

WHAT IS "COMMUNICATION CONTEXT"?

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ABSTRACT

Current studies in business communication recognize the significance of "communication context"; however, the meaning of the term context remains vague and confusing. A review of communication-relevant literature reveals two major difficulties. First, because the concept of context has not been sufficiently clarified, it is used in varied and sometimes contradictory ways. Second, relationships, which can be identified among the various lines of thought on context, often hinge on underlying assumptions that are essentially incompatible.

The purpose of the present paper is: 1) to identify some of the problematic aspects of the term context in communication-relevant literature and, 2) to introduce major issues which scholars may wish to consider when analyzing the concept of context. Clarifying the concept can lead to more theoretically consistent research in management communication.

INTRODUCTION

When asked "What is context?" colleagues responded quickly. "Well, that's easy," said one. "Context is a frame. It's what we use to make sense of things." Another added, "In the field of communication, context is merely situation. . . . Isn't it?"

On first thought, context seems a straightforward term. We know what it means. We use it often and with ease. We say:

"Let's look at the context."

"We need to establish the context."

"That was taken out of context."

"Put that in context for me."

Context is part of our everyday vocabulary.

In communication literature the word "context" is also prevalent. Giglioli's (1972) Language and Social Context, which includes definitive articles by Goffman, Hymes, Searle, and Gumperz, is standard communication reading. Articles centering around various "context issues" frequently appear in communication journals. Recently, Henderson (1987) analyzed the "context of the managerial work group" in Management Communication Quarterly, and Mendelson (1987) argued for a "context-dependent" approach to writing in Journal of Business Communication. In business and management communication literature the term "context" is becoming the catalyst for a plethora of new ideas and approaches, such as the Flower and Hayes (1981, 1983) process approach and the Shelby (1988) "strategic choice model."

Background

Growing interest in "context" may be traced in part to Pepper, who in 1942 identified a way of thinking he labeled "contextualism." Simply put, contextualism focuses on the active, ever-changing historical event. Contextualism starts with things in process, with patterned events as the basic reality (Hahn, 1942). A contextualist, Hahn explains, "recognizes that structures are structures of events, of things changing, and believes that adequate regard for things in process, patterned events in their contexts, makes possible a naturalistic account of anything whatever" (10).

Hahn called contextualism "one of the most important philosophical movements of our day, if not of all history" (18-19). The current impact of contextualism on theory, research and pedagogy is readily demonstrated. In psychology Sarbin (1977) posits "that contextualism is a more fruitful world view for students of the human condition," and McGuire (1983) proposes a "contextualist epistemology" as an appropriate metatheory for research. In our field, Georgoudi and Rosnow connect recent research endeavors with contextualism. Their Journal of Communication article titled "The Emergence of Contextualism" (1985) suggests that work in communication seems "to converge on a common theme 'that involves the study of the individual in his or her natural surroundings, in context, in the culture, and in historical time'" (80). Ideas issuing from contextualism, particularly the concept of context, permeate our literature.

Problem

Historically scholars recognize the concept of context as both important and overlooked. As early as 1931, Dewey argued: "The most pervasive fallacy of philosophic thinking goes back to the neglect of context" (206). In sociology Goffman (1964) wrote about "The Neglected Situation," contending that the social situation needs and warrants analysis in its own right. Within linguistics, R. Lakoff (1972) argued in "Language in Context" that "in order to predict correctly the applicability of many rules one must be able to refer to assumptions about the social context of an utterance, as well as to other implicit assumptions made by the participants in a discourse" (907). Mischel (1979) brought attention to the need for close study of the reciprocal interaction between person and context.

Despite this concern with the notion of context, the meaning of the term remains ambiguous. Over the years, some writers have deliberately left the concept vague. Bar-Hillel (1970) states: "I have left the central concept of this paper, namely pragmatic context, in rather thorough vagueness, and this for the simple reason that I see no clear way to reduce the vagueness at the moment" (80). As Ochs so simply put it: "The scope of context is not easy to define" (1979, 1).

Problems with the notion of context persist in current work. Argyle, Furnham, and Graham (1981) refer to the "unprecedented abuse and

overuse of the term situation," overuse which we believe involves the abuse of context (2). Levinson (1983) claims we have failed to produce a clear notion of context. Lannamann (1984) laments that there is no systematic treatment of context available and little empirical support for the important role of context in human understanding. In his opinion, context "remains an accepted but vague tenet of human communication" (2). Branham and Pearce (1985) note that, while humanists and social theorists frequently talk about the significance of context, they rarely provide precise definitions of context or descriptions of the contextualizing function (21). Even a cursory reading of communication-relevant literature reveals not simply the prevalence of the concept, but the disparate ways in which the term context is used.

Several problems emerge from the current treatment of context. As with the term communication, the concept of context has become overburdened. Dance and Larson (1985) suggest this overburdening occurs when a concept is employed and applied in different disciplines and in diverse ways within disciplines. Trenholm (1986) argues that such overburdening results in conceptual confusion, conceptual oversimplification, and ideological masking. Conceptual confusion is revealed by inconsistent use of the term. Scholars have their own, frequently undefined, meanings and at times use several notions of context in a single work. Oversimplification is seen in the use of the term context as a buzzword without concrete meaning. It is used because it is popular or convenient rather than because it is specifically selected. Ideological masking, which results from a failure to articulate philosophical underpinnings of an approach, which may result in inappropriate applications of the term.

Additional problems occur because context belongs to a family of terms that overlap. The closest companion-term is situation. In fact, many authors use context and situation synonymously. Setting and scene as well are sometimes used interchangeably with context. Episode, especially in Forgas (1979), also shares similarities with context.

In sum, a review of the communication-relevant literature using the concept of context reveals two major difficulties. First, the concept has not been sufficiently clarified; therefore, context is used in varied and sometimes contradictory ways. Second, relationships, which can be identified among the various lines of thought on context, often hinge on underlying assumptions that are essentially incompatible. To say this is not to fault individual writers. The notion of context is extraordinarily complex.

Purpose

The purpose of the present paper is twofold. The first purpose is to explore the use of the term context in communication-relevant literature, and in so doing, to reveal some of the problematic aspects of the term. The second purpose is to identify major dimensions for analysis; these dimensions relate to key issues that scholars may wish to consider when assessing the concept of context.

The underlying intent of the paper is to generate discussion on the concept of context. We anticipate that such discussion will (1) serve as the impetus for future discourse, (2) produce coherent understandings and consistent definitions of context, (3) offer direction for research, and (4) lead ultimately to the development of a context model (or context-based theory) that has relevance to current theoretical positions and utility for management communication.

USE OF THE TERM CONTEXT

From reading literature relevant to oral and written communication it is clear that multiple understandings of context exist. Many writers recognize and wrestle with the difficulties inherent in conceptualizing context. Our goal is to present the most clearly articulated of these.

The following categories present a number of approaches to defining context. Although we found it difficult to identify a single principle that would organize our presentation, we did recognize the emergence of three general groupings.¹ The main grouping involves individuals who associate context in some way with meaning. This position includes the majority of writers. As Bateson (1979) points out, "'context' is linked to another undefined notion called 'meaning.' Without context, words and actions have no meaning at all" (15). In contrast to this dominant position, which is represented by the first eight categories below, are writers who treat context as situation or as an organizing device.

In this discussion, some writers appear in more than one category. It is characteristic of the literature on context that writers refer to various aspects of context--sometimes in contradictory ways, sometimes in complementary ways. In such cases we try to reflect the dominant emphases of each writer.

Our purpose is not to deal directly with the strengths and weaknesses of individual conceptions, but to overview the kind of thinking about context that exists in the literature. The point is not that some of these authors are right and others wrong, but that different positions have different implications for theory and research.

Context as Frame

The notion of context as frame is closest to everyday use. Context may frame texts or frame events. When context frames text, it

¹ We considered several organizing principles: abstract . . . concrete, familiar-exotic, general-specific, internal-external. We decided in the end not to impose an organization on the approaches.

is the before and after which surrounds the written or spoken word. When context frames events, it² is the set of circumstances that surrounds a particular event.

We find the notion of context as text frame in Pepper.³ The total meaning of the phrase depends on the "outlying words and phrases which indirectly enter into the meaning of the phrase and constitute its context" (247). That context is the preceding and succeeding phrase or sentence is fundamental to literary analysis, linguistics and translation. It is this context frame which Tanenhaus and Seidenberg (1981) deem necessary for a complete understanding of text. We find the notion of event frame in Georgoudi and Rosnow who define context as "the surrounding sociopolitical and historical conditions in which the act unfolds" (81, emphasis ours).

A somewhat different conception of context as frame is sometimes associated with the dramaturgical explanation of communication (Goffman, 1964). Sarbin's description of dramaturgical framing is especially apt. "Rather than look for the causal connections between antecedent and concurrent events as demanded by mechanistic models . . . the contextualist looks for the method of emplotment" (1977, 17).

Emplotment suggests that a participant in any social activity, much like the theatre-goer, places an arbitrary frame around a given scene or episode to separate it from other scenes or episodes (Sarbin; Goffman). "In the theater," Sarbin explains, "the framing is carried out by artifacts such as curtains, programs, costumes, makeup, seating, lights, and bells, and by conventions acquired by both actors and audiences In everyday behavior," he continues, "frames have to be constructed, also for purposes of emplotment, in order to make sense of the complex of happenings or nature and the doings of persons" (17). Words, gestures, movements, facial expressions and the like, somehow signal changes so that in daily life, as in the theatre, we identify, distinguish, or frame individual scenes. We say, "This is work," or "This is play," and therefore signal particular contexts which require a particular role enactment (Sarbin). This description of context in which the notion of framing is central, Sarbin calls the "contextual-dramaturgical model" (31).

Context as Pattern

Linking context to meaning, Bateson offers the notion of context as "pattern through time" (1979, 14). To illustrate this idea, Bateson provides the example of a visit to a doctor's office: When we walk into

² Commonly used definitions of context were taken from Webster's New Riverside University Dictionary (1984) and The Random House Dictionary of the English Language (1987).

³ Pepper also suggests that this context frame supports the details of the event (250).

the doctor's office we create context by calling upon our supply of stories, those patterns and sequences of childhood experience which are built into us. This process allows us to make sense of the visit. Similarly, our patterns through time allow us to answer the question "What is an elephant's trunk?" We know that the elephant's trunk is his nose "by process of communication; it is the context of the trunk that identifies it as a nose. That which stands between two eyes and north of a mouth is a 'nose,' It is the context that fixes the meaning" (Mind and Nature, 15).

Context as Interpretive Processes

By process is meant very simply the cognitive activity engaged in when people construct meaning. The general rubric context as interpretive processes subsumes a variety of more specific terms, including inference, interpretive procedures, and perception. Branham and Pearce articulate one view when they state that "the 'context' of any given text is the perception of it by various interpretive communities, not the features of the historical situation in which it occurs" (20). The commonality among writers categorized here lies in their emphasis on the mental process of contextualizing, although these writers also deal with knowledge as a related issue.

Context as Knowledge Structures

The term knowledge structure the many terms used to refer to the content (and sometimes the organization) of the information stored in a person's cognitive system. Within the field of communication, writers who consider context as knowledge tend to leave the knowledge aspect rather vague. Lannamann (1984) describes context as a "complex symbolic system unified by rules for meaning and action which are known to the participants" (47). Pearce and Cronen (1980) refer to the meaning structure within the individual which serves as the context for interpretation and action.

In contrast, writers allied with linguistics tend to explicate the content of knowledge structures in more detail. For Ochs & Schieffelin (1979) context includes at a minimum the "language user's beliefs and assumptions about temporal, spatial, and social settings; prior, ongoing, and future actions (verbal, non-verbal), and the state of knowledge and attentiveness of those participating in the social interaction in hand" (5). Lyons (1974) views context as the knowledge language users have of universal principles of logic and language usage, as well as their knowledge in six more specialized areas (i.e., knowledge of role and status, knowledge of formality level, knowledge of appropriate subject matter).

Sperber and Wilson (1986) offer one of the most direct views of context as knowledge:

The set of premises used in interpreting an utterance (apart from the premise that the utterance in question has been produced) constitutes what is generally known as the context. A

context is a psychological construct, a subset of the hearer's assumptions about the world. . . . A context in this sense is not limited to information about the immediate physical environment or the immediately preceding utterances: expectations about the future, scientific hypotheses or religious beliefs, anecdotal memories, general cultural assumptions, beliefs about the mental state of the speaker, all play a role in interpretation (15-16).

Sperber and Wilson further suggest that the assumptions of the hearer form a gradually changing background against which new information is processed (118; see also Searle, 1979).

Context as Vantage Point

A slightly altered perspective is offered by Lannamann who introduces context as "a transparent vantage point around which a person orients his or her meaning structure" (1984, 95). Elsewhere he describes context as "a fluid variable representing the perspective a person uses to interpret any social act" (6). According to Lannamann then, context is not "a thing." It is not situation or some other static category. Such a categorical definition of context, Lannamann believes, is too narrow. Instead, context is in the head.

While Lannamann's position is clearly allied to the idea of context as knowledge structure, he makes a unique contribution in suggesting that context is a focus which allows individuals to perceive some meanings and not others (6). Furthermore, Lannamann describes this focus as a fluid variable, a position unique in the literature.

Context as Conventionalized Use

An interesting variant on context as meaning enters with the view of context as conventionalized use. This view was given substance by Searle (1965, 1972), who maintained that speech acts are meaningful in the context of conventional usage. Such a view is implicit in the work of people like Fisher (1987), who see one aspect of context as the conventionalized rules (norms, expectations) and roles internalized by people, as well as in the works of scholars who treat speech community and culture as the context which creates the meaning of acts (Hall, 1977; Hymes, 1974).

Approaches falling within this category tend to see social order as pre-existing the individual and/or as a static framework imposed by society; most of the other context as meaning approaches tend to view social order as an emergent process, created by participants (for further discussion, see Lannamann, 1984).

Context as Choice

Bateson's treatment of context is perhaps one of the most influential. He defined context as "a collective term for all those events which tell the organism among what set of alternatives he must

make his next choice" (Bateson, Steps, 1972, 295). While this notion only partially reflects Bateson's understanding, it has importance, especially in light of recent concern with "strategic choice" in management communication (Shelby; Rogers, 1988).

Context as Relationship

The term relationship has two rather distinct uses when applied to context. The first meaning of relationship refers to the connection between elements or ideas, as in the connections between elements in a system. These connections can refer to 1) physical/behavioral elements, 2) intangible/cognitive elements, 3) the contexts themselves, or 4) unspecified entities. An example is provided by Lannamann who states: "contexts are not things, but are instead relationships between things" (13). The difficulty with this view of context as relationship is that it is often not clear whether the context is being viewed as a relationship or if the organizational structure of the context (or between contexts) is being described as one of complex relationships.

The second meaning of relationship refers to the connection among people which many scholars have referred to as "the relational context." The notion of relational context seldom stands alone; sometimes, it is part of a set of hierarchical contexts: Pearce and his colleagues use the notion of relational context as one of the hierarchical levels of knowledge people use to contextualize communication. Sometimes relational context is part of a set of categorical contexts: Fisher (1987) views the relational context as one of three primary contexts of communication and subdivides the relational context into kinships, friendships, work, social contracts, acquaintanceships (60-64).

Context as Situation

One definition for context is simply situation.⁴ Frequently context and situation are used interchangeably in daily dialogue and in scholarly discourse. Moreover, scholars associated with situation are sometimes connected with discussions of context even though they may not deal with the concept directly. For example, Lannamann's review of "theoretical approaches to the study of context" (12) discusses scholars as diverse as Cody and McLaughlin (1980), Forgas (1978, 1979), Lewin (1943), Magnusson (1971), McHugh (1968), and Thomas (1931).

Thomas' and Goffman's definitions of situation are sometimes related to or interpreted as context. In his seminal work defining situation, Thomas describes situation as that stage of examination and deliberation which is preliminary to any self-determined act of behavior (1931). Taking a somewhat different approach, Goffman (1961) uses the term social situation to "refer to the full spatial environment anywhere

⁴ For example, context is defined as situation in The American College Dictionary (1982).

within which an entering person becomes a member of the gathering" (144). According to Goffman, "situations begin when mutual monitoring occurs and lapse when the next to last person has left" (144). The idea that the situation is an environment of "mutual monitoring," which is key in Goffman, is picked up by Cody and McLaughlin (1985), who "use the term social situation to denote the case in which two or more individuals are interacting within a physical setting, in which the interaction has an observable beginning and ending (defining by mutual monitoring)" (264).

Cody and McLaughlin's approach is closely tied to the dominant use of context as situation in the communication-relevant literature: the view of context as an entity with identifiable characteristics. Pervin (1978), for example, argues that situation as a source of influence on behavior is constituted by three components: who is involved, where the action takes place and what is going on (79-80). In rhetoric, Bitzer's (1980) treatment of the rhetorical situation is considered a classic. Extensive work identifying the characteristics of situations has also been produced (see reviews in Argyle, Furnham, & Graham, 1981, and in Cody and McLaughlin, 1985). Nevertheless, the relationship between the notions of context and situation remain cloudy.

Context as Organizing Device

One of the most common uses of the term context is as an organizing device. In this approach, context is not defined but rather used as a label. This approach is seen frequently in communication textbooks (e.g., Fisher, 1987; Littlejohn, 1983, Trenholm, 1986). Littlejohn, for example, follows the accepted plan of organizing communication into dyadic, group, organizational, and mass contexts. Following Bernstein (1972), Fisher identifies four contexts in which socialization occurs: regulative, instructional, imaginative or innovative, and interpersonal. In addition to these "socializing" contexts, Fisher lists a number of relational contexts (60-64).

To some extent using context as an organizing label is most common in works drawing from the context as situation approach, although scholars with other perspectives may use it for convenience.

FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES

A review of the literature leads us to believe that the difficulties associated with the notion of context revolve around four fundamental issues:

- The relationship between text and context
- The character of context
- The locus of context
- The organization of context

Views on these issues relate to underlying philosophical assumptions. Problems occur when writers do not explicate their underlying assumptions or when they offer contradicting positions on these issues. The classic example occurs when a writer discusses context as a process and then analyzes context as if it were a static entity.

Relationship Between Text and Context

We are using the term text to refer to the act (behavior, production) of a communicative message, whether that message is verbal or nonverbal, oral or written. The central question here is "What is the relationship between text and context?" Three answers to this question emerge: 1) the text is that which is contextualized; 2) the text is or becomes the context; and 3) text and context are mutually reflexive.

Most scholars distinguish text from context by indicating that the text is the act and context is the meaning given to the act. There is some evidence to suggest that for some authors--especially those influenced by linguistics--that the whole notion of context arose to distinguish the text from the interpretation people place on it (see, for example, Levinson's 1983 description of early work in pragmatics).

For some scholars, context is both meaning and act. These scholars suggest that the text in the present becomes part of the context in the future. For example, Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) claim that "the context and manifest messages exchanged become part of the particular interpersonal context and place their restrictions on subsequent interaction" (132). Searle (1972) argues that the speech act becomes the context for interpretation. Georgoudi and Rosnow (1985) suggest that communicative acts are defined by context and, in turn, communicative acts create, introduce, and alter new contexts.

A third position is presented by Branham and Pearce (1985) who see text and context as fully reflexive. "In any specific instance, 'text' and 'context' are . . . interactive, in that they are fully reflexive, in that each may function either as text or as context" (20).

The Character of Contexts

In seeking to clarify the character of context, two central questions arise: 1) Is context an entity or a process? and 2) Is context static or dynamic? These questions are here considered briefly.

The process debate which raged in the 1970s and which was never satisfactorily resolved, may well emerge again in discussions of context. The majority of writers indicate that they view context as a process. For example, Georgoudi and Rosnow (1985) suggest that "contexts are not stable and permanent forms of reality but are themselves developmental and transformative" (84). Lannamann uses the origin of the word context, which comes from the French verb contexere

meaning to weave or join together, to posit a process view. He argues that this idea of weaving or creating patterns is consistent with the notion that social contexts are processes rather than stable entities (12-13).

Problems occur, however, when writers who espouse a process view apply the concept of context to analysis. Authors frequently shift from discussing the process of contextualizing (a verb) to describing the context (a noun). This leads to the implicit and perhaps unintended suggestion that contexts are entities. We think this occurs because 1) it is difficult to deal with processes and 2) some scholars may be using context as a metaphor. Sarbin offers insight into this occurrence when he notes that "once a metaphor has done its job of making sense of an occurrence, the metaphoric quality tends to become submerged. In time, the metaphor takes on the characteristics of an entity, it becomes literalized, reified" (3).

Whether or not they explicitly describe context as a process, the vast majority of writers view context as dynamic rather than static. In fact, it is difficult to isolate the notions of process and dynamism. This is stated most colorfully by Bateson (1979) who sees context as a "dance of interacting parts" (see also Lannamann, 13; Branham and Pearce, 1985). The view that context is dynamic is aptly expressed by Lannamann who regards context as a fluid focus which cannot be placed or ordered in any system. Lannamann believes this definition of context disentangles it from static categories of meaning and suggests that we cannot say there are certain expectations deriving from particular contexts that are always accurate (13).

The Locus of Context

Issues involving the locus of context relate to the question: "Where is context located?" Four positions emerge in response to this question. Context is located 1) within the individual; 2) in the collaborative constructions of individuals; 3) outside the individual; and 4) simultaneously in a variety of places. These positions follow traditional ways of viewing the construction of social order or reality (as something within the head of the person, as something jointly constructed, as an independent reality, and as a multifaceted construct) and are subject to the same arguments as the more fully explicated philosophical positions.

Locating context in the interpretive processes within the individual is, logically, most common among those who take a context as meaning view. This includes writers who emphasize the knowledge of the individual, including all relevant beliefs and assumptions and/or the interpretive processes of the individual. It also includes people who view context as choice, selection among acts, or relevant features.

When Branham and Pearce (1985) locate context "in relation to the 'world' of an interpretive community, rather than objective properties of the situation" (21), they are giving expression to the notion that context lies in the collaborative constructions of people.

Branham and Pearce's (1985) statement of this position is refreshingly direct: "The locus of interpretation--the act which constitutes the text as text--is the interpretive community, not any individual authority" (20).

In attempting to describe the characteristics of context, some writers locate context external to the individual. This is especially true of those who accept the notion of context as frame (Pepper). For example, Tanenhaus and Seidenberg (1981, 211) understand the context as the preceding sentence or phrase in writing. Sometimes writers who take a context as situation approach also adopt the position that context is external.

The position that context has multiple loci is characteristic of those who use context as an organizational device. Fisher (1987), for example, deals with the locus of context by subdividing the context of communication into physical context, social context, and the context of language. "The context of a relationship in the sense of a physical environment is easy to find. The social context is often more difficult to locate. In a very real sense, it exists outside the communicative event, outside the parameters of the relationship; but one looks for the social context within each of the communicators" (25).

The multiple loci position is also characteristic of those who take a more philosophical approach to the analysis of context. Georgoudi and Rosnow (1985), for example, suggest that contexts lie in the interpretive process of the individual and at the same time are external to the individual.

Organization of Context

Three questions arise with regard to the organization of context: 1) Is context organized? 2) How is context organized? and 3) What features of context are organized? The first question has a rather clear answer: most writers assume that context is organized.

Scholars who deal directly with the question of how context is organized suggest a sequential organization, a hierarchical organization, or some combination of the two. (In addition there are a variety of interpretive schemes that individuals could potentially consider in light of this issue such as Delia, O'Keefe, and O'Keefe, 1982.)

Those who suggest context is sequentially organized more usually do so by implication. For example, van Dijk (1976) writes: "A context is construed as a 'complex event,' viz. as an ordered pair of events of which the first causes the second. The first event is--roughly--the production of an utterance by the speaker, the second the interpretation of the utterance by the hearer" (29). Other examples might include individuals such as Sarbin who discusses context as emplotment where one scene is followed by another.

Some writers organize context, or what we would call the process of contextualization, hierarchically. Gumperz (1982) considers the process of contextualization "as consisting of a series of stages which are hierarchically ordered in such a way that more general higher level relational assessments serve as part of the input to more specific ones" (207). In communication, Pearce and his colleagues (Branham & Pearce, 1985; Lannamann, 1984; Cronen, Pearce & Harris, 1982, et al) also propose a hierarchical view. They posit levels of context including: personal constructs, speech acts, situation/episodes, relationships, life-scripts, and cultural patterns. These levels form a hierarchical meaning structure characterized by relationships of variable influence between levels of context (Lannamann, 12).

Lannamann's context model couples these six "hierarchical levels of context" with the idea of reflexivity. "It is argued that communication rarely involves strict adherence to a hierarchical system of logical types. Instead, communication is a reflexive process involving the forms of context and the processes of interaction" (62). The notion of reflexivity muddies the distinctions and suggests simultaneous interaction between the hierarchical levels of context, Lannamann suggests (64; Johnson, 1980).

Because Lannamann believes that "reflexivity is fundamental to all communication acts" (79) he dismisses a strictly linear hierarchical model (76). "A communication theory which cannot account for both context dependent social action and the evolutionary process of changes in contexts is incomplete," he contends (79). At the same time Lannamann maintains the overall validity of Pearce and Cronen's (1980) context hierarchies. This he justifies by suggesting that the hierarchical arrangement is relative—sometimes lower level contexts may dominate higher level contexts and vice versa (81).

Pearce & Cronen (1980) also suggest a combined hierarchical-sequential (temporal) organization of context. They write: "A particular speech act, when perceived as part of an episode, is not only contextualized hierarchically, but also temporally. The meaning of the act," they continue, "entails and is entailed by the context of the preceding and subsequent acts" (134).

The most problematic question concerning the organization of context is: What is being organized? If we accept the hierarchical levels of context proposed by Pearce and his colleagues, then meaning is in some broad sense is being organized. If we accept van Dijk's sequence, we are organizing ordered events. Very different features of and organizational schemes for context may be proposed by: those who treat context as knowledge structures of the individual, those who treat context as the contextualizing process, and those who treat context as an entity. Difficulty with the question "What is being organized?" stems from the fact that the notion of context remains undeveloped and confusing. We cannot organize features we have not identified and accepted. We are not agreed upon "the stuff" of which context consists; therefore, we come full circle to that fundamental question "What is communication context?"

As we have seen, there are many views of what context is. As yet, we have no seminal work on context, and context has no features upon which we agree. In fact, we are divided as to whether we want to develop the concept of context so that it has features at all. We may decide to leave context featureless. On the other hand, if we decide to give context features we must determine if those features belong to personal knowledge structures, or stages in the contextualizing process, or elements of context as an entity.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we explored the problematic concept of context as it is used in communication-relevant literature and identified four issues critical to the analysis of context. Indirectly we established the need for clarification of context. We share with Bateson the belief that "whatever the word context means, it is an appropriate word, the necessary word, in the description of all these distantly related processes" (Mind and Nature, 15).

Our goal has been in part to stimulate discussion which will ultimately lead to a systematic analysis of context. We encourage scholars in management communication to read the literature critically and to identify relations among various lines of thought on context. Moreover, we ask writers to clarify underlying assumptions when developing ideas that rely on the concept of context. Such clarification will help avoid conceptual confusion, oversimplification and ideological masking (Trenholm).

Recognizing important differences in the treatment of context and working to clarify the concept can lead to more theoretically consistent research in management communication. Such work can also lead to the development of an integrated theory of management communication. Given current trends, it is reasonable that the concept of context will play a central role in such theory construction; however, without a clear understanding of context, it may be difficult to produce theoretical work which is conceptually sound. Therefore, clarifying the notion of context benefits the community of communication scholars at large and contributes immeasurably to the positive perception of management communication as a field.⁵

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