

Preface: Context – a missing link?

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For more than a decade, the standard comparative analysis of public management reforms in the ‘advanced’ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries has stressed the major influence which contextual factors appear to have had on the formulation, implementation and outcomes of reform (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). Pollitt and Bouckaert argue, to take just one example, that more radical new public management (NPM) reforms have been conceived, launched and implemented in those countries which have majoritarian, Westminster-derived systems (New Zealand, UK) than in consensual, continental European regimes such as Finland or Germany. The underlying argument is that one cannot assess the prospects of a particular technique or organizational form (total quality management [TQM], say, or semi-autonomous executive agencies) in the abstract. They work well in some contexts but not in others – context is crucial.

This is hardly an unusual or idiosyncratic position – many prominent academic authorities have taken roughly similar positions by recognizing that contextual features such as constitutions, cultures or political systems have major effects on stability and change – and even on what can be considered to be ‘good government’ (Andrews, 2010; Christensen and Lægreid, 2001; Kickert, 2007; Lynn, 2006; Ongaro, 2009; Painter and Peters, 2010; Pollitt et al., 2004; Savoie, 1994; Smullen, 2010; Verhoest et al., 2012; Wollmann, 1997). A recent literature review of 519 studies of the impacts of NPM reforms across Europe concluded that there was major variation in the results or reform from one time and place to another, and that many of the authors of these studies identified contextual factors as an important part of their explanations (Pollitt and Dan, 2011). Alongside such academic treatments we also find major international bodies such as the World Bank and the OECD stressing the importance of specific country contexts. They did not always do this, but appear to have learned that, to quote a recent World Bank paper, in their work with different countries they need ‘a deep understanding of the client’s long-term reform trajectory, and to develop reform designs

jointly that truly “fit” the client’s most pressing problems’ (World Bank, 2011, p. 3).

In short, many experts reach for ‘context’ as an important element in their explanations and recommendations. In that limited sense, at least, it is a popular concept.

But if context is so important, what *is* it, and what do we know about it? If it is everything ‘out there’, then surely it is also nothing? We cannot get far with a concept that is so omnibus-like that 101 different factors are all bundled together indiscriminately into one aggregate lump. But if context is something more specific, what is that specificity, or, more precisely, how can we conceive it? How can we conceptualize and identify individual contextual influences? Or do we need a typology or even theory of contexts, or some other way of sorting more specific and usable elements out from the larger background? As we shall see later in the book, there is actually no shortage of typologies of contexts.

Furthermore, how does context ‘work’? Is it like scenery on a stage – fixed items around which the action must take place (though even theatrical scenery, we should note, may have moving components, and in any case can be whisked away and replaced with something else during an interval)? Or is its relationship with action (people, decisions, events) less static and more dynamic? Is context perhaps actually part of the action, and, if so, in what way? A further question (or perhaps another version of the question about action) is whether context consists of an entirely autonomous and impersonal set of influences that constrain politicians and public servants alike, or whether it can also facilitate action. Context is often written about as though it were just a set of barriers and road-blocks, but can it also ‘help’ change? Can those reformers who are aware of the subtleties of the local context use them to seize windows of opportunity and push forward?

Mentioning ‘local context’ brings in another set of questions about context, in particular the question about what scale or level contextual factors operate at. Certainly, the literature mentions contextual influences at macro, meso and micro levels. National constitutions and international fashions in management thought would be two examples of macro-level features. High professional autonomy and self-organization in certain sectors (for example, the medical profession within healthcare) would be a meso-level feature (helping to explain, for example, why doctors have been able to resist certain managerial reforms more successfully than teachers or social workers). Happening to be in a particular, significant locality (within the constituency of the prime minister of the day; in an area with a high proportion of ethnic minorities; on a small island far from the nearest city) could influence the way certain reforms are implemented, and could

be thought of as a form of micro context (Pollitt, 2012). Whilst it is in some ways useful to divide up context into levels or scales in this manner, it also brings back the earlier concern lest ‘context’ becomes a vague, catch-all concept that, by containing almost everything, ends up with little discriminatory power.

Alongside questions of scale lie related questions of time or duration. Some contextual factors are very short-lived. A particular, politically sensitive reform cannot be announced because an election looms, but a few weeks later the election is over and it can go ahead – the election could be said to be a contextual influence, although an ephemeral one. Or the survival of a particular proposal may rest heavily on the leadership of one minister, and if that minister suffers sudden ill health, or is the victim of a scandal, they may fall from office, taking the proposal down too. This would be another short-term sequence. At the other end of the scale, many studies show national and organizational cultures having an influence on how new policies and reforms play out, but these cultures are usually deeply embedded and cannot be changed in months or even years. They exist as patterns of expectations, assumptions and values in the heads of thousands or even millions of staff, and – contrary to the claims of some business writers – no speech or law or training programme or charismatic leader can shift them in the short term, let alone replace them with some chosen new set of values and assumptions. It may need generational change before the previous culture can be said to have been fundamentally altered or replaced. Similarly, in Western countries, electoral systems are seldom subject to alteration, so that majoritarian systems tend to remain so, as do consensual systems, each with its own advantages and limitations for reformers.

Last, but not least, we can ask questions about the history and etymology of context as a term and concept. How has its usage developed over time? More than 50 years ago the famous anthropologist Margaret Mead wrote that practices and beliefs must be evaluated ‘in context’ (Mead, 1955). From the beginning of the 19th century various European writers have argued that constitutions and laws cannot and should not be transplanted from one country to another because they will not fit the new national context. Later in the present book we will be looking in more detail at the history of this notion of an ‘intransigent context’. We should also notice that, at various times, other terms have been used in ways that significantly overlap with (if they do not exactly duplicate) some of the meanings given to ‘context’. ‘Environment’ is one good example – it has been and still is widely used by systems theorists and others with the sense of ‘everything out there that may influence the thing we are studying in here’. Is context just the new ‘environment’? If it is, then most of the questions about context posed above must also be asked of the environment.

What we have, then, is something that many in the field of public administration and management say is significant, but few define, and even fewer theorize. Various metaphors suggest themselves. For example, one could say that context is an elephant in the room: we all know it is there and hugely important, but on the whole we don't do much to describe and analyse it. On those occasions when we do, the tendency is to refer to one bit of it – culture or the political system, or the influence of recent history – and then to use it metaphorically rather than analytically. Furthermore, there seems to be a bias in the sense that these 'bits' are most often mentioned when they cause trouble – when they inhibit or prevent – rather than when they help and facilitate a policy or project.

Here, however, we prefer another metaphor – context as a missing link: something that enables us to understand the different evolutions of public policy and management in different habitats. Something that provides us with a better grasp of how particular species of reform are related to one another, and why the evolutionary tree branches at certain points. Something that has long been present in the fossil record, but whose significance has hitherto been partly overlooked.

The aims of this book are both positive and negative. Positively, it seeks to establish a clear picture of the nature, potential use and value of the concept of context. Negatively, it aims to clarify and remedy some of the problems and biases discussed above. In sum, we set out to: make the concept more transparent; to define and dissect it; to reflect on its history; and to explore the conditions under which it can do useful academic work. We also offer a number of selected cases to demonstrate its usefulness in both description and explanation. Yes, we will be putting context into context . . .

NOTE

The book has its origin in a particular and somewhat unusual event, and is organized in a relatively unusual way. In late March 2012, about 30 academics from all over the world gathered in the old Begijnhof at Leuven to participate in an event called 'Contextualize *that!*' For two days they presented papers about, and held discussions on, context and contextualization. The seminar was organized by the Public Management Institute at Leuven on the occasion of my partial retirement (note 'partial' – after all, I am editing this book, among other things!). I am deeply grateful to all the participants, not only for taking time out of what were often exceedingly busy schedules, but also, in most cases, for stretching somewhat beyond their academic comfort zones in order to address this relatively unfamiliar

topic. It was both an honour and a pleasure to be made a fuss of in this way.

After the seminar we all continued to work on our texts, the result being what readers will find in the following pages. However, this is not a traditionally edited book of *n* chapters of roughly equal lengths. Contributors produced papers of varying lengths – some short notes, others full chapter-length studies. These have been adapted and refined for publication. We also recorded and noted the discussions at the seminar, and as editor I have had recourse to these records and used them as additional inserts wherever I thought they could add to the overall picture, or to the liveliness of the text. Finally, I have written quite an extensive linking commentary, which is inserted at appropriate points throughout the book, and which is intended to cross-reference and occasionally interrogate themes and insights from the different contributions. Therefore, if the book could be said to provide a portrait of ‘context’, the style would be more cubist than classical.

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