
Phenomenon-driven contextual research and context-driven phenomenon research: advancing impactful HRM scholarship

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper introduces two research approaches: (1) “phenomenon-driven contextual research” and (2) “context-driven phenomenon research” to advance human resource management (HRM) scholarship and generate more impactful practical insights.

Design/methodology/approach – Features and characteristics of these two research approaches are presented and elaborated taking into consideration the following: (1) the research starting point; (2) research goal; (3) research approach; (4) research application and (5) research orientation.

Findings – Basic guidelines for carrying out these two research approaches are established with valuable insights for advancing impactful HRM scholarship.

Originality/value – This paper advances emerging research and hot topics in HRM by offering new research approaches that generate more relevant and contextually-grounded insights for HRM scholarship and practice.

Keywords Phenomenon-driven contextual research, Context-driven phenomenon research: advancing impact, HRM scholarship

Paper type Research article

Introduction

The practice of human resource management (HRM) has undergone a significant transformation, evolving from mere administrative experts to becoming more strategic partners in organizations. This evolution has been captured in numerous studies (Wright and Ulrich, 2017; Lengnick-Hall *et al.*, 2009; Ulrich *et al.*, 2008) with others extending the examination to cover the different facets of HRM practices and the various factors influencing them. Varma *et al.* (2022), in their synthesis of *Personnel Review* at age 50, clustered these different areas of HRM research and came up with the following categorizations: (1) HRM policies and practices; (2) personnel competency, experience and well-being; (3) career management and employee engagement; (4) strategic HRM; and (5) organizational culture and workplace environment. All these demonstrate the breadth and depth of HRM research, as well as the extensive knowledge that HRM researchers have accumulated on the effective management of people, work and organizations.

There are also recently emerged topics that have attracted the attention of HRM researchers. The rise of artificial intelligence (AI) in workplaces and its implications for people management is one of those hot topics (e.g. Mori *et al.*, 2025; Malik *et al.*, 2025; Presbitero and Teng-Calleja, 2023). Another is diversity, equity and inclusion practices (e.g. Umeh *et al.*, 2023; Triana *et al.*, 2021; Konrad *et al.*, 2016) which have been controversial in some parts of the world particularly in the USA. Similarly, flexible work arrangements and the emergence of gig work (Waldkirch *et al.*, 2021; Duggan *et al.*, 2020) have attracted the attention of

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researchers because they challenge conventional HRM practices and the traditional ways of working. But, *how can we advance research on these emerging and hot topics to generate more impactful and relevant insights for HRM?*

In this piece, the aim is to address the abovementioned question. Specifically, this will be done through the introductions and illustrations of two research approaches we would refer to as (1) “*phenomenon-driven contextual research*” and (2) “*context-driven phenomenon research*”. But before we dive deeper into these two research approaches, let us first lay out some basic understanding and foundational concepts. Specifically, we will discuss in the next section key conceptual distinctions between (1) contextual research and (2) phenomenon-based research.

Contextual research

To enable us to better understand contextual research, it is crucial to establish what context is. [Johns \(2018; p. 22\)](#) explained context to include “ambient background stimuli, more salient situational features, and changes in these variables over time”. [Johns \(2006\)](#) also explained that context could cover the salience and strength of the situation (because it can exert influence on people’s actions and behaviors). Rousseau and Fried’s argument are consistent with this when they explained that organizational researchers should focus more on “location, location, location” (2001; p. 1). [Griffin \(2007\)](#) also articulated that context is important as it can facilitate better understanding of organizational processes.

[Shapiro et al. \(2007\)](#) offered a more elaborate description of context by identifying key variables that could offer informative insights about certain situations and locations. These include temporal–spatial variables (e.g. history, geography, time); environmental (e.g. technical, economic, political, social); cultural (e.g. behaviors, artifacts, values), among others. For HRM, [Fardale et al. \(2023\)](#) offered a more nuanced take when they explained context in broad sense to encompass a range of factors affecting HRM practices and systems. These include organizational, national, international and supranational institutional and cultural factors that exert influence on how people, work and organizations are managed. An example is the work of [Schotter et al. \(2021\)](#) who presented and explained how institutions as context can have influence on HRM.

Contextualization can also take an objective or subjective approach. An example of an objective approach for contextualization is the special issue on HRM in emergent market economy by [Cooke et al. \(2011\)](#). Here, they showcased HRM practices on a specific demographic location bringing in novel insights that are contextually relevant for this specific geographical area. Another example is the work on multigenerational research in HRM ([Ng and Parry, 2016](#)) wherein differences in generations (i.e. silent generation, baby boomers, Gen Xers and Millennials) were used as a lens to examine the suitability and effectiveness of HRM practices. In terms of contextualizing in a subjective manner, research works on culture in HRM could qualify for this. Research works on guanxi (e.g. [Nolan, 2011](#); [Ren et al., 2024](#)) or wasta (e.g. [Harbi et al., 2017](#); [Weir and Weir, 2020](#)) particularly the specific influences on HRM practices and work behaviors are good examples of subjective contextualization driving the research.

Phenomenon-based research

Now, let us turn to phenomenon-based research. Phenomenon-based research in management and organization science is also not a new research focus, as it has previously garnered scholarly attention. For instance, [Von Krogh et al. \(2012\)](#) have explained that this approach enables the early capture and understanding of a phenomenon, which can then inform theoretical insights. They suggest that phenomenon-based research can complement theory building through its deep engagement with and anchoring on a single phenomenon (or interrelated phenomena). This phenomenon-based research approach has seen considerable

adoption in international business scholarship (Doh, 2015). For example, studies have been undertaken to explore the rise of emerging market multinationals, with the aim of generating theoretical insights and innovations from this particular grouping (e.g. Hernandez and Guillén, 2018). Another example is research on international entrepreneurship which has anchored mainly on the phenomenon of entrepreneurial pursuit outside the home country (Zucchella, 2021). In HRM research, studies have also emerged on phenomenon-based research. For example, Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.* (2015) integrated the literature on talent management using a phenomenon-based approach. Yet, there remains to be calls for HRM researchers to conduct and engage in phenomenon-based research (Farndale *et al.*, 2017).

Introducing two new approaches for impactful HRM research

The current literature as presented above suggests that contextual research and phenomenon-based research are distinct and separate. However, we see the potential to bridge and integrate the two approaches together. We will explain this “bridging” and “integrating” with specific focus on how one can driver the other. The first we will refer to as “*phenomenon-driven contextual research*” and the second as “*context-driven phenomenon research*”.

To further clarify each one, the following features will be presented and elaborated: (1) the research starting point; (2) research goal; (3) research approach; (4) research application and (5) research orientation.

We will begin with an explanation and characterization of the phenomenon-driven contextual approach, followed by context-driven phenomenon research.

1. *Phenomenon-driven contextual research*

In this first approach, the phenomenon is deemed to have been driving the contextual research, hence, called as phenomenon-driven contextual research.

Research starting point. We conceptualize phenomenon-driven contextual research as a scientific inquiry that has a specific phenomenon as a starting point. As such, the research begins with the problem first (which should be phenomenon-based). The phenomenon could be a recent global event or a megatrend that spans and covers different countries. According to Von Krogh *et al.* (2012), examining a phenomenon, let alone a set of phenomena, is complex and ambiguous, as it involves considering facts and occurrences that are idiosyncratic and caused by multiple factors. Despite their complexities, we argue that these facts and occurrences can drive and inform our knowledge of the research context. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic was a global phenomenon that affected almost all countries, and this could be used as a starting point to surface differences in how different countries reacted or affected by such a global event. Another good example is the work of Ciuk *et al.* (2023) which presented an implementation framework on DEI in the context of multinational companies. Here, it can be observed that they have started with the phenomenon of diversity, equity and inclusion and utilized that to drive insights specifically for the context of multinational companies.

Research goal. The research goal in phenomenon-driven contextual research, we argue, is to surface and better understand how a phenomenon drives and plays out in different contexts. Here, the goal is to investigate a phenomenon as a driver and extrapolate how to derive its significance and showcase generality (or variances) across populations (Von Krogh *et al.*, 2012). We further argue that the goal for this approach is to specifically generate knowledge by examining how a phenomenon as a driver is manifested (particularly the extent and degree of its manifestation) in different contexts. For example, the rise of AI in workplaces can be considered as a global trend which can drive research studies that focus on how different countries have adopted or restricted the deployment and use of AI. The work of Ng and Klarsfeld (2018) is another good example of this approach. In their work, they engaged in comparative and multi-country examination following a thorough exposition of diversity, equity and inclusion as a phenomenon. For the gig work research, if the driver, for example, is

to understand gig work as a phenomenon similar to how it is viewed by sociologists such as [Vallas and Schor \(2020\)](#) then a phenomenon-based contextual research can be applied. Here, the focus can be on the design and implementation of gig work and how that is shaped by regulatory, economic and legal forces (and how they are similar or different across different countries).

Research approach. In terms of research approach, we argue that phenomenon-driven contextual research is more likely to employ a comparative approach to be able to surface differences or similarities in context as they relate to the phenomenon being investigated. For example, citing our earlier example on the rise and challenges experienced in relation to diversity, equity and inclusion practices in organizations, this can be better studied by comparing, for instance, the reactions of employees in the USA versus Australia. Furthermore, phenomenon-driven contextual research can also be argued to follow the cadence of developing hypotheses, testing these hypotheses through empirical evidence and confirming (or disproving) the hypotheses.

Research orientation. The research orientation for phenomenon-driven contextual research is more of an etic orientation – an orientation which adopts an external and outsider’s perspective in research ([Young, 2005](#); [Morris et al., 1999](#)). Here, the orientation is more toward examining a phenomenon and how it drives patterns and structures in different contexts from an external lens, for example, researchers from developed countries carrying out studies about developing countries. This draws upon the traditions of behaviorist psychology and anthropological approaches which link practices to external conditions which may not be readily apparent to those embedded within the setting ([Skinner, 2019](#); [Harris, 2001](#)).

Research application. Lastly, phenomenon-driven contextual research is applied when analyzing a defined event/trend (which defines the research process particularly in terms of determining how they vary across different environments). For example, the phenomenon of burgeoning small enterprise sector ([Kroon and Paauwe, 2022](#)) can be applied to scrutinize how they vary from country to country (and surface what makes them more prominent in some countries but not so in others).

2. Context-driven phenomenon research

In this second approach, the context is framed to be driving the phenomenon research (which is essentially the reverse of the first approach). Here, we draw on [Farndale, Bonache, McDonnell and Kwon’s work \(2023\)](#) which emphasized the importance of “positioning context front and center” when studying HRM (p. 1). [Cooke \(2018\)](#) also emphasized that “context is important in making sense of what is happening at workplaces in order to provide relevant solutions” (p. 1). [Rousseau and Fried \(2001\)](#) have similarly highlighted the need for more contextualization in organizational research, which equally applies to HRM research. So in this approach, we frame context to be driving the phenomenon. Below, we will elaborate more its features and characteristics.

Research starting point. For this second research approach, the specific context is the starting point. This specific context can be a setting, a particular environment or a specified group of people. For example, different generations can be a good context to start with given that [Ng and Parry \(2016\)](#) have argued that multiple generations have implications for HRM. Another example is focusing on cultural orientations and values as contexts given that these have been shown to influence the way people work in different geographical locations (e.g. [Aycan et al., 2000](#); [Nyambegera et al., 2000](#); [Reiche et al., 2018](#)).

[Cooke \(2018\)](#) clarified that context in HRM can be viewed from an objective manner (i.e. through a list of measured, demographic factors) or from a subjective manner (i.e. interpretation of the setting based on the upbringing and worldview of people living in that setting). For a context-driven phenomenon research, any of these objective and subjective contextual features can serve as a starting point to drive the research and surface more the phenomenon of interest.

Research goal. The research goal in context-driven phenomenon research is to discover and explain how a particular context is driving a phenomenon. This can involve closely and carefully examining the level in which the context mainly operates and drives the phenomenon (which can be at the societal/national -level, industry-level, organization-level, team-level, dyadic-level or individual-level). An example is the ongoing conflict between Ukraine and Russia, which can serve as a context for studying migration and integration of new workers into their new countries.

Research approach. In terms of research approach, context-driven phenomenon research typically employs exploratory and ethnographic approaches. As such, the approach is to produce inductively derived descriptions and capture nuances of a group (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010; Stebbins, 2001) with the further aim of explaining the phenomenon that is of interest. For example, the context of indigenous peoples can drive novel understanding of the challenges experienced by multinational companies when they enter new markets. This can be viewed to align with grounded theorizing (Charmaz, 2015) which follows an inductive strategy to make sense of data and surface novel insights into the context of the investigation.

Research orientation. The research orientation for context-driven phenomenon research is emic orientation – an orientation which utilizes an insider’s perspective in research. Here, the orientation is more towards comprehending patterns and structures from the “native’s” point of view (Morris *et al.*, 1999) to drive and inform greater understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. For example, carrying out indigenous research would require someone from an indigenous group or background to be able to offer those rich, insider’s perspective.

Research application. Finally, phenomenon-driven contextual research is applied when immersing in a context to discover insights about a phenomenon. This could be context at the country-level (i.e. immersing in an emerging market context to have a clearer picture of its challenges and prospects) or organization-level (i.e. working for multinational companies to be able to understand how they embrace flexible work arrangements).

To summarize the key features of the two approaches, we present [Table 1](#).

“How to do” research guides

In this section, we will present basic guidelines to determine which research approach is more suitable. These guidelines are also captured below in [Figure 1](#). We will also offer some guidance on how to conduct each one to advance and generate more impactful HRM research.

(1) Identify the driver of research

To be able to carry out an appropriate research approach, it is critical to ask the fundamental questions below:

Is it a specific phenomenon that is driving the research inquiry? There is a myriad of phenomenon that has been the starting point for many HRM researchers. For example, climate

Table 1. Key features of phenomenon-driven contextual research and context-driven phenomenon research

Feature	Phenomenon-driven contextual research	Context-driven phenomenon research
Starting point	A specific phenomenon (e.g. event, trend)	A specific context (e.g. a setting, environment, a cohort of people)
Goal	Understand how phenomenon plays out in different contexts	Discover and understand what phenomenon emerge within a specified context
Approach	Often comparative or hypothesis-driven	Often exploratory and ethnographic
Orientation	Etic	Emic
Application	When understanding a defined event/trend across different environments	When immersing in a context to discover insights about a phenomenon

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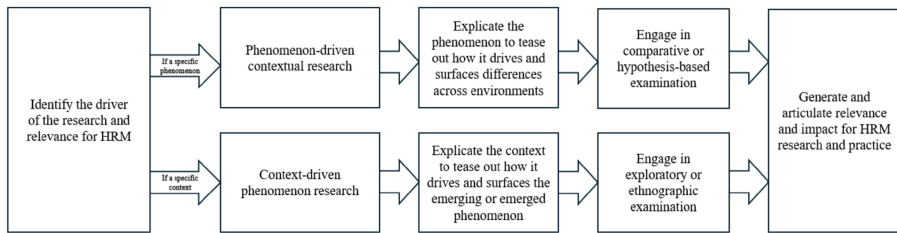


Figure 1. “How to do” research guides. Source: Created by the author

change and global warming remains to be hot topics leading to the generation of substantial research on green HRM and sustainability (e.g. [Renwick et al., 2013](#); [Aust et al., 2020](#)). Another example is the phenomenon of migration which has generated insightful research on skilled migrants (e.g. [Shirmohammadi et al., 2019](#); [Farashah et al., 2023](#)).

Is it a specific context that is driving the research inquiry? For example, the recent pronouncements of Donald Trump in relation to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in the USA can be a specific context which can drive research inquiry into how this impacts DEI practices in other countries.

(2) Explicate the driver more comprehensively

Once it has been determined whether it is phenomenon-driven or context-driven research, it is important to further explicate the drivers to better understand the nuances. For the phenomenon-driven contextual research, this could mean explaining the nature of the phenomenon that is driving the research. According to [Von Krogh et al. \(2012\)](#), this could be explained through three distinctive phases of a phenomenon: (1) embryonic phase; (2) growth phase or (3) mature phase. Embryonic phase, as the name implies, is early stage of a phenomenon and as such may only attract a few attentions among scholars due to its initial inception or limited scope and occurrence. Meanwhile, growth phase is a stage where a phenomenon is more visible with observable facts and occurrences. Mature phase is a stage where a phenomenon reaches a level of consistency and regularity, hence, enabling scholars to make predictions and calculations.

For the context-driven phenomenon research, it is likewise critical to explicate more the context driving the research. This can be done by examining more carefully the context in which it mostly operates (which can be at the societal/national, industry, organizational, teams, dyadic or individual level). For the societal/national level, a good example is [Mayrhofer et al. \(2021\)](#)'s work that explained national context and how a careful examination of context at this level can drive the explanation particularly the influences on HRM practices. The extensive work of CRANET also offers valuable insights on context at the societal/national level particularly “comparing individual countries with developments elsewhere in the world” (<https://cranet.la.psu.edu/>). There is also the potential to contextualize and drive research at the industry level. For instance, [Malik et al. \(2021\)](#) considered a specific industry as a context (i.e. global information technology industry) and summarized how this has driven the examination of HRM practices. Research works involving medical care professionals in hospitals and aged care centers (e.g. [Stanton et al., 2010](#); [Bartram et al., 2024](#)) are also good examples of how context could inform and drive the research question and the design/conduct of the study.

Perhaps for HRM researchers, the organizational level would be the easiest to contextualize. This is because HR practices and work settings are nested mainly within organizations. Yet, studies continue to be challenged by this lack of contextualization at the organization level. This particularly happens when there is a rush to explain a construct such as those in the organizational behavior domain without articulating well how such construct is important for the context in which the study is being conducted. A case in point is employee

turnover research. According to [Hom et al. \(2017\)](#) who did a 100-year summary of research on employee turnover, they explained and called to “expand turnover studies to better capture context” (p. 539). Specifically, they emphasized the need to recognize contextual factors and how they drive and shape turnover’s antecedents.

At the team level, contextualization could also be further strengthened. This is because not all teams are the same. For example, [Guzzo and Dickson \(1996\)](#) explained that flight crew teams in the cockpit are constantly into rotation and shift work. This means that who they work with in some days may be different in other days. Yet, these contextual nuances are often relegated to the back and ignored when studying teams. This is also relevant when studying global teams ([Mockaitis et al., 2018](#)). While many of the studies have considered, for instance, the members’ cultural background and differences ([Presbitero, 2020](#)), there are other forms of contextual nuances that drive and influence global teams such as their roles within the team, degree of familiarity with others, intensity of interaction, among others.

For dyads, there could also be potential to contextualize this type of exchange and how it drives key processes and outcomes. For example, when utilizing leader–member exchange (LMX) theory, the typical tendency is to include any leader or any member without contextualizing further where they operate or how are they situated in the broader organizational structure. It could be that this exchange is happening at the top level (i.e. CEO and the next in line) or at the small unit level (i.e. warehouse supervisor and staff). These would have different exchanges and interactions that should be carefully considered and taken into account to generate more context relevant and specific insights. Similarly, for individual level research in HRM, there are plenty of opportunities for contextualization. In particular, comparing and contrasting individuals would require a nuanced look and careful consideration of the context which drives and influences their similarity or dissimilarity. For those exploring the dissimilarities between individuals, oftentimes the tendency is to invoke “individual differences” as the reason why and how people are different. Obviously, this works for some constructs such as personality traits (i.e. that individuals are naturally different in terms of extraversion, openness to experience, etc.). However, this may not be the case for others. For example, career motivations and preferences may differ from one person to another depending on their career stage or educational background. These contextual nuances are valuable to consider to better understand individual differences and how they drive and influence relevant HRM practices such as career development and career planning.

There is also a possibility that contextual factors at different levels are interacting and simultaneously driving and influencing certain processes and outcomes. For instance, country level context could interact with industry level context and organizational level context to determine emerging HR processes and outcomes. A case in point is the adoption and institutionalization of workforce analytics (e.g. [Coolen et al., 2023](#)) which could be asserted to be driven by country-level context (i.e. what regulations do the country have in relations to use of AI and analytics); industry-level context (i.e. some industries would naturally have capabilities on this such as those in the information technology sectors) and organizational-level context (i.e. some firms would have well-established HR departments that could champion workforce analytics). All these contextual nuances at various levels must be carefully considered and examined to provide a more holistic view of a certain phenomenon such as workforce analytics and more broadly, AI integration and institutionalization in workplaces.

(3) Engage in appropriate research methodology

Next, it is important to engage in appropriate research methodology. As mentioned earlier, phenomenon-driven contextual research is more likely to utilize a comparative research methodology. According to [Van de Vijver and Leung \(1997\)](#), comparative research methodology is able to systematically compare two or more cases, groups or systems to better understand their similarities or differences. Such method allows for hypotheses to be developed and tested in the process.

Meanwhile, for a context-driven phenomenon research, the suitable methodology is exploratory. According to Stebbins (2001), exploratory research method is broad-ranging yet purposive and systematic. The focus tends to be maximizing the discoveries of generalizations which we argue can enable greater understanding of the context and how that drives the phenomena under study. Ethnography is a good example where participant observation is central to be able to build trust and have a sustained level of engagement with the research subjects. In the same manner, according to Gusterson (2008), this methodology enables the researchers to see for themselves which is argued to be far better than learning after the fact in a fragmented and anecdotal way.

(4) Generate and articulate relevance and impact for HRM research and practice

Once the appropriate research methodology is applied, it is relevant in the final stages to generate findings and articulate the impact for HRM research and practice. This applies to both phenomenon-driven contextual research and context-based phenomenon research.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, this piece has introduced and illustrated two research approaches: (1) “phenomenon-driven contextual research” and (2) “context-driven phenomenon research”. These two approaches have bridged and integrated contextual research and phenomenon-based research which are often carried out separately. Specifically, we explained how one drives the other which has consequential effects on research design and implementation. The “how to do” research guidelines we have provided, hopefully, can assist future research in conducting “phenomenon-driven contextual research” and “context-driven phenomenon research”. Doing so would not only surface more contextual or phenomenon-based nuances but also generate a more meaningful impact in terms of effective practice when managing people, work and organizations.

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