

**INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS AS DISCIPLINARY TAUTOLOGY:  
AN ONTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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**Abstract.** The identity, legitimacy, and sustainability of international business (IB) as a field is at stake. IB is being overtaken by the evolution of industries and technology, and critical voices challenge its distinctiveness and value. We identify IB's ambiguous conceptual space, articulate the roots of the problem, and suggest a perspective for re-legitimizing the discipline. Specifically, we contend that redrawing legitimate knowledge boundaries for IB requires an ontological shift. In this respect, we promote focus on the processual constitution of international entities across time and reconceptualizing IB as the amalgamation of local and international forces. The perspective we advocate aims to counterbalance the disciplinary tautology suffered by current IB conceptualizations and to open up the discussion on boundary identification in the field.

**Keywords:** international business, tautology, ontology, epistemology

## INTRODUCTION

Seminal works warn that the literature on international business (IB) phenomena is running out of steam (Buckley, 2002), exhausting its relevancy while accelerating its final demise (Delios, 2016). IB is seen as a contested terrain, with other “mainstream” fields challenging its distinctiveness through new journals, special interest groups in academies, and targeted critique (Jack, Calás, Nkomo, & Peltonen, 2008; Michailova & Tienari, 2014). This dire image of the present state and eventual fate of the field reflects a purely ontological concern: IB’s boundaries are now blurred. The evolution of industries and economies renders omnipresent the international dimensions of business activity: which dimensions of business activity are *not* now international? We contend that the answer is “hardly any,” since today’s firms are more likely than not to have some association with international phenomena. Hence, IB is ubiquitous in all strands of management. These are existential issues, pinpointing the “legitimate” theorizing territory that IB should occupy as an autonomous discipline<sup>1</sup>.

Therefore, the ontology of IB (i.e., what IB is) is challenged for wider and IB-specific reasons: On the one hand, as Wright and Phan (2017) note, several contemporary, disrupting events, which reshape our political and economic reality cause us to examine our underlying assumptions. How does our new, uncertain world redefine the conceptual space of IB scholarship; an area which is inextricably intertwined with these new realities? In turn, what is IB’s likely relationship with the wider management discourse? On the other hand, IB is firmly embedded in its own underlying assumptions i.e., specific onto-epistemological traditions emanating from its economics and strategy roots. Do these assumptions enable a solid standing for IB in light of its attempt for legitimacy in this new, uncertain world? These are some of the questions that this paper aims to shed light upon.

We propose a new perspective for re-legitimization of the discipline's identity drawing upon a process-relational ontology. Existing assumptions have offered a lot to IB theorizing but, given new realities, IB often confines itself within its own disciplinary silo and imposes a restrictive ontological bedrock. In turn, this "territorialization" of IB does not allow cross-pollination with wider theoretical advances. Consequently, there is confusion about the distinctive role that IB supposedly plays. On the contrary, our suggestion for a process-relational ontology holds promise to analytically appropriate the nuances of the new, uncertain world that Wright and Phan (2017) describe.

We introduce the study by highlighting the existential space that IB seems to occupy. We then articulate the criticism that IB's identity has attracted. Through paradigmatic evidence found in IB subfields and themes, we highlight how dominant theorizing assumptions perpetuate a disciplinary tautology. In turn, we challenge the self-contained perspective of IB and propound the influence of (unnoticed) local nuances and interdisciplinary perspectives. We conclude by promoting a different set of ontological commitments for theorizing in IB, as an opportunity for clearer circumscription of the field's boundaries.

## **THE CONCEPTUAL SPACE OF IB**

IB began as a critical response to premier management journals publishing heavily US-centric research programs (Shenkar, 2004). The state of the art at that time did not offer sufficient explanation of meaningful and interesting phenomena related to, e.g., foreign direct investment, international trade, or multinational corporations (MNCs) (Aharoni, 2013). This dearth was noted by early IB scholars, whose intellectual curiosity and sensitivity to local cultures led them to

elucidate businesses' pioneering attempts to internationalize their portfolio (Delios, 2016). These novel tendencies engendered the emergence of a new intellectual movement (cf. Frickel & Gross, 2005). Early IB, capitalizing upon the welcome offered by institutionalized actors (business schools) through mobilization of resources (people, access to firms, funding, symposia) legitimized itself as a collective mindset. These factors amalgamated to enable a new oeuvre and a new analytical focus; gradually, IB emerged as a stand-alone discipline.

The field's further evolution (mainly during the 1980s and 1990s; Shenkar, 2004) was critical for its current state. A particularly interesting aspect is that IB was (and, partly, still is) considered an "international" addition to core functional areas within business and management. That is, IB was the sum of international management, international marketing, international finance, and so on. Essentially, IB was a label to denote that phenomena of management, marketing, finance, etc. have an international dimension that uniquely matters. We term this attempt for autonomy *distinctiveness through contextual separation*, and we define it as the claim for distinctiveness on the grounds of geography, distance, and space. An additional physical context (in this case, country/-ies) was important at that time (for management, marketing, finance purposes), and this legitimized conceptual separation from "mainstream" functional fields, seen as dealing only with domestic issues.

This original understanding of IB as contextually separated from mainstream areas now is questioned as a defining element of IB. Increasingly, journals (e.g., *Journal of World Business*) refuse to consider, e.g., international marketing papers for review, while "functional" authors see IB as only a "related field" (e.g., in international human resource management; Bjorkman and Welch, 2015). Thus, there is a growing disconnect with functional roots in favor of a *pure IB approach*. Nevertheless, despite the attempt of IB scholarship for disciplinary lucidity, a lack of

clarity and varying views on what pure IB encapsulates prevail. In fact, “there is no clear public definition of our field given by the Academy of International Business, the premier academic grouping” in IB (Devinney, Pedersen, & Tihanyi, 2015, p. 68). What further aggravates the confusion is the unclear demarcation of *areas*, *themes*, and *contexts* in the quest for this pure IB. For example:

1. While, as noted above, journals in the field abstain from publishing functional papers (presumably due to the aforementioned quest for purity), leading scholars urge treating IB as a collective enterprise embracing many disciplines (strategy, marketing, finance and others; see Buckley & Lessard, 2005).
2. At the same time, while striving to maintain IB purity, these journals do publish, e.g., papers on NGOs with a remote international element compared to international functional areas. Consequently, whereas international marketing is not IB for some scholars, others place the actions of one type of organization within the scope of pure IB. Most importantly, there is no convincing rationale for such paradoxical choices<sup>ii</sup>.
3. While, e.g., international management is seen as separate from pure IB, high-profile schools in IB organize dedicated events for functional issues (e.g., “Advancing Finance Perspectives in IB Research,” Vienna University of Economics and Business, August 2017).
4. Though core institutions associate IB with “cross-border” activities (e.g., *Journal of International Business Studies*), the majority of published studies in the six major IB journals has been found to use a one-country sample (60.9%), while 88.9% of studies focused on Western countries (Yang, Wang, & Su, 2006). While more recent studies arguably showcase a new, increasing era of international diversification for IB the truth is

that IB scholarship is at best deployed across few regional hubs (N.America, W. Europe, and some specific Asian-Pacific nations) rather than being truly international (Ellis & Zhan, 2011; Michailova & Tienari, 2014). Thus, a supposedly “cross-border” field is essentially “parochial” (Jack et al., 2008). A single-country focus may be justified and could actually become a core strength of IB (see further below). However, IB contradicts itself when concurrently promoting the centrality of “cross-border” and projecting such a parochial or, at best, regional profile.

5. Despite seminal notes, such as Hennart’s (2010, p. 257) dictum that “IB scholars study the governance of interdependencies between individuals located in different countries, and hence separated by geographic, institutional and cultural distance,” comparative studies paradoxically fall outside the quest for pure IB (Shenkar, 2004).
6. Established MNCs have historically been the archetypical organizational forms in IB. In fact, Devinney et al. (2015) define IB as “the science of the multinational enterprise.” However, the modern evolution of industries has given rise to many more organizational forms concerned with and/or affected by international issues (e.g., SMEs).
7. At the same time, research elsewhere (e.g., entrepreneurship) has produced outcomes that consider “pre-international” periods as critical to explaining international phenomena (Westhead, Wright, & Ucbasaran, 2001; Zheng, Kavul, & Crockett, 2012). Therefore, if internationality (as an accomplishment) is better explained through a time-sensitive research stream (which embraces both pre- and post-international phases), what is the distinct angle that IB offers in explaining, e.g., entrepreneurial phenomena internationally?
8. IB’s focus on MNCs is undermined by several paradoxical conventions. For example, in researching international human resource management issues in MNCs, many studies

focus on expatriates as the unit of analysis, thereby ignoring the indigenous populations forming the vast majority of MNCs' employee base (Shenkar, 2004), overlooking the role of the local institutional context (Tregaskis, Edwards, Edwards, Ferner, & Marginson, 2010) or inadequately conceptualizing national effects (Edwards & Kuruvilla, 2005). Hence, a vital aspect of the dynamics within MNCs is left for illumination in other fields (e.g., organization studies or industrial relations). Exceptions, which recognize the importance of the local environment including workforce in shaping HRM policies include seminal studies couched in the institutional tradition (e.g. Ferner, 2000; Edwards & Rees, 2006; Meardi, Marginson, Fichter, Frybes, Stanojevic, & Toth, 2009; Wood, Mazouz, Yin, Cheah, 2014; Wood & Horwitz, 2015). However, these i) do not constitute the mainstream within IB scholarship and, surprisingly or not, ii) are more often published in non-IB (rather than core IB) outlets.

9. Finally, such themes as international success and internationalization (consistently in the top 1% of cited IB scholarship) are replete with unrealistic assumptions of, e.g., linearity and cautionary managerial work (Devinney et al., 2013) or rationality and economic reasoning (Aharoni, 2013). Variance and static theorizing are also deployed in such ill-defined conceptualizations (Welch & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2014), overlooking the fact that, in practice, internationalization is arguably a non-linear, processual phenomenon (Vissak, 2010), involving both local and international dimensions.

The above evidence indicates that the discipline's ontology (i.e., what IB is) is unclear to internal (let alone external) stakeholders. Definitions and conceptualizations in IB are shaped through generalizable exclusions (all minus something), through what IB is *not*, through too narrow a focus, or through a politicized view of what matters in theorizing. However, they



definitely *do not reflect a shared understanding*. Consequently, IB oscillates between a theory of “everything international” and a discipline in which thematic agendas are contingently prioritized by a scholarly elite. Importantly, for an intellectual movement to sustain its presence, its ideas must be framed in a way that resonates with the field’s inhabitants (Frickel & Gross, 2005). To legitimize its collective identity, it needs a clear defining story that identifies the group’s purpose (Wry, Lounsbury, & Glynn, 2011). This implies neither unanimity of opinion, nor marginalizing non-mainstream orientations. In fact, healthy contestation over a field’s identity should be commonplace, especially in IB. As an archetypical interdisciplinary field, its boundaries must be sufficiently porous to accommodate diverse views (Frickel, 2004). The problem herein is the limited contestation in IB. The discipline progresses based on *parallel monologues*, yielding contradictions and unresolved paradoxes such as those highlighted above. Therefore, we urge recognition of the value of epistemological plurality *around an unambiguous ontological core*, i.e., the knowledge domain that we investigate and nurture<sup>iii</sup>. Essentially, we endorse the usefulness of the quest for purity but are skeptical about the orientation (e.g. should distinctiveness through contextual separation be maintained?) and the means (e.g. should the epistemologically dominant mode of knowing be maintained?) as well as the scope and the breadth of uniqueness (i.e., should a clear boundary compared to the rest of management scholarship be established?) that IB will assume for itself. The stark polysemy that we described above does not facilitate progress toward a concrete intellectual identity.

For purposes of clarity, we consider it imperative for these tensions to be resolved. Most importantly, we stress the need for IB to find a balance between researching everything and too little, especially now that our interconnected world makes an international dimension omnipresent. Attempting to elucidate either an ever-expanding range or only small subset of international

phenomena engenders threats. On the one hand, more complex phenomena (aggravated by the interconnectedness of our world) require core complexities to be explained, i.e., IB must turn to other fields for illumination. Consequently, IB's distinctiveness as a unique channel for explanation may be diluted unless interdisciplinarity is *skillfully appropriated* as a standing element of IB scholars' analytical skills. Here, a certain threat lingers "when theories from outside the domain of international business [are] superficially understood, badly applied, and inappropriately interpreted" (Buckley & Lessard, 2005, p. 596). On the other hand, an overly narrow focus will deprive IB of its potential for impact and, hence, legitimization among the wider business and management community. We later suggest a way to more accurately sketch these boundaries. First, we seek to identify the source of confusion regarding IB's conceptual space.

### **IB's disciplinary roots as a source of the problem**

This collective confusion can partly be attributed to IB's two ancestral fields: economics and strategy (Aharoni, 2013; Rygh, 2013; Shenkar, 2004). As distinct fields, each is inevitably infused with its own assumptions that are, in turn, also carried into IB. Field-level conventions range from simple (e.g., lexical<sup>iv</sup>) to more complex issues (e.g., epistemological; Piekkari, Welch, & Paavilainen, 2009; or chronological; Moore & Lewis, 1999). "Definition by exclusion" is evident here, too: each camp defines pure IB and its themes based on its ancestral field's seminal studies, while ignoring other themes and authors (since they belong to the opposing camp), who may actually be equally instrumental in the field's birth and progress. Hence, IB risks being accused of the following cyclical mindset: anything international must be studied by IB because these are the "ancestral" authors we cite and recycle, these are the theories we employ to make sense of surrounding phenomena, and these are the epistemological tools we use to theorize.

Culture—one of the most widely used and cited notions in IB—is a characteristic example of disconnect between the two camps. While it dominates the overall discourse, it is variably (un)touched by each of the strategy and economics scholarly groups.

What are the implications of this ancestral diversity? Notwithstanding its undeniable contributions, we contend that it has also led to fragmentation and confusion. Let us further consider “IB as economics.” Economics,<sup>v</sup> as a field, prefers not to elucidate, e.g., local cultural phenomena and indigenous idiosyncrasies. More specifically, its arguments largely rest on environmental determinism, with managerial discretion and capacity considered unimportant or even ignored (Aharoni, 2013; Hutzschenreuter, Han, & Kleindienst, 2010; Shenkar, 2004). In fact, both the conceptual core and the epistemological arsenal in this camp are associated with generalizable aggregations, systematicity, and recurrence. Though, unlike in economics, IB’s quest for parsimony does not preclude acknowledging localized complexity, this aspect is not integral to its empirical sphere of investigation due to its onto-epistemological priorities. Much context is assumed away through controlling variables, despite simultaneous acknowledgment of the IB environment’s complexity (Poulis, Poulis, & Plakoyiannaki, 2013; Redding, 2005). Thus, despite their acknowledgment, the local forces that generate this complexity remain an unknown territory to many scholars.

Why should we condemn IB for its limited knowledge of local processes? Why is local situatedness important for IB? This situatedness may appear to be impenetrable by IB theorizing, but one could argue this is justified. Generalizable outcomes and universal conceptualizations are the core epistemological pursuits in IB, and this is a justifiable goal. We contend that this recipe-like focus *directly contradicts IB’s claimed distinctiveness*. In our view, IB’s claim to uniqueness is largely premised on our interconnected world’s complexity and plurality, involving other nations

and cultures. Essentially, IB sprung out of a promise: to elucidate the variety of business reality across the world against a heavy US-centric research body. How can shedding light on this heterogeneity be aligned with an epistemological orientation towards generalizability and universal conceptualizations that circumvent this local variety? If we accept that IB's birth and scientific evolution has been possible through this variety and heterogeneity of multifocal concerns (against a uninational, largely US-centric perspective), a prescriptive orientation towards universal conceptualizations that cut across boundaries i) undermines IB's sustainability and standing as a legitimately distinct field and ii) is misaligned with IB's original promise for illumination of the local and the particular. A discovery-oriented pursuit for the (many and varied) influential local nuances is replaced by the contrived packaging of heterogeneous phenomena for the sake of generalization. The epistemological arsenal that sustains this paradox is reflected in the wide use of representational modeling and abstracted conceptualizations that prevail in the field. Some IB practitioners behave as if adding or controlling for one more variable will offer a more nuanced or interesting view of the complex, uncertain world that first legitimized the field's creation.

These choices also have educational and scholarly implications, too. If IB's theorizing is not grounded, what should we teach our IB students? Arguably, the market's expectation is that IB graduates are culturally acute individuals, aware of and sensitive to local idiosyncrasies, hence able to inform more nuanced decision-making. How does the prevailing epistemology (e.g., analytical aggregations, lack of groundedness, assumptions of rationality) serve this purpose and construct the desired profile for our students? What is the enhanced knowledge arsenal that the latter possess compared to, e.g., management graduates? Ironically perhaps, prevailing IB conceptualizations of national culture are even "accused" of perpetuating cultural ignorance (Venaik & Brewer, 2016). One of course has to isolate seminal exceptions in the study of culture

within IB, which include studies couched in e.g. the institutional (Jackson and Deeg, 2008) or postcolonial (Fougère and Moulettes, 2012) traditions. Notwithstanding such exceptions, we nurture scholars (e.g. reviewers in journals, members of promotion/tenure committees, evaluators of scholarship schemes) who do not appreciate onto-epistemological diversity. As a result, a mere recycling of the status quo impedes expanding the domain and its impact.

Is IB at an inherent, perhaps unfair, disadvantage? We contend that it is. IB is much more complex than other fields due to the ontology it has assumed. It has self-proclaimed a knowledge stake in too wide a context (global, international, multinational, and transnational), creating inevitably overwhelming pressure for any researcher. IB scholars who bravely attempt to manage the complexity of this contextual template to theorize meaningfully and convincingly deserve credit. However, the chosen theorization process is misaligned with the field's ontological status. Which mode of knowing is better equipped to absorb the IB's inherently infused complexity? This is where a striking disconnect is noted. Representational models and theoretical abstraction prevail, despite the complex IB environment requiring deeper contextualization and illumination. For the sake of commensurability with a modernist, Newtonian ideal, theoretical meaningfulness is ignored.

Essentially, if IB cannot provide a convincing answer on how generalizable aggregations of practice reflect the local nuances that matter, it will keep theorizing on the basis of an ontological/epistemological misalignment; a fatal flaw in theorizing attempts. In our view, conventional modes of theorizing in IB and their modernist desiderata of systematicity, determinism, recurrence, and generalizability do not reflect the indigenous complexity that generates variable international phenomena. Assuming away the context and attempting to explain the world from a univocal perspective (e.g., Western-only or positivism-only perspective) implies

that context is seen as an obstacle rather than as a means to elevate IB's standing as a context-sensitive, plural domain. Therefore, instead of emulating conventional epistemological choices that are typically found in its ancestral fields, we contend that *IB's relegitimization passes through a non-isomorphic perspective in theorizing*. However, this requires an ontological shift.

## **IB AS DISCIPLINARY TAUTOLOGY: THE ONTOLOGICAL NATURE OF THE PROBLEM**

The epistemological orthodoxy described above is the logical outcome of IB's core ontological commitment: countries, MNCs, and their decisions are seen as *realized entities*. Hence, they are routinely represented as predetermined variables. This representational modeling also accords with the dominant paradigm of conducting and reporting research in IB's ancestral areas, and is based on a rigid entitative ontology (Thompson, 2011). When—due to our onto-epistemological priorities—we frame and analytically treat countries, MNCs, and their decisions as *accomplishments/outcomes*, we inevitably fail to account for their relational emergence and change. Ontologically, their historical constitution and ceaseless transformation matters, involving both international and non-international elements. Neglecting this fact conveys the impression that IB phenomena are international by default. Hence, “pre-international” or “post-international” circumstances are considered unimportant. We contend that past, present, and future concerns are extremely important for international endeavors since IB decisions (e.g. foreign market entry) are not taken easily: they are normally risky investments, whose constitution is inconspicuously hatched (from past to present), and projections/expectations about their outcome are varied, ambiguous, and influential for contemporary decisions (linking the present with the future).

Nevertheless, a certain chronological rigidity often frames present-only concerns as the drivers of theorizing in IB.

IB scholarship should recognize countries, MNCs, and their decisions as the amalgamation of localized forces and concerns. If, e.g., the MNC is a priori operationalized as an international entity (to which local or microfoundational aspects are of peripheral or zero importance), this neglects the underlying local relationality shaping MNCs' everyday practice (and, hence, their ongoing constitution). Essentially, IB *is* but rarely *becomes*. A self-definition of the field as "inherently international" (i.e., as a *fundamentally existent*, substantive discipline) omits its constitution and evolution based on hybrid international and local arrangements. With such an ontology, the whole IB narrative becomes a *disciplinary tautology* in its logic/rhetoric sense<sup>vi</sup>: if IB scholarship investigates phenomena at their already attained international phase (i.e., IB as a ring-fenced accomplishment) and ignores local and/or pre/post-international eras (which may though be instrumental in explaining those international phenomena) then, IB becomes a discipline which is unconditionally international by virtue of its self-contained characteristics. Therefore, a sense of cognitive closure excludes other logical or more meaningful explanations of the very international reality we seek to elucidate.

We further clarify this point through a focus on institutional theory. The latter is an archetypical example of a theoretical perspective which produces interesting results and showcases that indeed parts of IB become. Nevertheless, even in this tradition which stands out as exemplary, several studies have historically treated the institutional diversity of our world i) either in terms of quantifying distance from a baseline norm (usually the MNC's home country) ii) or using summary indicators to measure and test relationships between institutions (Jackson and Deeg, 2008). Notwithstanding seminal exceptions (e.g. applications of institutional perspective to IHRM), what

is missing from these approaches is an effort to *understand* this diversity which is itself constitutive of IB practice and not simply a taken-as-given constraint. What we argue therefore, is that field-level exceptions are not enough to ‘legitimize’ the rest of IB’s stagnation and hence, counter the attacks to its legitimacy. In our view, the bedrock of this stagnation is ontological in nature leading to a treatment of IB’s complexity (e.g. institutional diversity) as a rigid collection of unidimensional, fixed variables. Instead, the perspective we advocate is that *all entities*, including disciplines, *have to become in order to be* (Whitehead, 1929). The dynamicity engendered in this observation is critical for understanding any potential distinctiveness of IB and its ontological assumptions. Thus, we advocate a discussion acknowledging the seamlessness of business activity beyond rigid international/domestic dualisms. In this regard, we offer some points to consider across the three main entities characterizing IB:

*Environment (countries)*. As Brannen and Doz (2010, p. 242) note, “in the IB literature... the word ‘culture’ is still, much more often than not, used synonymously with ‘nation.’” Does a country or culture coincide with a market? How does conceptualizing country cultures as identifiable and unambiguous entities account for their mutable and heterogeneous nature? Hence, does IB legitimately treat countries as similar/dissimilar (the usual framing in the field)? How does this ontological treatment account for the regional and subnational heterogeneity so prevalent in contemporary societies (Beugelsdijk & Mudambi, 2013; Venaik & Midgley, 2015)? The purported ontological permanence of countries as markets is a suboptimal representation of intra-national ethnic diversity (e.g., in the U.S.A.), regional cultures (e.g., in China or India), and the cross-border mobility of people (e.g., expatriates in the U.K.). These are some of the core, restrictive ontological assumptions that have generated the epistemological implications described in the previous section. Consequently, predetermined conceptualizations of countries/cultures “are more likely to



reflect the world of their ‘makers’ than the world of their ‘subjects’” (Jack et al., 2008, p. 875). Even if we assume that a country is homogeneous, though, does historicizing its constitution matter? If so, how does a pure IB perspective offer a better vantage point for a requisite analysis (as opposed to, e.g., area studies)?

*Organization level (MNCs).* A reasonable assessment of MNCs’ or other firms’ international practice (e.g., operations, performance, actions) cannot sideline extra-firm focus (Delios, 2016). For example, the value network around a firm may be more influential than its own resources. This is particularly relevant for smaller firms seeking institutional support for international growth (Wright, Westhead, & Ucbasaran, 2007). This support comes early on (hence, it must be chronologically “unearthed”) and is also largely locally embedded. Moreover, how does particularizing the MNC as a fixed entity reflect intra-MNC heterogeneity, e.g., in terms of power and interests resulting in endemic conflicts (Dörrenbächer & Gammelgaard, 2016; Durand & Jacqueminet, 2015; Kostova, Nell, & Hoenen, 2016)? How can IB better account for this inherent diversity and relationality if it does not consider localized concerns? How is it better equipped to address smaller or newer firms’ international concerns compared to, e.g., the entrepreneurship literature?

*Outcome (international decisions).* Let us consider the binary decisional schemas prevailing in IB conceptualizations: e.g., the implementation of same or different strategies across clearly defined borders (Bjorkman & Welch, 2015; Chung, Wang, & Huang, 2012), or the dominance of dichotomous cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1980). Reality is much more complex than such aggregations, which suffer from issues of face, convergent, and discriminant validity, as well as measurement divergence, definitional inconsistencies, and problematic replicability (Poulis & Poulis, 2013; Venaik & Brewer, 2016; Venaik, Midgley, & Devinney, 2004). We

consider such shortcomings inevitable since much of IB does not account for, e.g., subnational variation, decisional complexity, embedded relationality, or the role of time in decision-making. To tame the complexity of the international environment, IB has resorted to parsimonious operationalizations of decision-making through theoretical abstraction (seen as a *sine qua non* of meaningful theory; Katsikeas, 2003).

The questions and concerns we pose above are not alien to the field. Several IB scholars have raised similar issues, though differentially expressed. For example, McDougall, Shane, and Oviatt (1994) early cautioned about the unrealistic assumptions of IB studies concerning the foundation of international new ventures, which lack sensitivity to time, context, and history. Fundamental platforms of an entrepreneurial schema (the entrepreneur and their network) are ignored and the focus is, unjustifiably, on the amalgamated outcome (i.e., the large, border-crossing firm). McDougall et al.'s contention is that the important contextual shifts for theorizing lie in the local and the particular. The former are the seeds that generate international phenomena of interest. Hence, detachment from parochial concerns distances IB scholars from meaningful reality. What we highlight, therefore, is that studies treating the MNC, its environment, and its decisions as fixed entities are decoupled from important, localized concerns. Consequently, IB studies embedded in this tradition are likely to use a bounded mode of knowing: they appropriate *aggregate models* to represent *synchronic-only linkages* between variables. Overall, a decontextualized, episodic (see Buckley, 2002) treatment of IB phenomena spawns and reproduces atheoretical analysis (Shenkar, 2004) and portrays IB as a chronologically fossilized discipline. Instead of an inherent curiosity for the locally unknown as it unfolds through time, IB is mostly characterized by detached observation, time-specific designs, and culture-free theories (Delios, 2016; Jack et al., 2008; Welch & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2014).

### **An illustration: the concept of fit in IB**

We illustrate these critical arguments through an example whose origins lie in the strategy-rooted IB camp<sup>vii</sup>. Specifically, the “concept of fit” has penetrated IB as a core concept borrowed from the strategy formation literature. Several IB studies aim to measure a substantially homogeneous environment (each country) and correspondingly propose matching strategies for fit and coalignment purposes (Chung et al., 2012; Cui, Walsh, & Zou, 2014; Gabrielsson, Gabrielsson, & Seppala, 2012; Griffith & Myers, 2005; Hultman, Robson, & Katsikeas, 2009; Katsikeas, Samiee, & Theodosiou, 2006; Ma, Chen, & Zang, 2016; Newman & Nollen, 1996; Tan & Sousa, 2013; Zeriti, Robson, Spyropoulou, & Leonidou, 2014). In such cases, the environment is fixed and subject to measurement as a whole, and the decision (which aims to match the measured, unified environment) is reified as a distinct substantive entity. Therefore, one assumes that fitting decisions can be analytically isolated and accurately measured in a corpuscular fashion (see Poulis & Poulis, 2016 for a critique).

The whole discussion of fit in IB is infused with assumptions of voluntary judgment and unilateral action by cognitively acute managers. Though these assumptions create the necessary parsimony for theorizing, they are unrealistic in the—unanimously acknowledged as complex—IB environment. Pragmatically, IB managers are cognitively bounded agents whose actions are mediated by influential and geographically scattered others. Consequently, assumptions of calculative and configurative mastery for internationally fitting decisions are unrealistic. IB managers are neither effortless processors of environmental complexity nor, optimum configurators of matching strategies at the international level; they do not possess any such “fittingness” skills. Rather, they act in a context of ambiguity, unintended consequences, and

suboptimal understanding. Actually, one would expect that IB—due to its overwhelmingly complex nature—aggravates such contextual characteristics of non-fittingness. Hence, IB should be at the forefront of deconstructing conceptualizations and resultant operationalizations that merely emulate unrealistic fit assumptions elsewhere. Instead, it unquestioningly embraces and reproduces them. The commonly found methodological choices in the field are in line with this isomorphic tendency. A covariance logic prevails and this accords with the rigid operationalization described before.

We contend that IB scholarship should *analytically appropriate* one of its basic self-defining features: if IB is indeed so complex, how should “fittingness” designs account for the role of other historically and spatially orchestrated (concentrated or dispersed) value chain activities? How do they account for wider strategic (e.g., subsidiaries cross-fertilizing other units) or purely parochial (e.g., subsidiaries as independent profit centers) concerns of a complex organization such as an MNC (Lim, Acito, & Rusetski, 2006)? Stripping away all this complexity to maintain *IB purity* prevents us surmising whether isolated international decisions and their consequences are indeed what we seek to *prove* or *affirm* with our conventional onto-epistemological tools. Specifically, is the purported effect of cross-border fittingness on business performance actual or conflated?

Therefore, in the quest for fit with external forces and to verify strategy–environment coalignment, IB’s conventional research designs assume that these fitting decisions are fully voluntary, cognitively laden, purposeful, consequential, and optimal. Fundamentally, we argue that IB has a unique opportunity to distance itself from such unrealistic assumptions. We promote an alternative set of assumptions and a systematic demonstration of how fitting decisions are bounded, emotionally driven, and (mis)aligned with internal accomplishments, other

developmental practices, or routine activities. Importantly, IB should show how international decisions *realistically* connect with other strategic decisions and actors across time and contexts. Otherwise, given the real nature of the aforementioned concerns, parsimonious aggregations of variegated phenomena will maintain suboptimal representations of the complex IB reality.

## **OUR SUGGESTED NEW PERSPECTIVE**

Given the ontological (and, hence, overarching) nature of the aforementioned assumptions, it is only natural that the locally embedded flow of IB phenomena is analytically sidelined. Therefore, we witness the following paradox: IB operationalizations in a complex, uncertain, and variably linked world are premised on permanent, distinct, and selectively linked variables. Consequently, IB research feeds its own tautology. Is there a better way to reflect the complexity that needs to be reflected? We advocate realistic acknowledgment that the international environment, the firm, and its decisions are *not* fundamentally existent entities<sup>viii</sup>. This will enable a more solid standing for IB. For example, scholarly research in the field should excel in demonstrating the bounded agency of local managers or the local involvement of others as enablers and constraints. A contrived representation of international managers as unilaterally deploying strategies as if concretely defined factors impact upon MNCs linearly and instantly, will not further IB's quest for legitimacy and impact.

How has IB responded to date? Leading scholars have called for big questions (Buckley, 2002) and grand focus (Peng, 2004) in IB as attempts to *rejuvenate* a mature field. However, we warn of more fundamental issues related to the legitimate *existence* of IB as an autonomous discipline. Without seeking a new set of dogmas, we contend that an ontological discussion may potentially reverse trends of fragmentation and inconclusiveness. Specifically, we believe that an

ontological shift will allow closer empathy with real-life phenomena. A new research program will not only unearth what, if any, is uniquely international in business: it will also guide us on which discipline is better equipped to elucidate important international phenomena.

Specifically, the evidence we used above illustrates that IB scholarship largely rests on the assumption of *situational and relational independence*, stripping away local situatedness and relational effects. This contrived representation of “internationality” focuses on the amalgamated international outcome, ignoring the local relationality constituting this outcome. Thus, it maintains the disciplinary tautology in IB. Instead, situational *interdependence* arguably has causal efficacy for international purposes and is determination itself. As such, it merits exclusive attention. Therefore, which set of ontological commitments can best offer such a perspective for IB?

Our proposal is for an ontology, which understands MNCs, their environment, or their decisions as emerging from processes that are locally embedded, relationally enacted and iteratively unfolding. Process-relational ontologies reject rigid dualisms and divisions of “international vs. local.” Reality is not abstracted and interrupted; rather, it involves a continuum of relational influences and originates in the past (pre-international), is realized in the present (international), and is oriented towards the future (post-international). For example, when it comes to foreign market entry as an archetypical IB decision, MNCs do not effortlessly process present-only concerns. Future states are imagined (e.g. an emotional approach towards empire-building) and past experiences resurface as influential (e.g. unsuccessful attempts or nostalgia for remarkable attempts). Only this integration of time streams permits a realistic understanding of how entities (countries, MNCs, their decisions) are born or deployed. In this effort, the analytical focus includes actors whose actions conflate and events which overlap. This intermingling would

allow us to surmise *how chronologically dispersed relationality* matters for the *synchronic* constitution of IB practice.

Let's take Beugelsdijk & Mudambi (2013) as a characteristic example of how ontology implicates with analytical choices and how a processual logic holds promise for an enhanced understanding. The authors offer an illustrative explanation of the serious weaknesses, stemming from a core IB assumption: that the country as a whole is used as the location unit of analysis. Where should a company locate its factory following its decision to produce abroad? In Country X (implying a random location within X) or in a specific place *within* Country X? How does conventional onto-epistemology and a typical research design in IB treat such a decision so far? It sees countries as fixed and unitary and proposes Country X as opposed to Country Y or Z as an optimal choice. Hence, it inevitably fails to account or misrepresents the multilayered complexity that is engendered in a country. This complexity is broadly definitive of every aspect of IB and includes local and particular nuances. On the contrary, a processual approach, through its focus on local relationality and its evolution, would illustrate how and why *particular agglomerations within* a country matter. Hence, it would allow a more informed IB decision through a more 'micro' as opposed to an exclusive focus on the analytical meta-structure called 'Country'.

Therefore, we promote a primary ontological focus on 'becoming' as a ubiquitous element of IB theorizing. The unit of analysis then becomes the situated (local) activities that generate outcomes and not only the realized international outcomes themselves. IB phenomena evolve and exploring and demonstrating their evolutionary track leads to powerful theoretical explanations and practically relevant modes of knowing. It is important to note at this stage that this focus on emergence does not preclude stability (e.g. the 'MNC' or 'country' as a rather unchanging structure). Yet, we argue that an underlying dynamicity (e.g. unfolding power games within

MNCs) is what generates such static representations. Hence, the value of an ontology which appreciates ongoing constitution and does not treat reality as a collection of spatiotemporally confined entities.

Importantly, no other academic discipline has a privilege in conducting this type of research. It may be the case that, e.g., organization studies have earlier embraced processual modes of knowing to a significant extent. Overall, though, business and management scholarship is largely based on a substance metaphysics wherein entities are seen as *realized facts*. Therefore, by embracing the value of processual studies, IB may not only gain a theorizing edge but also reverse ontological arguments against its very identity. It will portray itself as a discipline able to boast of its time-sensitive nature and varied knowledge of multifocal concerns. This will restore IB's strengths in relation to the "other" and the "unknown": areas that traditionally initiated IB and in which competing disciplines (e.g., economics) perform poorly due to their ontological priorities (Michailova and Tienari, 2014; Shenkar, 2004).

It may seem paradoxical (given the "I" in "IB") that IB's strength lies in its empathy with local variety and the particular; however, accepting these ontological-cum-epistemological caveats opens a wide realm of theorizing opportunities for IB. This potential will be realized only if IB scholars: i) embrace the analytical plasticity that another ontology affords; ii) demonstrate a genuine interest in nation-level divergence, which is currently largely missing (Delios, 2016) notwithstanding seminal exceptions (e.g. institutional perspectives; Meardi et al., 2009; Wood, Mazouz, Yin, Cheah, 2014; Wood & Horwitz, 2015); and iii) support revitalization of comparative studies and interdisciplinarity as IB's areas of specialization (Shenkar, 2004). The world and its heterogeneity are too wide to be known by one field alone. Thus, a requisite sensitivity to



influential local nuances can be claimed by IB as a field that originally legitimized its identity through exploration and awareness of otherness.

## **DISCUSSION**

With IB's prevailing epistemological basis being questioned (Jack et al., 2008), we think it is timely to take a further step back by questioning its ontological assumptions. By aiming to elucidate what exists and what is real, ontology is the springboard for the types of research questions posed and the theories developed: i.e., it is the foundational platform upon which epistemological choices are deployed. In this respect, a certain ontological univocality, following historically rooted conventions and editorial priorities, creates monolithic epistemological implications for what we can possibly know and understand. This disregard for ontological issues has favored glorification of methods. Interrogation of the very subject we study is sidelined for the sake of technical supremacy in conducting research. Consequently, incremental knowledge is routinely produced of relevance and interest to only an esoteric few. We contend this is one of the reasons for IB's failure to secure a solid standing and generate impact beyond its self-defined domain (Sullivan & Daniels, 2008).

Contrarily, the more inclusive ontology we advocate can unlock the potential that epistemological diversity may bring into the field. Therefore, by promoting a philosophically plural approach, this paper not only identifies disciplinary shortcomings but also suggests ontologically grounded ways to overcome them. Overall, we believe that this approach can initiate wider dialogue on the future state of IB research. Is IB an autonomous discipline and can its evolution be separated from advances in the wider management agenda? What kind of ontological

treatment would better (dis)connect IB (from) with its strategy or economics roots? These are fundamental questions for which we do not seek concrete answers and verification. They are intended to offer a novel perspective and, hence, ignite further deliberations. Ultimately, whether a more nuanced treatment of IB phenomena will lead to a more vague or more concise drawing of IB's boundaries is an empirical question that can be answered only through further research<sup>ix</sup>.

Our study argues that ontology has been unreasonably sidelined for the sake of epistemological considerations. We suggest a clear perspective to advance IB: embracing a process ontology in analytical endeavors. However, this should not be seen as the only means for re-legitimizing the discipline. Other means may be suggested by other authors or, even more importantly, a process approach may itself be proven non-fitting. This may be due to misappropriation by practicing scholars (which is already happening; see Hurmerinta, Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, & Hassett, 2016) or more appropriate treatment of focal phenomena by other disciplines (e.g., entrepreneurship). Therefore, we do not claim our suggested perspective to be an all-encompassing remedy: As a suggestion for paradigmatic shift, which is always a strenuous endeavor, its success will be contingent on several factors largely dependent on institutional gatekeepers (e.g., editors of core IB journals), authors' predispositions and theorizing skills, the evolution of global industries, and the relative importance of local particularities. Thus, this study reinforces the authors striving to delineate IB's ontological boundaries and aiming for ontological/epistemological consistency in their writing. It also aims to illustrate and chart how ontological concerns can be used for legitimizing a discipline. Consequently, it is also addressed to scholars uncomfortable with the striking absence or misappropriation of philosophy of science applications (Devinney et al., 2015) and the unjustifiable dominance of a theorizing monoculture (Jack et al., 2008) in IB research.

In the interests of fairness, we must note that, unlike many other disciplines, IB scholarship has witnessed brave outbursts of self-criticism. IB scholars have questioned IB's standing as an autonomous discipline or its ability to provide meaningful answers to important questions. Therefore, IB may be "challenged" over its onto-epistemological groundings but not criticized for its lack of reflection thereon. In fact, we empathize with several IB scholars feeling uncomfortable with the prevailing ontological orientation and choices in the field. They express their worry over the discipline's eventual fate and suggest meaningful ways to overcome fundamental shortcomings (while also producing insightful results). However, the aforementioned historically bounded priorities have limited the space for such critical voices, which are often marginalized as peripheral or heretic. We join these voices while embracing and extending their rationale. This is motivated by worry over our conceptual alma mater and our view that fragmentation and stagnation can be reversed.

## **CONCLUSION**

In a crowded academic space, competing disciplines strive to gain the attention of and to attract young scholars, university management committees, funding bodies, and practitioners. Therefore, legitimization of a discipline is not a peripheral concern but rather the bloodline that will sustain its existence. IB has historically been at the epicenter of such concerns, with IB departments routinely absorbed or obliterated in intra-institutional games of power and legitimization (Brannen & Doz, 2010; Michailova & Tienari, 2014). In this paper, we demonstrated that a lack of ontological clarity undermines IB's sustainability. In fact, definitional ambiguity is detrimental for any field, since there must be a degree of shared consensus in order to theorize meaningfully and coherently (Bruyat & Julien, 2000).

The evidence we used to demonstrate these shortcomings came from: i) various IB subfields (e.g., international marketing and international human resource management); ii) themes (e.g., culture or the MNC); iii) historical conventions (e.g., IB's economics and strategy roots); and iv) the internal inconsistencies of IB scholarship. Specifically, we challenged *the time-insensitive and a-relational character of several studies* in IB as a source of conceptual rigidity and cognitive closure. We argued that treating countries, MNCs, and international decisions as spatiotemporally fixed and self-contained entities perpetuates inconclusive conceptualizations and less interesting findings. We followed this approach in the hope of guiding the IB community towards employing a perspective on metaphysics that is *not* spatiotemporally concrete. In turn, this may enable IB to redraw its pragmatic conceptual space, triggering a wider discussion on its explanatory utility to commence. To our knowledge, this is the only study to utilize such means to enable reflection on the field's potential distinctiveness<sup>x</sup>.

We can only speculate about the discipline's eventual fate. We hope that the bold generation of IB scholars who have embraced alternative modes of knowing will continue to do so. Gradually, these authors will legitimize their value in a field whose own legitimization is attacked. In turn, this will help redefine IB's conceptual space, and a new discussion can commence. Therefore, IB is expected to be a useful discipline in the ongoing discussion of relevance and interestingness that all management researchers ought to sustain. In fact, through its aforementioned brave self-criticism, IB can be a role model for other disciplines. Fields such as marketing (see Firat, 2010) and strategy (see Tsoukas, 2017) should also reconsider their ontological presuppositions and epistemological assumptions. Hence, the discussion around IB's legitimacy may provide an organizing structure for similar discussions elsewhere. In turn, the management discourse as a whole will only benefit through such multi-thematic reflections.

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<sup>i</sup> In this paper, we use the terms “field” and “discipline” interchangeably.

<sup>ii</sup> We do not deny the international dimension of research on NGOs; we simply highlight the oxymoron of labeling NGOs as part of *pure IB* while some institutional gatekeepers simultaneously classify international marketing (which has historically been instrumental in the growth of IB) as a non-IB field.

<sup>iii</sup> If future conditions necessitate reflection on the ontological core of a discipline, it is then imperative for scholars to facilitate further becoming/change. The problem is that IB has not yet *become*.

<sup>iv</sup> For example, economics-rooted IB scholars use the term “multinational enterprise” while those rooted in strategy routinely refer to the “multinational corporation” as the defining organizational schema in IB.

<sup>v</sup> At least neoclassical economics, which is the base of core IB themes (Aharoni, 2013; Brannen and Doz, 2010).

<sup>vi</sup> IB can be tautologous in its grammar sense, too i.e., as a needless repetition of words: if all business is international, and hence, internationality is omnipresent in contemporary business activity then, international business is a pleonastic (redundant) expression. In this sense, if business is undoubtedly international what is the distinct angle that IB -as a distinct field of study- offers to the wider management discourse?

<sup>vii</sup> The example is simply an illustrative indication of the confusion described in the paper. It does not claim representativeness of any sort. Theorizing traditions elsewhere in IB may be couched on other assumptions, which do not necessarily resemble those found in fit scholarship.

<sup>viii</sup> Whether a unit of analysis or an empirical unit are treated as fixed and atemporal is dependent on a research team’s assumptions and hence, how the team formulates its research questions. For example, as Greenwood et al. (2011: 319) illustrate, some MNCs may be impervious to environmental pressures for conformity, legitimacy or mimicry. Their governance structures or idiosyncratic market features may diminish relational effects and thus, research questions related to such entities can indeed appear as fixed and atemporal for valid reasons. Hence, we do not promote a process-relational analysis as an all-encompassing remedy but rather as an alternative perspective that has the potential to offer more nuanced understanding.

<sup>ix</sup> An important starting point in this endeavor is to ease the frequency of filling existing gaps as the dominant theorizing mode (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011). Notwithstanding the value of such an orientation, we promote the enhanced value of challenging entrenched assumptions. Otherwise, problematic ramifications of existing assumptions

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will persist unnoticed or even become silently accepted by favoring incremental knowledge and isomorphic tendencies in theorizing.

<sup>x</sup> At this point, we need to stress an overarching point. IB is not a homogeneous and unilaterally directed field but rather one that encompasses multiple traditions and theoretical perspectives. Therefore, our critique would be unfair if we did not exclude those traditions and perspectives, which deviate from the restrictive norms described in the paper. For example, comparative institutional analysis (especially prevalent in IHRM) has offered rich insights, which acknowledge and examine the value and relevance of local and comparative perspectives for IB. Nevertheless, such perspectives are not the norm nor do they dictate the research agenda in the field.