



# The Other Contextualism:

*Exploring the Value of  
Descriptive Contextualist  
Approaches in Research  
and Practice*

Don Marks, Kean University

# Disclosure

## **Don Marks, Kean University:**

- I have not received and will not receive any commercial support related to this presentation or the work presented in this presentation.

*I am mindful of the difficulties involved in adopting the root metaphor of the historical act when we have been brought up to cherish the work of white-coated scientists looking for universals and invariant causality. Something akin to religious conversion must take place. Instead of describing the objects of human science with metaphors drawn from the more settled physical sciences, **contextualists may reach into the hitherto alien world of the humanities for their working models and metaphors.***

--Theodore R. Sarbin

“The Narrative as the Root Metaphor for Psychology”

# What Is “Descriptive Contextualism”?

- A term applied to investigative approaches that examine the act-in-context (Hayes, 1993).
- No event (i.e., behavior or other phenomenon) occurs in isolation; description explores the context from the observer’s perspective.
- History is often the reference example, though social constructionism and interpretive approaches of many kinds may be included.
- Researchers whose work could be usefully categorized as “descriptive contextualism” often do not describe their efforts using this term.

# Some Examples of Descriptive Contextualist Approaches

- Ethnographic narratives
- Phenomenological investigations
- Historical accounts
- Historiography
- Narrative and dramaturgical psychology
- Interpretive accounts (e.g., behavioral hermeneutics)
- History and sociology of science (e.g., STS)

# The DC “Truth” Criterion

- Pragmatics of a different kind
  - “Successful working” toward a stated goal is determined by whether an account is:
    - Compelling (rich, vital, useful)
    - Convincing
      - Coherent (foregrounds contradictions)
      - Comprehensive (subtle, nuanced)
- Could we envision a pragmatics with an aesthetic dimension?
  - Useful elegance; poetic utility; “making strange” (defamiliarization)

# Why Is It the “Other” Contextualism?

- From Gifford and Hayes (1999):
  - Accounts are local, incomplete, and deeply personal.
  - Difficult to know when an account is sufficiently comprehensive.
  - Utility is difficult to measure and disseminate.
- From the ACBS Web site (contributed by Eric Fox):
  - “The analytic goals of descriptive contextualists are somewhat ill-defined, and it is difficult to determine when such goals have been accomplished.”
  - “In addition, *a personal, holistic appreciation of a specific event and its context may or may not yield any practical knowledge or benefits.*”

# Is That Always a Weakness?

- Offers deeply personal perspectives (*n* of 1)
- Holds its aims lightly and re-examines and reconceptualizes them as it goes
- Continually re-stories experience, adopting various perspectives (no ultimate analysis)
- Changes the story according to the perspectives included
- Remains open to alternative analyses and interpretations
- Questions “progress” narratives – what works at one time might not at another
- Acknowledges the mystery inscribed in each descriptive act – no two perspectives are identical, though there may be commonalities



# Potential Strengths

- Reflexive (examines own assumptions)
- Zooming out (wider context), including context of the researcher
- Historical perspective
- Distinctly not mechanistic
- Qualitative
- Exploring connections across disciplines
- Constructing possible narratives
- Aesthetic/poetic/spiritual

# Is It Simply Personal?

- Can agreed-upon goals contribute to a “descriptive contextualist” approach?
  - Participating in dialogue with community stories and narratives
  - Describing community experiences with granularity
- Descriptive contextualism could help a community ask “how did we get here?” “what are our interests?” and “what is to be done?”
  - Systemic questioning
  - Disruptive narratives
  - Improvisational acts
- From these activities, new efforts to define aims and goals (and “successful working”) for functional contextualism could arise.

# Considering the Back Story

- What makes the data, the data?
  - Historical narratives are operative in psychological science but often remain unexamined (Sarbin, 1993).
  - Implicit narratives may pose problems similar to those associated with implicit pre-analytic goals (i.e., dogmatism).
  - “Theory is embedded and extended in empirical practice, and practice itself is necessarily theoretical.” (Law, 2009)
  - Measurement is contingent upon interpretative frameworks and behaviors.
  - Articulation and thick description (Geertz, 1973) of values may have utility.

# How Can Descriptive Contextualism Help the Functional Contextualist?

- Example 1

- Behavioral hermeneutics (Dougher, 1993)

- The interpretive method of Willard Day:

- Identify incidents of the behavior of interest, along with functional antecedents
      - Examine the researcher's own behavior and functional antecedents
      - Select and group behavior-antecedent relationships with common functions
      - Describe the research process, what discriminations were made, and why

- Act and context are mutually constitutive – facts are not distinct from the context and the interpreter of the context.

- Social, cultural, and historical contexts are relevant to an account of the act.

- There may be contexts too complex for experimental study.

# How Can Descriptive Contextualism Help the Functional Contextualist? (Cont.)

- Example 2

- “Weak” vs. “strong” objectivity (Harding, 2015)

- Most psychological science includes no account of its own discursive and institutional context (“Mr. Nowhere”).
    - “Weak objectivity” in science attempts to hide its implication in the constitution of its object, creating an artificial distance between observer and observed.
    - “Weak objectivity” assumes that examining contextual contributors to scientific behavior is “relativistic.”
    - “Strong objectivity” acknowledges that observations are laden with theory and context:
      - Assumes the position of the researcher/experimenter (i.e., “knowledge producer”) guides research and rhetoric.
      - Asks “which of competing grounds for claims about nature and social relations should we prefer” and on what basis?

# How Can Descriptive Contextualism Help the Functional Contextualist? (Cont.)

- Example 3
  - Material semiotics (Law, 1994, 1999, 2004)
    - Emphasizing the implication of the scientist in the context observed *and* the diversity of methods for investigation:
      - “...there is no question of standing apart and observing at a distance. We’re participating in ordering, too. We’re unavoidably involved in the modern reflexive and self-reflexive project of monitoring, sense-making, and control” (Law, 1994 p. 2)
    - Making room for multiplicity, heterogeneity, paradox, inconsistency, and unpredictability in method.
      - Can we “defy the overwhelming pressures on academic production to render knowing simple, transparent, singular, and formulaic” (Law, 1999, p. 11)?

# Why Employ Descriptive Contextualist Approaches?

- *“The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it.” – Marx, Theses on Feuerbach*
  - Descriptive contextualist approaches represent new forms of researcher/practitioner behavior in a psychology dominated by the hypothetico-deductive method.
  - Psychological researchers, like it or not, are implicated in the “truth
    - Contributing to discourses of control may be anathema to many practitioners and clients.
    - Proceeding with caution – humility is in order.
    - Foregrounding and problematizing the status of psychological “truth” may minimize dogmatic scientific conduct.
  - Examining our assumptions, and interpreting their functions, makes room for new perspectives, alternate voices.

“The critic is not the one who debunks but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather. The critic is not the one who alternates haphazardly between anti-fetishism and positivism like the drunk iconoclast drawn by Goya, but the one for whom, ***if something is constructed, then it means it is fragile and thus in great need of care and caution.***”

--Bruno Latour

“Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?”



# References

- Dougher, M. J. (1993). Interpretive and hermeneutic research methods in the contextualistic analysis of verbal behavior. In S. C. Hayes, L. J. Hayes, H. W. Reese, & T. R. Sarbin (Eds.), *Varieties of scientific contextualism* (pp. 211-221). Reno, NV: Context Press.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Gifford, E. V., & Hayes, S. C. (1999). Functional contextualism: A pragmatic philosophy for behavioral science. In W. O'Donohue & R. Kitchener (Eds.), *Handbook of behaviorism* (pp. 285-327). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Harding, S. (2015). *Objectivity and diversity: Another logic of scientific research*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Hayes, S. C. (1993). Analytic goals and varieties of scientific contextualism. In S. C. Hayes, L. J. Hayes, H. W. Reese, & T. R. Sarbin (Eds.), *Varieties of scientific contextualism* (pp. 11-27). Reno, NV: Context Press.
- Latour, B. (2004). Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern. *Critical Inquiry*, 30, 225-248.
- Law, J. (2009). Actor network theory and material semiotics. In B. S. Turner (Ed.), *The new Blackwell companion to social theory* (pp. 141-158). West Sussex, UK: Blackwell.
- Law, J. (2004). *After method: Mess in social science research*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Law, J. (1999). After ANT: Complexity, naming, and topology. In J. Law & J. Hassard (Eds.), *Actor network theory and after* (pp. 1-14).
- Law, J. (1994). *Organizing modernity: Social ordering and social theory*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Marx, K. (1975). *Early writings*. London, UK: Pelican.
- Sarbin, T. R. (1993). The narrative as the root metaphor for contextualism. In S. C. Hayes, L. J. Hayes, H. W. Reese, & T. R. Sarbin (Eds.), *Varieties of scientific contextualism* (pp. 51-65). Reno, NV: Context Press.