

CATEGORY OF «CONTEXT» AND CONTEXTUAL APPROACH IN PSYCHOLOGY

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The article contains a brief review of the concept «context» which is gaining its place among the key concepts in modern theoretical and empirical psychology. A comprehensive analysis of scientific literature leads the authors to distinguish two complementary conceptions of context – structural (which regards a fragment of a text as a semantic system) and functional (which treats it as a mental sense-generating mechanism). The authors suggest an understanding of mentality as a recursive-contextual phenomenon, where each fragment of its subject matter exists in the context of other fragments – parallel, preceding or ensuing. Such understanding may form a basis for the contextual approach in psychology.

Keywords: a context, contextualism, contextual approach, structure and functional approach, recursion.

It is widely recognized that scientific and philosophical cognition is realized through a number of various categories, embracing the most general notions. The latter cannot be reduced to other notions or deduced from them. Enrichment of science with new methodological categories manifests the process of reconsideration of the very subject of investigation, which may lead to a certain shift in its meaning and development of specific means of research. In the second half of the 20th century the notion “*context*” traveled far beyond the realm of linguistics to become an all-purpose term for humanities. It happened due to endeavors in linguistic philosophy, the philosophical concept of contextualism, semiotics and methodology of post-modernism, which regarded the world as a text. The notion can accordingly claim for the status of a new psychological category, which was suggested by one of the authors of this article in the beginning of 1980s (Psihologiya i pedagogika vysshey shkoly...).

1981). He formulated a definition of *psychological context* regarding it as a system of interior and exterior factors and conditions of human behavior and activity, which may affect perception, understanding and transformation of a particular situation, and which determine the meaning and sense of the situation as a whole and its comprising components. This led him to develop a theory and methodology of contextual education (Verbitsky, 1987, 1991).

This work provided a sound basis for the emergence of a scientific school (A.A. Verbitsky, N.A. Bakshaeva, M.D. Iljasova, V.G. Kalashnikov, O.G. Larionova, I.N. Russkasova, V.F. Tenischeva, E.G. Trunova, N.P. Chomyakova, O.I. Scherbakova, N.V. Zhukova, and many others), which laid the foundation for a *contextual approach in education*. A special emphasis should be assigned to the fact that Russian scholars were pioneers in contextual education. As early as 1981 A.A. Verbitsky introduced the theory of contextual education and described its considerable potential for the theory and praxis of education (Verbitsky, 1991).

At about the same time a number of works on contextual education appeared in the USA. But American “contextualists” found consideration of general laws and specific contextual methods of teaching rather unnecessary. They believed that ideas acquire certain sense for learners only in an individualized context of behavior. In her monograph, summarizing all the findings in the field of contextual education, E. Johnson admits that the term “contextual teaching and learning” came into extensive use in the USA only in 1990 (Johnson, 2002).

However, it should be noted that though views of contextual education in Russia and abroad do share some basic ideas, foreign scholars have not succeeded in creation of any consistent theory of contextual education to be compared with Russian contextual approach on scientific and methodological grounds. Moreover, contextual approach has virtually escaped the boundaries of pedagogical psychology, functioning now as a *methodological project of general psychological character*. Its emergence came as a natural result of evolution of the term “context” in humanities during the 20th century.

In linguistics scientific interest for the term “context” can be traced to K. Bühler’s works (Arnold, 1991). K. Bühler was both a linguist and a psychologist, he argued that concrete semantic contents of a word or a sentence are determined not only by their linguistic environment, but also by a particular setup of objects and situations, by characteristic fea-

tures of people who send and receive the message (Bühler, 1934). The fact that it was a psychologist who initiated context studies in linguistics and was able to foresee its plausible interpretations is rather telling in itself. Later this trend in science yielded generation of such concepts as Speech Act Theory, communicative linguistics, a discourse analysis, socio- and ethnolinguistics and others, which exhibit a wide range of implications for the concept of “context”. Results of these studies lead us to assert that linguistics operates with a certain pseudo-spatial structural model of the context, which reveals not only linear, the so-called “horizontal” dimensions (“left-hand / right-hand” fragments of the text), but also “vertical” (extralinguistic, situational-communicative) dimensions.

The concept of context engaged attention of many Russian linguists (N.D. Arutjunova, V.V. Vinogradov, E.V. Paducheva, O.G. Revzina, Z.I. Chovanskaya, N.A. Enquist). But it was G.V. Kolshansky, who devoted one of his works to *contextual semantics*. He maintained that context as a linguistic semantic phenomenon involves thinking, aimed at identifying the exact meanings of lexical units, meanings semantically specified by the context, which includes the text itself and a certain communicative situation (Kolshansky, 2007). Thus, gradually the “naturalistic”, structural understanding of the context as a fragment of some material or semiotic system (a text) was transformed into the functional approach, which treats the context as a complex of all the conditions of communication (states and processes).

A similar evolutionary process occurred in culturology. J. Firth, the founder of London linguistic circle, was developing the ideas of American anthropologist B. Malinowski (Arnold, 1991). His studies led him to introduce a new concept – “the context of a situation”. He formulated a contextual theory of meaning (“contextualism”), revealing its dependence on culture, traditions and concrete conditions of communication. Such understanding of context goes in tune with linguistic and philosophical interpretations of the phenomenon (Firth, 1957).

American philosopher John Dewey succeeded to prove that there is no direct correspondence between theories and real life; the way objects are perceived is always determined by the context presenting them (Dewey, 1925). The idea gave birth to a new school of thought – “*contextualism*” (P. Unger, J. Lewis, P.J. Cohen and others). In these and other pragmatically oriented concepts (D. Davidson, W. Quine, G. von Wright, T. Hogan and others) conditions generating a true statement are analyzed

through a complex of contextual characteristics (time and location), features of the speaker and contents of the utterance. Hans Reichenbach introduced the contextual approach into epistemology and methodology of science; he coined the term “discovery context” to designate a dynamic situation, when new scientific laws are discovered and theories formulated. He also suggested the term “validation context” to describe the process of testing and verification of knowledge (Reichenbach, 1959).

In Russian philosophy the domain of individual consciousness is conceived by N.A. Nikiforov as a unique semantic context, in which an individual reckons natural and cultural phenomena to understand and interpret them accordingly (Nikiforov, 1991). I.T. Kasavin has recently marked further development of contextualism as a methodological programme of scientific studies. The author regards the context in its broader meaning, as conditions of interpretation of cultural phenomena, and argues that certain cognitive problems can be solved on this basis (Kasavin, 2008). Thereby I.T. Kasavin highlights the functional-semantic nature of context.

Along with the above-mentioned interpretations, there is also a two-fold understanding of context in philosophy: structural and processual. According to K. Wilber, philosophical contextualism presents the world as an infinite hierarchy of systems, where upper systemic levels provide contexts for lower levels (Wilber, 2000). On the other hand, S.C. Pepper argues that context is a historical event implying a current action (Pepper, 1942). E.K. Morris echoes that contextualism uses the term in the meaning “context-as-history”, but not “context-as-location” (Morris, 1997).

In psychology the notion “context” initially appeared in studies of text and speech. It is highly probable that the term “psychological context” entered psychological discourse due to Russian scholars. Our guess is that V.N. Voloshinov was the first to use it in his work in 1929: “...an inner sign must become free from its absorption by psychological context ...” (Voloshinov, 1929). The author describes a sign as being merged into a living matter of the human psyche, which is understood as a semantic context, the latter enriches the sign with various mental contents.

L.S. Vygotsky used F. Polan’s concept to formulate the law of the “Dynamics of Meaning”. It describes generation of sense as a process of enriching the word with the meaning, which it absorbs from the whole context (Vygotsky, 1999). S.L. Rubinstein distinguished between contex-

tual and situational speech: any meaningful speech (an abstract content which goes beyond the limits of the present situation) is coherent. The word “coherent” here implies “contextual”. Situational speech, on the contrary, is relied upon a current situation, using the latter as a context (Rubinstein, 1989a). Moreover, the psyche itself is defined by S.L. Rubinstein through the notion of “context”, since he believed human activity to serve as a context for mental contents (Rubinstein, 1989b). Therefore, context interpreted this way comes not merely as a certain “milieu” for an object (it might be a material object as well as some mental content); context is presented as a system of activity-related links of the object, through which a person “exhaust” versatile semantic content of the object (Rubinstein, 1989a, 2003; Myasishchev, 1995).

However, the cognitive approach to context, which regards it as a condition of meaning formation, has been more profoundly developed. Thus, S.M. Morozov revealed the “meaning generative” function of psychological context. He considered the meaning as a fragment of sense, invariable against psychological meaning-generating contexts, where the latter stand for mental contents (Morozov, 1984). D.A. Leontiev proceeded with a specifically arranged analysis, which brought him to a similar conclusion – implications of an object are determined by a wider context, than its meaning, and both phenomena have contextual nature (Leontiev, 1999).

The key role of context is also revealed by studies in cognitive psychology (A. Anderson, R. Atkinson, J. Bruner, R. Klatski, P. Lindsey, D. Normann, U. Neisser, E.M. Hofmann and others). Among others, in studies of *priming* – a memory effect in which exposure to a stimulus may encourage a response to an ensuing stimulus (D.E. Meyer, R.W. Schvaneveldt and others). It is also revealing in the concept of field independence / dependence (H.A. Witkin, J. Palmer, L. Palmer and others), and in the concept of contextual identification (E.E. Bechtel, A.E. Bechtel).

E.E. Bechtel and A.E. Bechtel regard context as a memory-cognitive thesaurus of an individual, which provides information for psychological activity through systematization of cognitive material. The authors introduced a special term – “*cognitive pill*” – which is understood as a contextual structure, enabling a certain psychic construct to interact with any other construct (Bechtel & Bechtel, 2005). It should be emphasized that this work reveals not only structural but also functional, processual nature of psychological context. “Context is a system and at the same

time systematization of cognitive material” (Bechtel & Bechtel, 2005), or any mental content. For example, there exists a well-known position effect, when positive emotion is being re-assessed after a fit of fright).

Scholars in psychology and social anthropology, following their predecessors in the field of linguistics and philosophy, formulated their own approach with a similar name – “contextualism”. This approach was aimed at studying ontogenetic development of an individual in a broader socio-cultural context (R.M. Lerner, D. Matsumoto, G.V. Caprara, D. Servon, D. Ford and others). It is, in a way, a “re-discovery” of L.S. Vygotsky’s cultural-historical theory, extensively developed, both in Russia and abroad (M.D. Cole, J.V. Wertsch and others). A special emphasis on social-cultural context does not mean that an individual’s psyche is entirely determined by it, because there is another essential mechanism of mental development, which is called “*decontextualization*”. V.P. Zinchenko interprets decontextualization as “a historical and ontogenetic process of generalization of meanings and skills (semiotic acts), the process of their transformation into actions more abstract and independent from any particular conditions” (Meshcherjakov & Zinchenko, 2006). Due to this process some information may lose touch with the initial context to be translated by an individual to a number of new contexts.

Consequently, the review presented above shows that the notion “context” has proved its efficiency in a wide range of research areas, including psychology. In most cases, however, the term was used metaphorically or served as a supportive means when scientists tried to solve a concrete scientific problem. But it has never performed the explanatory function or has been regarded as a subject of study.

The analysis brings us to the conclusion that context, as regarded from psychological point of view, is not a structural fragment of a text. Primarily it is a *psychic mechanism*, generating sense and meaning. This mechanism (which A.A. Uhtomsky calls a “functional organ” of psyche (Ukhtomsky, 2002)) is responsible for interaction of mental functions and processes necessary to solve semiotic tasks – generation of sense through correlation of different mental contents (not only images or concepts, but also values, states, etc.). In this case context as a mental phenomenon appears as a function, the way of structuring of chaotic mental contents by applying certain “coordinates”, which help identify the meaning and sense of each psychic fragment and reveal regularities in its interrelations. Hence, text fragments, conditions of communica-

tion, social-cultural background knowledge, etc. should be treated not as varieties of context, but rather as the forms of its objectivation, revealing various aspects of this psychic semiotic process.

Thus, in psychology context is, above all, a cognitive mechanism of a human psyche. But it doesn't rule out a possibility of its "pseudomaterialization" in a structural model to compare various contexts on the basis of different parameters. Let's consider both structural and processual aspects of the psychological context in a detailed way.

1. *The structural aspect of psychological context.* Structurally context is traditionally regarded as a spatial phenomenon (a material text, a situation of communication), but psychologically it is treated as a pseudo-spatial structure (similar to K. Lewin's topological models (Lewin, 1936)). Context topology may have two variants of representation: 1) two-dimensional subspace (where coordinates are its size and time); and 2) n-dimensional space, where the number of coordinates ("n") is assigned by the number of contexts included into the model. It should be noted that E.E. Bechtel, A.E. Bechtel consider the context to be a multidimensional structure, its dimensions are given by the number of variables used to build it (Bechtel & Bechtel, 2005). Construction of such a model is a complicated task, which deserves a chapter of its own to become a subject of special study in the future.

This article will focus on a simpler (two-dimensional) model of psychological contexts, which we accept as a basic one. The central object of this model is a random fragment of the psyche. It should be noted, though, that "what comes as a context" and "what stands for the central object" is a matter of a sighting point chosen by the subject. The volume of context may be represented by a certain number of psychic objects, which lie within one order with the central object (images, concepts, etc.). They form a narrow or a broad context, or may indicate, according to G. Bateson, a certain logical level of information perception (Bateson, 1972).

The vertical axis reflects the most significant for psychology division of context into exterior (figural context and social context) and interior versions (subjective context). All these taken together represent a synchronic aspect of structural segmentation of psychological context. An arrow, indicating the "stream of psyche", represents a diachronical aspect. With the latter we can single out a preceding context (the one that forebears the central object) and an ensuing context (which succeeds

the central object). Thus, the structural model of psychological context is considered as some “space” (in this particular case, two-dimensional Cartesian space).

Consequently, we come to an understanding that psychological context, regarded from cognitivists’ prospective, is a multidimensional pseudospacial structure, comprising all the systems of interrelations between the central object and other objects. Hence, the subject acquires an opportunity to process the information in a number of ways, translating it to various contextual systems. It can be modeled accordingly through a certain matrix of contexts, adequate for a particular investigated object. Overlap of contexts enables researchers to get a detailed description of the phenomenon in question (the central object), which reflects the principle of systematization in psychological research.

2. *The functional aspect of psychological context.* Procedural, functional understanding of context suggests that its interpretation as a *relationship* between various fragments of information is a primary one (in psychology context is a specific mechanism of establishing such relations), while the fragment which is conventionally referred to as “context” functions only as an indicator of contextual relations.

Therefore, we should focus on *relational* understanding of context, that is, its functioning as a special mechanism, linking mental contents. The latter may act as objects of similar or different levels. Fragments of perceived information can serve as an example of unilevel objects, an object and a class it belongs to represent split-level objects. As a whole it guarantees conscious perception of a certain object or phenomenon.

Thus, we believe that a certain focus-shifting should be tried in psychology: its consideration as a process, a sort of psychic mechanism of semantization should replace a naturalistic- structural understanding of the context.

Information cannot be considered and interpreted without a context. But, which is more important, information *as it is* cannot exist without a context, since the subject perceives it phenomenologically, in the form of psychic processes and states. In *psychoinformation* concept introduced by V.I. Stepansky the notion “information” is understood as reflection of a certain impact in the object-recipient, which implies comparison of preceding and ensuing states of the object (Stepansky, 2006). Consequently, any kind of information appears only in the context of a preceding psychic state.

According to S.L. Rubinstein (Rubinstein, 2003), V.P. Zinchenko (Zinchenko, 1996) and some other psychologists human activity reveals a *recursive character* in its relation to objective reality. Recursive elements are those arranged in a self-similar way into a succession, regulated by a certain rule (Mikisha & Orlov, 1989).

Accordingly, each element of the succession can be perceived and interpreted only in the context of its logic, as well as the logic of arrangement of previous elements. Recursive structure represents a paradoxical phenomenon, it unfolds within its own self, newly comprising the elements it has been comprised of (it is similar to “repetition without repetition” in N.A. Bernstein’s concept of movement and to famous B. Russell’s logical paradox). This dialectical recursiveness creates an essential basis for human existence in the real world, which means for his psyche too.

As can be seen from the above, recursive understanding of the psyche helps overcome the opposition between an organism / psyche and its environment – the tendency which can be traced to the first Russian programme on Psychology suggested by I.M. Sechenov (Sechenov, 1995). Thus, any dynamic system can be adequately understood in the context of its past states, that is, in the context of “itself in the past”. It is especially true for the human psyche, which is characterized by conscious “time connecting” memory.

This explains the *recursive context nature*, vividly demonstrated, for example, in text unfolding (which is interpreted by postmodernism methodology as *discourse* or the process of *writing*). An individual, regarded as a subject and personality, assigns equal importance to *the context of the past*, and *the context of the future*. The latter can be presented as a process of anticipation or foresight (imagination) and the process of sense generation, when a subject considers his past through his future.

Teleological orientation of the human psyche, its determination by the future (“project”), but not the past became a basis for the conception of human personality and subjectness in existential psychology (L. Binswanger, M. Boss, A.H. Maslow, C.R. Rogers, V.E. Frankl, I.D. Yalom, K.T. Jaspers and others).

Interaction of contexts is yet another way to describe contextual mental mechanisms. It exists in two versions.

1. *Superposition of contexts* – the contexts overlap or even interpenetrate, but at the same time remain unchanged. Contexts pierce each

other “without noticing it,” this process is similar to the one in physics, when a solid body does not present an obstacle for a field. So, various explanatory models contradicting each other may coexist, without “disturbing” each other.

2. *Interaction of contexts* is a combination of contexts which leads to their mutual transformation, for example, as an attempt to combine two models, produced in different contexts (and, correspondently, from two different view points). This leads to knowledge transformation, which can be described as context broadening, i.e. creation of a new “*cognitive horizon*” as a result of merge of two formerly independent *conceptual fields*.

It is obvious that all these operations are mental; they take place not in physical but in psychic reality. That is why the above-mentioned interaction of contexts does not provoke any changes in physical reality. Topological model of interacting contexts can be presented differently in different projections (Verbitsky & Kalashnikov, 2010):

1. *Concentric inclusion of contexts* (contexts are regarded as systems inserted into each other), when a system of a higher systemic or logical level is turned into a context for its subsystems. Psychologically it corresponds to determination of one mental content by another.

2. *Superposition of contexts*, that is their overlapping without interaction. Correlation of contexts is determined by a single universal central object (the “core” of the context system). Psychologically it is correlated with a complex of interdependent points of view of an object that a subject or a group may possess.

3. *The space of contexts* is determined by a single core (object) and various contexts of its perception, while contexts do not interact. Semantically-psychologically it means that there exists several ways of interpretation of information and the subject can choose the one he / she likes.

So, on the basis of the material presented above we can come to the conclusion, that human psyche has a recursive, and consequently contextual character: each psychic phenomenon exists only in the context of other phenomena in diachronic as well as synchronic aspects, and each subsequent state of the psyche taken as a whole is determined by these contexts.

At the same time psychological context is considered as a twofold structural-functional phenomenon, a kind of a functional mental organ. Taken as it is, it appears to be a certain mental mechanism, but the

subject takes it as a form of “projections” of this mechanism on some fragments of his psyche, which are perceived by the subject as a “context” for a particular mental content.

As it was mentioned, the methodological approach, aimed at implying the context as a key notion for modeling and explaining various psychic phenomena and structures is called *contextual approach*.

It is a method of modeling the psyche and any other mental phenomenon in the shape of a system of contexts for any phenomenon under consideration. To be in line with general psychology, or in a wider meaning, with general scientific methodological basis of studies, the context approach should find support in a sound and consistent system of principles, typology of contexts, and specific context methods of research. All these tasks are thoroughly addressed and developed, as reflected in a number of publications (Kalashnikov, 2005; Verbitsky & Kalashnikov, 2009, 2010; Dubovitskaya, 2004).

In particular, T.D. Dubovitskaya suggested the following *principles* of employing the context as a means of psychological research and organization of educational activity: 1) *the principle of context widening* – consideration of a psychic phenomenon within a frame of contexts included into each other, which generates multidimensional perception of the phenomenon; 2) *the principle of interdependence of contexts* – any phenomenon under consideration is multifold; hence, it cannot be considered within a single context, all the contexts it can yield appear to be interconnected; 3) *the principle of context variability* – context is a pattern (gestalt), which structure is changed as soon the viewpoint is altered, hence, researchers single out different contexts of mental studies (Dubovitskaya, 2004).

The list can be extended with a number of other principles:

1) *the principle of context determination* – the analysis of a mental phenomenon is required to be conducted within systematically accounted contexts of its existence (in psyche) and study (in different concepts);

2) *the principle of systemacity* – the context is a system with all the attributes typical for it, i.e. inclusion into a context super system, suballocation of contexts-subsystems, interconnection between their parts, integrity and relative autonomy, emergence, structural and functional modeling, etc.;

3) *the principle of complementarity of contexts* or the principle of “*heuristic contextuality*” (Golubev, 2002) – a phenomenon can be exhaustively interpreted only when the information received in different contexts is combined; contradictory concepts are but alternative projections of one and the same object in various contexts (cf: *dimensional ontology* introduced by V.E. Frankl) (Frankl, 2000).

The conception of context as a mental recursive mechanism allows researchers to consistently relate a good deal of scientific data, accumulated by psychological science. The notion “context” and the suggested principles can serve as a basis for the context approach in humanitarian and cognitive studies. The context approach is aimed at systematization of discovered data about the nature and regularities of the psychic. A reference to the context of consideration of a certain phenomena guarantees profound reflexive analysis of the data and conclusions obtained by the researcher.

We share an earnest conviction that the contextual approach in psychology can provide a real breakthrough amidst the current crisis in psychological and humanitarian sciences, since this approach gives an opportunity for reconsideration and self-consistent synthesis of various concepts and empirical data, which will enrich and extend scientific understanding of the psyche.

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