

# THEORISING CONTEXT IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP RESEARCH

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based on a joint book chapter with Dr. Paul Selden.

Professional Development Workshop on 'Entrepreneurship and  
Context' at Academy of Management (2015)

PDW organisers (Friederike Welter & Bill Gartner).

# WHAT IS THE PROBLEM WHEN THEORISING CONTEXT IN OUR RESEARCH?

Problem (1): How to account for context and contextual factors (both analytically and methodologically).

Problem (2) Finding appropriate ways for understanding more deeply how entrepreneurs in real time, continually adapt & adjust their activities under conditions of genuine uncertainty, limited resources and time.

Problem (3):

**WHY IS THIS A PROBLEM?**

# **PROBLEM (I):**CONTEXT IS SO FUNDAMENTAL AND NESTED INTO WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE DO, IT TENDS TO BE TAKEN FOR GRANTED AND LEFT IMPLICIT

For example, we take it for granted that: the book is the context for the chapter; the chapter is the context for the paragraph; the paragraph is the context for sentence; the sentence is the paragraph for the word etc.

This implies that everything is a context for and of something.

So, what we are left with analytically is an infinite regress of contexts that are always nested in ever widening contexts.

This raises the question of: 'on what grounds should some characterization of context be preferred over another'. And who makes these choices (often retrospectively) about which contexts are important.

Context also tends to be objectified as something that is discrete from the very actions that we are trying to explain.

Then we tend to list various factors as contextual and in so doing we start from the assumption that they they were not context.

For this reason, our research efforts end up categorizing:

'distal contexts' – environments, organizational, industry, economic, political, institutional) as aggregations of patterns of activity.

proximal contexts – localized practices, social interactions, individual reflexivity, lives, biographies, experiences etc.  
(Schegloff, 1991)

## **PROBLEM (2):**

- **How do we reconcile our interest in localized & micro or situated contexts that aim to make generalizations that are valid regardless of time and place.**

# Problem 3

- As soon as we start looking at context, this renders context analytically as acontextual (Van Geldern & Masurel, referring to Burke).
- Does this mean that we must have started from the assumption that they were not context?
- Furthermore, these categorizations of context tend to be **retrospective**.

## HOW DO WE PROPOSE TO OVERCOME THESE PROBLEMATICS?

- We propose going back to basics and re-imagining context.
- This means asking directly the question ‘what is context?’
- Need to be clear on what is context as there is no correct or right context.
- Also, what counts as context depends on what it is we want to study (linguistic, social, political or material contexts).
- To help with this, we make a distinction between two fundamental notions of context –
- *Objectified* and *relational*

## WHAT IS AN OBJECTIFIED NOTION OF CONTEXT

- The dominant conception of context in entrepreneurship research is to objectify context (ontologically) as a causal entity distinct from the agentic power of the individual entrepreneur.
- This means starting from the assumption that the circumstances, conditions, situations, actions or environments are 'external' or separate to the phenomenon being studied.
- And then adding context variables to explain or illuminate such behaviours.

## WHAT AN OBJECTIFIED VIEW OF CONTEXT DOES:

- IS to ALLOW US TO analytically separate actions from contexts and to consider what is context and what is not context.
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- We also get to a listing of contexts but not necessarily a more meaningful understanding of the relations between actions and contexts.
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- BUT IT DOES NOT allow us to theorize context in way that is sensitive to the spatio-temporal specificities of the entrepreneur's real-time interaction with context
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- So by adding a relational conception of context some other analytical possibilities are enabled.

# CONTINUED

- First, we can acknowledge the relationality of actions and contexts but not as discrete entities that interact with one another but as relationally and mutually constituted.
- Second, we can acknowledge how prior action-context interactions are sometimes manifested in the momentary present especially as contingent events call upon us to relate to previous (market, social, material, cognitive, and sensory) experiences in order to deal with uncertainty and to progress to an imagined future scenario. In so doing, we can highlight the spatio-temporal aspects of context and how multiple contextual threads help entrepreneurs to cope with (perform) uncertainty.
- Third, we can draw attention to the different relational media (i.e. social, material, linguistic, cognitive) that are significant for connecting things.
- Fourth, we can work out how the threads of meanings are connected to and embodied in other things in order to say something about phenomena that are not in focus.
- Fifth, we can examine how entrepreneurs perform and effect their endeavors in relation to the different audiences (investors, consumers, suppliers) that the entrepreneur needs to satisfy.

WE OFFER AN ALTERNATIVE DEFINITION OF  
CONTEXT AND DISCUSS THE IMPLICATIONS OF  
THINKING ABOUT CONTEXT FROM A  
RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE.

- By a relational conception of context, we mean:
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- the thousand fragments or threads [of meaning, perception, understanding and interpretation] that explain our actions as connected with other things. These threads could have come into meaning in the past through social, cognitive, linguistic, sensory, cultural, material or bodily experiences but they become manifest in the momentary present in the form of a series of actions that occur as entrepreneurs respond to (perform) contingent events.
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