

# Discourses on Philosophies of Science in International Business Studies

## Perspectives and Consequences

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*Document Version*  
Final published version

*Publication date:*  
2018

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*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Jakobsen, M., & Worm, V. (2018). *Discourses on Philosophies of Science in International Business Studies: Perspectives and Consequences*. Asia Research Community, CBS. Copenhagen Discussion Papers No. 65

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Download date: 19. Mar. 2025



**65** 2018 January

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Science in International Business  
Studies. Perspectives and  
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# Discourses on Philosophies of Science in International Business Studies. Perspectives and Consequences<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

International business (IB) studies revolve around two key perspectives that can be defined as a firm specific perspective and a generic perspective that combined provide a company with crucial insights into how to enter and navigate a foreign market. Combined, such an approach provides a company with a holistic perception of what kind of resources and capabilities that are needed when entering a specific market as well as what to expect of the host market that the company is planning to enter. The key issue here is how to design a research strategy that is to provide the analyst with data that makes him or her capable of developing a pertinent explanatory framework for how to engage a foreign market. Before starting to look for appropriate research methodologies and tools for data collection, however, a pertinent philosophy of science point of departure has to be selected. This article has chosen to discuss three different philosophies of science. Each one of them is capable of providing the analyst with a specific take on how to 'think' data that are being extracted. Arguably, whatever approach one selects, the choice will have a crucial impact on the outcome of the research process. After settling down on a specific philosophical of science the article moves on to apply this on the Danish shipping company Maersk Line. The key focus here is on how employees at headquarter and in selected subsidiaries 'read' the company's global corporate culture so as to be able to navigate this particular company to their own benefit as well as to the company' per se. The article closes with a critical discussion of the ramification of selecting one philosophy of science over another when engaging in either qualitative or quantitative research in an IB context.

**Keywords:** *International Business, Positivism, Structuralism, Phenomenology, Qualitative and Quantitative Research, Maersk Line, Global Corporate Culture, Employees*

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Hedorfs Fond for providing funding for making the actual fieldwork in Tokyo and Shanghai in 2014 and in 2017 respectively. We would furthermore like to thank Maersk Line for allowing us access to the headquarter in Copenhagen as well as to their local offices in Tokyo, Shanghai, Kuala Lumpur and Penang so as to collect data for this research.

## Introduction

International business (IB) studies revolve around two key perspectives that can be defined as a firm specific perspective and a generic perspective that combined provide a given company with crucial insights into how to enter and navigate a foreign market. The firm specific perspective make the analyst focus on the company's internal resources and capabilities when it begin developing an internationalisation strategy for how best to approach and engage a given market. The generic perspective takes the analyst out of a firm specific context and encourages him or her to focus on the pertinent industrial as well as institutional and societal context that a given company has to relate to when entering a particular market. Combined, such an approach in an IB framed study provides a company with a holistic perception of what kind of resources and capabilities that are needed to enter a specific market as well as what to expect of the host market context that the company is about to enter.

The key issue in this connection is how to design the research strategy that is to provide the analyst with the needed data that makes him or her capable of developing a pertinent explanatory framework for how to engage a foreign market. Before starting to look for appropriate research methodologies and tools for data collection in order to initiate the research process, a pertinent philosophy of science point of departure has to be selected. This article has chosen to discuss three different philosophies of science. Each one of them is capable of providing the analyst with a specific take on how to 'think' the data that are being extracted accordingly. As it will become clear, whatever approach one selects, the choice will have a crucial impact on the outcome of the research process.

Before initiate the selection process of a pertinent philosophical approach, it is important to focus on a key dividing line in this regard. This can be drawn between qualitative and quantitative research (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012), Blumberg, Cooper and Schindler (2005)). At a deeper level, however, there is an even more important dividing line than the distinction between qualitative and quantitative studies, namely the distinction between how reality is to be perceived, that is, whether there is a reality outside ourselves or whether we ourselves are continuously creating the reality in which we live and act. The three philosophies of science that have been chosen to illustrate the distinction between these two major dividing lines are 1) positivism and critical rationalism, 2) structuralism and

critical realism, and 3) phenomenology. The reason for selecting those three philosophies of science is that the first two have an explicit understanding of there being a reality 'out there' meaning outside human consciousness, whereas the last one maintains that reality is something that we ourselves constantly create and recreate.

To be more specific, the two first philosophical approaches are generally employed within the quantitative tradition as they provide the researcher with a rational background for setting up big data bases from where research findings are to be excavated. The last one rejects the idea of a reality 'out there', as it is humans themselves who (re-)creates reality as we move along our various trajectories thus positioning this approach firmly within the qualitative tradition. This distinction prompts yet another factor that the researcher has to take into account, namely whether the notion of context has a bearing on how 'reality' is to be perceived by the respective philosophies of science seen from either an ontological and/or epistemological approach.

To initiate this discussion the article starts out by delineating the three selected philosophies of science and how they respectively impact data handling and theory building. The article then select phenomenology as the philosophical point of departure for analysing a case study of the Danish shipping company Maersk Line. The main focus here is on how employees at headquarter and in selected subsidiaries 'read' the company's global corporate culture so as to be able to navigate this particular company to their own benefit as well as to the company per se. To guide this analysis the following four assumptions have been developed:

- Assumption I: *Culture as process*
- Assumption II: *A processual approach towards culture avoids separation between structure and agency*
- Assumption III: *Agency is never purely individual as it always takes place in a context*
- Assumption IV: *It is in practice that narratives are used, reused, and created while simultaneously have the capability to change the way we understand each other and ourselves as mutually and socially constituted beings*

Arguably, these assumptions are firmly rooted in qualitative research following a phenomenological approach. After having discussed the case of Maersk Line, the article

returns to these four assumptions to demonstrate how such an approach provides different results compared to those of a quantitative study that is based on, for example, either a positivistic or structuralist approach. To initiate the above discussion, a short outline of the current relationship between qualitative and quantitative research in IB studies serves as an overarching framework within which the more philosophical and methodological discussion will take place.

### **Current Tendencies in International Business Studies**

The development and employment of big data as well as the pre-eminence of large scale surveys compared to single case studies as well as longitudinal studies in international business moves the balance between qualitative and quantitative research to the latter's advantage. Welch and Piekkari state that qualitative research has a minority status in the field of IB due to perceived difficulties of assessing the quality of the research for publication in especially high ranking IB journals. Based on a survey of the ratio between qualitative and quantitative articles in, for example, the Journal of International Business Studies (JIBS) and the Journal of World Business (JWB), the former published in 2014 10 qualitative articles compared to 41 quantitative articles, and the latter published 12 qualitative articles compared to 44 quantitative articles (Welch and Piekkari 2017). This has as a consequence that the notion of what or rather which kind of research method is the most scientific has (re-) surfaced within social science. For example, is predictability on the basis of big data more scientific compared to studies that are based on a small number of case studies or even a single case study? (Piekkari, Welch, Paavilainen 2009).<sup>2</sup>

This leads to yet another question, namely what kind of consequences does this have for IB as a social science discipline? We argue that due to an increasing closer relationship between academic business studies and the corporate world, studies that focus on predictions that are based on big data (bases) or surveys take precedence over qualitative in-depth based case studies of one or a few companies or organisations. The problem with the case based studies seems to be a lack of comparative capabilities between the selected case(s) and especially beyond them. The amount of cases is, according to

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion of how to prepare qualitative articles to international top journals, see Jonsen, Fendt and Point 2017.

reviewers from JIBS and JWB, too small to make valid comparative statements and thus future predictions for the development in a given industry or organisation (Welch and Piekkari 2017). This distinction between qualitative and quantitative studies is furthermore reflected in the selection of publication outlets for those researchers engaged in these kinds of studies. Top journals such as JIBS and JWB are becoming increasingly difficult to publish in for qualitatively oriented researchers. Arguably, authors who are not trained in, for example, international economics and statistics find it increasingly difficult getting access to them. Due to this, it is mainly economists or those who work with big data bases that publish in these journals.

This has, as a further consequence for young IB scholars, that those who are not trained economists but have pursued an education based on a combination of economy and, for example, anthropology, sociology or psychology that are more directed towards qualitative research, have difficulty in publishing in top IB journals. And if the department in which they are employed focuses on this kind of publications for promotional reasons then the road towards an associate professorship or a full professorship is long and winding if at all attainable. The main aim of this article is thus to point towards the importance of qualitative research based on a clearly formulated research philosophy of science when engaging in international business studies. We argue that it partly constitutes a vital part of IB studies that are currently reflected in the increasing importance of institutional theory in IB theory, and partly as a consequence of this are to be assessed on an equal footing with and complementary to quantitative research in IB studies.

### **Three Key Concepts within Philosophy of Science: Ontology, Epistemology and the issue of Value Bias in Data Handling**

When reading about whether to employ ethnographic methods when collecting data for a qualitatively oriented IB study, the discussion often ends up in what philosophy of science to employ (Sharpe 2004, Chapman, Mattos and Antoniou 2004). This is an important question as the key distinction between qualitative and quantitative studies runs along specific positions within philosophy of science. Qualitative studies generally employ a phenomenological or constructivist approach, whereas quantitative studies generally employ either a positivist or a critical realist approach.



To understand the reasons for this positioning within philosophy of science in IB studies, it is important to take a look at the ontological distinction between, for example, realism and constructivism. Whereas realism assumes that objects, relationships and characteristics exist in the world independently of our understanding of them, the constructivist approach suggests that we can only study our own understanding of objects, relationships and characteristics. Arguably, where ontological realism seeks to understand and explain that which exists in the world independently of how we understand it, ontological constructivism focuses on how these factors are created and perceived by the individual (Egholm 2014: 25-26, Duberley, Johnson and Cassell 2012: 17-18).

Epistemology, on the other hand, is about the nature of knowledge, that is, how we know something and how knowledge can and might be produced. Epistemology thus discusses how we acknowledge the reality in which we live. A central epistemological distinction is made between subjectivity and objectivity, that is, whether it is possible to achieve objective knowledge. Basically, the epistemological notion of objectivity can be described as the question of whether we can acquire knowledge about the world as it is, that is, without that knowledge being distorted by human cognition (Egholm 2014, Duberley, Johnson and Cassell 2012).

The final key concept in the philosophy of science that is relevant for this study is axiology or the study of values and value judgments (Heron 1996). Generally speaking, most scientists think that personal values should not influence academic practices. Other theorist and researchers believe, however, that value neutrality in the research process is actually impossible. Several influential philosophers have argued that it is impossible to avoid a certain value attribution in the research process. Therefore, the discussion is not ultimately about value freedom, but more about how values are a part of and shape, scientific practice (Egholm 2014, Sanders, Lewis and Thornhill 2012).

This short discussion of the three most important key words in philosophy of science, ontology, epistemology and axiology, provides us with a set of insights that allows us to make a distinction between the three philosophies of sciences that are being discussed in this paper. They are as mentioned above 1) positivism and critical rationalism, 2) structuralism and critical realism, and 3) phenomenology.

Positivism and critical rationalism: the view of science dominating this approach is the unity of science, which implies that science is seen as universal in nature. This means that the same rigorous method should be followed to generate scientific knowledge no matter which phenomena are being studied. This method is generally modelled on the quantitative-oriented natural science approach, which is proffered as an ideal. The main purpose of these studies is nomothetic, that is, to establish general laws or laws about causal connections through an empirical-analytic approach in order to create a basis for predictions.

The ontological starting point is realistic. This means that positivism and critical rationalism are based on the assumption that the phenomena and causal connections, according to this approach, exist independently of the researcher. It is the researcher's task to identify them by means of rigorous scientific methods (Egholm 2014).

Empirical studies play a central role when considering epistemology. That which can be observed empirically exists in the world, while that which cannot be observed cannot be claimed to exist or be worth bothering about scientifically. The validity of scientific statements is established through observable empirical data.

According to a positivist and critical-rationalist perspective, the ideal is natural-science methodology in which there is distance between the researcher (the observer) and the research object that is being observed. The aim is to ensure the highest possible degree of value-freedom and objectivity. This is done in relation to both data acquisition and data analysis that according to fixed methodological procedures do not require continuous subjective interpretation, but which produce the same result when repeated. The starting point for an analysis is thus the individual who is to be understood as a rational being and driven by what is rationally optimal for him or her (Egholm 2014, Duberley, Johnson and Cassell 2012).

Structuralism and critical realism: Somewhat similar to and yet different from positivism and critical rationalism, the subject field in both structuralism and critical realism consists of structures and mechanisms that form the background for collective aggregation of individuals thereby providing the opportunity for collective actions of those individuals. Both structuralism and critical realism challenge positivist unity-of-science thinking, which is based on empiricism. Instead, a new understanding of unity of science is introduced, in

which all phenomena must be understood at either a deep structural sub-conscious level or a supra-conscious surface level and consequently must be studied differently due to the range of subject areas that the disciplines work with in practice. The aim is to generalise about how structures form phenomena, individuals and their actions. Therefore structuralism and critical realism are highly reductionist and nomothetic. It also means that structuralism and critical realism are highly anti-phenomenalist that is, are not interested in how phenomena are perceived by the individuals who experience them, but rather in what they really are once we peel away their surface (Egholm 2014).

The ontological basis for (most of) structuralism and critical realism is realistic. This means that structuralism and critical realism basically assume that the structures and relationships they study exist in reality even if they cannot be observed directly. The purpose is to uncover the invisible and often unconscious structures and elements that exist independently of the researchers. Marxism and critical realism, in particular, consider the structures to be material, whereas structuralism incorporates both materialist and idealist positions (Egholm 2014).

In terms of epistemology, structuralism and critical realism aim to understand and explain at the same time. It would usually be argued that the structures we attempt to uncover exist independently of the researcher, even if some of them are man-made. Since the structures are invisible and unconscious, they cannot be known empirically, but must be revealed by identifying recurring patterns and elements. This kind of knowledge usually requires that we accumulate and process a very large amount of data from which conclusions can be drawn, both deductively, that is, hypotheses about presumed structures are verified, inductively, that is, repeated patterns are explained by establishing theories about the structures that generate them (Egholm 2014).

The view of human nature in structuralism and critical realism is thus that humans are subject to structural conditions in which the individual forms part of the collective. Individual intentions are not individual, but shaped by the inner logic of the structures. The individual barely sees or is aware of the inner logic. Several theoretical currents within structuralism and critical realism are working to rethink the relationship between structure and individual. The aim is that this relationship should not be deterministic but open and flexible, a relationship in which the individual is contextualised as a user of the structures

she or he is shaped by and continuously forms through her or his use of them (Egholm 2014).

Phenomenology: this is an approach that is both similar to, and yet different from, hermeneutics. Contrary to positivism and structuralism the purpose of both is to understand human experience and action, but where phenomenology is interested in describing and understanding phenomena and practices, hermeneutics concentrates on describing and understanding interpretations.

Phenomenology like hermeneutics challenges the concept of the unity of science, and especially its requirement for methodological reduction that is based on an assumption of a distance between the observer and the observed. Phenomenology challenges this dualism and multiple other basic dualisms that pervade Western philosophy (Egholm 2014, Nisbeth, Peng, Choi, and Norenzayan 2001, Chen 2002).

A phenomenological perspective assumes that phenomena are always phenomena for someone, and can therefore never be studied independently of how they appear to a particular consciousness. As such the subject of phenomenology is the way in which phenomena manifest themselves to human beings. Basically, phenomenology is an attempt to eliminate the dualism between ontology and epistemology. Objects do not exist in a vacuum, but in the different ways in which they appear in the world. The objects only become something (ontology) when there is someone who knows them (epistemology). The world does thus not exist as an independent entity. Rather, it manifests itself and therefore cannot be separated from the context in which the subject experiences it (Egholm 2014).

Phenomenology is about epistemology, that is, about how we know the world. In phenomenology, the interpretation begins with the phenomenon and cannot be separated from how phenomena are and can be experienced. Thus, from a phenomenological perspective, it is not possible to separate the subject from the world. The world cannot be considered objectively because there is not a special privileged position from where to observe an object. Any observations are always historically, culturally and experientially embedded. Phenomenology is therefore based on the idea that science can never be value-free. Basically, it takes as its starting point the individual's intentions and intentionality, which also form the basis for understanding the nature of phenomena. It is

therefore important that a phenomenologically description of the world correspond to the people who live in it, even if the academic descriptions of it are more abstract than everyday language. Arguably, a phenomenon is always something for someone; it does not exist in and of itself (Egholm 2014).<sup>3</sup>

### **Consequences of Selecting one Philosophical Approach over Another in IB**

As discussed above, a philosophy of science determines to a great extent the outcome of data handling and processing as well as subsequently theory making. Due to this, it is important to master the overall philosophical perspective of the research one has in mind as well as the consequences of the selected philosophical approach employed before initiating it. In order to be as clear as possible in critically assessing the consequences of selecting one philosophy of science over another we have in the following narrowed our selection of philosophies of science down to focus on positivism, structuralism and phenomenology. The point is to stress the implication of a conscious choice in this connection. As Heron wrote, '*Your choice of philosophical approach is a reflection of your values, as is your choice of data collection techniques*' (Heron 1996).

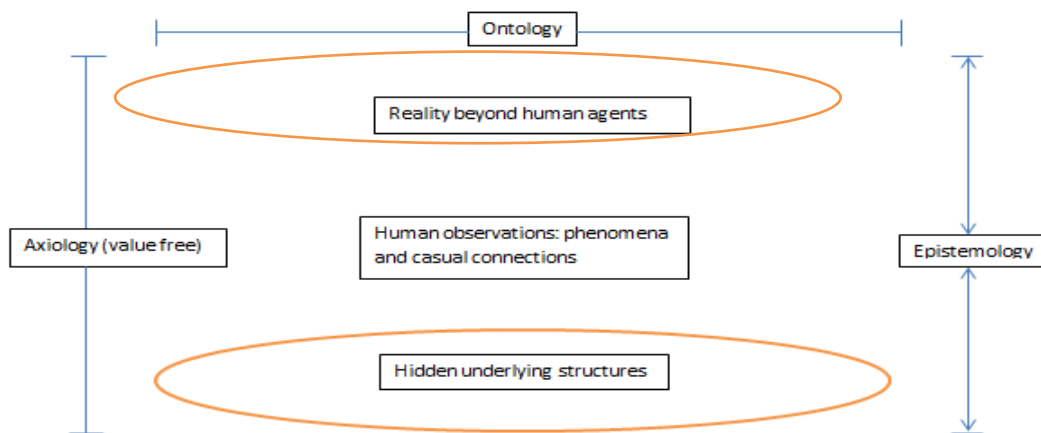
It is important to realise when selecting either a positivist or a structuralist approach that the researcher accepts that there is a reality outside him- or herself that is governed by underlying structures that determines the manifestation of the reality as he or she sees and knows it. According to this, both the object of study as well as the researcher are thus by definition reduced to human agents, which to a certain extent are caught in the space between an objective reality and some underlying structures. According to these two philosophies, human agents have little control over the structures that more or less govern the behavioural patterns and practical outcomes that characterises that space. As a consequence there is no dialectical relationship between the underlying structures and human agency. Arguably, because human agents are thus not in a position to have a major impact on these manifestations, neither on the underlying structures nor the corresponding reality, the two latter is not loaded with normative value and are as such objective.

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<sup>3</sup> See also Duberley, Johnson and Cassell for a discussion of Interpretivism (2012: 20-22).

When collecting data from either the objective reality or the underlying structures through, for example, empirically based deductive research methodologies, there is thus a distance between the researcher and the data that allows him or her to organise them in various kinds of objective data bases that fits a given research agenda. This kind of research is thus guided by agreed upon ontological and epistemological perceptions that together form a dual conception of how to approach and interpret the collected data. The following figure shows graphically how these complex relationships are spelled out.

**Figure 1: Positivism and Structuralism**



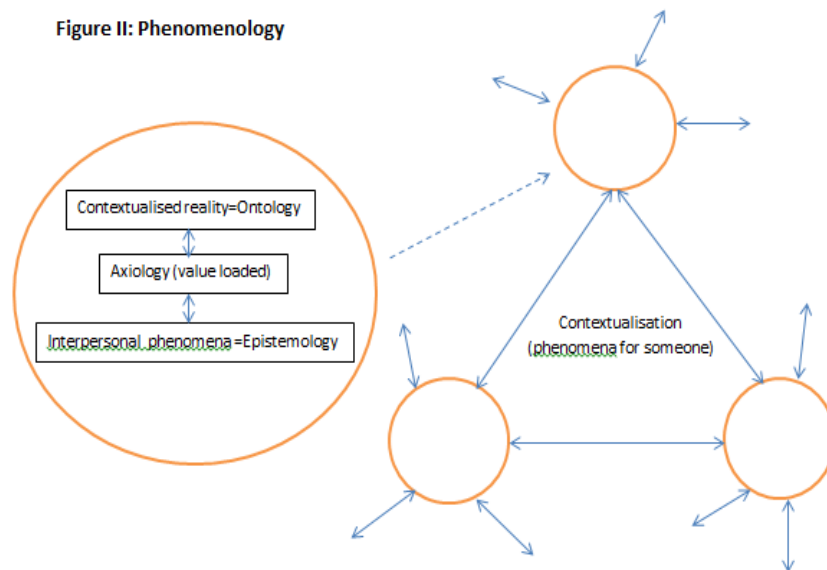
Working within these two philosophical traditions requires as mentioned that the researcher accumulate a large amount of data in order to disclose recurring patterns and elements that together constitute databases out of which conclusions can be drawn and pertinent predictions made. As these data originate from underlying structures that are invisible and unconscious to the researcher, he or she has to extract their findings on the basis of methodologies that are modelled on quantitatively oriented natural science approaches that are value free and thus objective. In this sense they do not require subjective interpretation as the informants behind the data are understood as rational beings and driven by what is rationally optimal for him and her.

The above philosophical research approaches promote as their key premise an objectification of human beings. It is correct that structuralism perceives humans as subject to structural conditions in which the individuals forms part of the collective, but it is, as mentioned above, as rational beings and driven by processes of personal optimization.

As a reaction towards processes of objectification of human (inter-) action, a phenomenological approach rejects such perceptions and focuses instead on the dialectics between human perceptions and actual patterns of interaction. Contrary to positivism and structuralism the purpose of phenomenology is to understand human experience and action, and is thus interested in describing and understanding phenomena and practices. It thus challenges the concept of unity of science and its requirement for methodological reduction based on the assumption of a distance between the observer and the observed.

Phenomenology is furthermore set on eliminating the dualism between ontology and epistemology. Objects do not exist in a vacuum, but rather in the different ways in which they manifest themselves to the world. Any observations are always historically, culturally and experientially embedded. Phenomenology is thus based on the premise that science can never be value free. Figure II provides a graphical overview of this approach.

Figure II: Phenomenology



As can be seen in figure II, understanding patterns of human interaction is the foundation for the creation of the world as various individuals understand it. The big circle represents an individual and how he or she perceives the environment, both contextual and relational. In contrast to figure I there is no distinction between ontology and epistemology. Here the two are conflated. This means that objects only become something (ontology) when there is someone who knows them (epistemology). The three smaller circles each represent the big one (an individual). The arrows show how individuals relate to each other. The arrows

pointing away from each of the smaller circles represent ongoing interaction with yet other individuals.

On the basis of these fluid social constellations there is no objective world outside humans and there is no hidden underlying structure(s) that governs human interaction. Every action a human performs as well as every relation he or she engages in is intentional. This means that objective data does not exist, only patterns of perceptions and interactions. This philosophical approach produces profoundly different results compared to those conducted on the basis on either positivism or structuralism. They are not even compatible in terms of findings. We revert to this in a moment.

### **Further Consequences on Employing One or the Other Philosophy of Science**

There are several reasons for this incompatibility in terms of approach, methodology and findings. From a qualitatively informed phenomenological approach, a critique towards a quantitatively informed positivistic or structuralist approach is that results from the latter may be statistically significant but are often humanly insignificant due to the fact that quantitative methods presume to have an objective approach to studying a given research problem, where data can be controlled and measured. This means that quantitative research seems more efficient and able to test hypotheses but may miss out on contextual details. This might lead to that results provide less details on behaviour, attitudes and motivation, as the dataset collected might be rather narrow and superficial. By narrow and superficial is meant that the results are limited as they provide numerical descriptions rather than detailed narratives and generally provide less elaborate accounts of human perception as in qualitative research.

The biggest problem with quantitative studies, seen from a phenomenological perspective, is partly that by applying well established standards means that the research can be replicated, and then analysed and compared with similar studies. Similarly, personal bias towards data can be avoided by keeping a 'distance' to participating informants by increasingly employing recognised computational techniques to keep just that.<sup>4</sup> From a phenomenological perspective standardised dataset that can be replicated

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<sup>4</sup> Research guides. USC Libraries, University of Southern California. URL: <http://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/quantitative> (accessed on November 2017).



on other cases is problematic as notions of context as well as the *ad hoc* nature of human interaction are not taken into account which would otherwise undermine a standardisation of data. Equally problematic is the notion of keeping a distance from the subjects under investigation, as according to phenomenological standards this is not possible. The key position here is that phenomena are always phenomena for someone, and can therefore never be studied independently of how they appear to another person. Objects of study do thus not exist in a vacuum, but in different ways in which they appear in a given context.

These observations lead towards the question of which philosophy of science as well as which data collection method to select a researcher should adopt when collecting data. Should he or she select a qualitative or quantitative approach to data collection? As indicated above a positivist or structuralist would probably select a quantitative approach towards data collection thus creating big surveys and databases. A phenomenologist, on the other hand, would probably select a qualitative approach to data collection thus employing semi-structured interview and/or participant observation modes when collecting data just to mention a few modes in this context.

Additionally, these differences in approaches can furthermore be framed in a top-down or a bottom-up perspective or in a combination of the two. This will have a direct bearing on how to engage context. Quantitative research seldom takes contextual matters into account as discussed above. In qualitative research, on the other hand, a prevalence of context in research is the norm.

### **Focusing on Single Case Studies in IB: the Case of Maersk Line**

Regardless of the minority status of qualitative research in IB as briefly discussed in the introduction, it is important to point out how qualitative research according to a, for example, phenomenological tradition contributes to the further development of IB studies. This is so much more important as IB studies have to relate to the increasing local grounding of globalisation in all its different manifestations. This is reflected in the increasing importance of employing institutional theory in IB studies so as to be able to identify and integrate the various drivers within a societal context that impact economic performance (Scott 2014). This means that besides employing quantitative approaches when analysing these developments in order to figure out how to engage these

developments, localised or single case studies are gradually gaining more ground as these studies have the capability of partly providing a deep insight into the inner workings of a multinational company, both from a top-down and a bottom-up perspective, and partly how various societal factors within a host market impact on the functionality of both local offices and the relationship between them and the headquarter.

In employing and applying a phenomenological and qualitative approach to the Danish shipping company, Maersk Line, we will in the following focus on the consequences of rolling out a global corporate culture throughout the company so as to streamline and optimise the functionality of and communication lines within the company per se, and how employees at headquarter (HQ) in Copenhagen as well as in three local offices in Shanghai, Tokyo and Kuala Lumpur respectively 'read' and react accordingly towards this move. The key point in this study is to understand how employees map the organizational landscape in order to identify organizational markers that provide them with hints on how to navigate this particular landscape, thus making them capable of constructing personal strategies as guidelines for positioning themselves within this landscape.<sup>5</sup>

Before initiating this kind of study it is important to distinguish between the notion of culture and the notion of organizational culture. Culture per se refers to a societal aggregation of specific local norms and values that socialize individuals in such a way that they are equipped with a specific type of identity that makes them capable of navigating that particular local culture thus reproducing it over time in the process. An organizational culture, on the other hand, refers to a specific set of norms and values that generally originate from a company's basic assumptions, sometimes referred to as the company's DNA (Schein 1997). The two types of cultures serve different purposes. A societal culture provides an individual with a normative compass that makes the individual able to navigate a specific social landscape where the past, present, and future merges into a familiar societal narrative. An organizational culture is a more pointed mode of creating a collected "we" that increases the functionality and profitability of the company. The basic assumptions that the company is based on thus serve to make the organization survive over time to the benefit of the owners, employees, and other stakeholders in general.

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<sup>5</sup> The following is based on Jakobsen, Worm and Xin 2017.

This distinction between the two types of culture should be recognized, as the study of corporate culture in major companies generally focuses on how such a culture, as defined by headquarter, is perceived in local offices located in markets that are different from the home country in which the headquarter is located. That is, the headquarter and the local office are governed or influenced by different sets of norms and values as defined by the respective national institutional setup thus challenging the corporate culture as defined by headquarter. This differentiated mode of defining culture in a societal cum corporate contexts serves as a main insight when analyzing our interviews with Maersk employees at headquarter in Copenhagen and in the local offices in Shanghai, Tokyo, and Kuala Lumpur respectively. One main observation is that they experience the interplay between Maersk's global corporate culture and the societal cultures of the host country in different ways, so employees at headquarter and the local offices relate differently to the global corporate culture and thus interpret its impact on them differently.

### **Global Corporate Culture and Local Adaptation**

We furthermore distinguished between a corporate culture and a global corporate culture. A corporate culture generally refers to the organizational glue that makes employees relate to the organization's basic assumptions, whereas a global corporate culture recognizes the need to accommodate the multi-cultural composition of staff as well as the multinational structure of the company. Another key difference between the two is the way in which the individual employees perceive the global economy. A corporate culture focuses mostly on optimizing the functionality of the company in a given industry, whereas a global corporate culture is more or less based on the assumption that the world is "flat" in the sense that the MNC is assumed to do business is more or less the same way all over the world (Friedman (2005), Florida (2005)). This is the Achilles heel of a global corporate culture, as the global economy is far from being "flat" or standardized because national environments are full of contextual specificities and local modes of doing business.

Maersk does indeed have a global corporate culture and since it has subsidiaries throughout the world with a highly multi-cultural staff at both headquarter and in the local

offices that again reflects the complexities across the various types of markets that make up the global economy. Maersk's global corporate culture is based on five basic values, as defined by the founder A. P. Møller (1876-1965) and his son Mærsk Mc-Kinney Møller (1913-2012), namely: (1) constant care, (2) humbleness, (3) uprightness, (4) our employees, and (5) our name. These values are very basic and have the ability to endure changes to the overall organizational setup of the MNC (Jephson and Morgen 2014).

These values are ideal for developing a global corporate culture due to their simplicity and straightforwardness that apparently transgress and nullify potential effects from local societal readings in various kinds of host markets. Hence, it is tempting to perceive such a global corporate culture that is based on these values as an acculturation mechanism when working in headquarter, but as a relative construct in the local offices due to their adaptability to host market specificities. So a main question here is whether there is an outer boundary for a standardizing global corporate culture in highly dynamic and culturally different local market environments.

When interviewing the Asian employees at the Copenhagen headquarter we noticed a strong similarity across the informants. They were all young, very competitive, pugnacious, motivated, professional, and very much part of the collective company "we." Another thing that we noticed was that the overall notion of culture, both at the societal and company level, was not at the forefront of their mindset. Rather, it was in particular three of the five company values, constant care, humbleness, uprightness, that constituted their main guidelines at least when working in headquarter. When asking the informants about their cultural background, they come originally from either China, Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore or Malaysia, and whether it impacted the way they perceived themselves in a Maersk context, the general answer was that their home culture was nice to have, but not needed to navigate their life while working in the Danish headquarter. Instead the company "we" and especially the three values of constant care, humbleness and uprightness, were the main guiding principle in their inter-personal relations. As a consequence, almost all of our informants from headquarter did not socialize with Danes, but exclusively with their colleagues in the company, who thus also were their personal friends regardless of their

country of origin. Only one of the informants from headquarters managed to engage the Danish society by actually marry a Dane.

Due to the heavy impact of the global corporate culture on the informants' mindset it is tempting to hypothesize that the five values incorporated into the global corporate culture affect the employees in such a way that they suppressed their original personal norms and values emanating from their home societal cultures. In this sense, the global corporate culture acts as a kind of acculturation mechanism that transforms and propels the individual employees into the collective Maersk "we."

When zooming in on the local offices in Shanghai, Tokyo and Kuala Lumpur, the picture becomes more complex. There was a general agreement among the informants that the global corporate culture constituted a benchmark for how to do business the Maersk way in all local offices. They also agreed, however, that it was impossible to fully implement the global corporate culture in a local context due to a more complex external environment affecting operations in and of the local offices. The five values designed as guiding principles for doing business the Maersk way were upheld to a great extent, but there were situations where the values had to be amended in such a way that they provided a better fit with the local work environment. The reason for this is that the five values are grounded in a Danish context and therefore more or less reflective of specific Danish cultural traits. Consequently, they are sometimes interpreted in different ways by individual employees in the local offices around the world than anticipated by management at the Maersk headquarter.

Asian business communities are generally characterized by strong networks based on personal ties, which of course also have an influence on companies like Maersk. We are talking about networks based on business to business partners as well as business to government relations. They are necessary to make business transactions work more smoothly. This is not to say that formal institutions, when working in an Asian context, are manipulated, nor are we talking about corrupt business practices. In emerging markets like the Chinese and Malaysian ones, the institutional set up is generally characterized by

rather weak formal institutions where informal institutions, such as more or less politicized local norms and values, have a bearing on the functionality and implementation of the formal ones.

This has a potential negative impact on the way formal institutions relate to businesses, both local and foreign-owned companies. It is in this context that business networks in the form of personal connections between business partners and business to government relations come into the picture, as they make up for the deficiencies of the formal institutions and make the market work in a slightly different mode than anticipated by HQ. This is a good example of why especially emerging markets function in an imperfect way thus stressing the importance of taking the various societal factors, such as different types of network practices, into account when engaging the company in business transactions in these kinds of markets.

The informants also pointed out that the five key values in the global corporate culture, especially constant care, humbleness, uprightness, could carry different meanings in a local setting due to a potential clash of value systems. It is important to keep in mind that the five key values were all developed in a Danish setting, but are nevertheless expected by top management in Maersk to be fully understood in all the local offices around the world. A consequence of this is that the individual value might carry different connotations in a different societal and thus local corporate setting.

If we take the first value, “constant care,” it means that one is expected to take care of the company and staff regardless of rank. For Maersk this is obvious as “company and staff” cannot be disentangled, they are mutually interdependent and thus conditional to secure success in business. Now, if we, for example, take a look at a Chinese company that is governed by classical Chinese (Confucian) virtues, such as respect for parents/elders/authority, this is sometimes translated into a hierarchical relationship between the company owner and the employees. This means that instead of a relatively “flat” company structure with less power distance like in Maersk and many other Western companies, a more hierarchical structure governs a typical Chinese company. If the

Chinese or Confucian mindset is confronted with the Maersk value of “constant care” the questions is, constant care for whom; the stakeholders, the company, the owner or the employees?

When looking at “humbleness,” we find a better fit between Danish and Asian values. Just as Maersk does not brag of its achievements, Asians do not either. Bragging is regarded as counterproductive to both “humbleness” and “constant care.” According to Maersk employees “humbleness” means that one has to listen, learn, and share. This is the only way to grow a company in a proper and respectful way. In a sense, this value is considered a personal feature that employees are expected to have and live by. To all of our Asian informants this was something they easily could relate to as it constitutes part of Asian values too.

The third value that we will focus on in this context is “uprightness.” This is more problematic as there is a difference in the way in which Danish and Asians understand the concept. This is reflected in the way the employer and employees behave towards each other. All the informants we have talked to, those from the headquarters as well as those working at the local offices provided vivid examples on this. If a manager, for example, gives an employee an order to handle a business situation in a certain way, even though the employee has a different perception of how to do this, then the employee will do as instructed and not question it even though he or she might find it unproductive or even directly wrong. In other words, an employee would not speak up if he or she finds it wrong so as not to offend his or her superiors thereby making them loose face, which is a key concept in Asian values. This is one example of how the value of “uprightness” carries an entirely different connotation in a Danish and in an Asian context.

The five values can thus be interpreted in different ways, as the individual values might have different connotations in different local societies. Regardless of how the five key values are interpreted, however, they do serve as mental markers that the informants employ when navigating the organizational landscape. This goes for our informants at

headquarter as well as those in the local offices. A key concept in this connection is the notion of sense making.

This concept implies that an employee is not only a representation of the collective company “we,” but also a representative of his or her own understanding of right and wrong that governs the way in which he or she navigates a given landscape. These modes of navigating a given context are, according to Weber and Glynn, governed by how the employees perceive, interpret and react to changes that are taking place in the organization in which they work. The outcome of this has an impact on their personal strategic positioning in in this case the Maersk organization as well as towards the other employees working in the same part of the organization (Weber & Glynn, 2006: 1641).

An informant from the talent management team in headquarter told us that the global corporate culture was constructed in such a way that it could withstand major changes within the organization. Now, taking into account that the Maersk organization is currently undergoing major changes, and knowing that employees are aware of these changes then it is highly likely that they are trying to make sense of these changes and thus navigate the organization accordingly. If we divide the informants into the main groups of those coming from headquarter and those operating from the local offices in Shanghai, Tokyo and Kuala Lumpur, then we can detect a major difference in terms of sense making between the two groups.

The employees in headquarter identify strongly with the corporate “we” as defined by the global corporate culture, and are more understanding towards changes in the organizational setup. The employees in the local offices, however, are split between being part of the collective “we” and a localized interpretation of the organizational changes taking place beneath the overarching global corporate culture. The main question that both groups of informants seek to find answers to is “what is in it for me?” or “how can I turn potential organizational changes into personal advantages thus providing positive avenues for a future carrier either inside or outside the Maersk organization”? In other words, all informants are trying to make sense of the changing organizational landscape to identify



their own potential advantages or disadvantages, but again from very different perspectives.

One of the informants in a local office mentioned that the drivers behind sense making originate from the personal ambitions of the employees. Those ending up working in headquarter have internalized the global corporate values to such an extent that they have transformed them into important signifiers thus making them able to navigate the organization to optimize their carrier opportunities within Maersk. This statement matched our own perception of the employees we interviewed in headquarter, that they were very ambitious young people with a clear understanding of the significance of working in headquarter of a global company.

The interesting thing about those employees is that they have a cosmopolitan orientation. When asked about their future carrier plans they did not necessary encompass Maersk. It was more the shipping business per se that they had in mind, and not necessarily job opportunities in their country of origin. Any country could do as long as it provided them with a challenge in terms of a good work-life balance. This mode of optimizing one's job opportunities has the consequence that time spend in a company, such as Maersk or any other MNC, is rather short, about 6-7 years.

Those employees, on the other hand, who stayed behind and kept working in the local offices, questioned whether it was worthwhile internalizing the global corporate values to such an extent that they would jeopardize their personal identity internalized from growing up in their local societal culture. They were generally satisfied with having a job in a well-known global company, which gave them prestige and status in the local business community. Several of those we interviewed had not been to headquarter or only attended very short upgrading courses there and then sent back to their local office. As a consequence, this type of employees tended to stay longer in their jobs compared to those working in headquarter, not because of the global corporate culture, but rather because the job indirectly entails status and prestige in the local community. To further stress this point, several of our local informants who had been working in the local Maersk office for more than 10 years were older compared to our informants working in headquarter.

## **Empathy versus Competitiveness as Personal Drivers**

Taking these consequences of sense making among employees into account lead to a discussion of what are the drivers behind personal strategy making among employees, both those working in headquarter and those working in the local offices. The five values, constant care, humbleness, uprightness, our employees and our name, cannot be ascribed to a certain type of person, as the values are so general and thus open for interpretation and the employees are so complex. Instead, we pose the question of how these values are internalize and then operationalized in such a way that they partly fits personal strategies when navigating the organization, and partly conforms to the overarching strategic aims of the company. To this end, we divide again our informants into two categories, those coming from headquarter and those from the local offices. In this context, we focus on the notion of empathy and competitiveness, and how they are played out among the employees representing these two main groups.

The informants working in headquarter have internalized the five key values to such an extent that they have become personal guidelines for how to become the professionals they are. In this case, the values of the global corporate culture have transformed these employees in such a way that they have become an integrated part of the collective “we.” The drivers behind this development are not the values as such, but rather what governs the ambitions of the individual employees. Having succeeded becoming part of the collective “we,” the premise for staying there is top performance within the organization. The driver behind this is not, according to informants, an empathic approach towards doing business, but rather a competitive edge that first benefit the company and empathic feelings and relations afterward.

When asking the informants in headquarter about how to approach vendors or engage with partners in various Maersk initiatives the answer was that first we discuss with them what we want, but in case we are not coming across with our messages and requests, we let them know that we represent Maersk, so they have comply if they want to stay “on board” with us. As can be seen, notions of empathy are not at play here. It is a competitive and assertive drive that dictates the way in which business is done. Of course, the

informants do have empathic feelings and understandings towards vendors and partners, but if the level of performance is to be kept high, the competitive factor is the main driver if one still wants to be part of the collective “we.”

This avenue towards maintain or expand one position in the collective “we,” is also acknowledged by the top-management in the organization so the road towards being part of the collective “we” is thus not only governed by the five core values, but also through alternative strategies introduced by the employees themselves. The key point here is that the personal initiated avenues are accepted by the top management as they fit into the overall corporate value matrix.

Things are somewhat different when discussing the same issue in the local offices. This is due to a more complex reality out there, where different mindset and different value systems are at play at the same time thus reflecting more or less conflicting demands emanating partly from the global corporate culture and partly from the local norms and values including the constraints and opportunities that govern the different market conditions found in Shanghai, Tokyo and Kuala Lumpur respectively. Business activities in the local offices are carried out according the prescriptions from headquarter, meaning that it is competitiveness and performance that drives business relations, but there is an extra dimension to it in the local offices that is not found in headquarter. Since networking practices and personal contacts constitute an important part of business relationships in an emerging market, empathy, as an essential relationship enhancer, plays an important role in building trust between business partners.

This point was stressed by our informants who stated several times that it obviously is important to abide by company rules so as to maximize business performance, but to read and understand a vendor or partner demands more than sheer business acumen. Here they were talking about personal connections based on emphatic feelings between partners. This is what makes business tick in a local office and what engages local vendors and partners in positive ways.

These differences between HQ and the local offices seen from an employee perspective have a major impact on the functionality of the organization, that is, Maersk per se. A more disciplined and controllable employee behavior at HQ makes the organization work more efficient and according to espoused value systems and basic assumption as discussed by Schein (1997). Things are, however, more complex in the local offices, as the espoused values and basic assumption are expected to link up to local mores as well as to local political and economic specificities. In other words, the level of interpretation of the espoused values and basic assumption at HQ is more direct and unidirectional, whereas in the local offices it is more nuanced and multidirectional. The problem is that in case the distance between the level of interpretation of the espoused values and basic assumption in HQ and local offices respectively becomes too big, then there is a danger of the organization per se might implode. This is because the relationship between the two levels moves from a functional towards a dysfunctional mode due to gradually moving out of sync. This is a situation that every organization wants to avoid, but how to do that given the increasing complexity of the global economy that leaves plenty of room for alternative and at times conflicting narratives within the organization?

### **Choosing a Philosophy of Science in IB: Some Concluding Remarks**

How to answer that question? Employing quantitative research techniques does not seem to be able to provide answers to these kinds of questions, as quantitative methods and research techniques generally results in static and rigid approaches due to inflexible research processes. As previously discussed, these kinds of approaches provide less detail on behavior, attitudes and motivation. Basically, quantitative research is generally limited as it is based on numerical descriptions rather than detailed narratives thus providing less elaborated accounts of human perceptions and actions. This means that neither a positivistic nor a structuralist philosophy of science approach can be employed here in order to generate answers to the above posed question.

Instead we suggest employing a phenomenologically inspired qualitative approach that might be able to get us closer to answering the question. Here the four assumptions

mentioned in the beginning of this article could guide our research process in order to generate some answers to the question.

Assumption I: Culture as process. When discussing the impact of culture on performance in multi-cultural and multi-linguistic organizations, sophisticated stereotypical perceptions of local employees working in an MNC are generally perceived as a point of departure for understanding behavioral differences between employees representing different cultures (Osland and Bird 2000). This is mostly organized along an East-West axis or as specific combinations of dimensions characterizing a society and people in a given market or society as is seen in the works of Gesteland (2005), Hofstede (1991), and Nisbett, Peng, Choi, and Norenzayan (2001). To go beyond such superficial considerations we have in our research employed a methodological approach that we have called a narrative pictogram data collection method. This is an emic approach in which an informant through drawings and narratives related to the drawings on his or her own account explaining how he or she 'reads' the organization as well as how to navigate it to the mutual benefit of both themselves and the organization.<sup>6</sup> As can be seen from the case of Maersk Line, the employees 'reading' of the corporate espoused values and basic assumptions this has a major impact of the perception of the organization per se.

Assumption II: A processual approach towards culture avoids separation between structure and agency. This means that a structure or an organization and the employees within it condition each other, that is, impact each other's mode of relating to each other. The theoretical approach taken here assumes an institutional logic as outlined by Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury (2012) as well as by Scott (2014). This approach emphasizes and specifies organizational processes that enact, recompose and even create a new institutional logic by stressing the importance of individual initiated processes that reproduce and transform the institutional setup itself. As we saw in the case of Maersk Line, there is a critical dialogue between the organization per se and the employees that have the capability of transforming the former in the process. The key issue here is how the various narratives relate or do not relate to each other seen from a top-down and a

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<sup>6</sup> For a detailed account of the narrative pictogram data collection method see Jakobsen et al. (2017).

bottom-up perspective. To achieve an effective and fully operational organization the two set of narratives have to complement each other like gears in a clockwork.

Assumption III: *Agency is never purely individual as it always takes place in a context.* According to Simpson, the basic thought behind this is as "... transactions are mediated by significant symbols, social agency can never be attributed to any singular actor. In other words, a gesture has no agency capacity unless it calls out some sort of response" (Simpson, 2009, p. 1336).

In a sense, this statement gives credit to a key proposition within phenomenology, namely that phenomena or experiences are always phenomena or experiences for someone and thus can never be studied independently of how they appear to other persons. This means that phenomenology encompasses everything in the interpretative process, including verbal and nonverbal forms of communication, as well as prior aspects that affect communication, such as presuppositions in relation to a given context (Gadamer, 2004). The reactions and experiences we discussed in the Maersk Line case is an example of this. The employees 'readings' of the key corporate espoused values and basic assumptions are reactions to the corporate culture. The functionality of the organization per se thus depends, as stated above, on whether the narratives emanating from top-management in relation to the espoused values and basic assumptions relate positively or negatively to the employees' narratives of same.

Assumption IV: *It is in practice that narratives are used, reused, and created while simultaneously have the capability to change the way we understand each other and ourselves as mutually and socially constituted beings.* This relates closely to what Simpson (2009) writes about transactions in which we re-negotiate the content of the significant symbols that we hold in common.

This further resembles what Geertz referred to in his definition of culture: *'The concept of culture is essentially a semiotic one. Believing that man is an animal suspended in webs of*

*significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of a law but an interpretive one in search of meaning'* (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). Here, Geertz relegates the notion of culture to a peripheral existence, as it only reflects the processes that govern the relationship between meaning and agency. Translated into an organizational context, an understanding of a global corporate culture can thus be turned into a semiotic understanding of social interaction within an organization perceived as different more or less related webs of significance that both top management and employees have spun.

Instead of perceiving organizations as only consisting of organizational structures and divisions, a perhaps more productive way is to think of it as constituting a playing field for competing narratives that changes content in synch with the overarching context in which the organization finds itself. Such a constant reconfiguration of narratives takes place regardless of where a HQ is positioned or where a local office is situated in a given host market. The key issue here is that this overarching context is very dynamic and rather unpredictable thus forcing an organization to critically 'read' it, as such a 'reading' constitutes the base lines from where narratives formulated by both top management and employees are nurtured and constructed. It goes for both of them that these narratives constitute organizational markers that are essential when navigating a dynamic and complex global business environment.

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