13. Special track: Methods in international business research
Interactive Paper

Advancing Bourdieu's 'Epistemic Reflexivity' as a Method in International Business Research

ABSTRACT

In this polemic conceptual paper, the author argues that the application of (Self) Reflexivity as a method(ology) in International Business (IB) research remains alarmingly marginalised and falling short of advanced theoretical developments in the wider social sciences. Negative implications entail potentially distorting knowledge production and to lower the level of transparency, credibility, and trustworthiness of qualitative IB research – as well in the positivist embedded quantitative research realm. Having been submitted as an 'interactive paper', the author aims to further develop the sections on theoretical contributions, the figures, and three illustrative examples concerning the limitations of applying reflexivity in IB research. The paper reviews the current inclusion of (Self) Reflexivity in IB research and introduces advanced interdisciplinary developments on this topic by drawing upon sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. The paper aims to motivate for debating the scope of present reflexive practices across different levels in IB research, in addition to further advancing Bourdieu's 'epistemic reflexivity' as a proposed theoretical contribution.

Keywords: Self-reflexive; 'epistemic'; International Business research; Bourdieu; qualitative research; advancing; theory-building; interdisciplinary.

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INTRODUCTION

This polemic conceptual paper takes a critical stance against the limited engagement with reflexivity in International Business (IB) research. The IB discipline's conventional understanding of reflexivity has revolved around being merely aware of the researcher's relationship with research subjects (Bryman & Bell 2003; Cunliffe 2002; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson 2008). The paper aims to establish 'epistemic reflexivity' as a key methodological framework in the IB discipline, hence catching up with social scientific advancements which already emerged a staggering half a century ago (see Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). In fact, Bourdieu materialised the concept already in the early 1960s based on his early research in the Pyrenees Mountains as integral to his 'sociology of sociology'. In their post-colonial critique of qualitative IB research, authors Jack and Westwood (2006:481) promulgate that "merely calling for more qualitative research is not enough; research must become reflexive and aware of its ontological and epistemological assumptions, political positioning, and ethical obligations" (my italicisation).

This is not to say that many eminent IB and Management scholars indeed do achieve this (e.g. Chapman et al. 2004), but nevertheless, I argue that there is a broad scope for further advancements through conducting an interdisciplinary inquiry and reaping benefit from intellectual advancements transpired in the wider social science community (i.e. Sociology and Social Anthropology in particular). This is achieved by drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu, one of the most influential social theorists in the post-war era (Jenkins 2002; Joas & Knöbl 2009; Wacquant & Bourdieu 1992) who incorporates the social and intellectual biases and

positioning in the intellectual field (Bourdieu 1990; Maton 2003). The reason for operating with (Self) in brackets relates to the notion of addressing the concept both at the individual level (for example field-researchers), as well as the reflexivity of methodology and the discipline as a whole, such as its research philosophical underpinnings (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2009). A diagram will be developed which depicts the interplay between the epistemic reflexivity traversing aforesaid "levels".

The former is diminutively discussed in IB research (see Jack & Westwood 2006; Westwood 2004; Marschan-Piekkari et al. 2004; Chapman et al. 2004 for noticeable exemptions). The latter seems non-existent in IB research (see Eagleton-Pierce 2011, for an example of such endeavour in the International Relations discipline – which seldom interfaces with IB (eds. Ruel, Bondarouk & Olivas-Lujan 2012)).

The paper proposes theory-building as follows. First, IB research is challenged to rethink its reflexive praxis (or lack thereof) which encompasses questioning its hegemonic objectivist paradigm and thereby to expand the methodological tool-box (Davis 1971; Smith 1997; Whetten 1989). Thus, this enterprise has the potential of moving the research frontier in the discipline through expanding the ontological and epistemological focus in IB research (see Corley & Gioia 2011; Kilduff 2006).

Enhanced and widened application of reflexivity does not only have important implications on making research more internally valid, credible, and trustworthy aligned with Sinkovics and colleagues (2008), but also to respond to eminent IB scholar Peter Buckley's aspiration to identify a 'big question' in IB research. I agree with the need to identify a 'big question' as it manifests a disciplinary identity, and thus direction, through reflecting something distinctive

of that discipline. The positivist quantitative research paradigm remains the mainstream and dominating approach to knowledge-production in IB and cognate disciplines (Chapman 1997). Elevating 'reflexivity' as the 'big question' can reflect that distinctiveness. Hence, IB could become the vehicle for enhanced (Self) Reflexive engagement in the broader Business & Management field. Furthermore, reflexivity as a method can lead to discovering new findings through continuous preliminary analysis during data-collection, herein leading to emergent and changing research directions whilst in the field integral to the 'cyclic' research process (Brewer 2000; Thomas 2004).

POSITIONING (SELF) REFLEXIVITY IN THE IB LITERATURE

The engagement with (Self) Reflexivity is imperative, and the dearth of engagement makes IB research accordingly (and potentially) weak(er). In idiographic research, reflexivity is important (Geertz 1973); an imperative in vanguard social science research according to Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009); indispensable in qualitative research due to recognising the constitutive effect of representational strategies on research analysis (Westwood 2004:75); the awareness of this can affect interview data (Marschan-Piekkari 2004:246); entering the field is reflexive process itself (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007) with "foreshadowed problems" (Malinowski 1922:8-9) and where the researcher is intricate to the research process as an instrument of analysis (Sanday 1979).

The focal point of this paper rests on the qualitative research domain, the criticism and encouragements of this paper are undoubtedly equally relevant for quantitative researchers. In fact, such an approach is by default when contemplating on mainstream research has been occupied by the positivist realm. This has plausibly resulted in reflexivity becoming further marginalised not contesting the various tacit boundaries in the supposedly 'scientific

approach' proper, and furthermore, what is upheld to constitute objectivity in research (see Kuhn 1952). Most of the included references in this paper, and IB (and Management) research in general, come from qualitative researchers. We are, however, not perfect, but at least it is widely recognised within this domain concerning the importance to reflect on what it means to "bend back" (literary; 're-flectere') (Wacquant & Bourdieu 1992:36) and placing this debate at the forefront as far as methodological advancements is concerned. It is in this intellectual space – of disciplinary isolationism – where a paramount concepts such as (Self) Reflexivity has been forgotten, and marginalised in a discipline where qualitative methods "were progressively marginalized in our field as quantitative methods have become the norm" (Birkinshaw et al. 2011: 573-574).

On the one hand, Sinkovics and colleagues (2008) call for more transparency, trustworthiness, and credibility in our research endeavours. The vacant space, particularly in IB research and methodology, is thus vast. Easterby-Smith and Malina (1999) point out the importance of self-reflexivity in regard to making sense of an Other culture. It is a concept of paramount importance in qualitative research as a means to avoid distortion of internal validity of the research (see Bryman & Bell 2003; Cunliffe 2002; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson 2008). This needs increases if studying "our own": I have tried to be aware when I am emic (inside, having an understanding of the surrounding situation) and etic (outside, viewpoints of a situation taken from afar disconnected to the situation) to those being studied (see Eckhardt 2004). If researching in untrodden cultural terrains, such as new emerging markets, the challenges only intensify (Guttormsen 2015).

However, although a traceable awareness amongst many IB researchers as reflected in the *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods for International Business* (eds. Marschan-

Piekkari & Welch 2004), the actual practice of (Self) Reflexivity seems somewhat constrained. The principle focus, however, remains on mere relationships – being aware of your relationships to your research subjects (see Bryman & Bell 2003; Cunliffe 2002; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson 2008) – a mere reflection on research experiences. This also applies in the following statement: "Reflexivity involves using information from another to gain insights into oneself, and in the present case we used two processes that we can label: mirroring and contrasting" (Hardy, Philips & Clegg 2001:1998).

Management researchers have made more progress, for example Johnson and Duberley (2003) – however the authors provides an (commendable) analysis and sensemaking of the concept of reflexivity rather than providing an operationalised praxis of reflexivity as a method(ology). My inquiry commences in this juncture between theorisation practicing research praxis; 'theory as method' as a "conceptual thinking tool" for researcher. The reason for this coupling across levels signify that individuals actually do conduct the research and who create and constitute the given research community in a discipline.

Evinced in IB and Management research publications, there is not much information provided about the authors' backgrounds. Therefore, in order to strengthen internal validity, transparency, and reflexivity of undertaken research, it makes sense to provide some autobiographical information (see Hammersley & Atkinson 1995; Thomas 2004). Very seldom do we see reflexive deliberations within published journal articles. A step closer to a more advanced engagement with (Self) Reflexivity is Al Ariss' investigation of self-initiated expatriates where he highlights that researchers socially construct his or her views – and links this to, in fact, Bourdieu (p. 238). Likewise, Weick (1999:802) pinpoints that people have become more aware of tacit practices of theorising but lacks engaging with theoretical

framework. This reflects tendencies to incorporate a theoretical overarching frame when it comes to (Self-Reflexivity).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It is particularly in the area of reflexivity where "Bourdieu stand(s) out in the landscape of contemporary social theory (Wacquant 2004:36). His obsession with this feature ('objectification of objectification') has placed Bourdieu at the forefront of the social sciences in this regard (Jenkins 2002). A more advanced level of (Self) Reflexive deliberation would be (a 'reflexive social theory'), preferably, to "use the thinker against the thinker", i.e. to evaluate the researcher's position and involvement in the study by applying the same concepts to analyse these relationships as they have been used to investigate the research problem in question (see Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992; Leander 2008). Examples on other theoreticians having made a mark in such intellectual practice include Garfinkel, Clifford, Marcus, Tylor, Bloor, Woolgar, Platt, Ashmore, Gouldner, Berger, Giddens, and O'Neill (see Wacquant & Bourdieu 1992:36).

As a starting point, Bourdieu emphasised a reflexive epistemological pluralism but without privileging a form of knowledge as representations of reality (Jenkins 2002). Self-reflexivity is an essential element in Bourdieu's 'sociology of sociology' – and arguably ought to be in any qualitative research endeavour. It serves as a self-analysis of the researcher (me, the 'thinker' in lower case) as a cultural producer through the conducted research within sociohistorical contextuality (King 2000; Wacquant 1990). Reflexivity concerns the opposing idea of objectivity and neutrality of knowledge (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007).

Bourdieu's reflexivity is at the core of his epistemological reflections (Brewer 2000). Reflexivity is, however, not one of his conceptual "thinking tools" per se. It does, though, play a crucial role in the ability to practice his praxis in regard to knowledge claims (Leander 2006). In Bourdieusian terms, reflexivity here takes a radically different form than "narcissistic reflexivity" which is constrained to solely take notice of its own presence (as the researcher) in discourses (Leander 2006). Wacquant highlights that Bourdieu's perspective on reflexivity encompasses a focus on the social and intellectual unconscious embedded in the analysis process rather than then the researcher as individual – the burden lies on the collective enterprise, and maintaining epistemological security of sociology (Wacquant & Bourdieu 1992). Bourdieu's focus on potential bias of the researcher due to the intellectual position in the academic field is particular original within the social sciences (Wacquant & Bourdieu 1992). It involves the danger to fail investigating "the differentia specifica of the logic of practice" and subsequently failing to offer systematic critique of "presuppositions inscribed in the fact of thinking of the world" (p. 39).

Following from the above, Bourdieu's reflexivity is prefaced on two central features: 'participant objectivation' (Bourdieu 2003), and 'the objectification of objectification' (Jenkins 2002:68). The former relates to detachment of research and the notion of objectivism, whereas the latter entails being reflexive of the social categorisations being in play as well as employed research methods (Jenkins 2002). Both notions expand on the existing ontological scope of reflexivity in contemporary IB research, thus relevant as theory-building. This is necessary, in Bourdieu's eyes, in order to establish appreciation of my accounts as a researcher, and involves two steps: to move away from the situation itself (my encounters with research subjects), and secondly, to take a step back from the actual act of observing (Bourdieu 1990; Wacquant 1989).

In terms of (Self) Reflexivity, awareness of my relationships with the research problem and research subjects may contribute to decreasing potential bias relating to how I analyse obtained data. The exercise of "reflexive sociology" is a focal point in Bourdieu's universe – the theory of 'intellectual practice (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:36). Thus, as researchers we ought to commit to a "systematic exploration of the unthought categories of thought which delimit the thinkable and predetermine the thought" (Wacquant & Bourdieu 1992:40) – 'epistemic reflexivity' beyond "reflection of the subject on the subject" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:40). In concert, such efforts assist in enhancing the rigour of undertaken research through establishing a stronger fundament for internal validity, credibility, and trustworthiness that exercise the utmost importance in, for example, ethnographic research (Brewer 2000). This is vital in interpretivist research because the researcher's subjectivity is inevitably integral to knowledge-production and thus performing as an 'instrument of analysis' (Sanday, 1979, Thomas 2004; Brewer 2000; Clifford & Marcus 1986; van Maanen 1983).

ADVANCING BOURDIEU'S 'EPISTEMIC REFLEXIVITY'

This section reflects the proposed area of theory-building: the coupling of IB research with social theoretical advancements for which there is insufficient vacant space for within IB's contemporary ontological scope. Bourdieu's undertaking on reflexivity can be expanded upon towards a stronger epistemological foundation; that the objectifying should also scrutinise the relationship between the objectified and the social scientific claim that I would present as the researcher (Maton 2003). This illustrates how my intellectual biases not only influence how I gaze at my interviewees, but also the knowledge-production emerging from that activity, and thus making self-reflexive deliberation efforts as an epistemological driver. Maton (2003) supplicates the establishing of 'epistemic capital' as an additional relationship to scrutinise:

between the researched (objective) and the knowledge-claim (by the researcher). This identification (of relationships) has the potential of "realizing the potential of Bourdieu's enterprise" and to remedy shortcomings in Bourdieu's conceded relationship through highlighting "a missing epistemic relation for research to become reflexive" (beyond merely exploring relations between the researcher and the researched) (Maton 2003:53).

Returning to the previous point, a self-reflexive deliberation also increases my own self-awareness as a researcher, but also enhances internal validity of knowledge-claim that I purport (aka 'objective reflexivity'). The extended value relates to divulging the "collective scientific unconscious embedded in intellectual practices by the field's objectifying relations" – hence, not only my own biases (Maton 2003:58). Maton (2003) illuminates the importance of supplementing the scrutiny of relationships between the object of the study and any knowledge-claims in order to achieve a collective, procedural and epistemological reflexivity as opposed to individualist, narcissistic forms of reflexivity (Maton 2003:63). This can be attained through pinpointing three integral but analytically distinct relations underlying Bourdieu's objectifying relation of knowledge:

> "the social relations between the subject or author and the knowledge claim, the epistemic relation between the knowledge claim and its object, and the objectifying relation between subject and object" (Maton 2003: 57).

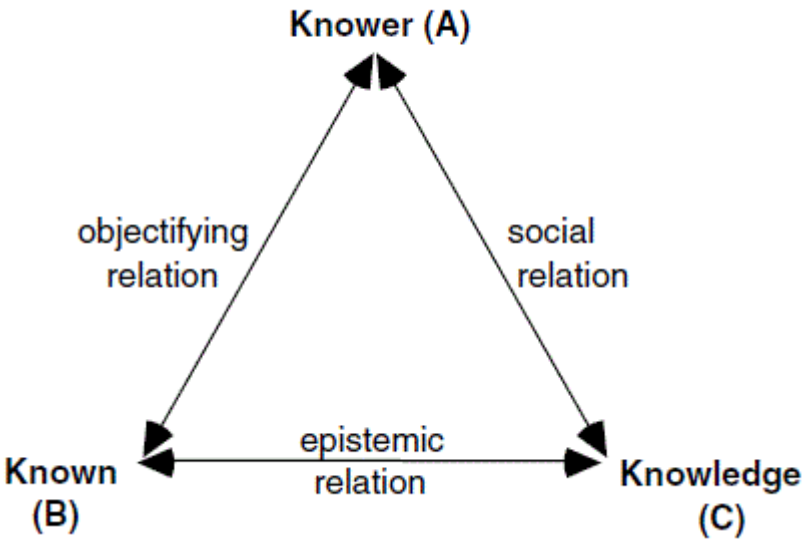
Thus, in terms of operationalisation, I would need to engage with "objectifying objectification" – referred to as 'participant objectification' (Wacquant 1989:33) – collectively assessing three main sources of knowledge biases when making social scientific claims, herein my social background as the researcher, my position in the intellectual field, and the "intellectualist bias" itself, i.e. the lenses I gaze at the social through (Bourdieu 1990). This constitutes Maton's 'epistemic capital' (Maton 2003:53) which moves beyond the

product of "objectifying objectification", i.e. own social background, position in the intellectual field, and intellectual bias (see Bourdieu 1990). I agree with Maton that aforesaid capital assists in further enhancing the epistemological potential of Bourdieu's 'epistemic reflexivity' and thus serving as a key element in advancing 'epistemic reflexivity' in IB research. This approach also reflects the additional relationship to scrutinise, herein between the researched (objective) and the knowledge-claim (by the researcher). This interface also marks a cross-roads where the aforesaid disciplines advantageously could make good use of Bourdieu's 'epistemic reflexivity' due to the epistemological – but tacit – assumption in Geertz naïve realism's (originating with Malinowski) engagement with the subjective role of the researcher: the belief in the ability of the researcher to impart one truth which can be told in one way, and the researcher serving to be a mere conduit of uncontaminated and non-biased data, non-theoretical, non-reflexive, and detached from the text and research process (Brewer 2000).

IMPLICATIONS: IB RESEARCH PRAXIS

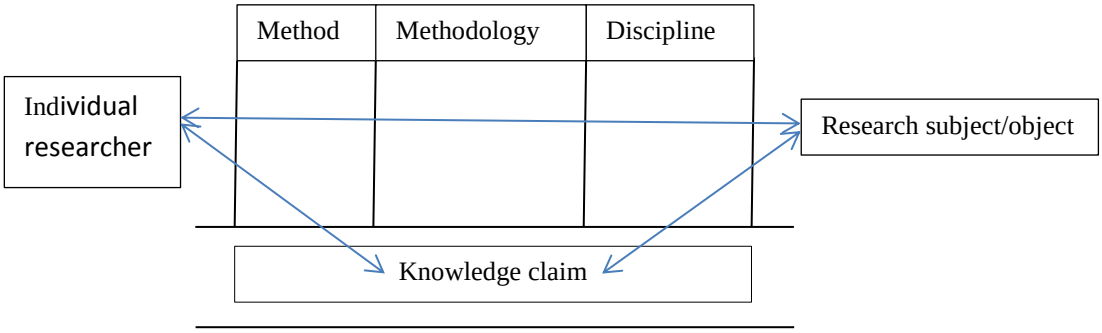
Advancing Bourdieu's 'epistemic reflexivity' as a 'theory as method' research praxis in IB, leads to building theory as depicted in the two below figures. The first figure, drawing upon Maton's (2003) philosophical extension of Bourdieu's work, reminds us about moving beyond the mere researcher-research scope. Figure 2 showcases the 'multi-level' reflexivity which this paper encourages IB research to engage with (Figure 2) – thus not only a matter for the individual researcher.

Figure 1 Three relations of knowledge claims



© Maton 2003

Figure 2 'Epistemic reflexivity' across individual, methodological, disciplinary, and knowledge claim spheres



CONTRIBUTIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper contributes to the methodological lexis in IB research – with applicability and relevance across the broader spectrum of Business & Management subject-areas – with the potential of improving how we research and the knowledge we produce for academic endeavours as well as policy-makers and public engagement. I argue that a Bourdieusian approach in terms of engaging with reflexivity can profit our disciplines by offering richer and more rigorous research, which may enhance trustworthiness, credibility, and internal validity on both sides of the epistemological aisle. In fact, I find this particular bridge between the epistemological realms, particularly fruitful for identifying avenues for collaborative

methodological engagement between the qualitative and quantitative research camps (see Thomas 2004). This inquiry has also contributed with highlighting one of the many untapped social theoretical advancements in the wider social science sphere and can hopefully motivate towards further fruitful interdisciplinary endeavours – not only to advance the mainstream focus on "mere" 'critical reflections' and the move towards Bourdieu's reflexivity, but indeed even further; a deeper engagement with '*epistemic* reflexivity' which acknowledged that we as researchers all have intellectual biases and that we are integral to multiple intellectual fields of knowledge-production with their own 'rules of the game'.

A step further could be to engage with relational constructionism and implications on human research. More transparency should also be devoted to self-reflexive deliberation, which can improve the rigour of the study. Integrating commentary style articles to an already published piece as part of the standard journal issue could be interesting – and is not uncommon in Social Anthropology. Furthermore, I encourage scholars to exercise this 'theoretical posture' regarding reflexivity beyond what Leander (2008) refers to as "mere" "epistemological prudence", which in my opinion reflects the constraining level of what is considered as 'reflexivity' in mainstream business school disciplines. Turning the 'Thinker' (i.e. Bourdieu) against the 'thinker' (me – the researcher) moves beyond a mere "interpretation of interpretation" (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2009), as well as the efforts to only deal with the relationship between the researcher and research subject. A self-reflexive dialogue will assist researchers to become more aware of own preconceptions and 'native categories' as a researcher, including contesting tacit underlying assumptions in research practices and the way the discipline, awkwardly in my opinion, tend to detach the empirical world from conceptualisation.

CONCLUSION

This paper has addressed (Self) Reflexivity in IB research and has claimed that the methodological praxis is constrained in comparison with the more advanced approaches in Sociology and Social Anthropology. I have argued that internal validity, trustworthiness, and credibility can be improved by engaging with reflexive engagement at the individual, methodological, and disciplinary level. In the pursuit to present and develop this conceptual paper further, the future version will showcase how (Self) Reflexive thinking as a method(odology) can unveil issues and problematic uncontested tacit assumptions concerning international business research problems, such as transaction costs, the international adjustment model, the 'expatriate failure' concept relating to expatriates as international business practitioners, and indeed, the ontological premise of giving primacy to 'difference', 'values', and 'behaviour' within the Cross-Cultural Management discipline itself.

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