



# The Psychology of Not Seeing a Large-Scale Critical-to-Life Context in Human Life

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## Abstract

Every aspect of human existence is built upon sharing human abilities that manifest as a societal capability sharing system that serves the daily needs of all for goods and services. This article 1) demonstrates that humans remain incapable of seeing the critical-to-life context of the societal capability sharing system and 2) examines the psychology of context-blindness in human thought and action.

## Introduction

In the process of satisfying the daily needs of life, humans are aware that organization — especially in the form of workplace and family — is a critical “context” that defines and shapes human action and behavior. But aside from that elementary view, at present, there is no precise, multi-level definition of “context.” A general definition of context describes it as encompassing “stimuli and phenomena that surround and thus exist in the environment external to the individual” [1]. Given the focus of this definition on the external environment, it is inevitable that some aspects of a context and even certain contexts would remain hidden and not noticed. The purpose of this article is to highlight one such critical-to-life (CTL) context that stares humans in the face and yet remains ignored even on a time horizon of millennia of experiencing its presence.

There have been multiple attempts at defining context. Stark et al. note that context “sets up expectations or contingencies that themselves can serve as ways of organizing information or as cues for retrieval,” and yet at the same time observe that, “[c]ontextual information ... is notoriously difficult to operationalize and study” [2]. In its most elemental form, context is represented with the “butcher on the bus” example. The person on the bus looks familiar, but without the butcher shop as relevant context, it is difficult to identify the individual as the butcher [3]. Even when the context is defined as “the meaning of human environments to the people who live and work in them ... much about it remains obscure,” thus, from a generic view, context can be “[a]ll those things in the situation which are relevant to meaning in some sense,” but most of which

have not been identified [4]. Even though in these statements “most people agree that context is a slippery notion that needs to be pinned down in some kind of operational definition,” it does not mean that a precise multi-purpose, operational definition of context can be developed [5].

Here are more examples of attempts at defining context:

- a) Context is “the environment or setting in which the proposed change is to be implemented” [6].
- b) Context is “broadly known as the physical and social environment,” even though “there is little agreement about what domains, measures, and features of context are important” [7].
- c) “The term ‘context’ refers to the surroundings associated with phenomena which help to illuminate that [sic] phenomena” [8].
- d) Contexts (also referred to as “places”) “contain implicit norms, values, customs and power dynamics, and actor constellations that prescribe actors’ behavior and are rooted in shared ‘experiences” [9].

In this article the purpose is not to seek or to provide a deeper definition of “context” that would encompass all previous definitions. Instead, the purpose is to focus on one specific context present in every aspect of every individual’s existence and ask the question, “why does that critical-to-life context, despite its daily presence in every aspect of human life, remain invisible?”

## An Ignored Critical-to-Life Context

Using the human life's social psychology point of view, Allport defines context as "actual, imagined or implied presence of others" [10]. To understand human life from that point of view, Rafizadeh uses the specific example of a water bottle to demonstrate that every aspect of human existence sits on a huge matrix of shared capabilities involving millions of humans as capability sharers [11]. Here I repeat his demonstration, starting with a single word, asking, the capabilities of how many humans must be shared so that a single word would be written down? We can readily see the individual who writes a word on a computer. On the surface we only need the capabilities of one individual, the writer. But what about that computer? Without it the writing cannot be completed. Of course, to write that single word, the individual does not need a computer and can use pen and paper. So, what about the pen, or the paper? The capabilities of how many humans must be shared so that a person would have a pen, or a sheet of paper?

I note that the shared capabilities argument is independent of which artifact — computer, pen, paper, or something else — is involved in writing a word. The sharing of capabilities can be as easily demonstrated using the chair on which the writer sits, or the room in which he or she is sitting, or the cup of coffee drunk in the process of writing the word. I continue with the piece of paper and ask, the capabilities of how many humans must be shared so that the writer would have a sheet of paper to write on?

How is a piece of paper created? Paper comes from wood. Pulping is the process of separating and cleaning the fibers from chips produced by a woodchipper in a paper mill. The fibers, extracted from wood, are used to make the sheet of paper. The woodchipper comes in different types. The "disc chipper" has a steel disc with chopping blades on it. The woodchipper is made of metal and therefore the capabilities of uncounted humans in the mining industry, metal processing and manufacturing have to be shared. The ore has to be found and mined. The mechanical and chemical processes, smelting, and electrical treatment, used in metal extraction, all require the sharing of a huge number of capabilities to produce a piece of paper to write on. The foundational understanding of the extent of societal capability sharing does not begin or end with the writer's link to the paper mill. Once the mill creates the paper, it has to be transported, thus requiring a truck. The making of the truck demands the shared capabilities of multitudes of humans in auto manufacturing. Without fuel, the truck is useless, thus the whole oil industry, the refineries and the gas stations share capabilities that flow into the writer's paper. The truck cannot function without roads, thus the capabilities of road builders and constructors flow into that single word. The paper mill cannot operate without electricity and natural gas, thus part of the capabilities of all those in electric power plants, transmission and distribution lines and natural gas pipelines flows into the writer's paper.

All the capability-sharers identified so far, sharing their capabilities to create the writer's paper, have to be fed if they are to be ca-

pable of sharing. So, part of the capabilities of all farmers and ranchers flows into the writer's word. Then, all capability-sharers have to be sheltered, educated, and taken care of when sick. Thus, part of the capabilities of doctors, home builders, and teachers flows into the writer's word. In short, millions of humans have to develop and share their capabilities so that someone like the writer would be able to write a single word. This line of thought is not limited to writing a word but can readily be applied to any good or service or any aspect of human existence. The result is the same. Humans can only exist within the context of a world of shared capabilities.

Why has the societal capability sharing — a foundational context for human existence — remained invisible or ignored? It should be obvious that without the Societal Capability Sharing System (SCSS), no human and no organization can exist. It is that system which sustains every individual and every organization, yet it is most persistently overlooked by everyone. That the societal capability sharing system is a foundational condition for existence of human and organization is not Rafizadeh's idea or even a recent discovery. For example, two hundred years ago Adam Smith observed that every individual's clothing, tools and food comes from an uncounted number of humans.

Every part of his cloathing, utensils, and food has been produced by the joint labour of an infinite number of hands [12].

Instead of "capability sharing" Smith calls it "joint labor," and instead of "millions of humans" he uses "an infinite number of hands." Yet the message is the same. Every human and every organization exist because of capabilities developed and shared by millions of others. Thus, SCSS is a context that must be considered in every aspect of human existence. But the societal sharing phenomenon observed and reported by Smith and Rafizadeh as the societal capability sharing system — a context crucial for human well-being and existence — is only seen vaguely by others. Senge's words typify the current mode of understanding the societal capability sharing system as a foundational context of human life:

[H]uman endeavors are also systems ... bound by invisible fabrics of interrelated actions, which often take years to fully play out their effects on each other. Since we are part of that lacework ourselves, it's doubly hard to see the whole pattern of change. Instead, we tend to focus on snapshots of isolated parts of the system and wonder why our deepest problems never seem to get solved [13].

To a large extent, not paying attention to the societal capability sharing system can have its origin in human addiction to fundamental attribution error-seeing the primary aspects and influences of life in terms of internal and personal factors and not in terms of external factors [14].

## Psychological Dimensions of Context

Context can be characterized as a boundary condition that "shapes the information over which deliberation processes operate" [15]. In this article the context focus is on external boundaries of human life, but it is important to note that context can also refer

to human body's equally complex internal boundaries which form the context for any specific brain state [16,17].

There is a general understanding that putting things into context would gain a deeper understanding of any situation within a prevailing worldview. In that orientation, context is understood as stimuli and phenomena in the external environment that surrounds the individual [18,19]. Mowday and Sutton offer a three-dimensional model of context [18]. They suggest that context varies in terms of 1) constraints and opportunities (p.198)p. 198), 2) distal and proximal influences (p.201)p. 201), and 3) similarity versus dissimilarity (p. 205)p. 205). From that perspective, context would shape and influence meaning and behavior in human life [20]. Along all three dimensions of Mowday and Sutton's model, the operational structure of the societal capability sharing system is founded on "manager-managed duality." In any societal setting, without exception, the sharing of capabilities to produce any good or service can only happen through manager-managed duality.

Every society on earth, at any time, is built on manager-managed duality. A small group, the *manager*, controls every aspect of the masses, the *managed*. In this arrangement, the symbiotic manager-managed link is crucial to any societal design. In current times, some are built on the dictatorial, master-slave relationship. In many societies, however, they strive to keep the relationship symbiotic, each component serving the other in meeting the daily needs of everyone [21].

"Leadership" is a concept that provides a simplified expression of the contextual influence of manager-managed duality. It can be studied using the three dimensions of organizational context defined by Mowday and Sutton. The traditional approach to studying leadership seeks to identify specific styles or characteristics thought to be important for presence of leadership and its effectiveness. Mowday and Sutton state that the study of leadership "began with the styles of consideration and initiating structure, moving more recently to research on charisma and visionary, transformational leaders" [22]. This statement may seem complete, but it represents a fragmented view of the leadership context. It assumes a degree of contextual familiarity that may not exist. For example, consideration and initiating structure are components of behavioral leadership style. Does the familiarity with consideration and initiating structure include the knowledge of behavioral leadership whose focus is on the idea that whatever the leadership might be, humans can be trained to behave in that manner [23]? Or transformational leadership is the style that demands all followers to give up and abandon their own self-interests in order to serve the interests pursued by the leader [24]. Is that known when naming transformational leadership? Thus, from the angle of familiarity with the variety of the leadership styles, the deeper understanding of the leadership context remains in the domain of academicians who study leadership, and even that for the duration that the study is active, after which, the context begins to fade even for the astute academician.

It is from this perspective that Mowday and Sutton observe

that, "It is useful to recognize, however, that leadership is often a distal contextual influence. Most members of large organizations rarely if ever, come into contact with executives and instead may find that the leader's distal attempts at influence are mediated by more proximal mid — level managers" [22]. So, the leadership that sets the direction for sharing the employee capabilities to serve the needs of others — the context that effectively sets the life direction for every individual through production and consumption of goods and services-is only vaguely perceived. Both employees and customers remain unaware of the leader's style of leadership even though it sets the direction for how the capabilities are shared and applied to the daily needs of the masses. Since leadership is only a coarse-grained view of manager-managed duality, not having a good idea of leadership is also not having a good view of manager-managed duality, and thus not having a good view of the societal capability sharing system that the manager-managed duality operates on behalf of all.

This implies that the success and effectiveness of manager-managed duality not only depends on development of experiences and skills, but it is also a process affected by the degree of connection to the manager-managed duality's context, the societal capability sharing system [25,26]. Stark, et al. further add that, to impact human behavior, the context 1) must be stable over time, 2) must be at least moderately complex, and 3) must have some behavioral relevance [26]. Those conditions are true for the societal capability sharing system, but clearly have not made this crucial context visible to humans.

Why does the societal capability sharing system remain invisible? Mowday and Sutton [27] use a model developed by Steckler [28] to represent context-awareness in terms of the organization's power structure. In this analogy the top management is the agent of exposing the organization to sudden awareness of any context that would affect everyone — the thunderstorm. The lower-level managers act in two ways in relation to the inflow of context information. They act as "umbrellas" that buffer the employees engaged in production of goods and services, thus keeping them in machine-like ignorance of the context, or they "funnel" and amplify the flow of context information to create a crisis atmosphere to pressure employees to see the production of goods and services in a new light of priorities, changing their behavior accordingly. This flow of context information and context awareness happens along the distal-vs-proximal dimension, driven by the needs of the manager-managed duality's power structure in relation to how the capabilities are to be shared to produce the goods and services.

## Conclusion

Why is it important to make the Societal Capability Sharing System (SCSS) visible to everyone? One reason is that, with SCSS invisible, humans would not see the critical-to-life concept of "not killing humans." The SCSS context-blindness allows human societies to rigorously prepare, as in armed forces, for mass-killing of humans. They do so because they have no comprehension of the societal capability sharing system. That ignorance makes them incapable of

recognizing that any act of killing humans is an act of self-destruction because it harms the capability-sharing system that sustains every human's life.

As another example of absence of context awareness, the emergence of globalization has never been seen as societal capability sharing systems transforming into a global capability sharing system, thus affecting the nature of the organization and the way work is done through shared capabilities.

It is equally significant to recognize that every societal capability sharing system is an "artifact" made and used by humans. Thus, context-awareness is also artifact-awareness. Humans are the artifact-makers and the artifacts become the context for human behavior and action [29]. Instead of seeing "artifact making" as a foundational context of human-the artifact maker, the tendency is to see it in terms of words like "complexity," for example as a "complex interplay of relationships that shape both individuals' experiences and organizational outcomes" [30]. The notion of context as complexity recognizes that individuals shape, and are shaped, by contexts [18], but still, it fails to recognize that all contexts and every aspect of human existence happen within a matrix of shared capabilities which essentially makes the SCSS a "world of artifacts".

Another reason for the invisibility of SCSS lies in how decision-making context is viewed from the perspective of addition of a new alternative to previously-existing alternatives. Thus, as an example, in an upcoming trip, the initial context is set as deciding between two hotels, one in a great location but expensive, the other in a worse location but cheaper. That context is altered when a third hotel with features between the other two is added to the list of alternatives [31]. The decision-making context is thus modeled differently depending on available alternatives [32,33]. Structurally, such models follow evidence-accumulation and as such only allow piecemeal observation of the context [34,35].

When making decisions, with the set of alternatives as context, time pressure is an important factor. Moreover, given multiple alternatives and selection branches, the management of context in real-world scenarios has to deal with high levels of ignorance—basically a black box located within the context. Given the ignorance—riddled context, Xie, et al. point at the mechanism of identifying the "correct" alternative as 1) previous knowledge of the correct alternative, 2) guessing and by chance arriving at the correct alternative, and 3) engaging in conversion of ignorance to knowledge through a method of analysis that arrives at the correct alternative.

The alternative-management focus in decision making, coupled with time pressure, results in context-blindness in relation to

the societal capability sharing system. We see the alternatives as agent of forming the whole, when in fact they are just a subset of the context. Seeing the societal capability sharing system first, before seeing the alternatives and time pressure, is a potential cure for SCSS-blindness. Any other approach would be deficient and not cure SCSS-blindness. For example, de Melo-Martín seeks to prove the existence of a general duty to participate in acts of knowledge-seeking and knowledge-sharing (research) based on a logic "grounded on justice and beneficence". In that approach, there is no recognition of the reality that everything humans make and use in daily life is a knowledge-based product (an artifact) created from a combination of earth material with what humans know. Thus, the duty to participate in acts of knowledge-seeking and knowledge-sharing is inherent in sharing capabilities to provide goods and services for the needs of all. That aspect of SCSS will not become visible if SCSS itself remains invisible.

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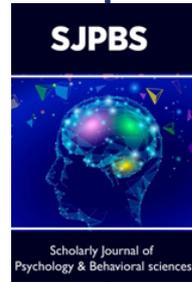


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