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Keep It Abstract, Keep It Equal: Reconsidering Contextual Demands in Global Sociology

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the unequal expectations placed on sociological studies conducted in peripheral versus core contexts, particularly in relation to abstraction, contextual justification, and claims of transportability/generalizability. Drawing on a content analysis of articles published in American Sociological Review and American Journal of Sociology (2021–2025), I show that peripheral studies are disproportionately required to provide detailed contextual descriptions, justify case selection, and acknowledge limitations in transportability—expectations rarely imposed on U.S.- or Western European-based research. I argue that such asymmetries constrain theory building from the periphery and perpetuate epistemic hierarchies in global sociology. While thick description may be warranted for deviant or crucial cases, typical cases—regardless of geographic location—should not face additional scrutiny. To promote equitable theory development, I call for consistent standards of abstraction and contextual treatment across all regions.

1 | Introduction

During a symposium on "what is good theorizing," Healy (2017) observed that an increasing number of sociological papers invoke the term nuance while distancing themselves from the abstraction upon which robust theory depends. Through abstraction, a process of throwing away details and omitting differences of things (e.g., objects, people, and countries), scholars can produce academic concepts (e.g., social capital) and apply it to various contexts. His claim —the good theory depends on abstraction—is, I believe, more or less shared across social scientists. Abstraction enhances the generalizability of findings to broader contexts and ultimately makes theory "useful" (van Tubergen 2020, 46). In other social science disciplines, such as political science, there is a growing emphasis on generalizability and the transportability of findings to other contexts (for empirical examples, see Bassan-Nygate et al. 2024; for theoretical discussions, see Egami and Hartman 2023; Findley et al. 2021). Looking ahead, social scientific research may increasingly seek to move beyond nuance in favor of

broader transportability across diverse and unstudied contexts, and behind the transportability, as a principle, abstraction always appears (definitions of key terms are summarized in the Table 1).

However, such realizations of abstraction are not equally permitted across all contexts. In sociology, high levels of abstraction are largely accepted for research on North America and Western Europe, where researchers can often avoid detailing regional characteristics, justifying case selection, or questioning the transportability of their findings (Fishberg et al. 2024; Kamal and Courtheyn 2024). In contrast, studies focusing on peripheral regions are still expected to provide extensive contextual descriptions, offer detailed justifications for their case choices, emphasize the specificity of the region, and confront skepticism regarding the transportability of their results (Connell 1997, 2006; Go 2017, 2020; Hoang 2022). This double standard is supported by empirical evidence; studies conducted in North American and Western European contexts are significantly less likely to include explicit geographic

TABLE 1 | Brief definitions of key terms.

Generalizability[a]	The extent to which inferences drawn from a given study's sample can be applied to that same population as a whole.
Transportability[a]	The extent to which inferences drawn from a given study's sample can be applied to a different target population.
Core[b]	Areas where power and resources in knowledge production are highly concentrated.
Periphery[b]	Areas where power and resources in knowledge production are limited.
Provincialization[c]	Acknowledging particularistic, partial, and context-bound nature of scientific knowledge.
Abstraction[d]	Mental process of forming a general idea by omitting individual differences or details of several objects or ideas.

[a]Based on Findley et al. (2021).
[b]Based on Collyer (2014); Connell and Wood (2002).
[c]Based on Go (2007), (2020); also see Chakrabarty (2000).
[d]Based on Healy (2017); Rosen (2014).

references in their titles, abstract, and even data scope compared to those conducted in the periphery (Castro Torres and Alburez-Gutierrez 2022; Ergin and Alkan 2019; Kahalon et al. 2022).

This study is by no means the first to address these issues; numerous works have already documented regional biases in sociology and the social sciences more broadly. Many of these studies offer forward-looking recommendations. For instance, Go (2020) emphasizes that all sociological knowledge is provincial, shaped by and particular to its own contexts. In criminology, emerging subfields such as Asian criminology and Southern criminology have sought to challenge Northern dominance (see Moosavi 2019). In response to this growing body of literature, the present study takes a different approach by foregrounding the role of abstraction. Specifically, I examine the challenges faced by studies conducted in peripheral contexts through the lens of abstraction. To do so, I begin by briefly outlining how sociologists have theorized the divide between core and periphery, and how this divide has contributed to a regional concentration in contemporary sociology. I should note that "core" contexts roughly indicate a dominance in knowledge production of sociology, typically includes the North America and Western Europe and "periphery" indicates the other contexts. Depending on authors and papers, it indicates the dichotomy of the global "North" and "South" or "metropole" and "periphery". In employing the core/periphery distinction, I aim to describe the target contexts of studies and the regional inequality in abstraction, rather than the scholastic or institutional concentration of resources.

I then identify two core problems that limit the abstraction of research from peripheral regions. To illustrate these problems empirically and indirectly, I analyze articles published in the *American Sociological Review* and the *American Journal of Sociology*, highlighting disparities in how researchers justify their choice of study context and describe the contextual limitations of their findings. Finally, I argue that only a narrow set of circumstances need to justify detailed contextual elaboration, and I conclude by advocating for a consistent application of abstraction across all regions.

2 | Brief Description of Euro-American Dominance

Concerns over the disproportionate focus on Euro-American contexts are widely shared across the social sciences. Perhaps the most prominent example comes from psychology, where research overwhelmingly draws on samples from WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) societies (Henrich et al. 2010). Indeed, more than 95% of studies published in the top six psychology journals rely on data from European or American populations (Arnett 2009), a pattern that has persisted even a decade after initial criticisms were raised (Thalmayer et al. 2021). Similar concerns are echoed in linguistics, where scholars have highlighted the disadvantages faced by non-native English speakers, including challenges related to language use, collaboration, and geographical location (Flowerdew 2001; Hyland 2016) (for the inequality of global authorship distribution in economics, see Aigner et al. 2025).

In sociology, these concerns have been framed through the lens of colonization. Connell (1997) argued that classical theory was developed in the heartlands of imperialism and that it continues to reflect an "imperial gaze" that reproduces colonial power dynamics. She later noted that much of what is considered "general" social theory is still produced in the Global North, citing figures such as Giddens, Coleman, and Bourdieu as examples of theorists who presented their work as universal (Connell 2006). Go (2017) expanded on this critique, arguing that the regional imbalance in sociology is not merely a matter of representation but of epistemic inequality; knowledge produced in the North or West is seen as superior to that from the periphery, reinforcing a hierarchy of knowledge. This epistemic inequality is compounded by resource disparities. While the relationship between colonization and resource distribution may be complex, scholars based in the Global North continue to dominate academic resources, including research funding, publishing infrastructure, the dominant academic language, and agenda-setting power (Brown et al. 2025). Brown and colleagues (2025) demonstrate that editorial board members are heavily concentrated in a small number of core countries, enabling them to shape the direction of research globally. Such

concentrations cause bias in acceptance decisions (for non-sociological bibliometric studies, see Rubin et al. 2023; Zumel Dumlao and Teplitskiy 2025), thereby distorting the representation of knowledge in peripheral countries.

As a result, Northern contexts are afforded default status, centrality, and presumed generalizability and transportability, while peripheral contexts are rendered exceptional, particularistic, and marginal (Marginson 2022). Empirical studies confirm this pattern. For example, Jacobs and Mizrachi (2020) found that over 75% of articles published in *American Sociological Review* and *American Journal of Sociology* between 2010 and 2016 included the United States in their analysis, with more than 65% focusing exclusively on the U.S. (also see Kurzman 2022). In comparison, other social sciences such as demography, economics, and political science exhibit a less U.S.-centric focus. Although there is some evidence of increasing internationalization in sociology, this trend is largely driven by a growing emphasis on Western Europe (Kurzman 2017). To be clear, there are also cases in which authors based in core countries study peripheral contexts (e.g., Purnell 2024, on hunger-related publications), and vice versa. Therefore, the observed distributions do not necessarily mirror the regional distribution of author affiliations, even though they may overlap substantially.

3 | Consequences of Heavy Concentration on Euro-American Regions

3.1 | Ideal Types of Research Practices

The concentration of sociological research in core contexts generates multiple forms of bias and inequality in academic practice. I particularly highlight two primary issues, (1) justification burden and (2) undervalued academic impact/transportability, both create structural disadvantages for scholars conducting research in peripheral contexts. The first issue, justification burden, arises during the review process, through comments and requirements imposed by gatekeepers (i.e., editors and reviewers) (see Lillis and Curry 2006). The second issue, undervalued academic impact, becomes salient after publication, particularly in how research is referenced and followed up by fellow academics; the limited number of scholars engage with or build upon research originating from peripheral contexts.

To explain these problems, I conceptualize the research process in two stages: the "original" study and the "subsequent" study. An "original" study introduces a new concept, perspective, framework, or theory. This theoretical innovation may be entirely conceptual or empirically grounded in a specific context. Researchers then follow up with "subsequent" studies, either in the new contexts or in the same context, which might explore mechanisms, propose alternative explanations, or offer refined operationalizations, thereby expanding the empirical reach of the original idea. Through this process, researchers generate additional findings that further develop the area of study. Although this pattern may be more visible in quantitative

research, I believe a similar progression is often observed in qualitative and theoretical work as well.

To give a concrete example, Putnam's (2007) study on the relationship between ethnic diversity and trust in both in-group and out-group members can be seen as an "original" contribution. It sparked a substantial research "market" (e.g., Dinesen et al. 2020), with numerous studies attempting to replicate, extend, or challenge his findings. One such follow-up is Dinesen and Sønderskov's (2015) analysis, which employed detailed geographical data, measuring ethnic diversity within an 80-m radius around individuals, and compared this with broader spatial units to examine effects on social trust in Denmark. Although this work is classified as a "subsequent" study, it clearly demonstrates novelty through its methodological innovations. By introducing a fine-grained spatial approach and a multilayered operationalization of geographic context, it influenced further research in the field (e.g., Laurence and Goebel 2025). This example illustrates that subsequent studies are not necessarily derivative or secondary; rather, they often make substantial contributions in their own right.

3.2 | Justification Burden

For scholars in the periphery who attempt to engage in these processes, research development is not as smooth as depicted due to the justification burden. As standard research practice, scholars build upon newly proposed ideas and apply them to various contexts beyond where the original study was conducted (with some additional insights to the original, of course). The choice of context depends on the aim of the test and the availability of data (on case selection, see Beach and Pedersen 2018; Levy 2008). In principle, the context can be anywhere, and its appropriateness should be evaluated based on the research goal.

However, studies conducted in peripheral contexts often face greater criticism from gatekeepers, typically falling into two categories: the need for justification, and particularistic criticism. These may be two sides of the same coin, but I discuss them separately for clarity. First, regardless of research goal, scholars in periphery are almost always asked to justify the reasons to select the context and fully describe the target contexts in details, even if the details are not relevant to the research goal. Hoang (2022, 214) concisely described that "nearly all papers published in U.S. journals on topics and research sites outside of North America and Western Europe must go through the painstaking effort to 'justify' their case by explaining why we should care about X country…". Indeed, scholars in peripheral countries are required to explain why their context was selected. While studies on North American or Western European countries are sometimes asked to justify their case selection, the justifications tend to be shorter and more readily accepted than those from peripheral settings. I do not argue that scholars should never justify their case selections. However, it is problematic when the expectations regarding the length and quality of justification differ by region (see Puthillam et al. (2024) for newly proposed guideline for social psychology reviews).

Additionally, there are issues concern disparities in the accumulated contextual knowledge across regions. As discussed earlier, sociological research disproportionately targets the U.S. and Western European countries (Jacobs and Mizrachi 2020; Kurzman 2017), creating an imbalance in shared background knowledge. As a result, scholars working on peripheral regions are often asked to include extensive details about the societal context, institutions, and historical background, even when these are not central to the aims of the research. Reviewers may request such elaboration on the assumption that readers of American or European journals are unfamiliar with the periphery. However, it is questionable whether researchers studying the U.S. or Europe provide equally comprehensive descriptions for the benefit of readers outside these regions. The demand for excessive contextual detail places authors from peripheral contexts at a disadvantage, as it consumes limited page space that could otherwise be used to develop theoretical arguments or analytic clarity.

More importantly, gatekeepers, and potentially readers in the core contexts, expect peripheral contexts to differ meaningfully from the core. Lillis and Curry (2006), analyzing the revision processes of papers submitted from peripheral contexts, argue that differences between such papers and those from the core are tolerated so long as they are exotic. Sometimes, gatekeepers even suggest including context-specific hypotheses or arguments, even when such additions are unrelated to the original contribution of the study. I personally experienced this when submitting a paper on hiring discrimination and its mechanisms, specifically taste-based discrimination, in the Japanese context (Igarashi and Mugiyama 2023). During peer review at one of the top sociology journals, a reviewer wrote:

> I don't disagree with the notion that (taste-based and statistical) ethnic discrimination may be rather universal, but I would like to invite the authors to elaborate how the specific Japanese context might affect the level of discrimination towards immigrant groups as well as the strength of the various mechanisms of discrimination. E.g., how does the need for immigrant workers due to labor shortages affect the debate about immigrant workers? How is the view towards Chinese immigrant workers related to their high educational level and the history of relations between China and Japan?

Ultimately, peripheral studies are discouraged from claiming the universality of mechanisms and are instead encouraged, or pressured, to highlight specific, exotic features of the local context, treating it as a rare scholastic opportunity inaccessible to core-region researchers. I do not deny that such studies may contribute uniquely to the literature, but not all peripheral studies should be required to do so. Imposing additional context-specific hypotheses against the authors' original aims does not necessarily enhance the quality of the paper and may in fact reduce the likelihood of a favorable evaluation.

Some scholars have criticized this practice as representing "passive" or "dependent" social scientific communication

(Alatas 2003), in which scholars in the periphery are "extravert" (Hountondji 1997), oriented toward scholastic developments originating in core countries (for a qualitative evaluation of these dynamics, see Connell et al. 2018). These critics argue that peripheral scholars merely follow agendas set by core-country researchers and apply their theories to peripheral contexts without generating original frameworks. Yet, I contend that enhancing the transportability of theories are crucial steps in social scientific development. Moreover, the research trajectory is standard practice in the core itself (e.g., Dinesen and Sønderskov 2015). Criticizing peripheral scholars for participating in a research model commonly accepted in the core is therefore both unjust and structurally unequal.

3.3 | Undervalues Academic Impact/ Transportability

Nevertheless, peripheral scholars do propose new concepts, perspectives, frameworks, or theories. However, even if the peripheral scholars propose these, they often face a lack of academic followers. For any research areas to grow, "subsequent" studies are essential. Yet, perspectives introduced by scholars in the periphery often fail to gain traction, perhaps because they are deemed overly particularistic or limited to the context in which they were developed. This dynamic has been noted by previous scholars. Analyzing the works of Coleman, Bourdieu, and Giddens, Connell (2006) argued that the universal claims made by these authors are rarely questioned. In contrast, "social scientists in the periphery cannot universalize a locally generated perspective because its specificity is immediately obvious. It attracts a proper name, such as 'Latin American dependency theory,' and the first question that gets asked is—how far is this relevant to other cases? It is only from the metropole that a credible tacit claim of universality can be made" (p. 258). Similarly, Go (2017) observed that "all of these rich diverse standpoints and associated insights [from the periphery] have been too often dismissed on the grounds that they are particularistic, subjective, and thus somehow inferior, as if dominant sociology has not been particularistic, subjective, and interest laden..." (p. 196).

Though the evidence is indirect, empirical studies support this pattern. Tóth et al. (2023), analyzing altmetrics and citation counts in communication science, found that while papers by American and Western European scholars received high citation and access counts, those from the periphery (e.g., Eastern Europe) were accessed at similar rates but cited less frequently. This suggests that even when peripheral papers are read and recognized, they are not followed or built upon. Collyer (2014) showed that American and British scholars tend to cite research conducted in their own countries, whereas Australian authors more frequently cite studies from other contexts. He described this as a pattern in which "Australian authors tend to look 'outward' for their sociological material, while UK and USA authors focus inward and source 'in-country'" (p. 259). Similar trends appear in BRICS countries, where scholars tend to cite Western-focused studies but rarely cite one another (Ai and Masood 2021). These disadvantages that peripheral scholars face can be structurally embedded, because

those scholars are socially and geographically separated from core scholars who circulate referencing practices within an inner circle of scholars (e.g., Holzhauser 2021).

In summary, papers published from the periphery face two main types of challenges: justification burden and undervalued transportability. First, scholars in the periphery may engage in follow-up research by applying existing theories to their own contexts, often adding valuable new insights. However, in doing so, they are typically required to justify their choice of context extensively or to revise their arguments to make them specific to their "exotic" setting. Second, even when scholars from the periphery propose entirely new perspectives or theoretical frameworks, their work is often cited less frequently than comparable work produced by scholars in core contexts. This is in part because their claims to transportability are more likely to be discounted or questioned. To further substantiate these challenges, the next section presents an empirical analysis of how scholars justify contextual choices and address (or are expected to address) questions of transportability. This analysis draws on papers published in the *American Sociological Review* (ASR) and the *American Journal of Sociology* (AJS).

3.4 | Quantitative Analysis of Justifications and Transportability

To demonstrate the two issues, I collected data on papers published in ASR and AJS over the past 5 years (2021–2025) and assessed how these papers justify their regional choices and mention the potential lack of transportability.[1] I collected geographical distribution of study contexts, along with the percentage of papers that provide justification for case selection or that mention the limitations of contextual transportability.[2] Most studies used for this study were conducted in the United States; 70% of papers published in ASR and AJS focus on the U.S., approximately 10% examine Western European contexts, and 13% are based in other regions.[3]

The overall rate of contextual justification was 15.92%, and 16.96% of papers included a discussion of contextual limitations. It is important to note that offering such justification is not unusual or unwarranted in academic work. For example, Robert Merton (1987) proposed the concept of "strategic research materials", cases selected for their theoretical advantage or accessibility. King et al. (1994) emphasized the importance of choosing least likely (or most likely) cases, wherein a theory's strength is demonstrated by its ability to explain outcomes in contexts where those outcomes are unlikely (or likely) to occur (also see Beach and Pedersen (2018) for counterarguments). Despite differences among these strategies, all of them require authors to justify their contextual choices to support theory testing or causal inference.

I calculated proportion of studies that include the two key characteristics for each regional category. As Figure 1 shows, however, contextual justification is highly uneven. Among papers published in ASR and AJS from 2021 to 2025, only 0.5% of North America-based studies provide justification for selecting the North America as their research site, whereas 53% of studies

conducted in European countries and 60% of peripheral countries include such justification. This trend holds even for studies conducted in Western European countries, which could be because these are the U.S.-based journals and the results obtained from European top journals, such as *European Sociological Review*, would differ. Some readers may argue that U.S.-based journals such as ASR and AJS do not require authors to justify focusing on the U.S., but given the status of these two journals as the top general sociology outlets (Hirschman 2020), this defense is inadequate. The expectation for contextual justification is clearly uneven.

While mentioning a peripheral context as a limitation does not directly imply that the paper will be ignored by scholars in core countries, it does reflect a more fundamental concern that such studies are implicitly treated as non-transportable. As Figure 1 clearly illustrates, studies conducted in outside of the U.S. are more likely to discuss the geographical scope of their findings as a limitation. Among these studies, 67.9% of European-based studies and 50% of peripheral context-based studies raise concerns about contextual transportability, whereas only 3.9% of U.S.-based studies do so. These disparities likely reflect unequal assumptions about which findings are considered broadly applicable and which are not.

3.5 | Closer Examination of Justifications and Transportability

I elaborate the detailed styles of contextual justification and transportability limitations in these studies. Broadly speaking, these justifications can be categorized into two types. The first type argues that the chosen case closely resembles the region where the original theory was developed or previously observed, most often the United States. For example, a study conducted in Australia emphasizes economic and cultural similarities with the United States to support the claim that the same theoretical framework can be applied (Mize and Kincaid 2025).

The second type follows the logic of typical case selection (Beach and Pedersen 2018), contending that the theoretical mechanisms in question are especially observable in the selected case. In this line of reasoning, researchers argue that specific institutional arrangements make the theoretical assumptions more visible or easier to detect. For instance, Kruse and Kroneberg (2019) chose Germany for its stratified system, which produces a clear educational hierarchy that makes ethnic inequalities more visible, thereby offering analytical convenience. In this sense, any case is acceptable, so long as it permits the testing of theoretical propositions. Cases are, in principle, interchangeable, as the theory itself is not inherently tied to a particular location. This idea of case interchangeability, or put differently, the lack of case necessity, is most clearly evident in studies based in the U.S. Because U.S.-based studies are generally seen as "universally relevant", they often omit any justification for their case selection and are not penalized by gatekeepers for doing so. In contrast, studies conducted outside the U.S. are typically required to justify their selection of case in detail. To borrow Hoang's (2022) phrasing, a "painstaking justification" is expected in such cases.
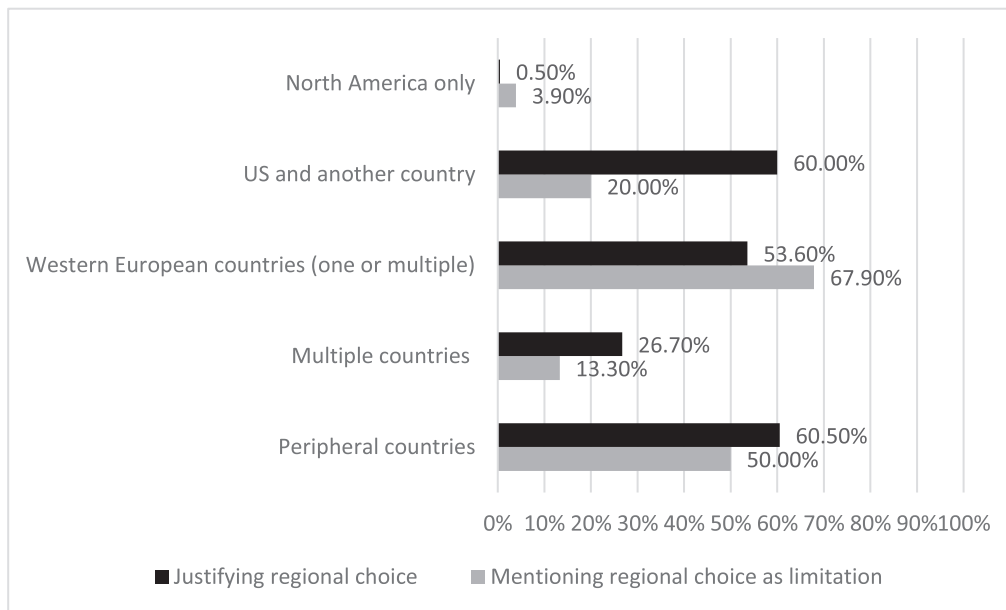
FIGURE 1 | Unequal frequency of justification and of mentioning regional context as a limitation (ASR/AJS, 2021–2025).

Second, there is an inequality of mentioning the "limitation of context". Papers published from core countries are less likely to raise concerns about the applicability of their results to other, unstudied contexts. This may be due to an implicit belief in the high transportability of their findings (or authors are not interested in transportability), or because gatekeepers do not require such reflection.[4] By contrast, scholars working on peripheral contexts would be required by reviewers, or would self-censor, to include statements suggesting that their findings may not be applicable to other contexts, particularly the U.S. or Western societies. By discussing the geographic scope as a limitation, studies aim to counter the perception that the phenomenon in question is exotic or unique to the studied country. Such discussions often serve to demonstrate that the observed phenomenon is not confined to a single national context or to underscore the broader relevance of the study's findings. In some cases, researchers go further by elaborating on the specific features of the selected country and identifying the conditions under which the findings might apply elsewhere. For example, a study conducted in Germany discusses the comparatively high level of public engagement with climate change mitigation among Germans, in contrast to the tendency among Americans to deny climate change, leaving open questions about the broader applicability of the findings (Sendroiu et al. 2025).

4 | What to Do?

4.1 | Previous Studies

As the preceding analysis of ASR and AJS articles from the past 5 years demonstrates, the practices of justifying case selection and stating the limits of contextual applicability are geographically uneven, especially in the case of studies conducted in non-U.S., or more broadly, peripheral contexts. Although directly addressing these inequalities is difficult,

scholars have proposed various strategies to mitigate them. For example, Collyer (2018) emphasizes the importance of developing alternative transnational circuits of scholarly publishing, particularly from the Global South. Go (2017), drawing on Camic et al. (2011), reminds us that "we sociologists have been among the first to assert that ideas are shaped by the social environments in which those ideas are generated" (p. 195), and calls for the provincialization of classical sociology. If all human behavior is socially situated, then all sociological knowledge is also provincial—shaped by and particular to its own context. With the background of provincialization, Hanafi (2020), in his depiction of global sociology, underscored the need for dialog among national sociologies to develop a theoretical framework that adequately captures the global condition. Theories are continuously reshaped by local contexts, rearticulating the relationship between the North and the South and, in Burawoy's (2016, 957) words, "giving place and voice to the South."

Following a similar line of argument, the field of criminology has advanced the development of regionally anchored paradigms such as Asian criminology and Southern criminology (e.g., Aas 2012; Carrington et al. 2019; Lee and Laidler 2013). These frameworks argue that the experiences of crime and punishment in the Global South have been marginalized within Northern criminological theory, and seek to develop new conceptual approaches that emerge from peripheral contexts. Additionally, there is a field of East Asian science technology studies (STS) growing to cover the multiplicity and complexity of East Asian STS (Lin and Law 2019). In this light, theorizing from the periphery represents an important and necessary next step.

However, this approach runs into what might be called the undervalued transportability problem; scholars in the core are often reluctant to cite or build on theories developed in the

periphery. Several empirical studies support this observation, showing that research conducted in peripheral contexts tends to be cited less frequently (Ai and Masood 2021; Collyer 2014; Ekdale et al. 2022; Tóth et al. 2023). This lack of citation may reflect a perception among scholars in core countries that findings from peripheral regions are not relevant or applicable to their own contexts (Connell 2006; Go 2020).

Ironically, the very emphasis on regional specificity that helps establish schools such as "Asian" or "Southern" sociology may also limit their universal legibility. To gain coherence and shared meaning among scholars, these frameworks must emphasize local context. However, in doing so, they risk being treated as particularistic and non-transportable by scholars outside those contexts. Connell (2006) directly addresses this tension: "The alternative to 'northern theory' is not a unified doctrine from the global South. No such body of thought exists nor could it exist. Indeed, one of the problems about northern theory is its characteristic idea that theory must be monological, declaring the one truth in one voice" (p. 262). Similarly, Moosavi (2019, 2020) offers a friendly critique of efforts to decolonize criminology and sociology, warning that the emergence of regionally labeled schools risks essentializing the Global South, "as if it has an innate essence that can be known and captured" (2020, p. 12).

In addition, naming a field after a region or provincializing sociological findings can result in problems of misattribution. As discussed in Section 3.2, authors from the periphery are frequently required to provide thick descriptions of their societies. While this ethnographic richness is often welcomed in sociology, it can inadvertently lead readers to attribute causal explanations to local societal characteristics, even when the findings may be driven by other factors. Identifying social context as the ultimate cause requires methodologically rigorous cross-contextual comparisons (Beach and Pedersen 2018). Yet, scholars, especially those from core countries, often jump to societal-level explanations when encountering divergent findings from peripheral studies.

It is important to recognize that all societies exhibit both similarities and differences, and it is not always evident whether the contextual features required for a given theoretical assumption or proposition are unique to a particular country. In fact, such characteristics may be widely shared across many societies. In psychology, for example, several studies have argued that individual-level variation in values is greater than between-society variation (Fischer and Schwartz 2011; Hanel et al. 2019; Schwartz and Bardi 2001; see also Minkov and Hofstede 2012). Moreover, a growing body of cross-national experimental research finds that treatment effects tend not to vary significantly across societal contexts (Bansak et al. 2016, Bansak et al. 2023; Bassan-Nygate et al. 2024; Iyengar et al. 2013; Valentino et al. 2019; Wimmer et al. 2024). These findings suggest that societal differences may be smaller than often assumed, and that attributing causal mechanisms to "society" may sometimes be misleading. Indeed, requiring excessive contextualization for peripheral studies, as well as the broader practices of provincialization and regional labeling, may inadvertently promote misattribution and obscure the potential transportability of findings.

4.2 | For Abstraction Parity

As shown throughout this paper, studies conducted in the periphery are disproportionately expected to justify their contextual choices and to highlight the limitations of their findings' transportability. In response, some scholars and disciplines have proposed strategies that emphasize localizing sociological findings, encouraging both core and peripheral contexts to be provincialized, and insisting on the importance of thick description of societal context. However, this raises a key question: when should contextual descriptions, justifications, and limitations be required?

As Healy (2017) argues, and in light of the principle of Occam's razor, such requirements may draw research away from abstraction, and reduce the likelihood that future scholars will engage with or build upon the research. Do we, in the first place, need to discuss context selection at such length? Strategically, it is indeed important to justify context selection (Merton 1987). Yet, in practice, many influential studies do not rely on strategic case selection (see the abovementioned case of Putnam (2007)). In reality, researchers often choose their study contexts based on accessibility and feasibility, not because they are uniquely suited for theory testing. In this sense, many, if not most, contexts are interchangeable. Requiring detailed justification or context-specific limitations may not be necessary unless the contexts and cases are truly atypical or theoretically pivotal (Beach and Pedersen 2018).

If so, when thick description, justification, or limitation statements are to be expected? Currently, as I described, studies conducted in periphery tend to be required. However, my argument is that only crucial cases and deviant cases, in both of which case and context selections are closely associated with the aim of analysis, are expected to provide such descriptions. Otherwise, where contexts are considered to be typical, I argue that such descriptions are not to be expected. Crucial cases mainly indicate most-likely or least-likely cases (Gerring 2007). These are selected specifically to test theoretical predictions under extreme conditions: most-likely cases are used to disconfirm theories, while least-likely cases are used to confirm them. Another one is the deviant case, which involve an anomalies for existing theoretical propositions and expectations (Levy 2008).[5] In both crucial and deviant cases, the context (or the particular case) is central to the theoretical test and must be justified accordingly. Crucial cases need to present the rationale why the selected cases are most/least likely, and deviant cases explain the differences from the previously studied context and distance from them.

However, a large volume of studies rarely rely on the crucial case or deviant case strategy, and instead, either explicitly stated or not, these employ typical case selection strategy, where the theoretical mechanisms, causes, and consequences in question are observable (Beach and Pedersen 2018). Typical cases are rarely expected to provide thick description of the contexts, at least when they are drawn from core countries. As I presented the example of Putnam (2007), core context cases are considered to be interchangeable and thus general, decreasing the needs for thick description as a typical case. In other words, for typical

cases, contexts are not as important and worth describing as those for crucial and deviant cases. Figure 1 illustrates this pattern; studies originating from core contexts (such as the U.S) rarely provide explicit justification for their case selection.

However, this standard does not extend to peripheral contexts. Even when researchers in the periphery use typical cases to test or extend existing theories, they are still expected by gatekeepers to treat their cases as if they were crucial or deviant. Using a peripheral context as a typical case to develop a new theoretical perspective or to empirically test existing theories does not, in principle, require thick contextual description, certainly not to the extent required for crucial or deviant cases, and even less so for generating hypotheses tailored specifically to the periphery.

Of course, some may continue to argue that peripheral contexts require nuanced, detailed description. But this view often stems from an exoticizing logic, an implicit belief that people in the periphery live fundamentally different lives from those in the core, and thus that theories developed in core contexts cannot be directly applied. Yet, whether this assumption holds is an empirical question; scholars and reviewers should not presume societal difference ex ante without strong justification. Moreover, when empirical differences do emerge between core and periphery, they can often be attributed to a range of factors, including sampling, measurement, modeling choices, and not just to cultural or societal context.

Despite the numerous potential explanations for empirical differences, researchers often attribute them to contextual or societal variation. For example, a systematic review of stratification studies comparing the U.S. and East Asia emphasized contextual differences rooted in Confucianism, arguing that divergent values led to distinct labor market structures and stratification outcomes (Sakamoto and Koo 2024). However, existing research suggests that values, particularly so-called "Asian" values, do not substantially differ across contexts (Kim 2010; Welzel 2011). Despite repeated scholarly claims that cross-societal differences are relatively minor, the tendency to explain divergent findings between core and peripheral countries by invoking societal uniqueness may reflect an implicit desire to preserve distinction and to exoticize peripheral contexts. Emphasizing contextual differences between core and periphery, especially when not empirically supported, is ultimately a way of reasserting a global difference: a "difference between the civilization of the metropole and an Other whose main feature was its primitiveness" (Connell 1997, 1516).

4.3 | Risk of Abstraction

I proposed to pursue abstraction parity across studies conducted in core and periphery to counter the current inequality, as evident in Figure 1. However, such proposal has potential risks: (a) erasing genuine contextual heterogeneity, (b) reproducing "view from nowhere" universalism, and (c) ethics of translation, power, and sampling. First, it is undeniable that contextual heterogeneity exists, and idealization of abstraction may consequentially erase or undervalue such heterogeneity. As I exemplified in deviant and crucial cases, contextual

heterogeneity can contribute to general theory, or beyond those cases, context-specific cases themselves are important to understand the focal contexts. Even if, however, scholars pay attention to the contextual heterogeneity, I believe it is important to detect the contextual conditions under which heterogeneous results are obtained in an abstract and empirical sense; otherwise scholars reproduce cultural essentialism.

Second, abstraction could expand the domination of the U.S. and Western European sociology. Provincialized sociology, as Go (2017) proposes, has its strong merit in explicitly countering the "core" sociology and establishing the raison d'être of regional sociology. By contrast, my proposal to promote abstraction parity may reduce opportunities for countering "core" sociology and risk reinforcing its dominance. Abstraction parity could connect Southern sociology more directly to the mainstream field and place it on a seemingly level playing field with Northern sociology. Yet, such dominance may already be institutionalized; in this sense, abstraction parity would not reproduce it but rather expose and normalize the asymmetry of abstraction that has long existed.

Third, promoting abstraction raises ethical questions concerning translation and power. The ability to sample and translate across contexts depends on the resources and linguistic capital of authors, institutions, and countries. Abstraction often requires standardizing languages and concepts across cases (i.e., survey instruments, analytical categories, and publication genres) which inevitably involves loss and distortion. The risk of being "lost in translation" is not evenly distributed; studies conducted in the periphery, or in languages more distant from English, the dominant academic lingua franca, bear higher costs. In this sense, abstraction may inadvertently reproduce the current hegemony of English and the structural inequalities embedded in global knowledge production, as translation privileges those already fluent in the dominant epistemic language. Additionally, there is a growing concern for "helicopter" and "parachute" research, where scholars from core countries visit briefly to gather data and then depart, at times doing so without informing or obtaining consent from local authorities (for the bibliometric study, see Purnell (2024)). Pursuing abstraction could further exacerbate such issue.

4.4 | For Future Gatekeepers

As I have shown, not all studies are required to justify their contextual selection or emphasize its specificity. Such requirements are typically justified in crucial or deviant cases, or in cases where authors seek to examine contextual heterogeneity. In other instances, context is not necessarily the central focus; such cases, either explicitly or implicitly, may be framed as typical case studies. However, even when a study employs a typical case, if the context is located in the periphery, gatekeepers often demand that authors provide detailed and extensive descriptions of the context, justify the selection of the case, and include a statement regarding its contextual limitations, as illustrated in Figure 1. I do not oppose the use of thick, nuanced description when peripheral contexts are employed as crucial or deviant cases. I argue that the standards of

contextualization should be applied consistently across research contexts, and that the depth of contextual description should not go beyond what is ordinarily expected in studies situated in core countries. As abstraction is the fundamental for generalizable theory-building (Healy 2017), the disproportionly requirements for thick description unequally hinder generalization of the studies conducted in periphery contexts. Thus, the equal level of requirement for the contextual description is essential for the equal knowledge production practices across the world.

For future gatekeepers, including reviewers and editors, I propose the following checklist concerning (1) contextual description and (2) transportability.

1-A. Require detailed case justification or "thick description" only when the study employs crucial or deviant cases, or explicitly theorizes contextual heterogeneity.

1-B. For typical cases, apply the same brevity expected of U.S. or Western-contexts research. Over-contextualization should not be demanded solely because the study is set in the periphery.

2-A. Treat findings from all regions as potentially generalizable and transportable unless strong theoretical or empirical grounds show otherwise.

2-B. Avoid default skepticism toward periphery-based studies or automatic assumptions of universality for core-based ones.

To deepen our understanding in the sociological theories and the world, we should move beyond the unnecessary demands for justification of contextual choices and undervaluing the impact/transportability of the periphery contexts and keep the contextual descriptions of papers equal.

Endnotes

[1] This survey was conducted between April and July 2025. A trained sociology graduate student collected and coded the articles. The author first coded 10 ASR articles, and based on that experience, developed a coding protocol and instructed the research assistant. Excluding papers that do not focus on any particular region (e.g., theory papers, social-media-based analyses, and simulation studies), the final sample consisted of 289 articles.

[2] Following Jacobs and Mizrachi (2020), I classified these articles into five categories: (1) "North America only," (2) "U.S. and another country," (3) "Western European countries (one or multiple)," (4) "multiple countries," and (5) "other countries." Because studies on Western Europe tend to be comparative, I aggregated those focusing on one or more Western European countries into a single category. "Multiple countries" refers to comparative studies involving more than 20 countries. As an additional clarification of "North American only" category, only one study focused on Canada. The "Western European countries" category includes studies conducted primarily in Western (and Northern) Europe, including multi-country comparisons (e.g., the U.K., Australia, the U.S., Germany, and Switzerland). The "U.S. and another country" category consists of two-country comparisons, such as studies comparing the U.S. and China.

[3] I categorized a paper as "justifying" if it included any rationale for the choice of context (typically in the introduction or methods sections), and as "mentioning limitation" if it explicitly stated that the findings were derived from a single context and warned readers about the limited applicability to other, unstudied countries in the limitations section. I did not count papers that merely noted the challenge of generalizing results to other subnational regions within the same country.

[4] As presented in the Figure 1, studies conducted in the U.S. tend not to mention "limitation of context", as their findings are often assumed to be broadly generalizable and transportable without the need to reflect on the choice of context. Even when U.S.-based research focuses on a region perceived as less typical, some discussion of generalizability may appear, but such discussions are usually limited to whether the findings hold across different regions within the U.S. For instance, a study conducted in Alaska includes caveats about the representativeness of its findings, discussing their generalizability to other parts of the U.S. (Wyndham-Douds and Cowan 2024), but this discussion remains confined to within-country generalization rather than cross-national transportability.

[5] As an example of most-likely case of the political campaign effects on voting behavior, Selb and Munzert (2018) use the seemingly persuasive case of Nazi propaganda. Hitler's speech seems to be "most likely" to affect voters' behaviors, but their findings (i.e., even Hitler's speeches had negligible electoral impact) offer a compelling challenge to conventional assumptions that political campaigns have meaningful impact. Example of deviant case is such that polarization is considered to be deepened in a country with regional divides, populist-supporting system, and economic decay. However, the Netherlands, a small and densely populated, consensus-seeking democratic, and affluent country also experiences polarization, especially perceptions of rural neglect prevail (van Vulpen 2025). This is deviant from theoretical propositions and empirical findings, and thus analyzing such contexts can deepen the study of polarization.

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