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Contextual Understanding in Constructionism: A Holistic, Dialogical Model

Abstract This paper seeks to develop contextual constructionism through elaboration of the concept of context and the articulation of an accompanying methodology for empirical research. I approach context as a construct involving awareness when: (1) claims-makers define contexts in social problem debates, and (2) academic analysts do likewise in studying those debates and their outcomes. Such constructions can either converge or diverge, both within and across groups of claims-makers and analysts, with significant consequences for understanding and interaction. Importantly, context is never singular, for it always presupposes at least two related settings, namely, an immediate situation involving claims that is embedded in a more distant or general one which has at least a short-term historical dimension. Both social problems claims-makers and constructionist analysts, moreover, engage in “context work,” that is, efforts to sustain an overarching sense of setting between periods of social problems claims-making and research on them. I suggest that analysts examine claims-makers’ discourse in order to identify their view of context, and then apply the same scrutiny to their own presuppositions. Analysts should also be alert to strategic uses of context as a resource (“context gaming”), they should map significant shifts in constructions of context and pay attention to unobtrusive factors that might not yet have entered awareness. Finally, analysts should avoid overly deterministic accounts. For although contexts, as constructed, do indeed impose constraints, they ought not to be seen as eliminating agency, but only as locating it in ways that facilitate sociological insight.

Keywords Context as Construction; Embeddedness of Contexts; Context Work; Context Gaming; Contextual Understanding

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Context, as an idea, is widely recognized and applied, with greater or lesser degrees of awareness, both on a common-sense level in everyday interaction and in sophisticated academic analyses. Generally speaking, it is not a controversial notion, but one that people of various ages, occupations, and political or religious preferences readily accept. Why then make this concept the focus of an extended discussion? As I will attempt to show, there are very good reasons for doing so, especially within the context of a set of papers devoted to developing the constructionist perspective on social problems.

I write from the perspective of a sociologist in the United States who has been influenced by the intellectual movements and political controversies in the field over the course of several decades. This is a key component of my own self-aware context: the professional setting in which I work. Consequently, I will draw mainly from the experience of the U.S. and its sociological profession in illustrating context and the interpretive issues involved in its understanding. I will, however, also touch on international events and I hope that colleagues in other lands will find the discussion useful in their own work.

The key issue is not the existence or non-existence of context, or the influence of particular types of context on social problem debates. Rather, the important question is how we can and should understand events contextually while doing constructionist scholarship.

Contextual understanding is arguably fundamental in our knowledge at all times. State-

ments and experiences only “make sense” within contexts, that is, in relation to selected reference points that provide spatio-temporal and socio-cultural locations. For example, each word in a scholarly book makes sense within the context of words in units recognized as sentences. These in turn acquire meaning within the context of paragraphs and sections of chapters, while chapters make sense within the overall context of the book, which in turn is understandable within a professional literature that is comprehensible within an academic profession. As this simple illustration indicates, contextual understanding is a basic heuristic strategy that pervades our lives; and we routinely take into account a diverse set of contexts, using each as a key for certain types of interpretation. The contexts we select in our sense-making practices, moreover, are often closely linked or embedded in one another like the painted figurines within Russian “matryushka” dolls.

Moreover, in the same way that we routinely engage in contextualized understanding in an intellectual sense, we also engage in contextualized valuation. For instance, the word “steal” and its accompanying action would have a negative significance in many settings, especially among generally law-abiding people. In other contexts, however, “stealing” can have positive value, as when a consumer gets a great deal on an automobile or when a baseball player races safely to second base from first while a pitch is being thrown to home plate. The same holds true for behavior. In the context of a wedding reception, for example, guests might be permitted—even encouraged—to kiss the bride;

but, if one of those guests were to kiss the same woman a week later at her place of employment, serious penalties might result. Meanings and values are thus inextricably linked, across diverse contexts.

Among sociologists of social problems, the most intensive discussions of context and contextual methodology within constructionist perspectives on social problems took place within the debate between proponents of “strict” and “contextual” constructionism. While the “strict” constructionist approach stuck closely to language (Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993), that ultimately became a minority position. The “contextual constructionism” position emerged as the most common view (Best 1989). From this perspective, one can only make sociological sense of claims-making activities if these are located in terms of social and cultural reference points.¹

With this as background, I want to examine the concept of context, and consider why it matters, with particular attention to several features, including context categories, context as logical prerequisite and logical necessity, the simultaneous multiplicity of contexts, and the indexical nature of meaning in context. The next section will also consider how social problem claims-makers and analysts construct context, and the “context work” that both do as background and backstage activity.

¹ In retrospect, it seems strange that the debate occurred at all, for the simple reason that Spector and Kitsuse (1977) clearly conveyed a sense of acting in an intellectual and professional context. They were thus, arguably, contextual constructionists.

Conceptualizing Context

The term “context” has numerous abstract meanings, as well as many empirical referents, and is used in a wide variety of senses. The *Oxford Dictionary of American English*, for instance, defines context as “circumstances,” or, more specifically, “the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood and assessed” (see: www.oxford-dictionaries.com). *Webster’s Online Dictionary* notes that context is an important idea in both literary and historical studies. Thus, context sometimes refers to “the part or parts of something written or printed ... which precede or follow a text or quoted sentence”; and with regard to historical understanding, context means “the set of facts or circumstances that surround a situation or event” (see: www.webster-dictionary.org).

The synonyms of context also show a great deal of complexity. Context might be thought of as “background” or “conditions” or a “climate,” as well as a “landscape” or “frame of reference,” a “scene” or a “panorama” (see: www.thesaurus.com). Contextual understanding is thus “systemic,” insofar as it relates parts to a variety of wholes. It is likewise ecological, insofar as it locates events in relation to environments. And, as both of these metaphors indicate, it is always holistic.

Etymologically, the word “context” originates in the practice of weaving fibers into cloth. The Latin prefix “con” means “together,” and “text” is the linguistic root of “textiles,” that is, fabrics. So in its applications in constructionist work, knowledge

of context helps us to understand how events are “woven together” in ways that we would otherwise miss. The “fabric” of construction generally includes social problem claims and counter-claims, the presentation of those assertions in mass media and popular culture, and practical policies (both official and unofficial) designed to reduce or eliminate the problems as defined in the arenas of debate (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988).

Why Context Matters

As the discussion below will demonstrate, recognized contexts affect the who, what, when, where, how, and why of claims-making activities, as well as the responses to them. The same holds true, of course, for the actions of analysts and their contextualized choices of what to study, why and how, and where to place the products of their interpretive work. In particular:

1. **Context affects the content of claims:** Perceived contextual factors shape the specific messages that claims-makers deliver to audiences about alleged shared troubles that require remedies. Such influences are often evident in the specific vocabularies that claims-makers employ, including distinctive terms to designate specific troubling conditions. For example, public health claims-makers began to speak of cigarette smoking as an “addiction” (rather than merely a “bad habit” or, as the tobacco industry preferred, “an adult custom”) in a period when medical professionals and mass media organizations were increasingly applying the terminology of addiction to other issues, especially

drug use. In the same way, later claims-makers would speak of an “addiction” to pornography, and would apply the term “sex addiction” to behavior might previously have been described, in the language of a religious context, as “adultery.” Thus, context affects the “what” of claims.

2. **Context affects who becomes a claims-maker:** In the same way, context affects the probability of particular types of persons or groups becoming claims-makers. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, where women have not been allowed to drive automobiles (a context of custom and law), women have become claims-makers and activists about this issue, for they are the ones who experience in their daily lives the stress and suffering that occur when they cannot quickly get to a hospital for emergency medical care for a child, or to a store to purchase items needed in the home. Thus, context affects the “who” of claims.
3. **Context affects the tactics used in claims-making:** Claims, by definition, involve efforts to persuade audiences, and context influences the manner of persuasion. An interesting international case is Northern Ireland in the 1980s, where the Catholic minority chose to adopt tactics such as non-violent marches (White 2014) that had proven effective in the African-American civil rights movement in the U.S. two decades earlier (historical context). The Catholics in places like Derry and Belfast went so far as to use songs and slogans from the U.S. experience, such as “We Shall Overcome.” Thus,

because participants oriented themselves in terms of the American movement, that context affected the “how” of their claims-making.

- 4. Context affects the response to claims:** Perceived situations and circumstances also shape the likelihood of particular responses by audiences to social problem claims. In some cases, these involve rather dramatic changes in attitudes and reversals in policy. Thus, after the 1981 shooting of United States’ President Reagan, claims that the country needed tighter regulation of gun ownership gained a more favorable reception, and Congress passed the Brady Bill requiring background checks on applicants. Similarly, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States, claims about the need for greater security at airports gathered support, and Congress created the Transportation Security Agency (TSA), despite the expressed desire of President George W. Bush to limit or cut the size of the federal government. Thus, perceived contexts affect remedial claims and their implementation.

Features of Social Problems Contexts

Context, of course, is contextualized. In this section, I will consider ideas that might contribute to a fuller understanding of the importance of context.

- 1) Context categories:** Social-problem claims-makers who apply common-sense assumptions, as well as academic analysts who work within disciplinary paradigms make use of typologies containing “context categories.” Such classifications

may be relatively simple or elaborate, informal or formal, but they are arguably consequential in the practical task of sense making with regard to social problems. Though in theory the set of categories might be indefinitely large, in practice, this is generally not the case, and both common-sense claims-makers and academic analysts apply a relatively limited vocabulary of acceptable categories, such as economic, political, social, and cultural contexts, and their various combinations (e.g., “race/class/gender”).

There are also filters and constraints—including self-censoring—that often go unnoticed. For instance, in a largely secular culture, very few claims-makers would locate events within the context of “an assault by demonic forces” or identify “extraterrestrial aliens” as a relevant context for action. From the vantage points of most contemporary claims-makers and analysts, such categories would seem nonsensical.

- 2) Context as logical prerequisite and logical necessity:** Discussions of certain social problems require that particular corresponding contexts be postulated. For instance, as Fine (1997) has observed, claims about “the problem of Hollywood” and the moral degeneracy of its celebrities could not appear, and would make no sense, until there was a movie-making center whose products were viewed around the country and which was the subject of much coverage in mass media. In the same way, claims about the problem of “Internet pornography” and its alleged injuries to women, children, and family life could not emerge without the presence of a searchable World Wide Web link-

ing personal computers and other devices to servers offering sexually explicit content. The alleged problems of Hollywood and Internet pornography, in other words, cannot be spoken without also speaking, simultaneously, of a directly corresponding context, which is the logical ground of meaning in each case.

Related to this are instances where it is difficult to discuss social problem debates without immediately referencing a particular factor or event. Although these are not prerequisites for the definition of problems as in the examples given above, they are nearly indispensable for purposes of analysis. Thus, the emergence of the social problem of “stalking” followed the 1989 murder of actress Rebecca Schaeffer, which became the most prominent example of “star-stalking.” This event seemed to transform interaction decisively when claims-makers “linked Schaeffer’s murder, the 1982 stabbing of Teresa Saldana ... and the deaths of four Orange County women ... These cases became typifying examples, evidence of the need for an anti-stalking law” (Lowney and Best 1995:41).

There are many other cases in which a similarly dramatic event occasioned actions through which alleged social problems “became real” in the sense of gaining formal recognition in law and policy. As Lowney and Best note, these are “contingencies,” but they are so closely linked to the recognition of problems that it is difficult to think of these problems without also immediately recalling the contingencies. Memorial laws and policies, such as “Megan’s Law” and “Amber Alerts,” the Brady Bill and the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety

Act (Surette 2011:3) all inscribe particular contexts into collective memory through naming practices.

- 3) The indexicality of meaning in context:** As some academics, especially ethnomethodologists and conversation analysts, have noted, the meaning of speech and behavior is highly dependent upon the settings in which it takes place. Thus, while the words of an utterance may have general meanings that can be found in standard dictionaries, the actual sense of a word or an utterance will vary a great deal according to the situations in which it occurs. For instance, the expression “to swipe a card” might refer simply to a routine transaction at the checkout counter of a retail store (in the economic context of shopping), or it might refer to the theft of a credit card (in the legal context of a criminal investigation).

The same contextual indexicality applies to behavioral moves and counter-moves occurring sequentially over periods of time. For instance, in the fall of 2014, in Ferguson, Missouri, a largely African-American suburb of St. Louis, a white police officer fatally shot an unarmed black teenager whom he claimed had attacked him. This led immediately to claims by community members of racist violence on the part of law enforcement and to both peaceful protests and episodes of violence. Throughout the process, interested parties interpreted the behavior of participants in terms of the emergent set of moves (i.e., the unfolding context) that conferred reciprocal meaning on one another. For example, the revelation that blood from the deceased was found in the police cruiser became “a cover-up” in the minds of local protesters, and

leaked testimony from grand jury proceedings became “a signal” from the authorities intended to prevent further violence.

4) The simultaneous multiplicity of contexts:

Because socio-cultural phenomena are complex, claims-makers and analysts may recognize multiple types of context as simultaneously present. Thus, a particular social problem debate, such as whether or not the federal government should rescue the American auto industry, can be understood in terms of a context that is both economic (e.g., the decline of the industry and the loss of many previously well paid jobs) and political (e.g., a divided Congress in which Democrats have ties to organized labor, and Republicans resist government interference with business). Other factors, such as the industrial policies of Germany, Japan, or South Korea, might also qualify as relevant components of a multiplex context that is useful for reading events.²

5) **Levels of context: micro, meso, macro:** Participants in social problem debates act with an orientation towards at least a double context. For example, while taking part in a public, non-violent protest (the micro context), they also presumably have some sense of participating in the process of “redress of grievances” permitted under the Constitution of the United States (the macro context). Their action is based on knowledge of both situational norms and a larger cultural framework with-

in which these are located. Therefore, as a rule, an adequate definition of the situation requires a stipulation of both types of context.

6) **Context as claims-makers’ construction:** Social problem claims-makers often make very explicit statements about perceived features of the contexts in which they see themselves acting, including both immediate and more distant aspects of settings. For example, claims-makers who point to alleged violations of Title IX of the federal civil rights code have stated their belief that an epidemic of sexual assaults has been underway for some time at colleges and universities around the nation, in which young women were the primary victims.

As they engage in such definitional work, claims-makers in the United States have a great deal of freedom, all the more so because most claims-making occurs informally (Nichols 2003) and is not closely monitored.³ They can draw upon a broad range of cultural resources that includes popular culture and folklore, as well as mass media programming and more respected scientific and technical information. At the same time, they can also employ more restricted resources, such as the teachings of particular religions. They can even make use of negative stereotypes and in-group

³ In my view, constructionists have tended to view claims-making as similar to a social movement, and thus to regard outcomes (e.g., “drunk driving”) as the achievements of issue-oriented organizations that seek maximum publicity (e.g., Mothers Against Drunk Driving). While there is much truth in this, such an approach overlooks informal claims-making (e.g., complaining about tax increases while sharing a beer) that is probably much more widespread. Most informal claims-making is probably simply “expressive,” but some helps to build a “climate of opinion” that leads to public claims-making. Such informal-formal linkages offer opportunities for research.

prejudices in ways that would not be permissible for academic analysts. All of this is protected by the constitutional guarantee of free speech, although some constraints exist, especially the risk of litigation when constructions seem to others to be libelous or defamatory.

7) **Analysts’ context work:** As they construe the contexts of social problems claims-making, academic analysts likewise enjoy much freedom, but their activities are also constrained by the norms of scholarship and science, and by codes of professional ethics. Whatever their personal beliefs, they cannot openly employ some stereotypes available to less regulated popular claims-makers without risking discipline from their peers and their employers. Nor can they draw upon personal religious beliefs and allege in professional publications that the context of social problem claims-making is, for instance, “the final days before the second coming of the Lord.”

In practice, academic analysts tend to define the contexts of social problem debates along conventionalized lines acceptable in sociology and related fields. Thus, most sociologists might cite “post-modernity” or globalization as relevant settings for a broad range of issues. Others, sharing the widespread but less extensive disciplinary culture of “conflict sociology,” would frequently construe context in terms such as “patriarchy” or “the world system.” Only a relative few would assert that sociologists should understand such apparently unrelated problems as sexually transmitted disease epidemics and corporate illegality via the context of “the over-ripe phase of Sensate culture” and

“the crisis of our age” (Sorokin 1982). But, sociologists have justified all of these approaches in terms of disciplinary standards.

When we examine the constructionist literature, however, we encounter a strange anomaly or inconsistency. While analysts take care to understand social problems as definitional activities and their outcomes, they frequently treat contexts as mere “conditions” and not as constructs that they, as well as social problem claims-makers, have defined. Economic systems, political administrations, social strata, racism, sexism, and so on are “simply there” to be referenced in a non-problematic way. Such treatments, however, gloss over the selective agency required to generate notions of relevant contexts (Woolgar and Pawluch 1985).

Needless to say, claims-makers operating on the basis of popular culture, common-sense, or folklore would often find the constructs of academic analysts largely incomprehensible, if indeed they considered them at all. Realizing this, many academics have called for the development of a “public sociology” along the lines advocated by Michael Burawoy (2005) that might initiate a dialogue and bridge the gulfs between at least some competing constructions of contemporary issues (Nichols 2003; 2007; Jeffries 2009).

Another complicating issue here is whether social scientific work can legitimately be done from an “advocacy” stance, an issue that has been debated in the U.S. at least since the publication of Howard Becker’s (1967) influential article, “Whose Side Are We On?” Recently, variants of a conflict

² The issue of simultaneous contexts brings to mind Patricia Hill Collins’s influential notion of “intersectionality.” For instance, in her *Black Sexual Politics* she examines race, gender, and sexuality together.

approach have become widespread to the point where this perspective might be considered sociological orthodoxy in the United States—or at least an approximation to it in a fragmented discipline (Turner 2006; Turner 2013). The question therefore arises whether sociologists of social problems tend to construct contexts of claims-making in the terms favored by groups they regard as oppressed and whose interests they hope to serve—especially if “liberation sociology” (Feagin and Vera 2008) or the struggle against inequality has indeed become a “sacred project” in the field (Smith 2014). Such constructions might be regarded as “alignment moves” that link the identities of analysts to those of selected others. Interestingly, while sociologists frequently criticize the use of “folk devils” by other claims-makers (Cohen 2004; Rothe and Muzzatti 2008), they themselves arguably tend to populate definitions of context with their own “sociological folk devils” (e.g., neoliberals, conservative Republicans, corporate lobbyists).

Of course, the question can be reversed to inquire whether analysts tend to construe contexts in the terms favored by dominant elites or other system-maintaining groups. Ultimately, it is the same question, namely, whether analysts can or must define context in partisan terms or whether a scientific stance offers an alternative that is both more intellectually autonomous and more encompassing, even more compassionate (Nichols 2012). Perhaps analysts could also adopt a holistic and dialogical stance, one that would be Integral (in Pitirim Sorokin’s sense [1964]) and which permits the recognition of truth in opposed viewpoints. Or, they might take the roles of all participants, in

George Herbert Mead’s sense (1967), and seek to act for the benefit of all concerned. In other words, in constructing contexts, we could opt to see truth as complex and even paradoxical rather than merely dichotomous and partisan.⁴

Convergent and Divergent Constructions of Context

Given the range of possibilities, it is highly unlikely that all participants in social problem debates will define contexts in the same way. In some cases, there may be a relatively high degree of consensus. For example, many would agree that a key context for the recent debate over the expansion of federal power and its dangers for civil liberties has been the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the U.S. In other cases, the degree of consensus about context may be very low. During the 1993 disaster in Waco, Texas, for instance, participants in law enforcement seem to have been influenced by a sense of context as a nationwide increase in anti-government paramilitary activity (e.g., the “militia movement”), whereas religious members of the Branch Davidian compound oriented their behavior in terms of a presumed context of “the final days” of the Earth. Indeed, these divergent senses of context

⁴ A famous example of non-dichotomous, paradoxical truth appears in the history of physics where opposed factions eventually agreed that light was both a particle and a wave—a phenomenon considered impossible within the dominant paradigm of the era. As regards sociology, I have elsewhere expressed concern (Nichols 2012) about the prevalence and harmful effects of an “enemies mentality” that is linked to otherwise worthwhile efforts to promote social justice. I believe that figures such as Lev Tolstoy, Jane Addams, Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Cesar Chavez, and Mother Teresa have demonstrated the possibility of working for change without stereotyping, vilifying, and demonizing those with different views, even when they were arguably oppressors (Nichols 2014).

were probably an important factor leading to the tragic loss of more than seventy lives.

Consideration of these issues adds a dimension to constructionist analyses, at a level different from that of typical claims and counter-claims. For example, Planned Parenthood and the National Right to Life organizations differ not only about the values of “pro-choice” and “pro-life”; they differ as well in their understandings of the situation in which their debate is occurring. Those on the Planned Parenthood side would likely define context in terms of a historically patriarchal society and culture and a contemporary civil rights era. Right to Life advocates, by contrast, would likely see context as an age of increasingly materialistic and self-centered systems of ethics. In the Planned Parenthood notion of context, the option of terminating a pregnancy would be a step towards liberation comparable to the refusal of African-Americans to sit in the back of the bus in the segregated South, that is, a step towards progress and justice. For Right to Life activists, however, ending the life of a developing child would be another excess of permissiveness in a society already marked by the disintegration of families and an overarching “culture of death.” It might even be said that the real conflict here is not so much “about” abortion as it is about sharply opposed views of the larger situation.

“Context Work”

As the “pro-choice” versus “pro-life” debate indicates, social problem claims-makers and social science analysts invest much time and effort in a re-

lated process that might be called context work.⁵ The focus of these activities is the maintenance, with modifications over time, of a general image of context that can be applied across a range of social issues as these arise. This idea is similar to what functional sociologists liked to call “pattern maintenance” (Parsons 1951) in social systems, and the corresponding behavior is observable in diverse groups all across the ideological spectrum. Even the most liberal or “radical left” groups exhibit a profoundly conservative impulse in this regard, by “remaining true to core values.”

Generally speaking, context work occurs in the background and backstage (Goffman 1959). As such, it has less visibility than the related activities that take place in claims-making campaigns that seek attention from external audiences (Best 2013) or in highly publicized books, articles, and reports on current controversies. Most context work, in other words, is done by and for members of particular groups who share a certain outlook. Its orientation is primarily internal. When successful, context work maintains solidarity and also creates a tendency to see newly arising issues in a particular way, as well as a shared emotional state that might be loosely described as “readiness for battle.”

As they engage in context work, groups of all persuasions maintain a sense of shared identity that locates their collective selfhood in relation to selected reference points and reference groups (both friendly and antagonistic). Many social scientists in the U.S., for example, work hard to sustain a sense

⁵ Jim Holstein and Gale Miller’s writings on “social problems work” influenced the choice of this term.

of being “on the left” and engaging in resistance to an oppressive social order based on race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. The American Sociological Association arguably facilitates such context work by submitting a series of “progressive” *amicus curiae* briefs in controversial court cases, by passing resolutions attacking policies considered “on the right,” and by adopting left-oriented themes for its annual conferences (Smith 2014). Meanwhile, opposed groups invest much energy in maintaining a sense of themselves as American patriots surrounded by an expanding New World Order that threatens national sovereignty. Other, more optimistic groups—through academic courses, publications, speeches, conferences, professional associations, and so forth—maintain the contextual image of a new era of “conscious capitalism” (Aburdene 2007; Mackey and Sisodia 2014) in which the business sector will contribute to human flourishing on a global basis.

Importantly, such context work spills over into social problems claims-making. Thus, having reinforced among themselves the sense of acting in an overarching context of increasing right-wing power, activists and academics on the left were quick to perceive the 2010 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* as a disastrous policy that opened the gates to unlimited corporate spending in election campaigns. Liberals circulated proposals for a “People’s Amendment” to the Constitution that would overturn the decision (Clements 2012). Conservatives and libertarians, meanwhile, having sustained the sense of an out-of-control-government context, reacted very differently, and raised the alarm that the Federal Elec-

tion Commission had actually banned free speech (i.e., a critical documentary) in violation of the First Amendment. Thus, both sides understood *Citizens United* as a reflection of the generalized contextual images to which they were committed in advance.

If, as Shakespeare famously wrote, *all the world’s a stage*, and if particular social problem debates are dramas that have a temporary “run” in the theater, context work is the background effort to sustain shared definitions of “the type of stage on which we appear.”

Researching Context

I will offer several related suggestions for building a more fully developed contextual methodology.

Assessing the relative importance of contexts:

A basic challenge facing analysts seeking to understand how a particular social problem construct (and its consequences) emerged is to weigh the relative importance and impact of numerous, possibly relevant contexts of interaction. At present, there are no widely agreed upon procedures comparable to those of quantitative researchers who narrow down a set of predictors by examining bivariate correlations between independent and dependent variables, and then entering the stronger predictors into regression equations. As Holstein and Gubrium (2006:281) comment: “[s]ocial structure, social class, social integration, social disorganization, and other overarching constructs are commonly invoked without empirical specification or description of just what these social ‘things’ might amount to in the situation being examined.”

Thus, if contexts are keys to a deeper understanding of events, how many keys—and which ones—should analysts use? This question is extremely difficult to answer. Much seems to depend on an intuitive sense, which might also be influenced by the analyst’s ideological commitments, that relating claims-making activities to one or more specific reference points will illumine the process. Decisions might also depend on such situational factors as the space available to analysts. More, obviously, might be done in a book, where individual chapters might trace the influence of specific contexts, than is possible within the shorter compass of a journal article.

For example, Craig Reinerman and Harry G. Levine (2008:41-45) examine the federal “war on drugs” of the 1980s through the lens of “the political context of the ‘crack crisis.’” They further specify this context in terms of two components: (1) the recent rise of the political “New Right” and (2) the competition among political parties in a conservative climate of opinion. Having assumed this stance, they attempt to demonstrate ways in which the political context influenced how politicians adopted particular issues, how it affected the content of claims they made (e.g., about a drug “epidemic”), and how it affected the tactics they employed in claims-making arenas. Reinerman and Levine do not tell readers why other possibly relevant contexts did not receive comparable attention. A discussion of other, non-political situational factors, such as the dramatic increase in the availability of drugs, including the thousands of new compounds introduced each year by the pharmaceutical industry, might also have enriched the analysis. On the

other hand, one might ask: Is it really desirable to trace in detail the apparent effects of six or eight or ten contextual factors? Would readers find such analyses comprehensible? Would publishers agree to such research designs?

An examination of a range of constructionist studies suggests that researchers often apply from zero to three contexts in empirical work, and perhaps this provides a sense of what is practicable. For instance, Michael Lipsky and Steven Rathgeb Smith (1989) provide a non-contextualized analysis of the process of treating social problems as “emergencies.”

Other studies apply a single context as a key to understanding events. For example, John Johnson (1995) locates his analysis of the defining characteristics of social problem “horror stories” in the context of a nationwide recognition of the problem of “child abuse.”⁶ Similarly, my own analysis (Nichols 1995) of perceived problems in U.S.-Japanese relations relied primarily on a single context, namely, fluctuations in the Cold War between the U.S. and the former Soviet Union. A number of studies use a dual-contextual key. Donileen Loseke (1995) approached efforts to construct the “homeless mentally ill” in terms of two contexts, namely, the community mental health movement and the increasing trend of homelessness (with briefer mentions of other contextual factors). Jun Ayukawa (2001)

⁶ Johnson’s discussion of decontextualization as a basic feature of published horror stories underscores again the indispensability of context for meaningfulness. In other words, the absence of context in published accounts of violence against children makes the violence seem senseless and maximizes stories’ shock value.

likewise identified the governmental structure of Japan (where the Ministry of Finance was deeply involved with the nation's tobacco business), along with U.S.-Japan trade relations as a dual context for understanding constructions of "the smoking problem" in Japan.

Still, other studies apply three contextual keys. Thus, Philip Jenkins (1995), in his analysis of the construction of clergy sexual abuse, points to three significant contexts: changing practices within mass media organizations, an increasingly litigious climate, and political factors. In the same way, Kristin Luker (2008) examines claims about "babies having babies" within a tripartite context consisting of a sexual revolution, a reproductive revolution, and economic transformations in the U.S.

Noticing unobtrusive contexts: Constructionists, it seems fair to say, have cultivated the skill of "noticing what gets noticed" and "noticing what does not get noticed" in the definition of social problems and in responses to them. Therefore, in undertaking contextual analysis, constructionists should be careful not to limit themselves to factors that are especially evident or dramatic, such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the U.S. or a landslide electoral victory. Some of the most significant factors may be relatively unobtrusive or unnoticed.

A good example is differential fluctuations in the birth rates in particular nations. In the cases of both Northern Ireland and Israel, the relatively higher birth rates of historically subordinate groups (Catholics and Arabs) will very likely prove to be "game changers." Unless present trends are

reversed, within the next several decades Catholics will constitute a majority of the population in Northern Ireland, and Arabs will be the majority within Israel. As this process moves forward, we can anticipate claims in both nations on the part of groups currently in the majority, who will very likely begin to feel endangered.

Mapping significant shifts in contexts: During a period of social problems claims-making, relevant contexts may remain relatively stable or they may change in important ways. For example, as I pointed out in an earlier study (Nichols 1995), when the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union ended, claims by government officials about "the problem of Japan" changed rather dramatically. During the Cold War period, federal officials had tended to downplay complaints about Japan's alleged unfair trading practices, and to emphasize Japan's crucial role as an American ally. When the Soviet Union collapsed, however, the same officials escalated their claims about problems with Japan, and went so far as to characterize that nation in terms of the negative stigmas previously applied to the Soviet "evil empire."

Examining claims-makers' strategic uses of context: James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium (2006) call for a rather counter-intuitive approach to the study of context in which context is not simply a setting but is also something that interacting persons can "take into their own hands" and turn to their own purposes. Focusing on conversational interaction, they state, "[i]n our view, context is best treated as an interpretive resource rather than a deterministic condition" (Holstein and Gubrium 2006:269).

This might be termed an "instrumental" and agency-oriented reading of context.

Philip Jenkins has also contributed analyses of this type, which are based on the idea of interest groups. For instance, in his study of the social construction of serial killing, *Using Murder* (Jenkins 1994), he notes how a number of parties sought to exploit ongoing claims-making about the issue in order to further pre-existing agendas. Prominent among these were feminists who tended to view serial murder as "femicide" and who used this issue to push for recognition of the more general problem of violence against women. Similarly, in work on constructions of clergy sexual abuse and "pedophile priests," Jenkins points to efforts by Catholic reformers to turn this issue to their advantage.

Such exemplars indicate a potentially fruitful direction for future constructionist work. Jenkins's research also suggests that the issue of legitimacy is likely to be a key consideration in empirical studies. In both of the cases he examined, a claims-maker group appealed to an emergent social problem context as evidence of the legitimacy of its own views and as a means of discrediting its opponents' views. Constructionist analysts might explore such uses of context as "strategic interaction," in Erving Goffman's (1970) sense, and perhaps think in terms of "context gaming."

The same issue applies to analysts who might "game" context by constructing it with an eye towards professional rewards. As game-wise players, they will realize that their interpretive work in-

volves risks and has consequences. If, for instance, they define the context of social problems in terms of currently hegemonic paradigms in their field (whether functional analysis several decades ago, or conflict theory more recently), they may gain professional benefits, including academic appointments, election to high offices in national associations, coverage in mass media—perhaps even paid speaking engagements. If, on the other hand, they define social problem contexts in terms of marginal perspectives (e.g., evolutionary biology) or discredited approaches (e.g., Herrnstein and Murray's [1994] "bell curve" of social class, race, and intelligence), their work may meet with rejection from peers, journal editors, and book publishers. Putting it another way, when analysts construct context in their practice of "normal science" (Kuhn 2012), they tend to produce "normalized" contexts that peers will respect and to ignore other factors—however relevant from a more detached intellectual perspective—whose application might lead to penalties. All of this is grounded in a continuous stream of cues that people entering the field receive from the time of their earliest coursework in sociology.

Avoiding contextual determinism: Knowledge of relevant contexts provides valuable insight into processes of social problem construction. But, this should not be taken to mean that contexts fully determine those dynamics in the sense that they had to take the particular forms they did. As Holstein and Gubrium (2006:280) put it, "[r]esearchers should be wary of conferring determinative powers upon aspects of context." In other words, contextualization should not be confused with

causation. For example, it would be wrong to conclude that claims about a post-9/11 “war on terror” had to take the particular shape they acquired, that there had to be a Patriot Act, or that “waterboarding” had to be implemented as a technique for “intensive interrogation” that evaded the legal standard for “torture.” Participants in social problem debates act with a sense of context, but the choices they make are not deducible from contextual parameters in any mechanical way.

Conclusion

I have offered reflections on how constructionist scholars might benefit by developing more fully the concept of context, as well as that of contextual understanding, and also by building up a more complete accompanying methodology for empirical research.

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I make no pretense of offering complete treatise on the issue of contextual understanding, but perhaps this is one small step in the right direction. My hope is that colleagues engaged in constructionist analysis will draw on some of the ideas presented here and thereby contribute to an invigorated future for the perspective. No matter what that future holds, I am confident that the interpretive tradition in sociology will endure. As part of that living tradition, which focuses on how human persons create meaning and then apply it in interaction, the constructionist approach to social problems has much to offer.

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