

*The JIBS 2021 Decade Award: theorising  
from case studies: towards a pluralist  
future for international business research*

Article

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## Editorial Introduction

The *JIBS* 2021 Decade Award: Theorising from case studies: Towards a pluralist future for international business research

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The Selection Committee for the *JIBS* Decade Award was pleased to recommend the presentation of the 2021 *JIBS* Decade Award, recognizing the most influential article published in *JIBS* ten years ago, to Catherine Welch, Rebecca Piekkari, Emmanuella Plakoyiannaki and Eriikka Paavilainen-Mäntymäki for their 2011 article, “Theorising from case studies: Towards a pluralist future for international business research” (*JIBS*, 42(5):740–762).

The award, sponsored by *JIBS*' publisher Palgrave Macmillan, is designed to recognize the most influential paper published in *JIBS* ten years prior and is presented at the annual AIB conference. In order to be considered for the *JIBS* Decade Award, an article must be one of the five most cited articles published in *JIBS* for the year being considered.

The 2021 Selection Committee members were *JIBS* Area Editor and AIB VP Administration Becky Reuber (Chair, University of Toronto, Canada), the current AIB Program Chair Gary Knight (Willamette University, USA), and ***JIBS* Area Editor** and AIB VP Administration Dana Minbaeva (Copenhagen Business School, Denmark). *JIBS* Editor-in-Chief Alain Verbeke was an ex officio, non-voting committee member. The Selection Committee examined total citations, total number of journals citing the paper, and total number of leading journals (excluding *JIBS*) citing the paper to determine the top five most cited articles. The Committee read and discussed the top five nominees and then voted on the winning article.

In recommending the award-winning article, the Committee noted that: “This article challenges the primacy of inductive theory-building as a rationale for the use of case studies in international business research. The authors construct a typology of research methods used to theorize from case studies, based on two dimensions: the emphasis on contextualization (weak or strong) and the emphasis on causal explanation (weak or strong). The four research methods highlighted are: inductive theory-building, natural experiment, interpretive sense-making and contextualized explanation. They describe each method and identify exemplar papers that use it, and call for a greater use in international business of methods that emphasize contextualization and causal explanation. Overall, the authors contend that international business research would be well-served by more diversity in the approaches used to theorize from case study research.

“The Selection Committee assessed this article to be the most influential paper published in *JIBS* in 2011 for three reasons.

“First, we consider the article to be influential because it has citation metrics associated with influence. The article is well-cited in the ecosystem of international business journals and beyond, including journals in the areas of marketing, entrepreneurship, general management, and innovation. Indeed, citations to it have increased over time, from 15 in 2012, to 25 in 2013, to over 70 in 2019. Based on metrics from both the Web of Science and the Social Science Citation Index, it has had double the number of citations of the next-most-cited 2011 *JIBS* article. The article has become a core citation for the advocates of qualitative research in general and for theorizing from case studies in particular.

“Second, we consider the article to be influential because it significantly raised the standards of qualitative research in international business, and it provided the basis for improving this research’s theoretical rigor. Ten years ago there were authoritative publications in other fields about the standards that should be applied to the collection and analysis of qualitative data, but little guidance specifically for international business researchers. The absence of clear expectations as to the requisite standards, combined with limited doctoral training in qualitative methods, resulted in few qualitative papers being submitted to international business journals and making it through the review process successfully. This article initiated a discussion about the need to make explicit the rationale for particular research design choices, thereby raising the bar for both authors and reviewers. It drew attention to the power of qualitative research for developing theory, not only in the realm of exploratory research, but also for refining, verifying, testing and challenging existing theory.

“Third, and perhaps most pronounced for international business, we consider the article to be influential due to its recognition of the role of contextualization in theory development. Specifically, the article advocates the articulation of the contextual characteristics influencing theoretical constructs and relationships as a key means of providing a stronger foundation for developing or extending international business theory. It provides insights on tensions and accommodations among the research goals of contextualization, causal explanation, and generalizability.

“In summary, we believe that the article ‘Theorising from case studies: Towards a pluralist future for international business research,’ is thought-provoking and opens the door for new types of scientific inquiry in the field of international business. It has provided insights on research design for both novice and experienced researchers, and has encouraged researchers to reflect on their own role in the research process. We are therefore confident that Catherine Welch, Rebecca Piekkari, Emmanuella Plakoyiannaki and Eriikka Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, should receive the 2021 *JIBS* Decade Award.”

The award-winning article itself, as is the case with many other influential methodological contributions, has faced scrutiny, especially its attempt to classify all

case-study based research into a matrix with four cells. Matrices can be particularly useful, *inter alia* for strategic decision-making purposes, especially in international business (cf. the famous matrix classifying enterprises on the basis of the strength of their country-specific and firm-specific advantages, also known as the CSA-FSA matrix). However, using a simple matrix to classify a very large body of research might be considered by some as not doing justice to the richness of the scholarship considered. The danger exists that especially junior researchers would try to fit their own approach to research into one cell, thereby (in this case literally) boxing themselves in, and perhaps missing out on insight inconsistent with the chosen box.

As Kathleen Eisenhardt (2020, p. 222) provocatively stated about the article: "...[its]central typology and 2 x 2 [matrix] create artificial distinctions. Its interpretation of theory building cases combines cherry-picking phrases with an eighteenth century view of positivism...the article itself misses context – that is, by failing to recognize that early writing on the theory building from cases occurred in the context of contrasting with armchair theorizing and justifying the method vis à vis the dominant paradigm of economic theory testing" (p.222). Case-study researchers should focus first and foremost on elements such as the conceptual soundness and replicability of their scientific endeavors, and they should not be distracted by labels. Importantly, this also holds for the reviewers assessing their work.

Nevertheless, the Decade Award winner was timely and likely instilled confidence in the minds of many researchers that their case-based research would be viewed as legitimate in premier business schools. The value of having given numerous young researchers in international business the courage to pursue the scholarly path of case-based research may be much higher than even the authors realize.

The award was presented by AIB President Jeremy Clegg, *JIBS* Editor-in-Chief Alain Verbeke, and publisher representative Nicholas Philipson during the AIB Online annual meeting in July 2021. In a recorded session, Professors Catherine Welch, Rebecca Piekkari, Emmanuella Plakoyiannaki and Eriikka Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, along with invited discussants, Becky Reuber, Gary Knight, Mary-Yoko Brannen and Eric Tsang, made a retrospective presentation of the work and discussed how scholarship based on case studies has progressed and where it should go next.

What follows in this issue are the authors' written Retrospective, together with the discussants' and co-authors' Commentaries, based on that AIB Online 2021 session. For the original 2011 article, please visit [www.jibs.net](http://www.jibs.net), where it is free to view, along with all other past Decade Award winners.

### **Reference:**

Eisenhardt, K. M. 2020. Theorizing from cases: A commentary. In: Eden, L., Nielsen, B. B., & Verbeke, A. (Eds.). *Research methods in international business*. Cham: Springer: 221-227.

