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Toward Polycontextually Sensitive Research Methods

Debra L. Shapiro[1], Mary Ann Von Glinow[2] and Zhixing Xiao[3]

[1]*University of Maryland, USA,* [2]*Florida International University, USA, and* [3]*China Europe International Business School, China*

ABSTRACT In this paper we introduce the concept of 'polycontextuality,' which refers to multiple and qualitatively different contexts embedded within one another. We distinguish polycontextuality from the singularly contextual types of description typically provided by social scientists, and use the case of China to elucidate polycontextual phenomena. Polycontextuality can include verbal- and non-verbal nuances whose understanding is rooted in local, cognitive, emotional and even spiritual references – most of which cannot be easily observed or historically studied. For this reason we recommend the polycontexual sensitive research method to supplement the scientific deductive research typically designed to study observable phenomena based on a singular context (e.g. verbal) that are controllable by the researcher's stimuli and/or measures. Actions for increasing scholars' polycontextual sensitivity are suggested, and guidelines for the scholar interested in doing high quality indigenous research are offered, using the case of China for illustrative purposes.

KEYWORDS context, cross-cultural research, cross-culture, indigenous research, polycontextuality, research methods

INTRODUCTION

Management scholars have noted the importance of 'contextualizing' research (e.g., Rousseau and Fried, 2001), or similarly of conducting 'context-specific' or 'context-bounded' or 'context-embedded' research (Tsui, 2004). The basic idea is that researchers are encouraged to incorporate 'the context' in the theory development, measurement, design, and interpretation of the study findings when conducting indigenous research.

But what is 'the context' to which scholars should bind, embed or specify in conducting their research? Cheng (1994) suggests that context-embedded research ought to include '. . . a nation's social, cultural, legal, and economic variables as

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predictors and organizational attributes as dependent variables.' Other scholars (e.g. Blair and Hunt, 1986) have argued that the field of management appears to be biased towards context-free knowledge or knowledge that is universal and not subject to specific contextual influences. However, by definition, Tsui (2004) argues that the field of international management has different populations, and therefore contexts, which demand higher levels of contextualization for accuracy in empirical generalization. Although such contextualization will strengthen scholars' understanding of an organization under study at varying levels of analysis (i.e., individual, group, organizational and national levels), this type of contextualizing reveals only one type of context – the context that can be historically accessed, seen and/or measured by the scholar. Despite the calls for context-embedded or context-specific research, both of which hold value for doing high quality indigenous research, we argue that the traditional type of contextualization is limited insofar as context is treated as a singular phenomenon. We assert that this singular approach fails to capture the multiple qualitatively different contexts that are inherently present in any setting.

We emphasize in this paper that traditional methods for describing context (via the use of sight and/or survey assessment) are by themselves insufficient for assessing the multiple and qualitatively different contextual variables actually present in a research setting, especially indigenous ones. As a result, we advocate that Chinese scholarship needs to move towards using 'polycontextually sensitive' methods. Such research methods require strengthening the many 'senses of knowing,' or sense making, by which cultural understanding can occur (cf. Von Glinow et al., 2004). Essentially, to approach data in a polycontextual manner means to acquire knowledge of a phenomenon by utilizing multiple senses such as various forms of communication (e.g., quantitatively or qualitatively engaged) that tend to be object focused as well as various forms of senses that are more (historically and currently) contextually focused. Nisbett (2003, p. 79) uses the metaphors of 'keep your eye on the ball' vs. 'eyes in the back of your head' to refer to Westerners' and Asians' tendency to focus on objects vs. the context, respectively. The polycontextual researcher will do both of these things by drawing on many qualitatively different sources of knowing that we identify in this article. The importance of doing this, we will argue, is because data most likely to be unfamiliar, hence missed, in indigenous research will be that which are polycontextual in nature. While the latter view suggests that polycontextual research is necessary in all indigenous research, we believe this is especially true for research in 'high context cultures' such as China where meaning is often derived more from surrounding cues than from spoken or written words (Hall, 1976; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1998). The use of written or oral accounts is a singular approach that may be inadequate or even misleading in studying phenomena in contexts where the bases of knowing go beyond the verbal medium.

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This paper proceeds as follows. First, we clarify what we mean by polycontextual research methods and why such an approach improves the traditional methods used in quantitative and qualitative studies. Our clarification includes why polycontextually sensitive actions are not equivalent to 'message framing' or 'reframing', the purpose of which is to phrase a communication in a way that enhances its receptivity. For example, one can make the content more immediately understandable via the use of familiar metaphors or by choosing positive rather than negative words ('opportunity' rather than 'problem,' respectively) as descriptors (cf. Reger et al., 1994). The latter actions presume that there is only one message to get from the context, that the message content is discerned from only one data-source (i.e., a communicated message), and that (only) the speaker controls the message that is received. In contrast, the polycontextually sensitive researcher recognizes that there are multiple and qualitatively different sources of potential meaning in a context. Moreover, theoretical and empirical work regarding 'framing effects' inspired by Kahneman and Tversky's (1979, 1982) prospect theory suggests there is potentially more confusion than clarity in attempting to equate '(re)framing' dynamics with polycontextual ones. We will share a story that illustrates the general concept of polycontextuality that we believe will help make clear its meaning and distinction from reframing. Secondly, we describe several contextual experiences that are unique to China and use these to illustrate its polycontextuality. Since many aspects of polycontextuality seem to escape typical measurement tools, we review the actions identified by Von Glinow et al. (2004) that promise to increase scholars' polycontextual sensitivity and note how each of these actions will increase indigenous researchers' ability to eventually *see* what is initially unseen by them (because it is either too unfamiliar or too obvious). Consequently, this paper attempts to help indigenous researchers know what to do to make obvious both the non-obvious and the obvious.

TOWARD POLYCONTEXTUALLY SENSITIVE RESEARCH METHODS

The contextualization descriptions that scholars typically provide tend to favour descriptors that are immediately recognizable by sight or by survey assessment, such as people's gender or race, or a nation's social, cultural, legal and economic variables (e.g., Kirkman and Shapiro, 2001; Shenkar and Von Glinow, 1994; Tinsley and Brett, 2001). As such, these variables do not (at least as traditionally assessed) cross their boundaries into qualitatively different contexts, such as cognitive, sensory, emotional, aesthetic or spiritual contexts. Table 1 captures different categories of context and illustrates the myriad dimensions and variables that contribute to each category. Although Table 1 presents the categories and each of their dimensions appear to be mutually exclusive, in practice these dimensions are often co-mingled.

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Table 1. Categories of contextual variables that span 'ways of knowing'

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

In Table 1, the three relevant contextual dimensions for China are emotional, visual and historical. The importance of the historical dimension to China is obvious. There were dynastic cycles every two to three hundred years, but the strong identity of the 'Middle Kingdom' was retained. Further, this identity is strengthened by the relative isolation of China from other civilizations (Fairbank, 1989). The shadow of the past looms in almost every aspect of a Chinese person's life. For instance, Zhang (1992) argued that Asians often utilize the decision mode of 'precedence matching'. When facing a decision, instead of a detailed analysis of available information, Chinese people search folk history for a precedent that appears relevant, which confers validity and legitimacy for the actor and observers. When a precedent is found, the decision maker follows it without any further processing of decision specific details.

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Confucianism is one of the most important philosophical foundations of Chinese thinking and teaches us how to build virtues on the basis of natural emotional responses. Mencius (1970), the second most important scholar of Confucianism, identifies four natural emotional responses (*si duan*) of sympathy, shame, humility and curiosity, and explains that these are the starting point of human virtues or humanity. Nisbett's (2003) description of Confucianism suggests that the centrality of these emotions to Chinese people is due to their orientation toward life being one that reflects the belief in the (yin yang) sign of the Tao, that '. . . [t]he world is constantly changing and is full of contradictions. To understand and appreciate one state of affairs requires the existence of its opposite; what seems to be true now may be the opposite of what it seems to be' (p. 13). This belief emphasizes 'holism' – that 'every event is related to every other event' (p. 17) and 'resonance' between man, heaven and earth. This belief in resonance in turn explains the importance of 'harmony' (hence the emotions of sympathy, shame and humility). The inextricability of this thinking is illustrated by an unnamed twelfth-century neo-Confucian who Nisbett (p. 17) quotes as saying: 'The universe is my mind and my mind is the universe.'

The importance of the visual dimension lies in the very nature of Chinese language as pictographic rather than phonic. Chinese people rely far more on visual images in comparison with the Westerners' uses of abstraction found in ancient Greek philosophy. Nisbett explains:

> Chinese philosophers quite explicitly favored the most concrete sense impressions in understanding the world. In fact, the Chinese language itself is remarkably concrete. There is no word for 'size,' for example. If you want to fit someone for shoes, you ask them for the 'big-small' of their feet . . . The Chinese are disinclined to use . . . categories in any arena, but instead use expressive metaphoric language. (pp. 17–18)

While pictographic language helps Chinese process visual images easily in a holistic, relational way, logical linear functions are sacrificed. For instance, Peng (1997) notes that Western logic focuses on decomposing issues down to their unique constitutive elements and people's reasoning is grounded in the three laws of Aristotelian logic: the law of identity, the law of non-contradiction and the law of the excluded middle. These laws suggest that there is one consistent truth, which can be deduced by introducing and discarding individual propositions until contradictions are eliminated. Chinese epistemology, on the other hand, places emphasis on appreciating the totality and complexity of an entire situation, the 'big picture', and disinclined to articulate the details or formal logic underlying the big picture.

Building upon the theorizing by Von Glinow et al. (2004), we use the term 'polycontextuality' to sensitize researchers to the fact that contexts can include verbal- and non-verbal nuances that are difficult to observe or study since their roots pertain to some or all of the dimensions shown in Table 1. For this reason, we

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repeat the concern raised by Von Glinow et al., and shared by Tsui (2004), that our typical methodological toolbox, handed to us by mostly Western-trained scholars, may be ill-suited for making the non-obvious obvious, as is often required in indigenous research. Making the non-obvious obvious is similar to Whetten's (2002) idea of making the unfamiliar seem familiar. Doing this requires nominally that the researcher be able to distinguish the non-obvious from what is obvious – a feat easier said than done due to our tendency to not see the obvious.

One research action that has been advised by management scholars, such as Milliman and Von Glinow (1998), Teagarden et al. (1995), Von Glinow et al. (2004) and Tsui (2004, 2006), is to utilize local nationals as collaborators in interpretation at all phases of the research (e.g., from designing measures to interpreting data). One caution with this approach is the need to be aware that local nationals are most likely to interpret findings based solely upon the research questions, grounded theory or hypothesized relationships that are of interest to that researcher. Relationships that are outside that researcher's awareness for which s/he may not think to ask interpretive assistance are likely to be missed. Another problem with relying on local nationals for interpretive assistance is that their over-familiarity with the context may blind them to the many qualitatively different observations (Tsui, 2006). As a result, the discussion that ensues between researchers and their local counterparts – as well as the 'narrative' that ultimately serves as the record of their discussion (cf. Boje, 2001) – will probably lack many qualitatively different observations or findings that might have been included if local nationals were used in proactive, as well as reactive, ways. In summary, researchers who rely on local nationals for interpretation may encounter two types of errors: (i) that of not presenting the data they don't see – due to its being unfamiliar or non-obvious to them; and (ii) that of not presenting the data they see, but overlook – due to it being too obvious! Metaphorically, 'one cannot see the forest for the trees' or 'the fish cannot describe the water'. Both sets of errors can prove costly to the researcher seeking 'truth' in the local phenomenon.

As a result, we share Tsui and Lau's (2002) suggestion that collaborations between Western and Chinese scholars may ease researchers' ability to avoid each of these errors, since such unions promise to enable researchers to 'see' more fully the commonly held assumptions that each alone may not see. This was illustrated by several studies reviewed by Tsui and Lau. One of these is by Fahr et al. (1997). While conducting a study in Taiwan, these authors discovered that the commonly used (Western) measure of 'organizational citizenship behaviour' (OCB) needed revision in that country since actions deemed 'beyond the call of duty' in the USA were *not* necessarily seen that way in Taiwan. Their discovery of the need for a revised OCB measure in Taiwan (which included some, but not all, of the Western OCB items) could not have preceded their own exposure to the Taiwanese culture. Similarly, Chen et al.'s (2002) study of supervisory loyalty in China found they had to revise the measure of loyalty that had been used in previous (Western-located) studies to reflect

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the behaviours of loyalty identified by their study's Chinese participants. These two studies exemplify the value of Chinese-Western research collaborations in helping to illuminate what research teams lacking multiple cultural lenses may overlook. However, we wish to emphasize that these two empirical examples plus the other inductive, ethnographic ones Tsui and Lau (2002) reviewed tend to rely on one (rather than multiple) types of data – namely, verbalized or written thoughts in response to questions prompted by researchers' interviews or questionnaires. Such approaches, we argue, continue to miss the many qualitatively different contexts and insights relating to them that might be captured by polycontextually sensitive research methods. Similarly, quantitative approaches (often survey-based in behavioural research) often miss nuances that may be more easily observed in 'qualitative' (e.g., naturalistic, participant-observer based) ways. However, our traditional qualitative method still fails to convey the polycontextual nuances that we are discussing here. In the main, qualitative research tends to assume that 'the context' is comprised of what can be observed (archivally or currently) and narrated by the ethnographer (e.g., Fife, 2005). As a result, it tends to overlook non-visual and potentially other different categories of data (hence polycontextual) that may be in the qualitative setting (see Becker, 1997, for a similar and rarely shared ethnographer's view). We present a story below that illustrates polycontextuality in general and the research methods needed to assess its presence. It will help us to clarify why polycontextually sensitive actions are not equivalent to reframing strategies.

> The prisoners in a maximum security prison had little to entertain themselves with so they told jokes to each other. They had long since run out of new jokes to tell, so they simply numbered the jokes and yelled out the numbers. A new prisoner hearing '42', '64' or '108' being yelled down the hall with raucous laughter following each number asked what was happening and it was explained to him. He asked if he could try it, and his cellmate said sure. He hollered '36,' and nothing happened. Next he tried '27' and still nothing. The new prisoner finally asked his cellmate what was wrong, and he replied, 'You didn't tell them so well.' (Schank, 1990, p. 39)

Why does this story show polycontextuality? First, the story shows that the numbers being vocalized by the prisoners were nonsensical to the new prisoner; this is because their meaning was associated *with a context that preceded his knowledge of their verbalization* (i.e., the initial storytelling associated with each joke's number assignment). Secondly, even with the context of the number call-outs explained to the new prisoner, this prisoner was still unable, because he had missed the full story associated with each joke's number, to know what was funny about whatever joke numbers were yelled. Thirdly, the meaning taken by the joke number call-outs differed when these yells were made by the new prisoner rather than by those with whom each joke's full story had previously been shared; this is because the meaning associated with the jokes resulted, not only from the joke's substance, but from who

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told the joke and how. In this story, then, at least four contexts are available to the prisoners as they heard the joke numbers. They are: (i) a verbal context (the articulation of each joke's number as called out by the prisoners); (ii) a cognitive context (a memory of the joke associated with its number); (iii) an emotional context (a memory of how funny each joke was when it was initially told and then repeatedly so; and (iv) a contextual group boundary (who was 'in' vs. 'out' when each joke was initially fully understood). Researchers studying 'the prison context,' prepared to do so with tape-recordings or other forms of real-time observations would have missed all but the verbal context that was available to him/her. The polycontextual richness could not be captured by them no matter how amply they described what they saw or heard in that scene. Researchers wishing to study the prison context in a polycontextually sensitive way would, instead, need to minimally recognize that the data currently available to them was of only one dimension (i.e., verbal) and, as a result, multiple qualitatively different sources of data (such as those named above) were in need of collection before the prison related dynamics could be more accurately interpreted.

Importantly, the latter 'prescription' is shared by anthropologists who choose to live in the environment they are studying in order to maximize the many points of observation they will see across time. But unlike anthropologists, the polycontextually sensitive scholar recognizes that the multiple qualitatively different points of data available cannot be exposed to him or her via his/her own eyes and his/her own (culturally biased) interpretive abilities and his/her own (culturally biased) interview and/or survey questions. Similarly, a native Chinese person's efforts to 'reframe' the situation so that the researcher will understand what dynamics preceded his/her physical presence fails to match polycontextually sensitive actions. Reframing is a verbal strategy meant to persuade the recipient of the speaker's viewpoint (cf. Reger et al., 1994); as such, reframing illustrates just one of the dimensions shown in Table 1. Polycontextuality asks for a 'multiple-framing perspective'. We argue the need for multiple lenses in order to make sense of a different cultural context. With our meaning of polycontextuality in general now elucidated, we turn next to experiences that illustrate polycontextuality in contexts specific to China. In general, the three experiences will focus respectively on the three dimensions that we think most relevant for Chinese – the historical, the emotional and the visual dimension.

Polycontextual Experiences in China

Experience #1: Deja vu? Teaching Chinese the 'learning organization'. Imagine now you are teaching a group of senior Chinese managers the philosophy and methods of the 'learning organization'.

The company used to be a prestigious, large state owned company during the central planning era. The transition of the economy, however, changed the fate of

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the company. The income level and social status of the employees of the company had since declined quickly, until it sold the majority share to the US company you are now representing. You have been told that the performance of the company has not been ideal, largely due to the lack of both trust and cooperative spirit between the Chinese management and the Americans. Implementing a 'learning organization' is part of the management development process that headquarters has prescribed. Despite the back-to-back translation, your lecture goes well. The ideas of the learning organization seem to be well received by the audience. At the end you wish to share a punch line with your fellow Chinese managers: 'Learn, learn, learn again!' you read from the Powerpoint slide, with intonation on each word. The interpreters translate it, somebody in the audience then says something inaudible and, suddenly, the audience bursts into uncontrollable laughter. The punch line was not intended to be humourous. Embarrassed as well as puzzled, you are stunned and left wondering. Why are they laughing? Did I say something wrong?

The word murmured by someone in the audience turned out to be, 'as comrade Lenin said,' which was heard by most of the audience and created the laughter. As the founder of the Soviet system which China and other countries took as a model, Lenin made 'Learn, learn, and learn again' one of the most important teachings of the Communist Party. For a period of time, it was one of the most ubiquitous slogans across the communist world. If one traveled in China during the 1970s, you would most likely have spotted that slogan painted in large characters on walls throughout the country. The slogan was also repeated by various Chinese leaders, from Mao Zedong and Hua Guofeng, Mao's designated successor, to others, in various mass movements, to sustain the ideological passion of the Chinese people. 'Learn, learn, learn again' was thus déjà vu for those Chinese managers. This expression reminded them of the ideological craze during which people were constantly brainwashed by the new initiatives of the top leaders and, at the same time, the economy of the country was brought to the edge of collapse and average people lived a miserable life. The age of ideology (and poverty) finally ended when China began the Open Door policy and foreign investors started to come. The Chinese managers' laughter was apparently their way of coping with the historical, ideological and emotional contexts conjured up by that famous slogan. For the expatriate manager, consultant or any outsider to 30 years of China history, s/he would not be able to understand the laughter until s/he understood the multiple embedded contexts in China, which explains why that slogan was so evocative.

Experience #2: Thanking Chinese dinner hosts in their native language. The second experience we wish to describe involves a business professor who is visiting China for the first time; imagine, now, that this is you.

You have just finished dining with a group of businesspeople who have graciously offered to pay for your meal. 'Thank you' in Chinese is what you thought

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you said (xie xie); yet, the embarrassed laughter your words have provoked leads you to believe you may have said something unintended. You asked what happened. Reluctantly, your Chinese-host told you that what you thought you said was not 'thank you' but instead 'kiss, kiss!' With corrected pronunciation, you try again to thank the group who in high spirits waves a friendly goodbye as your taxi leaves the curb. You are feeling grateful that your host corrected you so you could immediately make your intended message clear; no one else had ever done so. This exchange nearly ended with an expressed meaning that could have been misinterpreted – unknowingly – by all.

This story is not hypothetical; rather, it is one of many such experiences told by Westerners after first visiting China. Such stories might be examples of 'language based' misinterpretations that occur when people of different native languages attempt to speak with each other. However, language was only one of several qualitatively different contextual factors operating during that exchange. Additionally, the norm of not correcting an authority figure (a professor) was responsible for the reluctance in modifying the professor's expression. Another possible contextual factor regards the associations people have with the initially spoken words of 'kiss, kiss'; the embarrassment felt by voicing such associations during a business related exchange contributed to the group's silence with the exception of the host. In summary, several qualitatively different contextual variables (and probably more than we know) contributed to the awkward cross-cultural exchange described above. These different contexts – verbal expressions, societal norms such as power distance, how people treat authority-figures such as professors (cf. Brockner et al., 2001; Hofstede, 1980), the appropriate behaviour in business settings – were simultaneously nested within each another, making it difficult to ascertain which contextual variable caused the tension or which combination of contextual variables caused embarrassment during the cross-cultural exchange. Von Glinow et al. (2004, p. 572) note that the embeddedness of contexts is illustrated any time we use one contextualization convention (or localized speaking mannerism) along with another.

> For example, someone says, 'I am dead serious' while using the nonverbal 'eye-wink.' This embeds one convention within another. People with profound and intuitive cultural knowledge know which convention to 'read' for meaning, but even people who are quite familiar with a culture may not understand when words are negated by behaviour.

The above illustration shows how an embedded context conveyed by verbalized words and nonverbal actions apparently contradicting each other can occur.

Experience #3: Sitting at a dinner table in China. The next 'China experience' was provided to us by a native of Hong Kong regarding her initial experiences as a dinner guest in Beijing.

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> There is a ritual about seating in any official function in China. When I first got there, I would sit wherever I was asked and it is usually a chair facing the door . . . Now, I always refuse to be seated at the asked location first. Eventually, I might end up sitting where they want me, but refusing in the beginning is the right thing to do, culturally. Hong Kong people do not have such a custom at small official dinner gatherings even though there is a separate custom about 'seating' in large formal banquets. (On such occasions, the important people are at the same table which usually has a different colour table cloth and pre-arranged name cards arranged according to the status of the guests in relation to the host or the guest of honor.)

Understandably, there are cultural 'takes' on seating arrangements throughout history. This story's content makes little sense without understanding seating arrangements in China. There, the host or the guest of honour always is in the seat facing the door, even for small gatherings. The next in line is to the left and right of the host or guest of honor. The local etiquette, which was initially unknown to the author of the story above, would be to politely decline the seat offered and instead insist on sitting away from the honored seat because immediately accepting the honored seat does not convey modesty or humility (see the connection to the emotional context). It means that one is accepting the high position being bestowed. While other cultures may also have etiquettes about seating (e.g., the head seat at a dinner table), the seating arrangement in China is a good example of polycontextuality. Researchers who observe someone refusing to sit where requested would probably code this as evidence of 'rejection/rudeness' or 'modesty/politeness', depending on whether they were or weren't familiar with China's seating etiquette and its associated meaning. Again, it is what is not seen but historically understood that allows observers of the situation described here to see the multiple contextual cues (e.g., beyond verbal data) that are present – that is, to see polycontextuality.

Actions That May Increase Researchers' Polycontextual Sensitivity

We have argued here that in any setting, especially indigenous ones, people encounter multiple contextual variables in that context – a condition that we have referred to as 'polycontextuality.' Therefore, in indigenous research involving Chinese participants, the research tools traditionally used to enable scholars to thoroughly describe the (singular) context of their study are likely to be wanting. What else, then, should they do? We suggest that researchers rethink what is meant by 'context' and, more specifically, that researchers define context in ways that address as many of the contextual variables shown in Table 1 as possible, including ways that address how these contextual variables may be nested within each other. We echo the theorizing of Von Glinow et al. (2004) who illustrate the awareness

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enhancing value of thinking and acting in ways that involve the right side (or 'R-mode') of the brain (cf. Edwards, 1986) – that is, sensory-based ways of knowing (cf. Pickstone, 2001), or 'aesthetics or experientially based ways of knowing' (e.g., Boje, 1995, 2001; Draaisma, 2000; Heron and Reason, 2001; Palus and Horth, 1996). Given the magnitude of taking in as much of the context as possible in all senses of knowing, scholars ought to identify which sensory dimensions are most relevant in the culture they wish to study. The senses named in Table 1 go beyond the cognitive realm and thus the prescriptions we offer require us to combine cognition with the other senses.

Polycontextually sensitizing action #1: Think visually. 'Thinking visually' means to attempt to cognitively understand a phenomenon with a picture or image that is not narrative in nature. Recall the old phrase 'a picture is worth a thousand words.' Such visual thinking occurs with surprising regularity in the scientific community. Examples of this, taken from Von Glinow et al. (2004, p. 582), include:

> . . . English chemist Mendeleyev's visualization of a piano keyboard to guide his development of a periodic system of elements, and Einstein's visual image of taking a journey on a ray of light, holding a mirror as he did so (expecting to not see his reflection since light cannot go faster than the speed of light), when developing his Theory of Relativity . . .

According to Draaisma (2000) and Edwards (1986), visualization precedes scientists' ability to express their thinking with words. Edwards further notes that this is why the meaningless term 'eureka' precedes the rational (left-brained, or L-mode) narration that scientists ultimately document in their publications. The concrete and graphic imagery provided by metaphors, in particular, is Draaisma's (2000) explanation for why metaphors are commonly '. . . found in the phase which historians of science usually call the "context of discovery" ' (p. 17) – or the moment when scientists come to recognize a theory that explains the phenomenon they have been studying.

How might scholars interested in Chinese management research get themselves and their study participants to think visually? One way may be to show commonly used metaphors in their own culture to participants from (a particular location of) China, and ask them what images and related meanings these metaphors provoke. Next, they can repeat the latter exercise for themselves. Doing this may help Western researchers realize that the way they perceive things and how they relate to people – that is, their conceptual system which is centrally guided by metaphors (cf. Lakoff and Johnson, 2003) – differs from the way non-Westerners perceive things and relate to people. For example, examining the metaphor 'time is money' and asking people from different cultures to explain the images and meaning they derive from this may help Westerners realize that

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their tendency to conceive of time as a scarce commodity (hence costly if it is wasted) is not necessarily the way non-Westerners conceive of time. Moreover, more immediate mutual understanding between people of different cultures is eased by the use of metaphor since, as Lakoff and Johnson explain, '[metaphor] permits an understanding of one kind of experience in terms of another, creating coherences by virtue of imposing gestalts that are structured by natural dimensions of experience' (p. 235).

A second way is to explicitly ask themselves and their participants for metaphors that come to mind when they think about whatever phenomenon their study is attempting to assess. Such an approach was used by Gibson and Zellmer-Bruhn (2001) when they asked study participants to list metaphors that came readily to mind when they saw the term 'teams.' As a result, they learned that some cultures are more likely than others to view teams in competitive vs. affiliative ways. Another strategy to think visually is to show themselves and others images (e.g., pictures), and ask: 'What do I/you see?' Such a question is often asked by showing the widely used 'old lady young lady' picture (which can be found in many American introductory psychology or organizational behaviour textbooks). What is interesting, and potentially informative of polycontextualities, is that people see different images from the same picture. Why do some people see a lady who is old, and others see a lady who is young? To fully understand this, and to further encourage visual based thinking, additional questions scholars may benefit from asking include: 'Why do I/you see ____ (that)?,' 'What else might I/you see?,' and 'Why am I/are you having difficulty seeing ___ (that)?' By asking such questions of themselves as well as those that they are studying, scholars may become more sensitive to their own, as well as others', polycontextual references. Such sensitivity promises, in turn, to help scholars who are engaged in high quality indigenous research know what kinds of questions to ask when they wish to obtain deeper understanding of behavioural influences on people from cultures (such as China) that are relatively unfamiliar to them. Assuming we have convinced readers that there is value in learning people's reactions to visual stimuli, the question remains what pictures ought scholars to show? Our own scientific training leads to the suggestion that the visual stimuli be relevant to the phenomena that these scholars wish to understand. Therefore, a study about authority-subordinate relationships might include showing pictures of authorities interacting with subordinates and asking study-participants to provide the storyline.

The 'story,' or associations, people connect to stimuli are indeed guided by their past. For this reason, thinking historically or 'retrospectively' is a third visually related action that may assist Chinese scholars in 'seeing' what may be in the here and now and not be seen. Evidence that historically based perspectives can illuminate contextual associations in the here and now was shown earlier when we recalled how an instructor's concept of the 'learning organization' evoked in his audience of Chinese managers the memory of 'learn, learn, learn again'; and how

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the latter image (not at all intended by the instructor) impeded Chinese managers' ability to fully absorb the instructor's lesson. If in fact thinking historically can aid the cultural understanding of China, this also points to the importance of paying special attention to the age of Chinese study participants since cross-generational differences are an important and poignant part of Chinese history (Inglehart, 1997; Strauss and Howe, 1991). For example, Chinese participants' views of Westerners and/or Westernized philosophies (including the desirability of individualism) will vary across generations. Consistent with this, Egri and Ralston (2004) found significant value differences between Chinese generations he referred to as: 'the republican' (born 1930–1950), 'the consolidation' (born 1951–1960), 'the Cultural Revolution' (born 1961–1970), and 'the social reform' (born 1971–1975) generations. More specifically, in an earlier study, Ralston et al. (1999) found that the younger generation of Chinese generally held more individualistic values; and similarly, Lindholm (1999) found that young professionals working in the Chinese subsidiary of a multinational generally held very Westernized attitudes towards performance management practices.

A fourth visually related action that may help Chinese scholars be more polycontextually sensitive regards looking for cues in the 'background' rather than 'foreground' of the setting in which they are working. For example, a scholar who is interviewing a Chinese native at a restaurant may record rigorously the words that the interviewee provides or may bring a tape-recorder to ease the task of capturing the verbal data. Either of these actions illustrates focusing on the foreground, since presumably the interviewee and what s/he says is of utmost importance to the scholar. Yet, what is happening in the background? Are other restaurant guests eating? If so, are they sharing dishes, as is common in China, or are they not doing this, as is more common among Westerners? Might the collective sharing of a table's food be a visual cue that helps the observers to understand the (collectivistic) cultural norms that characterize China (cf. Hofstede, 1980; Xiao and Su, 2003)? Small though this nuance may be, perhaps scholars interested in understanding China ought to be trained to seek visual cues so that contextual nuances such as these and others (e.g., joke numbers or seating arrangement), and any deeper cultural understanding such nuances may provide, will *not* be overlooked.

A fifth visually related action that may help Chinese scholars be more polycontextually sensitive regards giving physical objects (e.g., dolls) to study participants and asking them to engage with them. For example, Nisbett (2003, pp. 150–151) describes studies by developmental psychologists Anne Fernald and Hiromi Morikawa in which they visited Asian and Western homes and compared how mothers played with their children with toys that the researchers gave them. They found that '. . . American mothers used twice as many object labels as Japanese mothers ('piggy,' 'doggie') and Japanese mothers engaged in twice as many social routines of teaching politeness norms (empathy and greetings, for example).' This

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observation helped these scholars recognize the tendency for Easterners vs. Westerners to view their role in the world in a more nurturing vs. controlling way, respectively.

In summary, the visually guided 'story' that scholars learn from their own as well as study-participants' reactions to image based stimuli that is in the foreground and background of their research settings may help inform the theory that these scholars then operationalize and test. Preceding the theory's narration with visual stimuli may help ensure that the theory is more polycontextually sensitive. We recognize that the dominance of the scientific method and the fact that this is the standard against which most work is evaluated for publication may discourage scholars from thinking visually in the ways that we have suggested. We further recognize that our insatiable need for empirical findings is why the metaphors that preceded history making scientists' theories are often excluded from the publications that ultimately reflect their thinking (cf. Draaisma, 2000). Bruner (1979) explains that when generating testable hypotheses, the inclusion of visual images (metaphors, or other sensory based ways of knowing) in a publication would threaten its perceived scientific basis. Boje (1995, 2001) reminds us that visualizing and storytelling occurs naturally and, ultimately, all stories are 'codified' using words and narratives that we rely upon in management science. Scholars who engage in indigenous research by sanitizing their narratives and revealing only clinical 'data' that helps us understand whatever significant differences they report, risk missing the polycontextual richness that, as our earlier examples showed, can deepen cultural understanding. Thus, scholars engaged in high quality indigenous research will ideally supplement their conventional findings with the visual images and related contextual knowledge that lead them to want to understand the indigenous culture in the first place. Steinbeck's (1951) words go to the heart of this metaphor:

> Let's go wide open. Let's see what we see, record what we find, and not fool ourselves with conventional scientific strictures. (p. 3)

Doing so (i.e., not disregarding 'stories', 'images' or 'feelings' as overly subjective), has been demonstrated as valuable by leaders who recognize that words alone are insufficient to motivate employees to change (Kotter and Cohen, 2002), and by researchers who have publicly stated that management research may benefit more from non-linear thinking, especially in contexts that are global (cf. Hitt et al., 1998) or pluralistic (Eisenhardt, 2002; Von Glinow et al., 2004). Tsui (2004, p. 508) adds her voice to this by stating:

> The need for studies on the efficacy of different methodologies in indigenous settings is clear. Such methodological studies also may lead to the identification of new methods of inquiry reflecting different training and ideology, as well as culturally determined thinking patterns of the people within the culture.

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Ultimately 'thinking visually' assists us to make the obvious and the non-obvious more obvious, since visualization precedes narration (Boje, 2001).

Polycontextually sensitizing action #2: Think emotionally. 'Thinking emotionally' means to attempt to cognitively understand a phenomenon by focusing on reactions that are, again not narrative in nature, but emotional. This is because the people's feelings can be important cues about their cognitions, since emotions and cognitions occur nearly simultaneously (cf. Schacter and Singer, 1962). Sometimes emotions are more easily expressed than words (cf. Von Glinow et al., 2004, for an elaboration); and this is why it can behoove the researcher to become sensitive to 'reading' emotional reactions and even stirring them. The value of eliciting emotions as part of motivating certain behaviours has been demonstrated in leaders' efforts to create change. For example, Kotter and Cohen (2002, p. 180) describe the more effective change leaders as those who '. . . make their points in ways that are as emotionally engaging and compelling as possible'; they describe such ways to include tear provoking presentations and events such as '. . . videotape of both angry and joyful customers . . . vivid stories . . .'.

One way that scholars may encourage themselves and their study participants to get more in touch with their feelings is to get participants to nonverbally share emotional experiences. Examples where this occurred, and yielded important insights by researchers, include Murnighan and Conlon's (1991) finding that more successful British string quartets tended not to discuss their differences, but to place their energy in performing their music. Importantly, the data collected by Murnighan and Conlon also occurred via shared emotional experiences – namely, in English pubs where the researcher tape recorded interviews with the musicians. The public art projects like the 2,435-foot long mural entitled the 'Great Wall of Los Angeles' and the numerous photographs that became public exhibitions in New York City during the year following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York are additional examples of shared emotional experiences. These are conflict mitigating and community building experiences between people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds (cf. Hawes and Zelizer, 2000). Such effects have been found, too, in businesses like Honda, Walmart and the Maytag Company that have managed to get employees to share in company cheers and songs (cf. Nissley, 2002).

What does emotional thinking mean for the scholar interested in doing high quality indigenous research? Those who study emotional intelligence know that our emotional side is invariably subordinate to the 'other' side whether in the work we do, the research we conduct or the careers we choose (Boyatzis and Taylor, 2002; Goleman, 1998). Yet, the inevitable conclusion of those who study emotions in the workplace is despite our best efforts to hide our emotions, we should attempt to understand them more accurately. When people have incredibly intense emotional reactions to anything, their ability to reason through logic is lost (cf. Janis and

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Mann, 1977). Indeed, words fail them, and that is why some of us become 'speechless' when confronted with something intensely emotional. Our L-mode is incapable of being invoked, since the R-mode is so intense. This inability to express words during intensely emotional experiences is not rare. For example, child psychologists use dolls to help children describe traumatic events so that the child associates, thus play re-enacts, intense feelings with a doll. (Doll play even with adults, as described above, has been found to help scholars discover important cross-cultural differences; by exposing data on both a visual and emotional level.) Our hopes, fears, dreams are all part of the perceptual process and strongly influence what we see. The phrase 'if it is your perception, it is your reality,' suggests that we act on an emotional level all the time. Such sensory based ways of knowing should be cultivated in high quality indigenous research, since emotions influence so much of what we observe. Recall the embarrassed encounter where an American thought she was saying 'thank you' and accidentally said 'kiss, kiss' in Chinese, the range of emotions embedded in this polycontextual event allows the scholar to better understand how much of what we say and do goes misinterpreted. Creating emotions, rather than merely accepting whatever we feel, is yet another way scholars can become sensitive to the multiple embedded contexts. Joke telling achieves this since the joke teller hopes to provoke a positive affect and laughter. In discussing such things as 'jokes,' we often hear comments such as 'I don't get it' or 'I don't understand it' when the joke's punchline is said to those from different cultures. This is why, for example, translators discourage the use of jokes that evoke different cultural contextualization conventions. There are very few 'universals' when it comes to jokes and punchlines. Yet, telling a joke may help to reveal various embedded contexts in the joke's imagery; and thus, why it is important that the local national be able to explain the joke's nuances sufficiently well, such that reasonable understanding occurs. This helps to make the non-obvious, obvious. Evidence of this was discussed from the perspective of Chinese managers who, unlike their instructor, found humour in hearing someone murmur 'learn, learn, learn again.' In this case the instructor did not knowingly tell a joke; however, humour was felt by the Chinese natives in the room and thus cued the instructor that this was an opportunity to be culturally informed. Because humour is often a cover for other (often uncomfortable) emotions (cf. Burnett, 2003), the expression of laughter is also a potential cue that an emotion other than glee is being felt.

Scholars who 'think emotionally' will welcome emotional cues (of any kind) as potentially culturally informative, especially when differential emotions are apparently occurring in response to a similar stimulus. Paying attention to who is and isn't laughing after a joke, who is and isn't speaking in a group, who is and isn't using a direct style of communication to deal with conflict, etc. may be among the ways to increase scholars' ability to be emotionally sensitive in the polycontextual context they are studying.

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How might a research study using our normal context (i.e., verbal) not produce the same results as an indigenous approach that uses contexts relevant to China (e.g., visual or emotive)? One example concerns the construct 'collectivism.' In a study employing a verbal or narrative methodology, this construct would probably be assessed with either verbal or written questions whose substance conforms to how collectivism has been measured in prior research. The result of this verbal/narrative approach would be an alpha coefficient for reliability that would probably demonstrate that the Chinese participants in the study indeed tend to answer collectivism related questions similarly (as would participants from any country since most cultural values tend to be more homogeneous within rather than across country borders, cf., Hofstede, 1980). If, in contrast, researchers who study collectivistic Chinese people, by using a visual- or emotion- or communal-oriented approach, would probably conclude that Chinese people's behavioural inclinations toward 'collectivism' depends on: (i) whether the person(s) with whom they are interacting are community insiders or outsiders; and (ii) what level of emotional rapport exists between the respondents and those with whom they are interacting – in the present and in the past – assessed via methods that are observational and historical rather than (only) paper and pencil in nature. For example, if researchers took a visual approach to studying collectivism in China, they would probably see that people in China are collectivistic – not necessarily towards all members of any particular in-group, but – toward those in their social network with whom they have developed emotionally close dyadic relationships. This is why more recent work on collectivism has recognized the need to qualify it in terms of whether one's in-group is characterized by 'horizontal' vs. 'vertical' networks (cf. Gelfand et al., 2007, for a review). Although such qualification has emerged from the result of construct validation using the verbal/narrative approach, this emergence could have been quicker if a combination of visual, emotionally sensitive, and historically oriented approaches had also been used.

Polycontextually sensitizing action #3: Think communally. 'Thinking communally' means to cognitively understand a phenomenon by building a community of scholars who are associated with that phenomenon, typically referred to as communities of practice, exemplified by the Academic International Research Team (AIRT) referred to as the 'International Human Resource Management (IHRM) Best Practices' team (Teagarden et al., 1995, 2005; Von Glinow et al., 2002). In addition to building a community of scholars, relationship-building (i.e. *guanxi* in Chinese) with those scholars who wish to understand it is equally important. To fully understand cross-cultural comparisons, we also have encouraged the local Chinese scholars to embrace polycontextuality, since it influences their ability to understand the phenomena holistically. The local collaborator can explain local customs, traditions, history, word dynamics, etc. This 'community based' teaming approach would assist tremendously in helping to make the not so obvious, obvious.

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The polycontextually sensitive scholar will think communally in additional ways too. Drawing upon our previous polycontextual sensitizing recommendations, the polycontextually sensitive scholar will question what visual images and emotional experiences (e.g., language related, metaphorical choices, aesthetically related) seem to be bringing the 'community' to (all or some of) the research team, and what cultural-based insights can be drawn from the answers to these team-reflective qualitatively different questions. We ask the researcher to include stories, jokes, emotions, auditory stimuli, metaphors, paradoxes, analogies and other R-mode modalities for understanding the multiple contextualization conventions in practice.

Summary. We recognize that the actions we have recommended for increasing polycontextual sensitivity will not guarantee that the indigenous Chinese researchers won't occasionally fail in these ways: (i) they may fail to make the obvious obvious (for example, when they fail to realize that Western scholars on their team may be unaware that the common *guanxi*-driven relationships between authorities and subordinates in China makes 'beyond the call of duty' a near impossibility in China, cf. Fahr et al., 1997); and (ii) they may fail to make the non-obvious obvious (for example, when they fail to realize that even the word 'duty' (or loyalty) has a different meaning, hence behavioural correlates, in China than it does in the USA (cf. Chen et al., 2002). Hopefully, our emphasis on increasing sensitivity to polycontextuality (e.g., visually, emotionally, and communally) will help Chinese indigenous researchers know how to qualitatively broaden the senses they can make of the indigenous data available to them. Operationally, this may mean that the researchers evaluate the survey designs (or other data-gathering methods) against a 'checklist' (or guidelines) that include questions such as those outlined in Table 2. The first two items on the checklist are what tends to dominate research guided by the scientific method, or 'L-mode' thinking (cf. Von Glinow et al., 2004), which reflects largely Western-centric training (cf. Engwall and Zamagni, 1998). This suggested checklist encourages Chinese management scholars to supplement the first two actions with ones that may open their senses to new contextualities generally omitted from organizational research (cf. Peterson et al., 2003). Table 1's various contextual dimensions are useful sense making prompts for the researcher trying to understand different contextual phenomena. In fact, even the writing of this paper required the North American authors to 'listen with an emotional ear' to the Chinese scholar, who brought a completely different set of contextualization experiences to bear on this theorizing. North Americans rarely look to 'historical' interpretations of context, given our short 'history'; however, this is clearly not the case in China. The polycontextualization method is like a 'kaleideoscopic' approach to viewing China with multiple and different lenses.

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Table 2. Guidelines in designing indigenous research high in polycontextualization

Contexts	*Guidelines*
Starting	(1) Which construct and which relationship is of keen interest to you in this indigenous Chinese setting? (2) What theory have you drawn upon to identify this central relationship of interest?
Increase the use of the visual context	(1) What visual imagery (e.g., metaphor related exercises, picture presenting or picture drawing exercises) have you engaged in to clarify whether the construct or the relationship of interest to you is relevant to the indigenous setting in which your research will occur? (2) What is the difference between the visual imagery that you and the potential study participants presented? Why are there differences? (3) What kind of historical memories or images these construct and relationship will evoke for the potential study participants?
Increase the use of the emotional context	(1) What emotion-checking (e.g., facially and/or sound sensitive) or emotion creating (e.g., storytelling or requests for stories) have you engaged self-reflectively and then with others – to clarify the affective variables that may be associated with the central construct or relationship of interest to you, as felt by you and/or by the natives of the indigenous setting in which your research will occur? (2) What ubiquitous face saving mechanisms (over and beyond the social desirability problem), especially those in front of a foreign scholar, might influence the study?
Increase the use of the community context	(1) Will your potential study participants trust you as independent researchers? If they do not, how can you enhance their trust? (2) What communal thinking and related actions have you engaged in to clarify whether 'community' is yet felt by all (or some) of the research team whose collective commitment and insights are needed if the data you collect in this indigenous setting is to be interpreted as openly and thoroughly as possible?

These suggestions pertain to all management scholars. We chose to target China specifically, because the Chinese specific context is nuanced with many different contextualization conventions, and it is that multiple embeddedness that led us to our recommendations for those interested in doing high quality indigenous research in China.

CONCLUSION

A commonality among the actions we have recommended is their emphasis on the 'R-mode' rather than 'L-mode' – right vs. left side of the brain – respectively (cf.

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Edwards, 1986). Our intended message is that both sides of our brains need to be engaged (rather than only the left-side which dominates scientific research) if fuller, more contextually rich cultural understanding is to be revealed. Our view is consistent with that of Pickstone (2001, p. 25) who derided scientists' overemphasis on a rational positivistic approach to doing science.

> . . . [S]cience, technology, and medicine are and have always been much more plural than most people know; at any time there have been lots of different ways of knowing and of sense-making'). Yet, despite this plurality, the dominant paradigm in the organization sciences – indeed in all sciences – is the rational, analytic, narrative-guided scientific method ('L-mode').

In this same vein, there is a growing movement toward R-mode thinking where management scholars seem to be favouring '. . . conceptions of change and pluralism that are more consistent with non-linear notions like chaos and complexity, as opposed to a more Newtonian view of the world (Eisenhardt, 2002).' Indeed, such different polycontextualities make for rich interactions but can confound the research team unless steps identified earlier are taken.

We understand that some research methodologies (such as anthropology) require thicker description than others. Nevertheless, all studies of human behaviour can be enriched if the contextualizing that is done to describe the context are not limited to only the context that researchers can physically see. We encourage scholars interested in doing high-quality indigenous research in or outside of China to supplement efficient methods (e.g., pencil and paper methods, database purchasing methods) with multiple qualitatively different ones. By increasing polycontextual sensitivity scholars also will increase the likelihood of formulating research questions and hypotheses that are contextually relevant to the indigenous culture they study. This in turn will increase the likelihood of discovering new and valid theories in novel contexts such as China or beyond for contribution to the stock of global management knowledge.

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Debra L. Shapiro (dshapiro@rhsmith.umd.edu) received her Ph.D. from Northwestern University and is currently the Clarice Smith Professor of the University of Maryland's Robert H. Smith School of Business. An author of nearly 60 journal articles or book chapters and senior-editor of 'Managing Multinational Teams: Global Perspectives (JAI/Elsevier, 2005), Shapiro's work centres on actions managers take to manage conflict and perceived injustice/mistreatment in organizations, including negotiation strategies, dispute intervention strategies, strategies for managing the transition to teams and cross-cultural challenges associated with these actions. She is currently an Associate Editor of *The Academy of Management Journal.*

Mary Ann Von Glinow (vonglino@fiu.edu) received her Ph.D. from Ohio State University and is currently the Knight Ridder Eminent Scholar Chair in International Management and Director of the Center for International Business Education and Research (CIBER) at Florida International University. She also is the 2006 Vice President of the Academy of International Business (AIB) and an editor of JIBS. Dr. Von Glinow was the 1994–1995 President of the Academy of Management.

Zhixing Xiao (xzhixing@ceibs.edu) received his Ph.D. in Organizational Behavior from INSEAD in 2004. He is an Assistant Professor at China Europe International Business School (CEIBS). He conducts research on social capital, social networks, social cognitions and comparative management issues. He is a member of the editorial board of *European Management Review* and has published in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *Organizational Behavior* and *Human Decision Processes*, and *Management and Organization Review.*

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