

Dual Approaches to Development in Context

Robert Cohen and Alexander W. Siegel
(Eds.)

Context and Development

Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1991. 329 pp.

ISBN 0-8058-0481-1. \$49.95

Review by

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This edited volume aims to advance understanding of how development occurs as a function of the contexts of children's lives. It reflects an increasing interest throughout psychology in exploring how to go beyond focusing exclusively on individuals as the topic of analysis. The issue is a classic one in the field: how to conceptualize the relation between people and the environment. Few would disagree with the premise that the context matters. The question is one of how to conceptualize its relationship with the individual. The authors of

Context and Development-developmental, cross-cultural, family, and educational psychologists-present a collection of ways that the problem of context and development is pursued in different areas of psychology.

The relation between individual and context has been handled prototypically by conceiving of the person and the environment as independent entities, with one acting on the other, or with bidirectional influence. An alternative that has been less easily assimilated in psychology-proposed by scholars such as

Dewey and Bentley,; Pepper, Piaget, Gibson, Vygotsky, Leont'ev, **Angyal**, and Kantor-is that the individual and the environment are inseparable. **Rogoff** (1982) contrasted the interactional approach (in which person and context are independently defined and the aim is to examine their interaction) and the contextual event approach (in which it is assumed that individuals and contexts are mutually defining, as people participate in contextual events that they both constitute and are constituted by).

In the introductory chapter of this volume, Cohen and Siegel call for the contextual event approach:

Context is a melding of person and environment. Context includes the consideration of persons (conceptualized as active, constructive, information processors, replete with a past history and current sets of agenda, goals, expectations, etc.) as embedded within sets of social relationships (proximal and distal), and within a physical setting (offering behavioral opportunities and constraints), all developing over time. (p. 18)

Cohen and Siegel's proposal is extended by an extremely thoughtful Chapter 2 by Houts, which provides an account of world hypotheses and root metaphors, building on Pepper's approach. Houts discusses strong and weak forms of contextualism and discusses methodological choices that would follow from each. As Houts points out, often the methodological and theoretical approaches espoused by authors (including many in this volume) contradict each other. The methods applied sometimes are less contextual than the conceptualization offered.

The remainder of the book involves a mix of approaches to considering contextual issues. Although many of the chapters are interesting in their own right, the stance that they take with regard to how to conceptualize contextual issues is often implicit rather than discussed as a focus of the chapters. However, through noting how contextual matters are treated empirically or by reference to other work, we infer that a good number of the chapters fit the interactional model. They treat context as an outside influence on individuals, each defined independently of the other. At times, the chapters treat **context as an influence on individuals; at other times, they examine bidirectional approaches.** However, even very complex systems approaches to bidirectional approaches do not become contextual in the way called for in Cohen and Siegel's and Hout's chapters. They portray a dualistic view, with context as a separate

element from the organism, constantly involved in dynamic interaction with the organism. Context is described as a stable setting that could be represented in experimental research as additional variables or as a set of stable behavioral scripts.

This dualistic approach calls for a fuller (or exhaustive) description of contextual settings and for developing complex dynamic models for studying the interaction between context and development. Such recommendations were summarized by **Lerner and Tubman:**

We need more studies considering in an integrated, synthetic, or fused, fashion: (a) organismic, individual-difference variables, such as physical attractiveness, puberty, and temperament; (b) sociocultural contexts; and (c) the more proximal familial, school, and peer contexts. Finally, such research must be longitudinal, multilevel, and hence multivariate in nature. With such research we will be able to gain insight about the bidirectional relations between individuals' development and the significant contexts of their lives. (p. 204)

The dualistic interactional approach allows researchers to appreciate the guiding power of contexts; however, it limits the dynamic character of context to the interaction between relatively stable separated parts involving context or setting and individual variables.

Some authors in **Context and Development** work with the integrated approach, which treats context and organism as inseparable. In this view, context is not just settings; it is actively constructed by people and guides their behavior. An example is Minuchin's chapter, which argues that in order to study the family context it is necessary to study families in transition to be able to see how context develops. Siegel and Cohen describe the inseparable relationship of context and people in their conclusion to the volume, provocatively titled "Why a House is Not a Home":

Contexts are neither additive vectors nor combinations of persons and settings, nor can contexts be reduced to the sum of the person effects and setting effects. Suffice it to say that the person-setting constitutes the appropriate unit of analysis in such context sensitive conceptualizations and research designs and data-analytical strategies. Contexts aren't just settings; they're persons-in-settings. .

We have argued in this chapter that contexts are constructed by people, that they are essentially social, and that they embody human motives and memories. Insofar as persons are inextricably bound to contexts, contexts-no

less than individuals-change and develop.
(p. 313)

This perspective calls for a focus on the change processes of people-in-context as people revise contexts as well as being guided by them. Thus the dynamics involved in this approach differ from that of the dualistic, interactional approach. It is not a dynamic of interaction between parts but instead a dynamic of contextual construction simultaneous with contextual guidance or constraint.

This book is an honest attempt for dialogue between psychologists of different research areas to share in the difficult endeavor of advancing research to incorporate context and human development. The topics covered include cognition (Graesser and Magliano), language (Sell),

social cognition (Costanzo), biocultural development (Greenfield and Childs), popularity (Cohen, Summerville, Poag, and Henggeler), adolescence (Lerner and Tubman), delinquency (Henggeler), family transitions (Minuchin), relationships (Hartup and Laurson), and an overview of ecological psychology (Schoggen). We hope that this volume will encourage researchers to consider just how they cast the role of context in their conceptual formulations and in their research.

Reference

Rogoff, B. (1982). Integrating context and cognitive development. In M. E. Lamb & A. L. Brown (Eds.), *Advances in developmental psychology* (Vol. 2, pp. 125-170). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.