

Understanding Context

A look to the theory

About Context

The term "**context**" derives from the Latin "contexere" which means a set of elements **interlaced together**. In the literature, the first author who spoke about context and **interdependence between context and the individual** was **Kurt Lewin**. Lewin introduced the idea that the individual cannot be considered as separated from his society; similarly, the society cannot proceed without the action of the single individual. He proposed **a formula** (precisely a function), through which he showed "mathematically" the relationship between the individual and his/her environment: **$C=f(P;A)$** .

According to this formula, the behavior (C) is a joint function of the person (P), of the environment (A) and of their interaction at a given moment, where the environment is also affected by the characteristics of the person. This formula is the basis of Lewin's "**Field theory**".

Starting from Lewin's studies, **Roger Barker** showed how in a particular context (or behavior setting), behavior and the social environment are **in synchrony**.

Another author, **James John Kelly**, identified **4 principles** for analyzing changes in different context systems (or settings):

- **interdependence**: changes within a context will influence and produce changes in other parts of the system;
- **distribution**: what are the resources? how are they created? how are they distributed in the context?;
- **adaptation**: is there the capacity and the possibility of creating suitable alternatives?;
- **succession**: considering the perspectives and evolutions of a phenomenon in a context.

In the literature, another important reference is **Urie Bronfenbrenner** who studied the interaction among different contextual levels. ["A breach in the theory"]

Individual and context

To better **understand** individuals' behavior we need to consider the **environments** which characterize their daily life. Individuals' well-being, is the **result of the relationship** that they establish with the social structures and the physical contexts that constitute and give meaning to their life. For example: relationships with friends or the family, in the workplace or at school. When we need to understand social or individual problems (e.g. behavior), we must therefore pay attention to different levels of relationships, in different life contexts.

Example: We can consider a student at school, to understand his/her behavior, in addition to looking at his/her individual characteristics (e.g. self-esteem); we can consider the student's behavior in the classroom or his/her relationship with classmates or teachers; moreover, we can consider the school context in general (example : where the school is located, the school curriculum, the relationships among the teachers, the way in which the school involves the parents) because it can indirectly influence the student.

As we can see, by observing only the individual we cannot obtain sufficient information about his/her behavior or relationships, but when we examine the individual within the context, everything can be clearer.

Action in context

Actions (or interventions) that **aim to favor** community building and **mobilize individual and community** resources and assets must consider the context where they take place. We can refer to Lewin's methodological approach of **action research**, both to understand the context and to create change (e.g. what actions can we propose in our community?).

The **model of action research** involves a **circular** process between **knowledge** (theory) and **transformative action** whereby the theory directs action aimed to change current conditions, and reflection over action's outcomes leads to a subsequent restructuring of knowledge. To conduct an action research, it is necessary to **identify** a group acting as agent of change, to transform reality, and to develop new knowledge.

Action research requires the **active participation** of group members in exploring the issues that they have identified as relevant in their community. After analysing these issues the group makes decisions, monitoring and documenting their outcomes. The group establishes whether the actions implemented have reached their goals, or whether they have been unsuccessful, and brings to the attention of members newly perceived problems.

Why understanding context?

Understanding and defining **context** (its different levels and dimensions) is necessary because individuals' actions and their meaning are **embedded** in the context (e.g. historical, cultural, social, political, geographical/territorial, etc.). To explain individual action it is necessary to specify the circumstances in which it occurs, namely the context (Ligorio, M.B., Pontecorvo, C., 2010).

A look to the theory: Bronfenbrenner.

Urie Bronfenbrenner followed Lewin's intuitions and became interested in the **relationship between individual and context**. According to his perspective, **to fully understand the individuals**, we must **consider the contexts** (or systems) that surround them. Bronfenbrenner developed the **theory of ecological systems**, which includes **4 systems**:

- **Microsystem**: it refers to institutions and groups that have a direct impact on the individual; examples of microsystems are: his/her home, the school, the work context;
- **Mesosystem**: it includes the interrelations among two or more environmental situations (microsystems) to which the individual actively participates; for example, for a child, the relationships between his/her home, school and group of peers who live near his/her home; for an adult, the relationships between family, work and social life;
- **Exosystem**: it is formed by the elements of a social context in which the individual does not have an active role but which have a profound effect on him/her;
- **Macrosystem**: it is composed of cultural values, customs, laws and in general the culture in which individuals live. It refers to the global models of ideology and organization that characterize a particular society or a social group; the effects of the great principles defined by the macrosystem have a cascading influence on the interactions among all the other levels.

A small example of context in our case study

«Dreamcatcher Project»

- **Microsystem:** when the psychologist welcomes and listens to the adolescent, this has a *direct impact* on the adolescent and on the system (service);
- **Mesosystem:** when the psychologist meets the adolescent's parents, this has *an impact on a system (family)* of which the adolescent is part;
- **Exosystem:** the psychologist is part of a team that talks and discusses the problem of the adolescent, this has *an indirect impact* on the adolescent;
- **Macrosystem:** the psychologist and the other team members are part of the “Dreamcatcher Project”, that follows the guidelines of the "Adolescence Project" at the regional level. This produces a *cascading effect* on the adolescent. More specifically, the regional policies influence the policies of the local health system, that in turn influence the adolescent (i.e., making specific services available, etc.).

How to analyze the context.

Quantitative and qualitative methods

In the literature, there are **different methods and approaches** that allow to perform a context analysis.

We can distinguish between **qualitative and quantitative methods**. The former are helpful to describe the processes occurring in a specific context, while the latter aim to identify patterns and trends and test hypotheses through statistical models.

The main quantitative and qualitative research tools are: questionnaires, interviews (structured, semi-structured or unstructured), focus groups, observation (structured or participant observation).

Some approaches **mix qualitative and quantitative methods**. Among these, we mention: SWOT analysis, community profiles and community-based participatory research.

- ❑ **The questionnaire** is a **quantitative method** for collecting information through a set of questions. The questions may be structured (*closed*), with pre-established response categories, in which the interviewee is asked to identify the answer that best corresponds to his/her own position. Alternatively, the questions may be *open*, leaving the interviewee the option to write his/her response in text.
- ❑ The questions can be read by an interviewer, but generally it is used as a self-report instrument.
- ❑ **The focus group** is a **qualitative method** in which a group of people is invited to discuss on a specific topic under the supervision of moderator; the participants are free to communicate with the other members.

The group may includes **8 to 12 members**; the discussion session may last about two hours.

The expert moderator has the task of guiding the group discussion by introducing topics and asking questions, as well as ensuring that all the participants have the opportunity to share their views on the topic.

- ❑ **The interview** is a **qualitative method** that involves a **conversation between two persons** (interviewer and interviewee) aimed to obtain in-depth **information on a topic**. Depending on the degree of flexibility, we can distinguish **3 types of interview**:
 - **Structured interview**: it provides a fixed and ordered set of questions that are asked to all respondents in the same wording and sequence.
 - **Semi-structured interview**: it consists of a list of topics or general questions around a main theme. The interviewer can decide the wording of the questions and their sequential order, and can deepen the topics if additional unexpected questions arise during the conversation.
 - **Unstructured interview**, also called "in depth", free or hermeneutic. In this type of interview, the content of the questions is not pre-established but varies depending on the participants. The interviewer starts from a general theme; the specific topics emerge spontaneously during the interview.

- ❑ **Observation methods** allow to capture certain elements within the context (e.g. individual and group behaviors, non verbal behaviors) that the interviewer aims to **describe and explain**. To this purpose, the observer may use a structured grid, that provides a series of "**target**" **behavior categories**. The content of the categories must be clearly defined, without ambiguity.

Mixed methods approaches

Some approaches to the analysis of the context **combine quantitative and qualitative methods**, especially when we aim to collect information that describes both the context and the perspective of the people in that context.

- ❑ **SWOT analysis** allows to highlight the *strengths and weaknesses*, the *opportunities and threats*, in the internal or external context of an organization, a project or a community. The strengths and weaknesses are part of the internal context (e.g. What are the resources of my community? What are the critical issues in my community? How can I improve it?). Opportunities and threats are part of the external context (e.g. What opportunities does a specific service offer to my community? What are the possible threats and weaknesses?).
- ❑ **Community profiles** allow to identify **problems and strengths** that **characterize a local community**; the profiles are examined by a research group including community members and psychologists. This group, under the guidance of key experts, identifies the strengths and problem areas, using both "hard data" (such as unemployment rates, demographic data), and "soft data" (such as hopes, fears and emotions linked to the community). We can distinguish **8 community profiles**: territorial, demographic, economic, services, institutional, psychological, anthropological and future.
- ❑ **Community-based participatory research** is an "*action research*" method, engaging people of a community, who **become both the subject and the target of "research"**. This method includes knowledge, involvement and change. In the process of community-based participatory research, researchers collect the subjective representations of the different actors regarding the situations and issues arising in their context (e.g. concerning adolescents). The participants are not only listened to but they are the ones who, through **discussion (e.g. in focus groups)**, **provide the meaning and interpretation of the issues**.