
Given a Context by any Other Name: Methodological Tools for Taming the Unruly Beast

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Context is "...the pattern that connects...all communication necessitates context...without context there is no meaning."

(Bateson 1978, 13)

"The first step in taming the apparent wildness of context is distinguishing the various kinds of contextual factors."

(Dascal 1989, 243)

Context is "...a spatial and temporal background which affects all thinking and a selective interest or bias which conditions the subject matter of thinking."

(Dewey 1960, 90)

When Justice Holmes asked John Dewey why his later writings were less clear than his early writings, Dewey replied: "...I was digging down three inches; now I'm trying to dig three feet."

(Dewey, as quoted in Postman 1974)

INTRODUCTION: THE UNRULY BEAST

Our focus is on the study of information needs, seeking, and use in different contexts. However, this paper spends little time on this focus as such. Instead, this paper asks the question "What is context?" on the assumption that to ask a question that is so little asked may prove useful. This paper looks for possible answers in the literatures of the social sciences generally, both philosophical and observational, focusing particularly on literatures in the communication fields on the assumption that the phenomena of our interest are most usefully defined as communication phenomena.

One answer to the question – what is context – is both good news and bad. The good news is that context is hot. Everywhere one turns in literatures of the social sciences and humanities focusing on how humans make sense of their worlds one sees increasing references to context. The bad news is that the very question turns out to be almost embarrassing, and certainly a question leading to a quest that demands extraordinary tolerance of chaos. After an extended effort to review treatments of context, the only possible conclusion is that there

is no term that is more often used, less often defined, and when defined defined so variously as context.¹

There are three aspects of this confusion that stand out. The first is that the term context has become "almost a ritualistic invocation" (Slack 1989, p. 329). The importance of context is rarely an issue although there are some writers who still decry what they see as the lack of generalizability that attention to context introduces while others see attention to context coming too little and too late. Mostly though, context is evoked but rarely with detailed treatments and even more rarely philosophically or theoretically.

The second trajectory that runs through this literature is one of paradigmatic isolation. It is a oversimplification but useful to note that treatments of context are plagued by the polarities that otherwise divide those of us involved in the academic study of human beings and their societies. The divide is better seen as a continuum. At one end are those who give allegiance to what is commonly referred to stereotypically and erroneously as more positivist science. At the other are those focused on more qualitative, humanistic science or critical/cultural science. There are interesting positions which are not so easily categorized about which I will speak below. In the main, however, those at the extremes of this divide appear to know little of the comings and goings of those on the other end.

At one end of the continuum, there is a great deal of work which evokes context as another analytic factor among many. Context, it is said, must be taken into account along with other factors such as structure, culture, person, situation, behavior, and so on. From this conceptualization comes a lengthy and bewildering array of possible contextual factors. Virtually every possible attribute of person, culture, situation, behavior, organization, or structure has been defined as context. Thus, for example, if the researcher focuses on the meaning of texts, then the perspectives and behaviors of sources or receivers or channels can become context. If the researcher is focused on relationships between people, then factors describing the situation can become context. In this logic, context has the potential of being virtually anything that is not defined as the phenomenon of interest. Context is conceptualized, usually implicitly, as a kind of container in which the phenomenon resides. The trick appears to be to pinpoint exactly what aspects of the container impact or relate to the phenomenon. Mostly, at this end of the research continuum, the choices seem capricious.

At the other end of the continuum lies a context that is assumed to be a kind of inextricable surround without which any possible understanding of human behavior becomes impossible. In this view, context is the carrier of meaning and research must be contextualized. Further, every context is by definition different, an intersection of a host of nameless factors. Because of this, research can only be particularized and generalization in the traditional scientific sense is impossible.

The third trajectory that emerges is that those writing at both ends of this continuum as well as those in the middle all admit that there is an inexhaustible list of factors that are contextual. At one end of the continuum, there is a mandate to build conceptual systems which would provide guidance for the selecting. At the other, the issue is set aside as irrelevant because the many factors are seen as so intertwined that systematic unraveling is unwarranted.

The two ends of this continuum as I have described them here are, of course, stereotyped. Part of the good news about context is that in the last few decades – and particularly in recent years – a variety of well-developed philosophic and theoretic positions regarding context have emerged. Most of these positions do not fall neatly at either end of this stereotyped continuum; nor do they fit easily into camps. All of them provide challenging illumination for our struggles with context. What is interesting is that writers at each end of the continuum stereotype the other end precisely as I have here even though a more useful assessment of what is going on shows many strands of common struggle. It can be said with some irony that scholars invoking context in one way or another as important to the study of their phenomena are unwilling to invoke context in their attempts to understand scholars who define context differently. This is one of many contradictions which pervade discussions of context. I will speak more of these below.

What is apparent, however, is that context is a label for a site of struggle. In this struggle, the species is reaching for a new kind of understanding. Not everyone, of course. And, not in the same way. But the intensity of attention and confusion is suggestive of a shift in the episteme, a shift that is occurring haltingly and dialectically. Context is the focus of attention for those working within a wide variety of perspectives. To name but a few: symbolic interaction, pragmatics, systems theory, qualitative studies, cultural studies, hermeneutics, political economy, phenomenology, constructivism, interpretive anthropology, transactionism, contextual psychology, ethnography, perspectivism, situationism, and post-modernism. Given that every one of these perspectives in one or another version is in contentious opposition to at least one of the other of these perspectives, this common call to context can be interpreted in two ways. One is good news – perhaps this is the road that will eventually free us from the polarities that drive us apart. The other is bad news – perhaps there will emerge a plethora of contexts, adding to what already seems overwhelming confusion.

Whether this movement toward context is called a shift in the episteme (as in Foucault 1969) or a faultline (as in Hayles 1990) or the reach for a new mode of wonder (as in McGuire 1986), what all the instances have in common is a move away from research that does not account for the here and the now (i.e. time and space) to research that does. Other than this common agreement, some of the approaches I examined have little else in common. But this one commonality provides at least a modest anchor across the divide.

If, however, one focuses not on the perspectives which are struggling with context at the ends of the polarized continuum, but rather with those struggling in the middle an entirely different picture emerges – a portrait of common themes and common challenges. To build this portrait, I have not relied on any particular treatment of context but rather have sought out conceptual and methodological treatments which are self-reflexive and explicitly struggling with premises which have been left unstated by the more implicit approaches at the ends of the polarized continuum.

Other writers have done extensive lineage descriptions and comparisons of approaches that call themselves contextual (e.g. Adams 1987, Hayes 1993b, McGuire 1986, Rosnow & Georgoudi 1986). That is beyond my purpose here. What I want to do is tease out my own sense of the primary agreements and disagreements orienting specifically on issues which have methodological implications. Thus, this exercise is not to be construed as a “faithful” reading [even if such a thing were possible] of these sources but rather as my personal attempt to identify common themes of continuity and discontinuity within and between and to illuminate my own approaches.

This last statement gives the reader some guidance for the reading. I will not be discussing my own approach to research on information needs, seeking, and use in this paper. However, obviously my own work informs my journey here. In my own work I have chosen to adopt a contextual perspective but at the same time have taken a position “in between” regarding methods for studying context, admitting both quantitative (which some label as positivist) and qualitative approaches to my repertoire and rejecting the idea that there is any necessary technological determinism embedded in method. However, philosophically I position myself closer to the qualitative end of the continuum.² In a sense, then, it can be said that I am attempting to be systematic about something which some scholars see as unsystematizable, either because (as at one end of the continuum) context is defined as chaos, enemy of order and generalization; or because (as at the other end of the continuum) context is defined as amorphous and fragile, fractured by the artificial imposition of method.

Several important points before I begin the search for themes. I am using the terms contextual approaches and contextualist in this paper to refer to a variety of perspectives which under a variety of names make similar assumptions regarding something that is frequently referred to as context. The scholars referred to do not necessarily refer to themselves or their approaches by these same labels. It is my interpretation that binds them and I have intentionally reached out for theorists and philosophers operating in unconnected discourse communities. Second, my extracting of themes is of course limited to the literature of which I am aware. Given the complexity of the issues and given that context is referred to with myriad names, there are no doubt important sources of which I remain unaware. Third, in most of these discussions the terms

situation and context are used interchangeably.³ For purposes of this paper, I will operate in that definitional framework.

COMMON THEMES

Clearly, for those who are addressing context theoretically and philosophically, there are common themes which mandate a particular approach whether their approaches are called interactionist, transactionist, contextualist, pragmatist, perspectivist, or by any other label. These common themes are:

Knowledge is partial and temporary. What is common is an anti-foundationalist position, a rejection of the idea that there is a bedrock reality that can be captured in knowledge. Any knowing is assumed to be partial and temporary, bound into context. Some posit this assumption as pre-contextual – i.e. one of few assumptions necessary in contextualized approaches. Others prefer to posit it simply as axiomatic assumption admitted to up front as part of a mandate of self-reflexivity. In either case, the criteria by which knowledge and action are warranted are embedded in the doing, in practice, in workability, in consequences, not in epistemology or axiology. Also fundamental to this assumption is the conclusion that, as McGuire (1986, p. 274) states it, “To admit that knowledge is intrinsically erroneous is not to imply that we should forgo it.” One thing most of these thinkers have in common is their efforts to build a new and radically different kind of science. This new science does far more than acknowledge epistemological fallibility or diversity on the part of knowers. Rather, it challenges that it is impossible to extricate epistemological fallibility and diversity from ontological uncertainty and fluidity.

Reality is discontinuous, gap filled, changeable across time-space. This assumption aligns with the first. Reality is seen as accessible only (and always incompletely) in context, in specific situated historicized moments in time space, in what Altman (1986, p. 25) terms the “...spatial and temporal confluence...” of people, settings, activities, events that is context. Drawing on the work of Pepper (1942), many refer to contextual approaches as based on the same root metaphor – that of the historicized, situated event. But even within this event, contextualism posits a gappiness which is both ontological as well as epistemological in root. All we have is “scraps” and “fragments” (Said 1983a, b) which come potentially from elusive origins and there is a tendency to treat these as if they are whole. McGee (1990) suggests that we should refer to contextual formations (in his terms, the convergings of texts and contexts) as “fragments” because of their inherent incompleteness and inseparability.

The knower-and-the-known are inextricably bound. Foundational to the calls for contextual approaches is the epistemological assumption that knowing is a product of some inextricable combination of human action, human predisposition, and that elusive thing called reality. Whatever fallibilities and diversities exist in human interpretation these are inextricability bound and situated

in context. As Gadamer (1975, p. 239) puts it: "all understanding inevitably involves some prejudices." These are a pre-condition of experience. Common to the contextual theorizings which I have reviewed is the assumption that this pre-condition is neither good, nor bad. It is, rather, necessary.

Context is not usefully conceptualized as independent entity. As Ellis (1981, p. 226) states: context is conceptualized most often as an artificial entity, invariant in time, and independent of human interaction. This entity is most often portrayed as a surround that in enclosing things (e.g. persons, structures, events, situations) becomes in essence an attribute imposed on these things but yet at the same time independent of these things. This kind of separation of context makes it too easy to reduce context to simple parts, and, to reduce the things onto which context attributes are imposed to these parts. A living breathing struggling person becomes merely a person in a job context. A message with history and contradiction becomes merely factual or entertaining. Extrapolating from these kind of inside-outside ideas about context (e.g. context enclosing other things and context inside other things) is a related idea which also is challenged by those who are theorizing context – the idea that somehow context is in an opposition relationship to other things. An example is the not infrequent idea that context is that which ruins the purity of purpose encoded in so-called factual messages. All of these ideas – inside, outside, opposition – are made possible only when context is conceptualized as independent.

Context requires a focus on process. While implications and implementations drawn from this assumption vary greatly, most of those who theorize context mandate attention to process, to change over time, to emergent and fluid patterns. In the terms of Dewey, considered by some one of the philosophic grandfathers (along with Hegel, Marx, Pepper, and others) of contextual approaches, this is a mandate to focus on "action verbs", on acting, doing, talking, thinking (Dewey and Bentley 1949). This emphasis on process is usually considered another of few pre-contextual mandates, an "irradicable" (Rosnow 1986) necessity. In this framework, reality is in a continuous and always incomplete process of becoming. A distinction between process manifestations and product manifestations of reality is helpful here. Product manifestations only seem to have stability across time-space. Sometimes their time-space fixedness is quite wide. But, ultimately, those who address context as central see this stability as mere illusion, as a static manifestation of that which is ever changing. As Weick (1979) challenged: there is no such thing as organization. There is only organizing. As Garfinkel (1967) suggests our accounting practices impose substance and form on otherwise indeterminate flows of activity.

Focus must be placed on the dialectical relationships between product and process. While there is even more variability in ramifications resulting from this assumption, most of those calling for contextual approaches call for attention to an inherent dialectical relationship between product and process, noun and verb,

context and action, structure and agency. Bateson (1979, p. 13) says it best: context is a "dance of interacting parts....a zigzag ladder of dialectic between form and process." Form is constituted by process and is constitutive of process. Process is constituted by form and is constitutive of form. In Giddens's theory (1979, p. 5) of the "duality of structure" this is stated as seeing structure as "...both medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices." Schutz (1964, p. 11) was getting at the same idea when he said: "When an action is completed its original meaning....will be modified in the light of what has actually been carried out, and it is then open to an infinite number of reflections...."

Focus must be placed on multiple interdependencies. The assumptions above intersect on another – that there are multiple potential interdependencies. Some theorists who conceptualize context draw on systems theory for this assumption (Rapoport 1968, von Bertalanffy 1968) while others draw on various forms of dialectical theorizing such as that manifested in the works of Dewey and Marx (Gavin 1988). In both cases, ideas of linear progressions are either rejected or tempered and patterns are seen as potentially exhibiting themselves in every possible temporal or spatial direction. Further, the idea of the summation of parts, so ever-present in traditional causal thinking, is rejected in favor of views that assume either that things will be less or more than the parts, or that this kind of part-whole thinking is alien to the very nature of contextual theorizing.

Context is a necessary source of meaning. Obviously, fundamental to this line of thinking is the idea that context is a necessary source of meaning. For some, context is also sufficient for meaning but this rigid idea usually comes from those who do not attend to the subtleties of potential dialectical relationships in the analysis of context. The most subtle, and I think useful, treatment, comes from Gadamer (1976) who is interrogating a common struggle pertaining to context – that of the relationship between context and text – as he challenges traditional hermeneutic approaches. Morris (1993, p. 140) provides some helpful background. The text, he says, has traditionally been revered (a legacy, some suggest, of the judeo-christian reference to the biblical text). In essence, the text has been seen as encompassing essential truths and because of this, Morris challenges, the "silences" that are thus invited are "...grotesque, untenable, and fundamentally anti-intellectual." This reverence of text made context into con-text, something apart from text and often something with impure impacts on text. The struggle in the humanities to theorize this relationship marks the development of interpretation and criticism literatures and, of course, remains a hotly contested issue in discussions of the value of a canon. Even in the 1990s one can still find, for example, studies which ask whether students should be allowed to take context into account when they write or when they interpret.

In Latin root, both context and text refer to connectings, weavings, unitings. Gadamer, in opposition to the privileging of text over context, asks if meaning is not in the text (as accessed traditionally with semantic approaches), then where is it. He acknowledges that meaning can be individuated, unique to the person as interpreter. But, he reasons, if meaning were only individuated there could be no communication. In essence, then, Gadamer shifts attention in hermeneutics from the context of production to the context of interpretation and mandates in line with assumptions such as those detailed above attention to the circular dialectic of interpretation in which he sees a mandate for analyses of an almost endless continuum of factors (e.g. intentions of speakers, authors, interpreters; history, culture, psychoanalytic digs). In theorizing this way, Gadamer denies any basic ontological status to the subject and any ontological distinction between subject and object, a position he shares with many labeled as "post-modernists" (e.g. Bourdieu 1989, Derrida 1988, Foucault 1969, Lyotard 1984, Rorty 1985).

CONTESTED THEMES

If one can designate three major camps of scholars most actively theorizing context, those most apparent in the literature are those grounded in hermeneutics or the analysis of texts (e.g. Branham & Pearce 1985, Gadamer 1981, McGee 1990; Pearce & Cronen 1980; Ricoeur 1981); those grounded in Batesonian pragmatics and systems theory (e.g. Adams, in press; Bateson 1978, 1979; Ellis 1981; Fisher & Adams 1994); and, those grounded in contextual psychology (e.g. Altman 1986; Gergen 1985; Hayes, Hayes & Reese 1988; Hayes 1993b, McGuire 1986; Owen 1996) with its emphasis on Pepperian (1942) contextual world views. As noted earlier, in the literature one finds some comparisons between these camps and these inform my discussion below. But my purpose is broader for I bring to bear on this discussion treatments of contextual ideas that fall outside the network of citations in these three camps: e.g. those from scholars labeled as post-modernists, symbolic interactionists, and so on. Again, my intent is to inform my own use of context so the trajectories of discontinuities I tease out here owe allegiance only to my own interpretative framework. Further, my discussion attempts to dig deeper than the contests thus far explicitly identified in comparisons. Most of the contests in treatments of context involve subtleties at play within common themes. Thus, for example, while all these theorists accept the idea of the necessity to study communication processes in context and all accept that context is social, there are some marked differences in how the social is conceptualized. What is most striking to me is that the common themes described above are usefully seen as a kind of world view (again McGuire's 1988 term a kind of "wonder" seems to fit). While this world view mandates certain methodological moves in common, in fact methodological differences most often are accounted for by undiscussed differences.

Whether the lack of attention to these contests is by omission or commission is often not clear. It is also telling to note that even though these theories share a common contextual world view, among the issues which divide them are issues commonly associated with polarizations between those who adhere to contextual views versus those who do not. This suggests that our discussions of what divides us are often based on superficialities that serve as markers. Thus, much is made of the contests between so-called quantitative versus qualitative work and this has become stereotyped as the absence versus presence of variable analysis and use of numbers. However, the differences in how context is conceptualized seem at root to have far more to do with the divide. This, in turn, suggests that the bridge between meta-theory, theory, and methodology is too infrequently addressed.

It is difficult to find an order in which to present these contested themes because they are so very intertwined. The reader may find it most helpful to start by skimming the entire set. Further, while each of these themes has direct implications for methodology, I will delay attending to these until the final section of this paper.

Width of history: now versus then. While all those theorizing context refer to the historicized event as context, what is meant by history differs. For some (Altman 1986; Hayes 1983b), the term historicized seems to refer to an anchoring in the here-and-now as opposed to the kind of trans-situational theorizing that has traditionally characterized more positivist social science. In contrast, historicized to others (e.g. Gadamer 1981; Foucault 1969, 1979; Ricoeur 1970) means anchored in the time-space of both the present and a potentially infinite past, with the limitation, of course, that interpretations of the past are necessarily contextualized in the present.

Play of power: present versus absent. In the most overt way, this contest involves a difference between those contextually-oriented theorists who are informed by marxist scholarship and those who are not. For the former (e.g. Bourdieu 1989, Gramsci 1988, Hall 1989, Foucault 1969, Lukes 1974, Ricoeur 1981) power is itself accepted as pre-contextual – as direct or indirect force which pertains to or permeates all phenomena. In contrast, we find McGuire (1986) drawing a distinction between epistemological ways of knowing (those focusing on the nature of knowledge and the language in which it is expressed); power-inscribed ways of knowing (those focusing on issues of power in actuality or image); and perspectivist or contextualist ways of knowing (those focusing on bridging the gap between the knower and the known). In between, we find, for example, various scholars working in the transactional pragmatics tradition (e.g. Adams, in press; Fisher & Adams 1994) who attend to power as observable in on-going human interactions and not in the sense of the historical dig that is mandated by critical approaches.

Nature of the dialectic: mediation versus constitution. The subtlety involved here is one of whether the theorist emphasizes openness or constraint. Thus, while contextually-oriented scholars generally attend to the tensions between nouns and verbs, product and process, proximity and distance, some refer to the practices which form this dialectical middle as mediations while others refer to them as constitutions. Some make much of this (e.g. Sigman 1990) charging that the former term rests of vestiges of fixed reality ideas. Ultimately this tension may arise more from language limitations because whether it is called mediation or constitution, contextualists generally focus on the duality of acting on and being acted upon. Sigman agrees in spirit (1990, p. 562) when he calls for the development of "...vocabularies that recognize both... relative stability... and ...change."

Relationship to non-contextual approaches: opposition versus dialectic. At an abstraction level up from the preceding theme is another – that of how contextualists view the utility of the work of non-contextualists. It is perhaps a mark of our time that most contextualists present themselves in polemical contrast. This can itself be interpreted as a contextualized move of the kind that Gadamer (1976, p. 11) emphasizes when he says "No assertion is possible that cannot be understood as an answer to a question..." For Gadamer this is the "most clear-cut evidence of the unsaid [i.e. context] revealing itself in the said" (p.89). While few speak of it, it is obviously possible to look across the divide of contextualist versus non-contextualist dialectically. Lana (1986) makes the point when he calls for a kind of transcendent dialectic. Even the extreme differences between positivist science and contextualized science can themselves be considered as necessary dialectical forces. To consider one without the other, in an ironic sense, is itself a decontextualizing move. To consider them jointly would, Lana suggests, produce useful explanatory syntheses while leaving the methodological elements of the dialectic intact.

Nature of the subject: transcendental versus decentered. Perhaps the trickiest issue, the one that draws more passion and protest, is the issue of how to conceptualize the human being. The transcendent human with an essential constancy across time-space is, of course, a fundamental tenet of the judeo-christian tradition. The trait-described human, boxed in by demographic, personality, and other attributes, has been a constancy of positivist social science. Despite the core contextual belief that context and person [when assumed theoretically as separable] constitute and are constituted by each other, some contextual approaches appear to retain efforts to find human constancy across time in space. Thus, for example, in distinguishing interactionist approaches from contextualist approaches, Veroff (1986) sees the former as looking at personality as stable but complex and impacted differentially by contextual factors. In contrast, Veroff asserts, the latter contextualist approaches assume

that what is stable about humans is not their personalities as these change with experience but human orientations to change.

Gadamer, as was noted earlier, is a exemplary contrast to these efforts to retain a conceptualization of the human as constant across time-space when he denies any basic ontological status to the subject. Colapitro (1988) draws the same kind of emphasis from his efforts to connect the works of Marx and Dewey. Both, he says, replaced the free, conscious individual of classical liberalism with the situated, divided, conscious, unconscious subject. In essence both Dewey and Marx abandoned the isolated individual as foundation of social order for the situated, contextualized subject bound into a matrix of human subjectivity. From these moves, of course, it is not too far to the positions of various scholars labeled as post-modern pointing to the decentered subject. One example is Foucault (1979) with his emphasis on socialized "docile bodies" Another is Derrida (1988, p. 8) for whom the subject disappears entirely and what remains is text (often referred to popularly as discourse formation) and the "essential drift" in interpretations and uses of that text over time.

Focus on behavior: interpretation versus observable action. To exemplify this contest, I will attend to two approaches to contextual work that are both labeled discourse-analytic. One of these is more heremeneutically-based and focuses on surrounding contextual interpretation utilizing all possible sources of edification. Gadamer's (1975) anti-method method is a primary example with his emphasis on spiraling and never-ending successive interpretations approaching but never reaching a "fusion of horizons." In contrast is the transactional pragmatic approach (e.g. Adams, in press; Fisher & Adams 1994) which focuses only on observable behaviors in order to identify patterns of relationships between, for example, content of talk and relational/temporal structures. Proponents of the latter approach sometimes explicitly state that they see a focus on interpretation or sense-making as antithetical to what they understand as contextualism.

Choice of method: one versus many. Necessarily it follows that the various contextualists differ in allegiance to method. Some (e.g. Gadamer 1976, McGuire 1986) call for a multiplicity of approaches although Gadamer while calling for a multiplicity of surrounds is explicitly anti-method. McGuire (1986) is more typical of the method pluralists in his call for psychologists to go beyond their traditional reactive methods and incorporate case studies, text analyses, and a host of alternative analytic forms as well a variety of creative uses of logical and statistical analyses. McGuire has done more to connect contextual philosophy to specific methods than any other scholar I identified. Contrasting with the pluralists are those (e.g. transactional pragmatists) who focus much more narrowly on developing and perfecting methods which allow them to analyze observable behaviors in on-going interactions.

Use of method: bias versus illumination. This contest reflects the ends of the polarized continuum which I used as a tool in the opening section of this paper. Within the spirit of contextualism, as well as between contextualist and non-contextualist approaches, is a divide. On one side are those who are anti-method. On the other are those who see the absence of method as concomitant with the absence of systematic scholarship. Those on the "anti-method" side call for holistic approaches that create narratives or accounts bringing together multiple strands of attention. They eschew anything that is analytic in the variable analytic sense. At the other side are those who see the dangers of reification and the freezing of the fluid as necessary concessions in the service of their goals to conduct research with consequence. Hayes (1993a) discussion is useful, referring to two contextualisms – descriptive and functional. The former with its emphasis on holistic description stays true to contextualism's root metaphor but remains isolated from practical goals. The latter borrows more mechanistic methods to serve practical ends but in the process threatens its own philosophic roots. Gadamer (1975) is, of course, most identified with the anti-method stance because of his assertions that anything that is methodical is reductive and necessarily suppresses those aspects of experience that do not fall within the methodical range. At a more abstract level here, however, is not the issue of method. Even Gadamer points to possible step-takings (e.g. psychoanalytic digs, cultural analyses, etc.) but rather the impact of the constraints of recipe methods. The contest here is with mindless method not method per se. Only the most extreme qualitative perspectives call for the absence of analysis (e.g. an auto-biographical account presented without analysis). The issue is not analysis but brutal decontextualizing analysis. Ultimately, the contest here pertains to the reduction of methodology to recipe method.

Depth of the dig: surfaces versus dark depths. Necessarily related to the above is a difference in how much attention various contextualists pay to the depth of their digs. While all seemingly accept that what is involved in inquiry is not as straightforward as positivist social science assumes, what differs is the intensity of the mandate to pursue dark and hidden depths in a dig for which the archeological metaphor seems apt. This difference seems to relate primarily to the extent to which different theorists emphasize power. Those who do are more likely to assume that power does not play out on surfaces but rather in often hidden depths requiring, for example, psychoanalytic digs or multiply intersecting spirals of cultural and historical interpretation. Attention to power alone does not fully account for this division, however. Another aspect seems to be the pursuit of refined and narrow methods versus the pursuit of multiple methods. McGuire (1986), for example, does not emphasize the power dimensions of context but does imply in his call for innovative approaches a need to attend to deeper and deeper complexities.

Nature of interdependence: hierarchy versus infinite regress. This contest relates to the issue of depths. Some contextualists relying more heavily on systems theory roots place privileged attention on the notion of hierarchies of contextual factors. Bateson (1979) is one example although clearly Bateson's hierarchy is more, as he puts it, a "dance of interacting parts." This very emphasis on parts in any kind of systematic order is, however, antithetical to the more descriptively and holistically oriented contextualists. Again, at issue here is the extent to which analytic moves are seen as invading the root contextual metaphor.

Role of the researcher: contextualized versus decontextualized. All those who move toward contextual approaches concur that the researcher being involved in communicating [and, thus, both in observing and being observed] is theoretically contextualized. What happens in research practice is quite another matter. There is a general call for reflexivity – as Morawski (1986) puts it, the act of turning back on oneself. But the closer the contextualist moves to methodical recipe method, the less likely one is to find reflexivity in practice although there is no reason to believe that this is a given. Also at issue here is the extent of the demand placed on the theorist to move between the parts of their theorizing in strictly methodical logical steps. Thus, the method of theorizing is called to account as well. Gavin (1988) in his comparison of Marx and Dewey teases out the idea that any allegiance to a non-foundational position implies a necessary involvement of value and subjectivity on the part of the theorist. The spirit of this idea appears in Hayes (1993b) assertion that all theories of truth are illusory but the contextualist admits to valuing a utility-based theory of truth. Hayes (1993a) develops the same kind of an idea when calling for a goal-oriented contextualism because in the absence of a stable foundation effort can only be evaluated against goals which are themselves value decisions. In the absence of such explicit statements of goals, Hayes warns, there is a danger of creeping dogmatism.

Purpose of research: intervention versus transformation. Little discussed but in many ways most obvious is the difference in various contextual approaches in their emphasis on interventionist versus transformatory potentials of research. What is involved here seems to be more of a contest over whether the scholar's focus is on serving policy and planning needs as currently defined or on critiquing and reconceptualizing the nature of society. The former perspectives are typically labeled as administrative and the latter typically as critical but in actuality the dividing lines are not so clear. As a group, scholars focused on contextualism seem more likely than most to be worried about issues of ethics and fears of imposition and more concerned about assisting society in change for the better. These attentions are in essence mandated by the premises of the contextual world view and its anchor in situated purpose as criterion. Clearly,

though, there are marked differences in how different contextualists talk about change.

Some contextualists (e.g. Hayes 1993a) discuss in some detail the conditions under which the contextualist can produce outcomes which allow useful interventions in planning and policy processes. Hayes speaks quite explicitly, for example, of the need to manipulate context because one can not impact human action directly. This is a sleight of hand move, of course, and Hayes recognizes it when later he mentions this paradox: if context is only realized in action and if I am part of context, what is it that is being manipulated and with what justification? Perhaps what we have here is in part vestiges of old mechanistic vocabularies. The word "manipulation" in itself raises a red flag.

A different kind of discourse is found with other contextualists who focus on utopian ends. What they all have in common is a debt to philosophical perspectives which imbue a self-reflexive attention to societal transformation. Dewey (1960), for example, emphasized philosophy as a tool for reconstruction (1960). In describing Dewey (along with Heidegger and Wittgenstein), Rorty (1979) saw Dewey as starting out as a foundationalist but later warning of its dangers. Dewey's later work, Rorty (p. 5-6) says: "...is therapeutic...edifying...designed to make the reader question his motives for philosophizing"; and, designed as well (Rorty 1982) to offer greater alternative perspectives and options for future action, to challenge world views.

Inherently involved in this kind of a move is the idea of unmasking the "potency" (Sigman 1990, p. 560) of interpretation and how interpretation serves the order of things. This kind of methodological attention is popularly labeled as deconstruction although what various scholars do when they deconstruct varies markedly (e.g. Derrida 1988, Foucault 1965). The very premises of contextualism (e.g. that humans constitute their worlds and are constituted by them) suggests for scholars such as Douglas (1986, p. 127) the mandate for a different kind of moral philosophy to serve research. Gadamer (1976, p. 94) approaches this point when he speaks of the virtues of "translation" – allowing the foreign to become one's own in a fusion of horizons which does not neutralize any contributing perspective. The "...hermeneutically enlightened consciousness," he says, "seems to me to establish a higher truth [and]...draws itself into its own reflection." Slack (1989) and Marvin (1989) point in the same direction when they emphasize that in contextualized scholarship relating to technologies attention shifts from decision-making and choices to how technologies may contribute to conditions of self-knowledge. Sontag (1966, p. 59) also points in the same direction when she refers to the consequences of this deconstructing process as an awesome responsibility for inherently it involves "modifying consciousness and organizing new modes of sensibility."

Of course, the line between such self-reflexive, consciousness-raising goals and imposition of dogma or tyranny is easily crossed. In his often quoted

statement (Gavin 1988), Marx called for philosophers to do more than interpret the world: "...the point...is to change it." While this statement was embedded for Marx in a complex theory of human subjectivity and human need (Heller 1974), in fact the complexities of his project have often been overlooked. Clearly, whether critical or administrative in orientation, research informed by contextualist world views is challenged to a new kind of scholarly self-reflexivity and humility.

Potential for universals: nouns versus verbs. As Taylor (1989, p. 112) puts it: "...distinguishing human universals from historical constellations and not eliding the second into the first so that our particular way seems somehow inescapable...is the greatest intellectual problem of human culture." The issue of whether there are any universal understandings possible from contextualized approaches remains contested but really more so at the ends of polarized continua. Those who are theorizing contextual approaches most often operate in an elusive terrain in between where they are not easily categorized and most explicitly hold out the promise of universals of one kind or another. Thus, for example, Colapeitro (1988) says of Marx and Dewey that their attention to historical context does not preclude attention to universals.

As one traverses this body of work, there seems to be four different kinds of attention to universals which are rarely simultaneously present. What they have in common, however, is that they are all methodological. The first three have to do with methodology as theory of method – here providing guidance for step-taking in observing. One is the idea that more complete understandings emerge from contextual approaches. McGuire's (1986, p. 274) comment is representative: The perspectivist [contextualist] does not deny the "imperfections of knowing" but instead exploits them by "...using the fuzziness and internal contradictions of knowledge representations dialectically to create additional knowledge, until a holographic image emerges from the convergence of multiple fuzzy representations of the known seen from different perspectives." Gadamer, operating out of a very different discourse, approaches the same idea with his often used phrase "the fusion of horizons."

A second reach for universals focuses on the moral consequences of the unraveling of processes of interpretations for human self-knowledge. Here, in essence, the utopian idea gets implemented as a universal in the sense of becoming a mandated methodological move. The issue is not whether one can make utopias but rather the value of pointing in utopian directions. A third reach for universals is the mandate to bring to bear a greater variety of methods, that this kind of method plurality is an inherent mandate of the contextual world view.

Finally, the fourth reach toward universals is a bit different in that it points more toward methodology as theory for theorizing or a theory of method for theorizing. The universal implied here is the call in contextualism for theorizing

focusing on both verbs or process manifestations and on noun or product manifestations, and on dialectical bridges between. This, in turn, mandates the kind of emphasis on practice and action which characterizes much of this work. It is, in essence, a reach for a new kind of understanding of the human condition – not an understanding of what that condition is or even was or might be, but rather an understanding of its becoming, its struggling, its transforming. One implication of this kind of change in focus is the possibility that process approaches focusing on verbs will engender a new kind of knowledge about the human condition, a knowledge including some of those elusive universals, which pertains not to substance but to process.

Inherent paradoxes: decontextualized or contextualized context. One theme permeates the discussion above but needs separate attention. Virtually every contextualizing theory points to things which are considered pre-contextual. These essentially axiomatic propositions are often described as a minimalist approach to ontologizing because, of course, contextualizing perspectives mandate against positing ontological existences across time and space. Thus, for example, Gadamer (1976, p. 66) deontologizes the human subject but mandates that "...depending on the situation is not situational." Others, as noted above, speak of the idea of context being in itself pre-contextual and of the inherent difficulty of talking about context when one is part of it. Others refer to the contradiction of having to rest research on human-established goals in the absence of a stable foundation while being party to the constituting of the very context that is being studied.

Hayes (1993a) talks of these contradictions as a permanent ambiguity which must be tolerated. If not, contextualism would have to be abandoned. Hayles (1990) in speaking of the impact of chaos theories on both the sciences and the humanities refers to the inherent paradox in assertions of this kind: "there is no absolute knowledge" or "everything is contextualized." Everything is thus false except this; or everything is true except this. As has been suggested above, this tension can be looked at unbearable constraint or welcoming opportunity.

METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

In recent years the term methodology has been used as a substitute for methods when it is more usefully referred to as the theoretical analysis of methods. In essence, methodology is theory for research step-taking, including theory of the methods of theorizing as well as theory of the methods of observing and analyzing. This is an important point to hang on to for, in fact, there is very little useful discussion of methodology in the social science literatures and methodologists (in this sense of the term) are typically under-appreciated.

The many ways in which the themes of context described above play out in the move from theory to method and method to theory – i.e. in methodology – is extremely hard to trace at this stage. Clearly, this work is richer in the theory

of method for theorizing then in the theory of method for observing and analyzing. The work has generated ideas about context which give direction for theorizing potential.

Figure 1 (at end of paper) attempts to picture⁴ using an analogic spatial language the relationships between reality, information, person(s), structure(s), context(s) and actions/practices implied in a series of 10 theoretic treatments of context, organized in rough chronological order of their appearances in social science literatures. The set of 10 pictures is not intended to be exhaustive, nor representative of any particular single or body of work. Rather the intent is to show how over time conceptualizations of context have changed. In pictures #1 through #4, for example, there is no context. First there is reality from which information mysteriously emerges (picture #1); then there is reality from which information emerges mediated either by persons (picture #2) or structures (picture #3); or by the actions of persons or structures (picture #4). In picture #5 we find the relationship between reality and information mediated now by persons or structures in context (in culture, in episteme, in historical formation) and in picture #6 we see structure and person now explicitly but intertwined in context as mediator between reality and information. With picture #7, something radically different happens. Neither reality nor information exists now outside of context – this is the first contextualized picture. With picture #7 we see an intertwined but unspecified relationship between reality, structures, and persons which yields that which is called information. With picture #8 the relationships become not only unspecified but elusive with two important changes: information is no longer seen as separate consequence and the elements – reality, person(s), structure(s), information – become attributes of context rather than entities in context. In picture #9 structures, reality, information, and persons become but instances of actions and practices which characterize contexts. This is another more radical ideational move pointing toward perspectives which are frequently labeled "post-modern." Finally, in picture #10, we see reality, structure, persons, and information as themselves disappearing – as merely noun manifestations of the situated actions/practices which are attributes of context.

The purpose of this brief ideational journey is to provide some flavor of the profound implications of these differences in ideas for theorizing and ultimately research conduct. We move, for example, from a focus on embodied transcendental individuals to fractured decentered elusive subjects. Even more difficult, perhaps, is the idea that seemingly immutable structures are usefully conceptualized as having the same kind of temporality. It is these kinds of changes in fundamental ideas that has led to near agreement among theorists of context that what is called for in contextualized research is a "...radical new position regarding the aims and methods..." of the human sciences. (Rosnow 1986, p. 309). Further, if we were to really do this, as Shotter (1986, p. 227) says: we

would "...find ourselves in a world that is utterly strange to us, even though it would still be the world of our own everyday life."

But what lessons can we extract for step-takings in our own research efforts. Each reader will hopefully draw their own conclusions from the review of common and contested themes above. My own list follows, informed most usefully by Carter (1982, 1989, 1991), Gadamer (1975, 1976, 1981), Branham & Pearce (1985), Gavin (1988a,b), and McGuire (1986). The reader will no doubt ascertain that my position is one of comprehensiveness. I see lessons to be learned from most of the discussions above.

This is not to imply that I do not see incommensurabilities. For example, I mandate that power be a consideration in all my research both because of my interest in critical approaches and because of my conceptualization of movement (and process) as inherently involving forces and, thus, power. Because I make this choice, however, does not necessarily mean that there is nothing for me to learn from acritical work. This goes back to the idea of whether I will see work completed outside my perspective as in opposition and thus irrelevant or as in dialectic and thus as inherently relevant.

In essence, my list of implications can all be summarized in one statement: I must learn – and, I believe we must all learn – to walk the in between:

1. To be concerned about the coherency of our conceptualizations as we move from meta-theory to theory to methodology to method and back, but to acknowledge that there is no foundational stable logic that can bridge all these gaps. To understand that there is, as Gavin (1988) suggests a "will to believe" (borrowing from James 1927) in between.
2. To find a balance over time between more particularized approaches to research (such as case studies and participant observation, accounts and narratives) and more systematized approaches to research (such as systematic interviewing and statistical analyses). To understand that I must research for a variety in methods if I am to implement the contextual mandate to surround. To pursue alliances across bridges with colleagues so that cooperatively we can apply the full range of possibilities to our study.
3. But at the same time to understand the necessary tension between more holistic, narrative-based accounts and more systematic attempts to tease out patterns. To explicitly put these differences into contest with each other. To understand that there is a marked difference between merely incorporating context and being contextual and to put these two ways of moving into contest with each other allowing one to inform the other.
4. To posit (as McGuire 1986 suggests) every contradiction, every inconsistency, every diversity not as error or extraneous but as fodder for contextual analysis. To ask and re-ask what accounts for this difference or this similarity and to anchor possible answers in time-space conceptualizings. To search for

and develop a variety of creative ways for bringing multiple sources of evidence to bear on theorizing.

5. To seek out not only multiple approaches but multiple voices. To no matter what research approach I use learn from qualitative researchers the necessity of including myself as a subject of my own examination, and to check with the actors who are the subjects of my focus how they interpret my interpretations. But, at the same time, to not marginalize my own voice. To take seriously what contextualized multi-method, multi-perspective means.

6. To unearth and invent approaches to interviewing and listening to others that are explicitly dialogic and explicitly invite others to theorize about their worlds. But, at the same time, to understand that surfaces and depths, textures and strands, nouns and verbs require different research approaches and that the research interview and even the invitation to multiple voices is but a slice of the spiraling circle. Other, often stereotyped as more determinist approaches, such as political economy or statistical analysis, necessarily inform and enrich. To avoid grasping too firmly to the popular idea that the way to tame the unruly beast of context is to (as suggested by Nofsinger 1996) focus on context only as relevant to actors in that context. This move is too bound by non-contextual views of the human subject and ignores, for example, the possibility that there is something to be learned from marginalized and protest voices, or from the search for the hidden and silenced.

7. To risk and own up to my own choices, including the choice to be a contextualist, by defining reflexivity as an ever-present, on-going mandate. But, at the same time, to not be frozen into inaction or by the fear that every word I speak is potentially a tyranny. To utilize utopian ideas as methodological moves.

8. To avoid the temptation of dabbling which seems to beset the human sciences and pursue a programmatic program of scholarship aimed at surrounding my project philosophically and observationally.

9. To simultaneously attend to constraint and freedom, finitude and openness, limitation and changability, flexibility and inflexibility, proximity and distance, historical formation and everyday resistance and invention. To posit that the possibility that a new kind of transsubjective knowledge will emerge from focusing on process, verbs and dialectics.

10. To use the mysterious depths and contradictions of context as methodological tool. In the absence of any kind of essentialist external foundation, it is comparisons and contrasts, discontinuities and bridges, struggles and accomplishments which provide analytic frameworks. The infinite regress of context mandates a constant circling in and out of frameworks which becomes in itself methodological guidance.

CONCLUSION

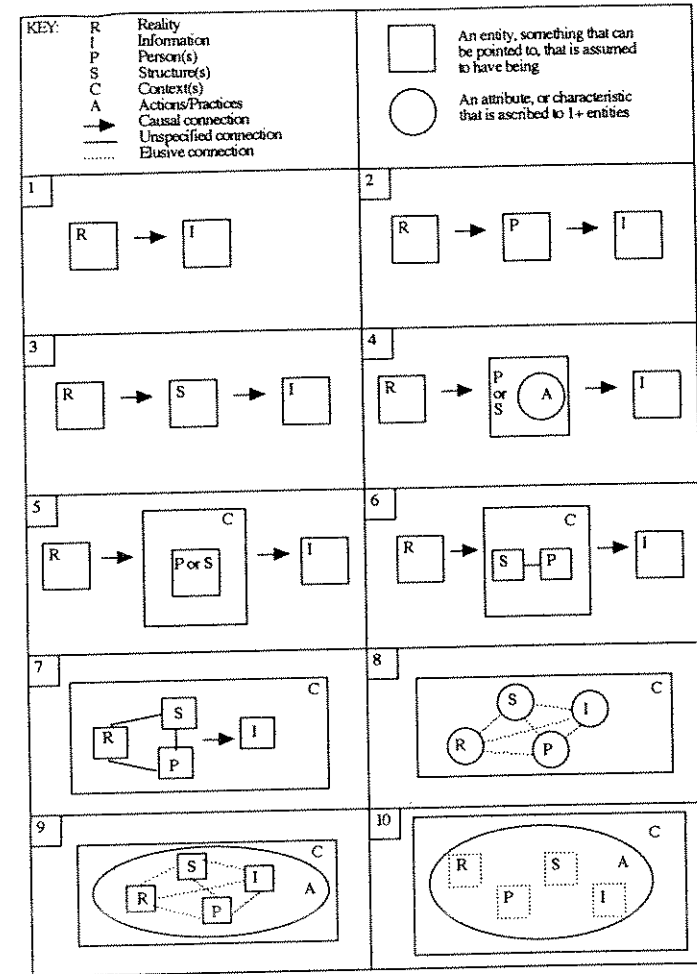
Context is something you swim in like a fish. You are in it. It is in you. A contextual view mandates a new way of being as scholar and researcher. The journey, the inventions have just begun. To implement a contextualist methodology implies in essence what Blumenberg (1983, p. 30) terms not method as planning but as “the establishment of a disposition: the disposition of the subject, in [her] place, to take part in a process that generates knowledge in a transubjective manner.”

Admittedly in this discussion I have refused to be cowed by the polarized arguments of either the more post-modern contextualists who see nothing but tyranny in systematization, or the more modern contextualists who see nothing but chaos in a fully implemented contextualism. Rather, I have explicitly chosen the “in-between” as an appropriate position for a contextualist world view which mandates dialectical attention.

What I have been unable to do is provide recipe guidance for how to tame the unruly beast. In one sense, a contextualist approach requires that we understand that the beast is inherently wild. In a second sense, a contextual approach requires that we be wilder, accepting the inherent absolute unattainability of our quest while pursuing the journey. In a third sense, the taming is of us, mandating a walk toward complexity, toward as Dewey proposed, digging deeper.

FIGURE 1

Picturing ten different ideas regarding the relationships between reality, information, person(s), structure(s), and actions/practices, in rough chronological order of their appearances in the social science literatures



NOTES

- 1 This paper is based on references obtained from a search of the 75 journals of the communication fields indexed by Comserve. From these additional references were extracted from bibliographies. Some 200 possible sources were identified but only the 100 most useful are listed in references. The author is grateful to Sam Fassbinder and Kathleen D. Clark, both of whom assisted with literature review; and to Peter Shields with whom continuing discussions regarding philosophic issues guiding the social sciences have been most helpful.
- 2 See Dervin 1991, 1992, 1994.
- 3 Pettegrew (1988) is an exception – positing situation as always contained in contexts but his container approach to context is one which ultimately I would label as non-contextual.
- 4 The notion of "picturing" was developed by Richard F. Carter (1974). This version used here was adapted by Dervin (1975).

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