

The Presence of Large-Scale Critical-to-Life Context Blindness in Human Life

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Abstract

Every aspect of human existence, especially in satisfying the daily needs for goods, has as its foundation the sharing of human capabilities that collectively manifest as a societal capability sharing system. This article 1) demonstrates that, despite its significance, 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.

1. Introduction

In the process of satisfying the daily needs of life, humans already know that organizing human capabilities—especially in the form of workplace and family—is a critical aspect, a foundational context, that defines and shapes human action and behavior. Outside of the mundane view of life defined by knowledge of family and workplace, at present, there is no precise, multi-level definition of how humans share their capabilities to create their structure of

existence. There is no comprehension of the larger picture of human life, especially the context within which the societal capability sharing system takes shape. Before we can address humans not seeing the societal capability sharing system, we must ask if humans understand the concept of “context” when conducting their lives. As such, as highlighted in Figure 1, this article starts with the search for a foundational consideration of context.

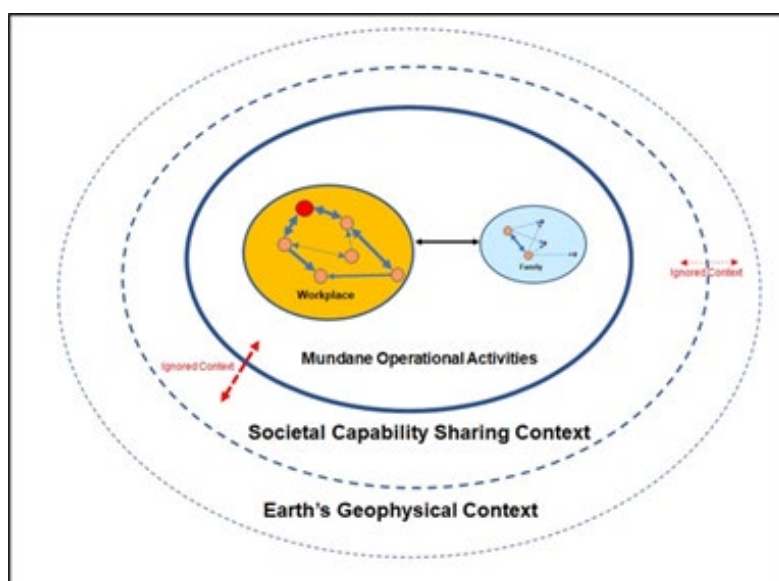


Figure 1: A layered view of human life and the contexts such as the societal capability sharing system that are regularly ignored.

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 definition’s focus on just the external environment, it is inevitable that some aspects of a context, and even certain contexts, would remain hidden and not noticed.

This observation is important because the purpose of this article is to highlight one such critical-to-life (CTL) context, namely the societal capability sharing system that stares humans in the face every day and yet remains ignored even on a time horizon of millennia of experiencing its presence through family and workplace.

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, they 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 point of 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]. Pessimistically, it is noted that, even though in the context-definition statements “[m]ost 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:

- Context is “the environment or setting in which the proposed change is to be implemented” [6].
- 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].
- “The term ‘context’ refers to the surroundings associated with phenomena which help to illuminate that [sic] phenomena” [8].
- 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?”

2. 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 the process of 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 choose to continue my analysis focusing on the piece of paper, and asking, 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. Since the woodchipper is made of metal, therefore, the capabilities of uncounted humans in the mining industry, metal processing and manufacturing have to be shared in order to make it. Moreover, the ore has to be found and mined. The smelting, electrical treatment, and various mechanical and chemical processes 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 system 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 capabilities of all those in electric power plants, transmission and distribution lines, and natural gas pipelines flows into the writer’s paper.

All of the capability-sharers identified so far, sharing their capabilities to create the writer’s paper, have to be fed if they are to be capable 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 on a piece of paper.

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. Whether we focus on the breath that human takes, the thought that human has, or any product or service that human uses, the result is the same. Humans can only exist within the context

of a world of shared capabilities, namely the societal capability sharing system.

Why has the societal capability sharing system—a foundational context for human existence—remained so invisible and ignored? From the most elemental aspect of human existence, like being born, it should have been 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 life.

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:

“Human 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 and foundational factors that involve multitude of others [14].

3. 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 has been on the 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),
2. distal and proximal influences (p. 201), and
3. similarity versus dissimilarity (p. 205).

From that three-dimensional perspective, context is expected to 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, in 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 just mentioning the words transformational leadership? Thus, from the angle of familiarity with the variety of the leadership styles, the deeper understanding of leadership context is not within the domain of the individual of the masses but 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 [26]

1. must be stable over time,
2. must be at least moderately complex, and
3. must have some behavioral relevance.

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 use a model developed by Steckler to represent context-awareness in terms of the organization’s power structure [27,28]. In this analogy, the top management is the *agent of exposing* the organization to sudden awareness of any context that would affect everyone—thus the top management as *thunderstorm*. The lower-level managers act in two ways in relation to the inflow of context information. First, 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 second, 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, thus changing their behavior accordingly. This pattern of 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 organization’s goods and services.

4. 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. It is the “world of artifacts” that becomes the ultimate context for human behavior and action [29]. As artifact maker, a human can construct and represent any artifact as a foundational context of human life. The simplest artifact that a human make is “word.” For example, the word “complexity” is offered as a way of understanding the contexts in human life. Thus, the foundational context of human life is described 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 turns SCSS into a “world of human-made artifacts.”

Another reason for the invisibility of SCSS lies in how the decision-making context is viewed from the perspective of addition of a new alternative to previously-existing alternatives. Thus, as a case 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 the available alternatives [32, 33]. Structurally, such models follow evidence-accumulation methodology, and as such only allow piecemeal observation of the context [34,35].

When making decisions, with the set of alternatives as context, the time pressure is another important factor [36]. Moreover, given multiple alternatives, 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 following as mechanisms for identifying the “correct” alternative [37]:

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, inevitably results in context-blindness in relation to the societal capability sharing system. We think that the alternatives are 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 would 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” [38]. 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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