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Module Overview



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Context and Infrastructure

The Importance of Context, Environment, and Support Systems

In the first lecture, the idea that “society precedes self” (Persell & Cookson, 1993) was introduced. This idea is the basis for context. Society is made up of nested communities—family, neighborhood, town, nation, religion, ethnicity, school, peers, media, laws, and more. All have lessons to impart on how to live, as individuals and with one another. Within these communities (with millions of little interactions), it is learned that *community is us*—singular and plural at the same time.

This individual-to-community and community-to-individual interaction defines humans as a species and offers an insight that is difficult to express. Individuals are so embedded in context that they often miss its influence. Are there many single-parent households? Is this community well-off, or is it struggling with poverty? Has there been a natural disaster that has traumatized the community? Is there an attitude that needs to be overcome? Does society organize around people in need or let them lie as they are? Does society recognize that both responses may be necessary at different times? The choices that are made are embedded within this interaction between the individual and the community.

Context and Community

The strength and stability of the contexts within any community matter. Continuously, and often contentiously (perhaps more than often), there are arguments over the various contexts. Are schools adequate? How does one keep welfare fair and not an entitlement? What is an individual’s responsibility to a neighbor who is elderly, disabled, abled? Are parks, pools, disaster relief, and tax breaks provided for people on fixed incomes? Is it recognized that individuals are the foundation of the community and the community is the foundation of the individual?

Context is more than a set of values or assumptions because it is enacted physically as well as emotionally and cognitively in the daily lives of its individuals. Context and the values represented frame behavior individually and collectively. Familiar contexts are sought and are shared. This last

idea—that context is shared—is one of those little statements that links many communities. Think of the communities you inhabit, such as ethnicity, religion, or the ones you choose, such as being an athlete, a musician, a coach, or a volunteer firefighter; they are all shared. Context psychologically is one's personal and social meaning. Does one belong? Context matters.

If, in context, questions are answered on how to live together, the norms of togetherness that arise frame collective behavior. As communities grow, they find it necessary and helpful to communicate, collaborate, build, and maintain support systems—the infrastructure or scaffolding that enables communities to thrive. The arguments are over how much to help, who is responsible, how to balance individual and community responsibility. Is it “survival of the strongest” (a common but misapplied understanding of Darwin) or “We are the world”? As a professional, how does one navigate these differing points of view? What research is available to help all find consensus on the most appropriate responses to community and individual needs? How can an individual, as part of the context as well as part of the support systems, keep the larger needs of the community in mind?

Support Systems and Community Stability

Context frames—and is, in turn, framed by—the support systems we allow and build. The community norms that are agreed upon make claims on the individual: taxes, citizen participation, volunteering, vested interests, children's education, safe roads, food banks for the needy, mental health services, and many more. All is interconnected. Underfund education, for example, and the workforce will be under-skilled, and many will not possess the needed citizenship skills to participate in a democracy. Support systems, well managed, are pathways to community stability and development.

As pathways for community development, support systems are those policies, programs, and values that nurture the nature of the individuals. They are future-oriented, as they prepare individuals to live in and manage their communities for tomorrow. How well these support systems work affects the contexts of our collective futures. In the nurturing of this nature, the idea of community becomes a generational work in progress. What conditions, goals, meaning, and values will be collectively nurtured? One does not need to look far to see how concrete this is: right to life, pro-choice, gay marriage, family stability, the Tea Party or 99 percenters platforms, gun ownership, and the open society that encourages the various debates that inform and shape communities.

Conclusion

It bears repeating: Context matters. That awareness and the concept that the nurturing of context is foundational both individually and collectively must itself be nurtured and enacted. The support systems that are created as infrastructure, based on collective values and assumptions, are enacted

in communities with practical consequences. Communities want teachers, police, daycare providers, entrepreneurs, and social workers. Communities want them to be trained and competent and to have community spirit. In a sense, deep within one's nature lies the drive to nurture that nature as it brings a community together. The community will reflect the strengths and weaknesses of the support systems it creates in nurturing this nature. The community worker will come to understand and foster the reflection and critical thinking that is necessary to grasp context and support in community development. This does not negate or diminish individualism; in fact, it makes it stronger.

References

Persell, C., and Cookson, P. (1993). *Making sense of society*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.

Moritsugu, J., Wong, F., and Duffy, K. G. (2010). *Community psychology* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.



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