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2009 : September 2009 - New Hot Papers : David A. Whetten on the Importance of Context-Sensitive Knowledge

## NEW HOT PAPERS - 2009

September 2009



David Whetten talks with *ScienceWatch.com* and answers a few questions about this month's New Hot Paper in the field of Economics & Business.



**Article Title: An Examination of the Interface between Context and Theory Applied to the Study of Chinese Organizations**

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### SW: Why do you think your paper is highly cited?

Within the field of organizational and managerial studies, cross-cultural research is coming of age. More broadly, leading scholars are increasingly emphasizing the importance of accounting for relevant context effects in mainstream organizational research. My article extends these areas of focus to include the development and application of theory.

### SW: Does it describe a new discovery, methodology, or synthesis of knowledge?

I'd classify it as a methodology for cross-context theorizing.

### SW: Would you summarize the significance of your paper in layman's terms?

It examines the critical interface between theory and context. More specifically, it emphasizes the need for scholarly explanations of important outcomes to account for relevant contextual circumstances, primarily as antecedent or moderating conditions.

It also outlines a systematic approach for conducting cross-context theory application and testing/improvement—what I refer to as cross-context contributions of theory and cross-context contributions to theory. I also offer several practical suggestions for scholars living outside the US who are seeking to publish their research in US journals.

### SW: How did you become involved in this research, and were there any particular problems encountered along the way?

Several years ago I was invited by Anne Tsui, the Motorola Professor of International Management at the W.P. Carey School of Business, Arizona State University, to a

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conference in Hong Kong. My role was to comment on a series of recently completed Chinese organizational research studies, mostly conducted by scholars from Hong Kong or mainland China.

My initial reaction was that it sounded like the studies had been conducted in Kansas—the middle of the US—rather than China. While I sympathized with the scholars' efforts to model their research after the US-based literature, I expressed concern about their failure to account for obvious contextual differences between the US and China in their use of US-based theory. That discussion led me to develop the framework for context-sensitive theory application and testing published in this 2009 *Management and Organization Review* article.

*"The paper highlights the importance of context-sensitive knowledge application, which has broad implications for all walks of life."*

**SW: Where do you see your research leading in the future?**

Following the completion of this paper I expanded its focus on context-sensitive theory application and testing across cultural boundaries to include other salient contextual differences in organizations studies, starting with the central distinction between organizational and non-organizational social settings.

Too often, organizational scholars borrow theories developed in non-organizational settings—e.g., the products of psychological research in behavioral labs—without making suitable adjustments for the distinctive features of the organizational social context, including internal hierarchical control, increased membership salience, and greater member dependence.

By extension, I've also urged greater contextual sensitivity in scholarship involving different types of organizations, such as old vs. new; large vs. small; public vs. private; education vs. business vs. health care; family business vs. non-family business.

Not only will enhanced attention to contextual differences among different populations of organizations improve the validity of organizational theory and research, it should also boost interest in an underdeveloped form of organizational scholarship: comparative organizational research. (It is noteworthy that the field of organizational studies is one of the few social science "disciplines" that does not have a journal with "comparative" in the title.)

**SW: Do you foresee any social or political implications for your research?**

The paper highlights the importance of context-sensitive knowledge application, which has broad implications for all walks of life.

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KEYWORDS: CONTEXTUALIZED THEORY; CROSS-CONTEXT THEORIZING; THEORY DEVELOPMENT.



[back to top](#)

2009 : [September 2009 - New Hot Papers](#) : David A. Whetten on the Importance of Context-Sensitive Knowledge