
Preface to the Special Issue – Contextual Effects in Psychology

What do contextual effects mean in psychology? Reber (1985) wrote: “A cover term for those behavioral effects that result from the particular context within which a stimulus is presented or a response is made. No behavior, no thoughts, no dreams – in short, nothing any organism can ever do – can take place in a physical or psychic vacuum. Context effects are necessarily ubiquitous. This is at once a most trivial and most profound statement; ignoring its obvious truth has led more than a few well-meaning theorists to grief. The trick for the scientist is to discern just which context effects are significant and worthy of accounting for and which are negligible” (Reber, A.S. 1985. *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books Ltd.)

This definition implies that the research on contextual effects is important in psychology and potentially very spread out. Different data can prove that. When we started with preparing this issue of *Review of Psychology*, 16.254 various texts that use the word “context” in their title (psychology and related disciplines) could have been found in Psych-INFO base. Few months after that number went up to 17.533.

With this issue of *Review of Psychology* we wanted to contribute to answering the question about what can context in psychology mean as a variable, where can it be used, in which ways can it be defined and what is a potential heuristic value of psychologist’s contextual “way of thinking”. Different field of contributions in this issue proved it.

Authors of contributions to this issue of *Review of Psychology* mostly come from Alps Adria region and occasionally work together. Context and contextual ways of thinking in their scientific work are some of the elements that connect them. In the last few years this group has been organizing small symposium regarding contextual effects in psychology.

One of the pioneers in this field of study from this group of authors is surely *Vladimir Kolesarić*. He had infected many of his associates with contextual effects, so it can already be said that contextual effects have passed on to the third generation of his associates. Since he had taken retirement, this issue of *Review of Psychology* is actually acknowledgement to all of his work in that field of research. In his brief review of contextual effects, he set a question which he had probably set at the beginning of his interest:

What is context in psychology? What can be considered as context in psychology and how it should be treated? The answer to these questions is not clearly specified nor will it be soon. Everyone who starts dealing with contextual effects needs to face this question sooner or later.

First definitions of context have their source in psychophysical research. In the field of psychophysics, context is commonly defined as stimuli context that implies the characteristics of sequential stimuli, whether it’s related to stimulus intensity or place in series. *Anja Podlesek* gave a clear and short overview of the role of sequential stimuli in series as very important variable that can change the results of research. This text will be useful to every young psychophysicist.

Probably the most mentioned and clearest contextual effects in psychological research are those that refer to field of visual perception. An excellent overview of the importance of context in that area is given by *Dejan Todorović*. As the title suggests, and what is especially valuable, possible mechanisms of contextual effects on this field are offered.

Three contributions (*Tiziano Agostini & Alessandra Galmonte; Dražen Domijan & Mia Šetić; Tanja Gulan & Pavle Valerjev*) give their opinions and review of research of the role of context in verbal processing. In fact, all three papers imply that cognitive language processing is dip immerse into context and that such influence cannot be ignored.

Danko Nikolić attempts to give context a hard background. He actually presents an implicit explanation why are there so many activities in psychological research that deal with contextual effects. Brain, as he had lucidly mentioned, is a machine for context production, that is, a machine that cannot function if the context does not exist.

Riccardo Luccio & Grazia Caporusso give one very interesting point of view on the role of specific contextual influences. That contribution implies large variations in what can be defined as contextual influence.

Finally, *Vesna Buško* offers a psychometric viewpoint on studying possible contextual effects. She shortly describes how one explicitly defined and empirically testable psychometric theory can serve to account for portions of variability in any kind of measures which are attributable to contextual factors including those resulting from interaction of person and situational factors.

In the end, there are two empirical studies that consider the influence of context. One of them is from the field that overlaps with psychophysics, the field where contextual effects are firstly noticed (*Spehar & Kolesarić*) and the other one belongs to the field of pain perception but where the context is socially defined (*Modić Stanke & Ivanec*).

As a guest editor of this issue of *Review of Psychology* I thank to all colleagues who agreed to write their own thinking on what can be a context in psychological research,

where they see contextual effects and what are the boundaries of possible explanations of contextual effects in psychology. We hope that all contributions in this issue of *Review of Psychology* will be interesting to all those who deal with contextual influences in psychology in this way or another.

Dragutin Ivanec
Guest editor