Research into the Internationalisation Process: Advice to an Alien

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Abstract: This paper reviews several facets of the state of play of current research into the internationalisation process. In particular, the author considers origin, geographical coverage, methodology and the theoretical impact of this research domain. The paper concludes by suggesting future directions for colleagues researching in this area and argues that interdisciplinary initiatives by colleagues are likely to be the most productive.

Just imagine if an alien landed tomorrow on earth from a distant but much superior culture (it always is!). Now this distant and superior place is a site of great learning where the study of internationalisation processes are of great importance to them (they just got here after all so they have some experience of it). Faced with this cutesy little alien (another common characteristic) you are asked to explain and give account of earthlings' research into the internationalisation process? A daunting prospect is it not? Where would you begin and what story would you weave together to impress our furry friend? (I've only just noticed the fur, well its impolite to stare).

I guess I should sit my alien visitor down in a bar with an adjoining micro-brewery (this I have noticed over the years is the favourite haunt of those involved in research into the internationalisation process) and try to tell 'it' (for sex is so far indeterminate) something about the scope of the work down on earth. This would consist of saying something of its origins, the geographical coverage, the methods used, its theoretical impact, and finally an indication of where we go from here.

This then is what I propose and my alien companion indicates that this will be acceptable. (It is always useful how they can freely translate into English or any language as appropriate on meeting earthlings). However, where to begin my first conversation with an alien on internationalisation is a problem. There is a vast amount of material available, which, on the face of
it, is relevant to understanding internationalisation. To trace the beginnings of interest in internationalisation more specifically within this work I would point to Simmonds and Smith (1968) and their study of the first export order as a marketing innovation. In addition Cunningham and Spigel’s 1971 study of successful exporting is an early classic. The development of the Stages Model by Johanson and Wiedersheim (1975) and Johanson and Vahlne (1977) warrants a mention, as does Bilkey and Tesar (1977) and Bilkey (1978). After this the work becomes very disparate focusing on strategies and behaviours associated with exporting including firm size and a myriad of performance characteristics. Thus, those review-based articles, which attempt to pull together the literature and impose some order on it are important as a starting point. Miesenbock (1988), Welch and Luostarinen (1988), Aaby and Slater (1989), Johanson and Vahlne (1990; 1992); Melin (1992) and Andersen (1993), Leonidu and Katsikeas (1996) all fit comfortably into this category.

There are many streams of research which feed into internationalisation from those driven by economics to ones based on personal behaviour. To narrow the field it becomes necessary to declare my personal interest. This can be achieved by, for instance, focusing on the Marketing Entrepreneurship Interface and narrowing the interest to small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) and micro enterprises. For some 13 years under the direction of Professor Gerald E. Hills, from the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), there has been a research symposium held into 'Research at the Marketing/Entrepreneurship Interface'. This event has close links to the Marketing and Entrepreneurship Special Interest Group (MEIG) of the American Marketing Association. The proceedings of the UIC group amount to a substantial body of source material for further study.

This group attracted so many European researchers that in 1996 a UK based group of researchers held their own conference at Glasgow University. This has now become an annual event attracting up to 40 people and the group is a Special Interest Group (SIG) within the UK Academy of Marketing. The intimacy of the group is one of its great strengths. Again the proceedings are being published to create a resource base (Hulbert et al 1998). While the UK and US based groupings have similarities there are also differences, a key one being a greater use of qualitative methodologies amongst the Europeans. However, both groups have the same intention to bring a greater awareness of the Marketing/Entrepreneurship Interface to a wider audience. For anyone specialising in internationalisation some of the material produced by these groupings is worth a visit.
As for geographical coverage this has been dominated by Anglo-American researchers with occasional contributions from studies in Australia, New Zealand, other European countries (Sweden, Finland). Some evidence of this can be found in an article by Coviello and McAuley (1999). In a review of articles which had the following characteristics:

1. empirical studies published between 1989 and 1998

2. focused on SME's, with the individual firm as the unit of analysis, and;

3. focused on examining the process of how smaller firms increase their involvement in international operations, with the process captured as a series of events, or as an episode, epoch, or biographic history.

It was found that in the 16 studies eligible for review 11 were European based, while 3 were based on New Zealand with the further 2 from Hong Kong and Pakistan. It seems that traditionally small and open economies attract researchers attention but huge economies like the USA are conspicuous by their absence. While the study of SMEs has a global appeal there is a marked absence of cross-cultural studies in those reviewed (Bell, 1995; Gankema et al 1997). This is myopic given the nature of internationalisation.

Method is important. In studies of the internationalisation process there has been a shift in emphasis from quantitative to qualitative. It is too simplistic to see one or other of these approaches as better than the other. Not better, just different. Most researchers, including those outside the topic area, regard themselves as being familiar with quantitative methods but sometimes there is less appreciation of qualitative methods. Few studies use multiple methods with most focusing on a single approach. A useful article by Hill and McGowan (1998) gives an overview of available qualitative methods.

My alien friend smiled knowingly. What if, he said, more of you earthlings used multiple methods to unlock the internationalisation process. Think of it as entering another dimension. You talk of viewing the business holistically yet, at the same time, focus on a single method of research. In our defence I tell him that there has been talk of the importance of longitudinal work and the insights that can be gained from it but little has been achieved as yet. Most work is dominated by the snapshot approach usually of a single-sector. Clearly time will tell if the emphasis changes but,
so far, the preference for researchers has been to concentrate on short-term cross-sectional work.

I have to admit that, in my view, theoretical development remains stifled. There is little to point to in terms of findings which can be generalised and which are not subject to the caveat 'for this sample in this time space context'. It may be that the heterogeneous nature of the SME is too varied but it may also stem from a myopic view of methodologies and lack of cross-cultural or truly international studies. On a more positive note commensurate with a shift away from stage or process models of internationalisation to a network perspective there have been more acute insights gained which are arguably more generalisable. However, the potential for variation in patterns of SME behaviour is illustrated below even within one short journey from the UK to Ghana.

Given the beginning of the new millennium there has, naturally, been much focus on the meaning of time in our lives in the media and elsewhere. One of the more innovative approaches to this was by the UK broadcaster Channel 4 in their series 'On the Line'. This is a unique millennium project that celebrates the similarities and differences of the eight countries found along the Greenwich Meridian - the UK, France, Spain, Algeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, Togo and Ghana. These countries, lying along zero longitude, share the same morning, noon and night, but the people who live in them lead very different lives. In watching some of these programmes I was struck by the often huge gap in experience even down to the level of a discussion with a driver in Mali about the fact the earth was curved and not flat as it appeared.

One programme in particular comprised Jon Snow (who first devised the idea of ‘On the Line’) travelling up the Greenwich Meridian from Accra in Ghana to Timbuktu in Mali, where he meets Ekow Eshun, who has travelled down the line from Grimsby. En route both spend time with local people with widely divergent cultures. In this one small transect the feeling was brought home to me that what we as academic researchers said about the internationalisation process was potentially very limited in coverage. This one journey along the Greenwich Meridian had exposed such variety that it left one feeling rather small, ant like, beneath a towering colossus of the unknown. Is there a lesson here for research into the internationalisation process?
So where do we go from here? There is a danger that the subject area will become stagnant unless researchers are prepared to come above the parapet and work with others on a truly global scale to lift findings from the mundane. More reflective articles are needed to link existing disparate empirical studies. More needs to be done to enhance the reputation of the work by showing its relevance to policy makers worldwide. We need to reach out to other research groupings to expand and deepen our knowledge. The service sector needs more attention. Technology, notably developments in e-commerce, is changing the internationalisation process and quickly redefining business in a borderless world.

In short there is a need for:

◊ Increased global coverage
◊ Multiple sector studies
◊ Cross-cultural studies
◊ Multiple methods of approach
◊ Increased relevance to policy makers

Some of these 'research directions' need to be taken quickly to avoid the research falling into the 'more of the same trap'. In addition those of us involved at the Marketing/Entrepreneurship Interface need to get our work published more frequently. The UK's Academy of Marketing Special Interest Group has a system in place to produce the proceedings from the annual winter conference. The MEIG has links with the Journal of Developmental Entrepreneurship. The creation of this new Journal is also welcomed as an outlet to further enhance the reputation and the development of the area. Within this wider grouping those of us concerned with the internationalisation process can make our impact felt. It is important that this is done as other academic groups are discovering 'international entrepreneurship' for the first time. Professor Richard Wright at McGill University hosted a very productive meeting in 1998 with a further meeting planned for 2000. It was interesting to see international business scholars and those researching entrepreneurship link into 'international entrepreneurship' for the first time unaware, largely, of the work produced over the years by the UIC/MEIG group and by the UK SIG. This 'competition' is not a threat but we have the opportunity here to grasp some of the issues which to date have not been fully developed within our study of the internationalisation process.

The further development of the area in the future may involve small specialist meetings where we 'interface' with other academic groups drawing on groups whose primary interest is SMEs or entrepreneurship. Such
activity will I believe establish our activities more widely and at the same
time provide a greater possibility for cross-pollination of ideas. We come
together already in our specialist Marketing/Entrepreneurship groupings and
at the same time link into mainstream marketing, SME and entrepreneurship
groupings. By formally 'interfacing' with these groups I think there will be a
creation of synergy.

My alien friend looks at his timepiece and indicates it is time to go. He has
learnt something of our work and promises to return. In the meantime he
wishes us well with our researches into the internationalisation process. I
turn to ask my alien friend to tell me something of his knowledge and
learning but it seems he has had enough. Gradually, before my eyes he is
fading moving to another dimension.

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