INTERNATIONAL MANAGEMENT RESEARCH:
IDENTITY, PLURALISM AND INTERDISCIPLINARITY

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By all accounts, the popularity of International Management (IM) research has increased substantially among Management and International Business (IB) scholars. While the IM field and scholarship was rather isolated until late 1980s, this situation changed in early 1990s. The current state of development of IM research is assessed differently - from “a sort of golden age” (Kirkman & Law, 2005: 379) to “slower than desired progress” (Tsui, 2007: 1360). Despite the varying judgments, it is difficult to question or debate the fact that IM is a legitimate field of study with growing popularity, a field that presents limitless possibilities (Tung 2006: 23) and abundant opportunities for exciting new work (Tsui, 2007: 1360).

The path to these limitless possibilities and abundant opportunities also presents serious challenges. This paper focuses on three such challenges: 1) identity struggles of the IM field; 2) no sufficient expression of pluralism in IM research; and 3) no consistent evidence of true interdisciplinarity in IM research. The paper is aimed at contributing to the continuing debates about the position, the role, and the current and future development of IM research. Subscribing to the view that such debates are “as personal as they can be: it is our science and our profession” (Fabian, 2000: 367), I discuss the three issues through the lens of a) my own reading of the IM literature and b) the views I have formed on the basis of my editorial work for two major IB academic journals over the last nine years.

The objective of the paper is not to merely describe or criticize the current state of development of IM research; rather, it is to analyze it in the spirit of considering persistent problematic issues. I offer explanations of the underlying causes of the challenges and realizing that these causes are complex and multiple, I primarily focus on structural and institutional ones. I argue that discussing and dealing with the three challenges will assist the IM research community to make sure that IM research fulfills its potential. I also offer some suggestions on how improvements can be made.
Challenge #1: Identity Struggles

What is IM, what is the domain of the field and what characterizes IM inquiry has been the subject of several academic articles during recent years. The definitions of what is IM differ in terms of how inclusive they are. Kirkman and Law (2005: 377) defined international publications as studies that satisfy “any one of the following three criteria: (a) at least one author is a non-American scholar, (b) the sample is collected outside North America, or (c) the topic is related to international or cross-cultural management issues (regardless of authorship or data collection location”). *Journal of International Business Studies’* (JIBS) editorial policy statement points out that “the use of criteria (a) and (b) in determining what constitutes IM research is inappropriate from JIBS’s perspective; only (c) is relevant” Tung and van Witteloostuijn (2008: 181). Werner’s (2002) definition of IM research – which is stricter than the Kirkman and Law’s (2005), but more inclusive than the one suggested by Tung and van Witteloostuijn (2008) – referred to three categories: pure IM research, comparative management studies and foreign domestic studies.

The lack of unity in definitions of IM research, of what defines the IM domain and enquiry could be associated with the relatively young stage of development of the IM field. Whereas the broader field of Management has reached maturity, IM research is in its adolescence years. In such a growth phase, it is natural that the field struggles with its identity, discusses what the field is and is not, how it can be defined, what developmental options and approaches exist, etc. In contrast to Management scholars who “have gone beyond asking what management is, what it does, and how it does it” (Martínez & Toyne, 2000: 15) and IB scholars who are moving the field to a higher level of paradigmatical development (Peng, 2004) and are debating what is the big fundamental research question in the field (Ricks, Toyne, & Martínez, 1990; Buckley, 2002; Buckely & Ghauri, 2004; Peng, 2004), IM scholars are still very much occupied with carving out a distinctive space in and a specific contribution to the intellectual space of related disciplines.

The IM field’s identity struggles are partly associated with its dual parentage: IM is a subset of both Management and IB. While a dual parentage as such provides a comfortable position, the child’s struggle
is associated with positioning itself and its contributions in relation to the parents. It has been emphasized that IM inquiry adds either “distinctive” or “unique” knowledge to the field of Management: IM studies processes and phenomena that do not occur within culture-bound situations or highlight management aspects that culture-bound management does not and cannot address (Martínez & Toyne, 2000). IM’s contribution to IB theory, on the other hand, has been defined in terms of the “process-oriented examination of the interfaces between the firm and the various markets it is exposed to” (Buckley, 1996: 29), including the identification and implementation of strategies, and understanding the dynamics of human interactions within this context. IM has also, to a certain extent, differentiated itself from IB in terms of unit of analysis: while IB has occupied the segment of the continuum towards the supranational units of analysis, IM has tried to document contributions more towards the individual actor extreme of the continuum, both fields claiming the firm as an important unit of analysis. Finally, whereas international aspects of functional areas are part of IB, they are not really vital components of IM. These specific contributions to both parents, while explaining some of the growth pains, also provide a reason to believe that IM research can flourish by leveraging its advantages.

A third, yet related explanation of IM’s identity struggle stems from the very labeling of the field. IM is “an ubiquitous but vague expression” (Boddewyn, Toyne & Martínez, 2004: 196). These authors argued that “IM is not just a geographically applied area of management, but an intrinsic and dynamic part of it” (p. 206) and that “the concept ‘international’ conjoins the dual concepts of crossing borders and of entering unfamiliar environments” (p. 201). An illustration of the vagueness of expression is the rephrasing of the domain statement for the IM Division in the Academy of Management. Established in 1970, the IM Division’s domain statement in 1996 acknowledged that it sought to focus “on content pertaining to management theory, research, and practices with an international or cross-cultural dimension” (Martínez & Toyne, 2000: 17). In 2004, the Division’s domain statement was revised and at present it declares that the IM division “focuses on content pertaining to the theory, research, and practice of management with a cross-border or cross-cultural dimension” (http://aomonline.org). The term “cross-border” substituted “international”, probably reflecting the need for the IM division members to
distinguish themselves from other divisions’ members who have increasingly internationalized their research. With a clearer articulation of what constitutes the “international” dimension, perhaps what exactly is IM research, would become moot since it encompasses all management research that has a “cross-border or cross-cultural” aspect.

How do the above three factors shape the current state of IM research? Following an institutional theory based argument, one consequence is that, in an effort to gain legitimacy as an academic discipline, the IM research agenda and methodologies have sought to mimic those prevalent in already legitimized fields. This has resulted in what Pfeffer (2007: 1341) referred to as “theoretical isomorphism” which “is, by the way, not the same as the consensus that characterizes high levels of paradigm development” (emphasis in original). Pfeffer continued by asserting that “as institutional theory tells us, often what get imitated and signaled are only the most superficial aspects of something, and these imitated forms have little effect on deep, underlying processes” (ibid.). In attempting to attain research rigor, it appears that the dynamic that “involves accelerating attention to the purification and refinement of existing ideas with emphases on maintaining agreement on fundamentals of knowledge and of tightening the enforcement of shared standards of scholarship” (March, 2005: 9) has taken hold in journals that publish IM research. Tsui (2007: 1358) concluded that “currently, there is neither enough systematic borrowing of existing theories nor enough creating of new theories in IM research”.

A different, yet related consequence is the “undue fragmentation in the [IM] field” in the sense of “artificial and unnecessary separation between multinational and comparative management” leading to difficulties in “systematic accumulation of knowledge” (Cheng, 2007: 25). A different aspect of such fragmentation is the fact that often the dynamics and processes of managing intra-national processes are very similar to those of managing cross-border ones and yet, the former would (often) not qualify as IM research as no (national) borders are transcended. In that sense, excluding foreign domestic studies would be unfortunate for the development of the field as the IM scholar community is likely to continue fragmenting the field.
Challenge #2: No sufficient expression of pluralism in IM research

Management research is, by nature, prone to reflect variety of attitudes and mentalities that underlay specific management practices. This is true even more for IM research which is inherently pluralistic, polycontextual and polyvocal, beyond simple and rational analysis and resolution. Yet, much of the existing IM research is occupied with projecting dominance, rather than pluralism, of particular cognitive styles, scientific cultures, intellectual traditions, epistemological stances, and representational modes.

Much of the published IM research seems to be based on rational purposive thinking which is characteristic of some, but it is not typical for other contexts. Ignoring the emotionality that bounds our own – internal, history-based, and demographically-bound – thinking and imposing rational judgments on others through their enactment is not, I argue, a preferable strategy for IM researchers. It is not very often that IM researchers voice the importance of implicitness and subjectivism (in terms of assumptions and beliefs). We are inherently subjective, but much too often pretend to be objective in the way we present our ideas and findings. The domination of “comparative management” over a number of years can be partly devoted to the fact that the attempts to understand management in “other” localities was mostly associated with comparing it with management as projected in (superior) western models.

IM researchers are socialized into and comfortable with different intellectual traditions and epistemological stances, e.g. structural functionalism in Britain, post-modern deconstructionism in France and longitudinal research in Scandinavia. At the same time those are not as powerfully represented as functional positivism on the pages of our IM journals (Whitley 1984; Jack et al. 2008). While there is a huge variety of representational modes at our disposal, our writings are predominantly conveyed via propositions and hypotheses. Some scientific cultures (e.g. cultures belonging to the Anglo-Saxon tradition) endorse a high degree of interest in specific phenomena with precise middle-ranging theorizing. Others, however, are skeptical towards simplicity and aim at developing all-encompassing grand theories that mirror to a higher degree the complexity of the world.

Yet, despite the inherent pluralism and variety, there is an explicit reproduction and perpetuation of dominant cognitive patterns, intellectual traditions, scientific cultures, epistemological stances and
representational modes continues. Our mainstream journals have not documented a high level of acceptance, not to talk about promotion and appreciation of such variety (e.g. Adler & Harzing 2009). In an Editor’s introduction note in *European Management Review*, Kogut (2006: 1) pointed out clearly that “…the intellectual resources outside of North America have hardly been tapped by the relevant journals”.

A clear manifestation of institutional pressures that pushes the research community into a Western-based hegemony are the continuously conducted huge-scale and expensive research evaluations nation-wide in several countries. Examples include the Research Assessment Exercise in the United Kingdom (assessing departmental and school research performance), the Research Quality Framework in Australia (assessing research quality and impact of departments and schools) and the Performance Based Research Fund in New Zealand (evaluating individual, departmental and school research performance). These are government-initiated exercises designed to assess research productivity according to a number of “objective” criteria. The business schools play along as they depend on governmental funding.

Not voicing powerfully the pluralism in IM research is also partially caused by and reflected in the short-term nature of the tenure process which “drives scholars to make safer choices in the research questions that they pursue and the methods used in pursuing them”, a process that basically “excludes innovation as an option” (Smith & Hitt, 2005: 584).

A constructive and efficient way to deal with the insufficient expression of pluralism in IM research is the birth of new and vibrant academic IM journals that explicitly (and in practice!) value and appreciate intellectual diversity as well as diversity in articulation styles. The IM field has already bold examples of academic IM journals that not only were launched outside of North America, but which also profile themselves as being non-North American. Most recent examples include *European Management Review* (launched in 2004), *Management and Organization Review* (launched in 2005, with focus on Chinese management research), *European Journal of International Management* (launched in 2007) and *European Journal of Cross-Cultural Competence and Management* (launched in 2008). All three journals are explicit about the difficulties of American journals to adapt to the intellectual diversity found elsewhere in the world and in their ambition of becoming first choice journals.
Challenge #3: No consistent evidence of true interdisciplinarity in IM research

For the purposes of this paper, I adopt King and Brownell’s (1966) definition of academic disciplines characterized by a range of important elements, such as a community, a network of communities, a tradition, a particular set of values and beliefs, a domain, a mode of enquiry and a conceptual structure. Although various definitions have been proposed (e.g. Toulmin, 1972; Whitley, 1984; Becher, 1989), there appears to be agreement that disciplines have their own objectives, bodies of concepts and methods and their own social organization and their members tend to share, at least to a certain extent, a distinguished mental map. Interdisciplinary research is bridging disciplines to synthesize something new. There is a discrepancy between the potential of IM research to pursue true and continuous interdisciplinarity and the fact that this largely does not happen. By definition, IM issues are polycentric, pluralistic and polyvocal in nature. Contarctor (2000: 7) highlighted that IM scholars are best positioned to make contributions that offer balanced perspectives and better explanatory power because they “more than others, are prone to using variables from all three dimensions of the firm (product, function, and geography) and combining methodologies”. JIBS’s editorial team explicitly states that it is “particularly interested in publishing innovative papers that […] integrate across disciplines rather than being single disciplinary” (http://www.palgrave-journals.com/jibs/jibs_statement.html). Why then are the examples of true interdisciplinary research bridging IM and other disciplines not many and not too convincing?

A possible explanation of the failure to adopt an interdisciplinary approach is the tendency toward compartmentalization – our universities are typically organized into different schools or faculties on the basis of their disciplines, such as law, medicine, humanities, and social sciences. Then, within each of these disciplines, the structure is refined further according to specializations. For example, most business schools are organized as departments of management, finance, accounting, marketing and so on. Companies, in general, tend also to be organized around functional lines, such as production, human resources, finance, etc. In reality, however, because the practice of business is, by its very nature, interdisciplinary, multi-layered and multi-functional, practitioners are often required to engage in collaborative team work across departments and functions. In academia, however, management
researchers seldom study the phenomena under investigation with a broader and multifaceted vision (Aligica 2004). This is true not only in IM but also in management as a whole.

There are several disciplines that would be of great asset to consider as IM research partners in a interdisciplinary journey. Examples are economic geography and comparative sociology. IM research has paid insufficient attention to the possibilities of integrating insights from economic geography (Buckley & Ghauri, 2004). Contractor (2000: 6) pointed out that a distinctive attribute of the IM division is “a comparative advantage in the study of location-specific attributes or differences such as culture or economic geography”. Another fruitful partner would be comparative sociology. According to Guillén (1998: 61), “the impact of sociology on the field of management has been far-reaching. Many strands of organizational theory (bureaucracy, human relations, institutionalism, contingency theory, population ecology, network analysis, neo-institutionalism) are deeply rooted in sociology. Yet, comparative sociology has rarely occupied a central place in studies of management and organization”. This could serve to explain, in part at least, why Barney (2005, cited in Tung 2006: 26) asserted that the most recent important theoretical developments in our area of research ”have not appeared in leading management journals, such as the Academy of Management journals, but in sociology and other social science disciplines”.

One might argue that the very phase of development of the IM research field invites for striving towards clarifying its identity and this is related to trying to reach more consensus and integrity within the field itself. The argument continues, in such a phase, the efforts to look seriously into other disciplines are not of highest priority. A counter-argument would reason that especially in an age of growing up, the mindset is more open and flexible and hence, more perceptive to alternatives grounded in other disciplines. Maturity may be a too late phase (accompanied with too well-defined agenda, domain, professional jargon and social life) to cross boundaries of other disciplines and make serious efforts to synthesize new insights. I argue that the IM field does not need to close itself (for whatever reasons) and instead, it should activate and utilize any constructive option to learn from and contribute to other disciplines, also more remote ones. It is not bad for a field to be exposed to outside influence if the field is well-grounded in its
own domain, modes of inquiry and conceptual structures and preferences. I, therefore, find disturbing (and inconsistent with JIBS’s own editorial policy) that it is found problematic that “a surprisingly large number of submissions to JIBS are without a single reference to a JIBS article, or even without any reference to an IB paper” (Tung & van Witteloostuijn, 2008: 183). The IM research field should not be(come) self-referential.

**Conclusion**

Because of the nature of its enquiry and domain, the IM body of knowledge can contribute meaningfully to the development of both its parents, Management and IB. More ambitiously, it can contribute to the academic literature of more remote disciplines and to professional practice aimed not at (re)producing performative and normative models of IM based on generalizing epistemological knowledge or value-free technological knowledge, but at generating new, value-informed and context-dependent and sensitive knowledge.

I have identified three critical challenges which the IM research field faces at present, as I see them. I have also tried to outline some, primarily institutional, causes of the current state of affairs that often seem to reinforce and perpetuate existing practices and prescriptions. At the same time, while it may be true that institutions (as the ones I have referred to in the paper) reproduce path-dependence and conformity, they can also be powerful actors in initiating and legitimating change. I believe this is true particularly in the case of professional communities and the IM research community should not be an exception.

So, where do we go from here? In the spirit of a critical reflection, it would not be desirable to outline clear trajectories and well-defined solutions. Yet, I will allow myself to conclude the paper with tentatively attempting to suggest a few possible ways of how the IM community can address the issues analyzed above. Indeed, these are not solutions – the IM research community’s “collective mental map” (Thomas, Shenkar, & Clarke, 1994: 685) is far more creative and powerful than any single limited effort in finding out what are the issues and how they can be dealt with. What follows below are a few
additional, perhaps more looking towards the future, fragments to each of the three issues and a few
thoughts regarding their interaction effects.

Identity struggles are natural, particularly when a field is in a relatively early stage of development. The
IM research field has invested serious efforts in discussing its main domain, enquiry and essential
features. The efforts are likely to continue. As evident from very recent discussions on the pages of JIBS,
the IM community continues discussing what is “international”. These debates should be voiced rather
than suppressed; otherwise we risk postponing the movement of the field beyond a pre-paradigmatic stage
of development. Along with taking the identity struggles seriously, rather than suppressing them, the IM
research community can utilize to the best of its abilities the fact that it has two powerful parents, IB and
Management. It has the option to choose what to mimic and what to avoid, what to take on board and
strengthen and what to reduce and suppress. While “integration” (Wright & Ricks, 1994: 700) is a
possible form of progress, alternative approaches deserve equal attention. Imitation may, too, prove
relevant for the IM research community. Imitation “can draw attention to reconsidering the taken-for
granted rather than to subsuming ‘other’ past or present differences within a larger practical or theoretical
project” (De Cieri, Cox, & Fenwick, 2007: 293) and in that way, imitation “both resists and supplements
integration” (p. 282).

We cannot afford to continue contributing to a field that we, collectively, construct as “a field where
Western scholars study the economic activity of the West and justify their conclusions based upon the
work of other Western researchers” (Wong-Mingji & Mir, 1997: 361). One possible way to change this is
to reconsider the imbalance between the potential variety and existing dominance of certain cognitive
styles, scientific cultures, theoretical and methodological stances, and representational modes. Explicating
the pluralism of those more strongly, more convincingly and continuously is worth trying. It is one of the
ways how “IM research can meet ‘the rest of the world’” (Özkazanc-Pan 2008).

Instead of further spilling ink on arguing that interdisciplinarity in IM research is important, it is probably
about time that we focus on institutionalizing the importance of conducting interdisciplinary research and
generating interdisciplinary knowledge. One promising way ahead is the formation of cross-disciplinary
teams. This can be particularly fertile if the institutional support is complemented by social and psychological support as well as adequate administrative and management practices. Some universities have established designated endowment funds to encourage faculty members from different disciplinary areas to launch joint interdisciplinary research projects to gain a better understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Others have launched substantial research grants aimed at cross-faculty / cross-disciplinary ambitious projects. Stanford University, for instance, has recently established Interdisciplinary Graduate Fellowships program to provide funding for doctoral students pursuing interdisciplinary research. Such approaches and initiatives aim to encourage researchers and students to abandon their silo mentality and venture into heretofore uncharted territories or areas. Leading business schools around the world have started requiring their students to take leadership and arts courses as part of their business education. The fascination about the relation between art and leadership and how leadership can be imbued with new insights has led Denmark’s Copenhagen Business School to establish a Center for Art and Leadership at the Department of Management, Politics, and Philosophy. Copenhagen Business School also hosts Imagine, the Creative Industries Research Center that includes researchers based in five different departments who share a common interest in the study of creativity and commerce. University of Minnesota is heading up a new consortium of ten research universities to answer critical questions about the best ways to foster and encourage collaboration across disciplines. These examples provide the evidence that it is possible to leave the comfort zones and engage in structural settings and activities that are not pre-occupied with coordination and cohesiveness, but instead are conducted on the boundaries of several disciplines. I hope that the identification and analysis of the three critical issues contributes to a deeper understanding of our discipline and to continuing the debate on our future meaningful trajectories.
References


