative studies of HRM by Cooke et al. (2017) also reveal a diverse range of contexts at various levels considered by authors, with a heavy focus on the institutional and cultural context at the macro level and organisational context at the micro level. In particular, studies of HRM in MNCs rely quite heavily on varieties of capitalism (Hall & Soskice, 2001) and business systems (Whitley, 1999) as influential strands of institutional theories for their contextual analysis (see Cooke, Wood, Wang, & Veen, 2016 for a comprehensive review). These various contextual dimensions are useful and important sense-making prompts for researchers trying to understand different contextual phenomena.

But having a list of contextual prompts may account for only part of the sense-making experience. This is because research paradigm and cognitive understanding are shaped by ideologies and mindsets that the researcher is associated with in their intellectual and social upbringing. Although Johns' (2006) and Shapiro et al.'s (2007) lists, and those revealed by others (e.g., Cooke, 2016; Cooke et al., 2017), reflect some of these elements, the implicit assumption is that these contextual factors exist out there for the researcher to capture.

The fact that the researcher plays an important role in screening the context and in sensitising the findings has not been given due to recognition in the discussion of the need for more attention to the role of context in management research. As Samuel P. Huntington (1996) wrote in his *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of World Order*, “[e]very civilization sees itself as the center of the world and writes its history as the central drama of human history.” Huntington (1996) went on to demonstrate the rivalry between the western and eastern civilisations, with particular reference to democracy and religious values. Each asserting its superiority. But the difference is not just between the “East” and the “West”—even within the “western” context, there exist different theoretical perspectives. And this gives rise to what could be categorised as the subjective context, as discussed in the next section.

TABLE 1 Categories of contextual variables that span “ways of knowing”

Category	Possible contextual variables (dimensions)
Temporal-spatial	Historical Geographical Time Personal space
Environmental	Technical Economic Political Social
Cultural	Behaviours and artefacts Values Assumptions and beliefs
Psychological	Cognitive Affective Emotional
Philosophical	Aesthetic Moral Spiritual
Communication	Verbal Facial expression Gestures Body language
Sensory	Visual Auditory Kinaesthetic

Source: Shapiro et al. (2007: 132)

4 | CONTEXT OR CONTEXTUALISATION?

There are at least three levels/layers of contexts in HRM research (see Figure 1). The first level is the descriptive context. This may include, for example, demographics and characteristics of the individuals/workforce, company, industry and country, which are what existing studies have largely focused on and for many quantitative studies to use as control variables, and for some, to be controlled out (for a critique, see Jackson et al., 2014). They are often treated as the factual findings or factual context based on which to make sense of the findings. A second level is the analytical context, which often focuses on higher levels than the individuals and organisations and on broader phenomena, such as the institutional, cultural, and structural context of the firm/HRM issues examined, as we have often seen in international HRM studies (for a review, see Cooke et al., 2017). A third level is the subjective context, which may build on, and is arguably more important than the first two levels, that underpins our conceptualisation of the empirical data. It is informed by the researchers' cognitive understanding of what they see, as well as how they interpret what they have seen that is informed by their disciplinary and ideological preference/background. So much so that a context may not be a context, but multiple, and at times even competing, interpretations of a given phenomenon.

The multilevel/layer context I propose here builds on but is distinct from existing multilevel (e.g., macro, meso, and micro) frameworks advanced by other authors (e.g., Kwon, Farndale, & Park, 2016) in the analysis of HRM issues or multilocal frameworks of MNCs that straddle host and home countries contexts (c.f. Meyer, Mudambi, & Narula, 2011). More specifically, my framework emphasises the analytical lens and subjective role of researchers rather than factual/spatial levels of analysis. Although the first two levels of the context are more commonly examined in HRM research, the third is often left implicit and underplayed.

It should be noted that the boundary between the three layers as indicated in Figure 1 is for the clarity of discussion. In reality, the boundaries between the three overlap rather than being clear cut. For example, the choice

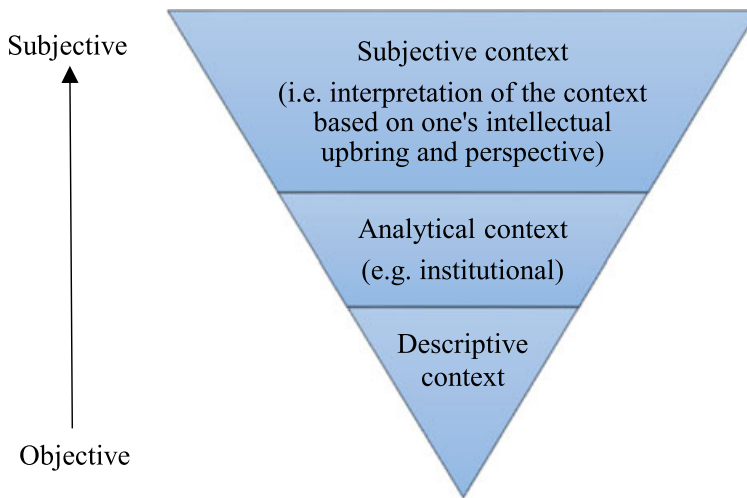


FIGURE 1 Context or contextualisation? Different levels of understanding context [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

of what contextual factors to include in this study invariably contains a subjective element and the analytical context may to some extent reflect the disciplinary preference of the researcher (c.f. Sackmann & Phillips, 2004). In other words, the three layers form a spectrum from a relatively objective description (e.g., a list of demographic contextual factors) to a more subjective interpretation of the context as a more sophisticated intellectual understanding of the phenomenon being studied. The first layer represents input, that is, what data to collect/include for the analysis, whereas the third layer concerns with how the data are interpreted, which is part of the research output.

As argued earlier, the challenge of understanding the subtlety of context and the scope for different theoretical interpretations will be greater, and more exciting, in the international HRM field (e.g., De Cieri, Cox, & Fenwick, 2007; Kostova, Roth, & Dacin, 2008). In the next section, I will illustrate this through the story of implementing a corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiative in an MNC in the Sri Lankan context. I choose CSR as the topic because it is a western concept that has gained much attention in economic globalisation with an aim to shape the development of transnational norms and standards, particularly through the involvement of MNCs (e.g., Williams, Davies, & Chinguno, 2015). Although HRM in Asian countries continues to be heavily influenced by their respective institutional and cultural traditions, changes in HRM at the workplace level are marked by the adoption of western HRM practices as a perceived more modern and strategic approach to people management (Cooke & Kim, 2017). As we shall see below, the implementation of a CSR initiative triggers changes in HRM practices and new ways in which employees are involved/managed. I chose Sri Lanka as a locale for an example because it is an Asian nation with a rich history and had been involved in a civil war for 26 years until 2009, which led to heavy disruption in its development, and is in a process of rebuilding and catching up. It has since been increasingly engaged with the global economy as a favourable destination country for offshore outsourcing and foreign direct investment (e.g., Wickramasinghe & Mahmood, 2017) but has been less well featured in major HRM journals than some other Asian countries.

5 | IMPLEMENTING A CSR INITIATIVE IN A SRI LANKAN GARMENT FACTORY AS AN EXAMPLE

5.1 | The case¹

GarmentCo (pseudonym) is a Hong Kong-owned multinational garment manufacturing company that has been operating in Sri Lanka for nearly 20 years. Its shopfloor workers are primarily young women from villages. The

company needs to comply with international standards, including the International Labour Organisation labour standards and ISO standards, such as environment protection, occupational health and safety (OHS) protection for employees and so forth, in order to meet the auditing requirement of its international client firms, which are mainly large western retail corporations. But GarmentCo wanted to go beyond the compliance approach to implementing international standards. A number of initiatives were launched. One of them was the CSR initiative, which was sophisticated with comprehensive schemes targeting external stakeholders as well as employees internally.

One major aspect of the CSR initiative was to raise employees' awareness of environment protection and OHS. The company involved employees in the initiative by first asking them to consider safety hazards in their home environment and share their thoughts in the company through drama play, cartoons on billboards, and so forth. Employees were encouraged to involve their families, particularly their children, to participate in the activities. The idea was that starting from the home environment would better motivate employees to be engaged with the initiative because it was closely related to their own interest. As the CSR Manager interviewed said:

Sri Lanka is a collectivist society and the company needs to show that it cares about its workers and their family in order to win their cooperation. Having the employees' children involved in the CSR initiative is a great way of engaging them with the initiative. Employees are very proud that their children's art works are displayed at the workplace. It gives them something to talk about and be very proud of.

Once this round of home safety environment assessment was completed, employees were then asked to consider safety hazards in their immediate work environment and give suggestions, and so forth. This exercise would then be broadened to the factory environment as a whole. The shop floor workforce was divided into teams based on production lines. Each team's CSR initiative participation and performance was rated and published on the wall in the workshop. A monthly quiz was held to test the workers' knowledge on their work environment and OHS issues. The winning team was awarded prizes, including lunch with the General Manager (GM), who is a middle aged Scotsman.

According to the managers and employees interviewed, the winning employees felt very honoured to have the opportunity to lunch with the GM because it was a very rare occasion that shopfloor workers could sit at the same table as the GM, and enjoy a good lunch and conversations together. As a female worker remarked:

It was a very precious occasion for me and my family was very proud of me. It was so good to be able to speak with the GM about our life and family. I found that he is just a human like us. He has two children too and has the same issues with them as we do with our children at home.

6 | INTERPRETING THE CASE²

If we analyse the above story of CSR initiative and management practices from different management perspectives, we may come up with rather different foci and critiques stemming from distinctive intellectual orientations. Take humanistic (soft) HRM, strategic management, critical management studies, and international HRM as examples for a brief illustration below—and I wish to acknowledge my considerable simplification here in describing the perspectives and ignoring the considerable variations and different analytical angles within each perspective.

Scholars from the humanistic (soft) HRM perspective would applaud GarmentCo's approach to extensive employee involvement (which was extended to their families) in implementing the CSR initiative with employees' interest at its heart. The case would be exemplary of good management practices in developing and implementing CSR initiatives that take into account the characteristics of the workforce and societal culture in which the (foreign) firm operates. Here, employee involvement, empowerment, and engagement would be seen the key success factors in implementing HRM to improve organisational performance. Through the CSR initiative and activities, employees-management relationships have become more harmonised, if superficially, as a result of the employee care

rhetoric and strong family values of Sri Lankan society. Peer pressure, and those who may not subscribe to this rhetoric, are not mentioned. It is a unitarist perspective and largely internally focused on the individuals, their family, and the organisation. It highlights the interdependence between the firm and the employees and the good will that is generated through employee-oriented HRM practices. It is the type of HRM that is described by Guest (1990: 379) as "American, optimistic, apparently humanistic and also superficially simple."

Similarly, scholars from the strategic management perspective may highlight the important role of effective communication in implementing new initiatives/management practices. Here, the management may be endorsed for strategically adopting an incremental approach to secure the buy-in from the workforce when initiating organisational change. Strategic management scholars may also draw our attention to the role of artefacts and story-telling in strategy implementation as an organisational process and a part of organisational life, and as effective intermedia and data in themselves, in management research. Similar to the humanistic/soft HRM perspective, the strategic management perspective is management oriented and internally focused. It is top-down, with employee involvement and engagement as a key condition for success. Through material and intrinsic rewards, employees have been incentivised to cooperate with the management to achieve organisational goals as shared goals. The bottom line is to improve organisational performance through strategically projecting the firm as a progressive one that embraces international norms and standards.

By contrast, scholars from the critical management studies (CMS) perspective might come up with a sharp critique of the initiative, accentuating the dominance and control crafted by the management through strategic and structural legitimacy, the intersection of class, gender and race, and the resultant power imbalance and inequality. From the CMS point of view, this case demonstrates the power dynamics at workplaces. Here, the structure of management power and control is reproduced through an apparently casual setting of celebrative lunch in which the patron is a western white, male, and middle class manager, whereas the entertained are relatively young female shop floor workers, mainly from rural Sri Lanka, and earning modest wages in the lower echelon of the global value chain. Even in the seemingly benign environment of workplace socialisation, power structure, and therefore power relations, can still be reproduced to entrench inequality along the line of gender, race and class, facilitated by a society that has a profound respect for social hierarchy. The power imbalance between the management/firm and the workers means that the firm can impose on employees to spend their nonworking hours and part of their family life, unpaid, to come up with solutions that would improve the fortune of the firm. Performance is publicised in a name and shine/shame manner, thus creating undue pressure on employees to comply and to enhance their performance. In Kaufman's (2015) words, the firm is rent capturing from its employees instead of rent sharing. Those who do not subscribe to this management practice may find it difficult to openly articulate their indifference, or even to resist, as it would be seen as anti-climate, uncooperative, and even obstructive to good causes. A postmodernist strand of CMS would further consider the extent to which visual images, such as pictures and cartoons, can be used to construct a reality in social sciences research and how accurate it may be in the construction.

Finally, international HRM scholars may adopt a political economy perspective, for example, to examine the role of the institutional actors associated with the global value chain, particularly those who are remote from the production site, in shaping the nature of work of the workers through imposing specific initiatives that reflect the ideologies and motives of those in power/position to influence. This perspective draws from the CMS perspective but extends it in the international context (on the role of power and politics in examining MNCs, see also Geppert, Becker-Ritterspach, & Mudambi, 2016). Here, CSR as a western-developed politico-economic idea/ideal is imposed upon GarmentCo to legitimise its business and is adopted and configured in an Asian context with a totally different setting, institutionally and culturally. What GarmentCo workers were encouraged/required to do by their company may not be accepted by workers in western countries. Nor may the western workers feel so privileged at having award-winning lunches with their bosses, due to the greater level of equality and smaller degree of power distance in western societies than in Sri Lanka. If the first three perspectives largely focus on the organisation setting and the society as the context, then the political perspective adopted to interpret HRM in the global value chain casts the analysis in a broader international context by assessing the role of the institutional actors, including international

NGOs and foreign client firms, as the driving forces, or for some, as sources of power and hegemony, for GarmentCo's adoption of CSR initiative. Viewed from this perspective, one can see the potential for multiple levels of actions and interactions here: who are the driving forces or sources of pressure for adopting CSR, and what responses/actions may be required at various levels (e.g., international, national, industry, owner, firm, management, and workforce)?

The indication of how GarmentCo's CSR story may be interpreted from four main theoretical perspectives in HRM research, as examples, suggests that we are not dealing with context as a given or as a simple cognitive process. Rather, context may be contextualised from the lens of the researcher with theoretical preferences and subjectivity conditioned by one's intellectual and social background. This theoretical distinctiveness in the interpretation of the case and in the way different elements of the context may be drawn out or ignored suggests that there may be limited scope for interdisciplinary integration. This case also exemplifies that the context may be rather more complicated in international HRM than domestic HRM (e.g., Schuler and Jackson (2005); see also Doz (2011) on the need for more qualitative studies in international business in order to capture the richness of the context).

7 | RESEARCH SETTING AS A CONTESTED SITE FOR UNDERSTANDING CONTEXT: ASIA AS AN EXAMPLE

Existing research of HRM has been mainly conducted in developed countries or applying a western research topic to a nonwestern country with preconceived research question and theoretical framework that are insensitive to local context and history. A number of management researchers have pointed out the importance of knowledge of societal cultures in understanding the nuances of phenomena, artefacts, symbols, stories, and so forth (e.g., Shapiro et al., 2007). For example, a peony flower to a Chinese who understands poems may associate it with an ancient poem or drama in a (tragically) romantic context, whereas researchers who do not have such a preunderstanding would not be able to appreciate such a rich context behind what is seemingly a simple phenomenon, that is, peony as a beautiful flower. In short, societal context is contingent upon the individual's upbringing and knowledge structure, and it is this contingency that shapes the way we contextualise our research.

A key challenge in HRM research in the Asian context, or a nonwestern context, is that the field of HRM research continues to be heavily influenced by western-developed concepts, theories, and methodological tools.³ Despite the recognition of the importance of situating international HRM research within the changing context of social and economic conditions (e.g., Brewster, 1999; Schuler, Budhwar, & Florkowski, 2002), "US values have continued to underlie international business research over most of the past twenty-five years" (De Cieri et al., 2007: 294). And despite Meyer's (2006: 119) appeal that "Asian management research needs more self-confidence" and that indigenous researchers are developing their research capacity, they have yet to develop their own language and knowledge paradigm instead of a continuing dependence on existing western concepts, theories, and instruments (Tsui, 2004, 2009; Whetten, 2009). As such, current HRM research is dominated by western narratives and discourses as the orthodoxy, in ways similar to what Johnson et al. (2006: 532) described as "institutional ethnocentrism," and one might extend this to "cultural ethnocentrism" (see also Siebers, Kamoche, and Li (2015) for an application of Bourdieu's (1991) notion of "symbolic violence"). The dominance of certain discourses may be dangerous, intellectually and practically, as De Cieri et al. (2007: 286) argued:

There is a need to develop better understanding of the implications of language in multinational corporations and IHRM research. As an example of an enduring and prominent application of language in IHRM, we note that certain typologies and terminology depictive of IHRM have been vigorously and persistently articulated and applied. These may assist theory building and research activity as well as enhance decision choices for IHRM practitioners. The risk here is that terminology and the structuring of it into descriptive typologies can impose narrow and exclusive meanings.

Take the concept of work-life balance (WLB) as an example to illustrate De Cieri et al.'s (2007) view further. WLB is largely an American-initiated notion made popular in HRM against a context of, amongst other things, work intensification, skill shortages, and the need to develop HRM policies to accommodate employees with care responsibilities (for reviews, c.f. Fleetwood, 2007; Greenhaus, 2008). HRM intervention prescribed in western organisations, again with simplification, to increase WLB is to make work and working hours more employee friendly and allow them more time for themselves and their family. Both the premise and solution are individualistic in nature, and in some national settings, WLB policy is politically driven (e.g., Pocock, 2005) and spatially contested (Pocock, Williams, & Skinner, 2012). The assumption is that work is bad or a burden and life is good, and this needs to be balanced.

However, the cause of and solutions to, work-life/family conflicts in the collectivist Asian context differ significantly from that in the western context, primarily due to the different work-life/family values pertaining in western and oriental societies (e.g., Cooke, 2015). The western notion of WLB creates a physical and psychological boundary between work and nonwork life and the remedy of work-life conflict rests primarily outside the work domain. By contrast, the traditional Asian culture believes that work is one's obligation, that work may be fun, and that the workplace may be a source of happiness, spiritual support, and good social life where employees' families may be involved in its activities as an extended part of the company (e.g., Abu Bakar, Cooke, & Muenjohn, 2016; Cooke, 2015). Here, the Asian value systems, such as the Confucian and Islamic values, play an important role in underpinning management practices and the workforce's acceptance of work-life patterns. In this situation, applying western philosophies and management approaches to address WLB issues in the Asian context may not be a productive undertaking.

When interpreting HRM issues in the Asian context, the nexus of political ideology and societal values proves insightful. Political ideology underpins the top-down institutional environment, for example, political ideology affects the social welfare system and equality policy that may be reflected in HRM policy and practice at the organisational level. Societal values, such as the role of religiosity and Confucianism, fosters a bottom-up social setting within which HRM practices are implemented and their motives and effects perceived by the employees. Where political ideology has failed to achieve political, economic, and social equality, and this has happened in a number of Asian societies, the sense of injustice amongst those disadvantaged has to some extent been suppressed or internalised through the doctrine of social values and religious beliefs. This partially explains why workers may often tolerate management malpractices until they reach a limit and then suddenly erupt with grievances. That said, values and ideologies are changing in developing Asia, as evidenced in the rising level of labour disputes from workers, demanding a greater level of social justice (e.g., Cooke & Kim, 2017). In short, societal context for HRM research is an evolving setting instead of a static given.

8 | CONCLUSIONS

Context is important in making sense of what is happening at workplaces in order to provide relevant solutions. There have been growing calls for more attention to context in management research. These calls tend to presume context as a given (despite acknowledgement of multifacets of the context and multianalytical levels of analysis), and that if we broaden our studies (especially quantitative research) to include context in the research design as an integral part rather than variables to be controlled out, then we will be better able to sensitise research findings by embedding them in the context. This is prescriptive. HRM phenomena are often context dependent and interdependent, and how these may be embedded is an empirical question that requires in-depth and qualitative investigation. This also means that "generalisability" may not be used as a key criterion to assess the quality of each study, especially for case studies, which have the potential to reveal rich contexts and enrich our understanding of what is happening/happened, why, and so what are specific to the organisation and people studied. Generalisability is not their primary aim, nor should the lack of generalisability necessarily be seen as a limitation.

In addition, existing calls for more attention to context emphasise the need to adopt different perspectives to study the same phenomenon, suggesting that using an interdisciplinary approach will help us build a more comprehensive picture of the reality. It assumes complementariness of different perspectives and willingness to cooperate amongst researchers rooted in different disciplinary traditions. This may be the case but cannot be taken as a universal given without challenges. It requires researchers to be open-minded and receptive to other disciplinary orientation and knowledge that has been created. It also requires researchers to be more reflective of the limitations of their own discipline in approaching research phenomena.

In the academic sense, differences in understanding the world of management practices may be demarcated by disciplinary traditions as well as ideological boundaries (e.g., West vs. East). Contextual factors/variables are neither neutral nor static but viewed through the lens of the researcher with particular ideology and mindset, with some researchers being sympathetic and others critical in their interpretation of the phenomenon studied and actors involved. The coexistence of multilevels/layers of contexts and ways of contextualisation calls for not only critical realism but also tolerance of various forms of sense-making in contextualising our empirical research in HRM in different parts of the world and in constructing our knowledge paradigms that are societally sensitive and relevant. This includes, for example, allowing voices from Asia, and for that matter, other nonwestern regions, to be heard (more sufficiently) to redress the current dominance of western ideology and theorisation, often projected as universal theory, in HRM research. This requires researchers to go to the field to identify what may be confronting organisations and people there and how we can make sense of the problem and provide solutions, instead of adapting a preexisting research phenomenon/question from the West and apply it to the new site to confirm/extend the theory.

To conclude, contemplating the role of context in (international) HRM research not only is an intellectual exercise or preference but also concerns the power and authority to construct and project management reality through the voice and language mobilised by the researchers. But such an opportunity to inform and influence is not evenly distributed. More efforts are needed to make the field more diverse in epistemic/paradigmatic and geographical terms and in subject matters to be researched to reflect local realities.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ This case study was conducted by the author in 2015 in Sri Lanka. Interviews were conducted with nine shopfloor workers and six managers in two separate field trips. The author also collected many photos and documents from the company that captured various activities related to the CSR initiative.
- ² I would like to thank my colleagues (in alphabetical order): Veronique Ambrosini (strategic management), Gavin Jack (critical management studies), Susan Mayson (HRM) and Julie Wolfram-Cox (critical management studies) for their input in developing this section. Each of them was asked to interpret the case from their own field of study and their perceptions have been incorporated in this section. All errors are my responsibility solely.
- ³ I am aware of my gross simplification of the West vs. East here and that there are major differences within the two broad regimes.

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