**AEA Annual Meeting**
**Orlando, FL**
**November 2009**

**Presenters:** Peter Dahler-Larsen
                    Thomas Schwandt
**Session:**    A Conversation on the Sociology of Evaluation
                    Thursday, 12 Nov. 3:35-4:20 pm

Schwandt Opening Remarks:

First, some logistics: I will begin with a few words explaining the purpose of this session and how what we will discuss relates to the theme of evaluation context; then, given that this is an expert lecture, we will let the expert speak—Peter will be invited to expand on a few questions and issues that I will pose to him; then, I'll add a comment or two and give Peter the opportunity to do the same, that will leave about 15 minutes for questions and discussion.

We have been asked to reflect on the meaning of the phrase "context of evaluation practice" with specific reference to Denmark. Because Peter and I are naturally inclined to point out how things are more complex than at first they seem, there are a few matters related to the meaning and use of the term context that we feel ought to be put on the table not simply for this session but for consideration of the conference theme in general.

*Context* comes from the Latin word *contextus*, meaning "to join together" or "to weave together". It is one of those slippery terms that can take up many meanings and has a significant history of investigation associated with it in different disciplines including philosophy, psychology, linguistics, literary theory, and social and cultural anthropology.[1] In the English language, we use many synonyms for context, including setting, situation, circumstances, milieu, and background.

It is commonplace to use context as an *analytic strategy*—that is, some object or phenomenon is placed in context in order to understand or interpret it. For example, The International Development Research Centre's "Knowledge Translation: A Research Matters Tool Kit" devotes a chapter to context mapping

---

[1] E.g., in philosophy, B.-A. Sharfstein, *The Dilemma of Context* (New York: New York University Press, 1989); in anthropology, R. Dilley (Ed.), *The Problem of Context* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999); in linguistics, A. Duranti & C. Goodwin (Eds.), *Rethinking Context: Language as an Interactive Phenomenon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

tools (e.g., stakeholder analysis, force-field analysis, policy network mapping, and influence mapping) that can be employed to understand the dynamics of the policy environment for researchers and evaluators.[2]

Jennifer Greene has argued that the context for an evaluation largely refers to the *setting* in which a given object of evaluation is located.[3] A setting has multiple extra-linguistic (or what some might call, socio-cultural) dimensions including the demographic characteristics of the actors in the setting, the material and economic features of the setting, the institutional and organizational climate, the interpersonal dynamics, and the political dynamics. To that we might add that all of those dimensions have both historical (diachronic) and concurrent (cross-sectional, synchronic] aspects. All of these dimensions or aspects of context are woven together in some way to form an understanding of the object of evaluation.

That said, and just so we do not become too comfortable chatting about context in an unproblematic way, we'd like to point out the following ideas as relevant to our understanding of context:

(1) Context has been broadly defined as that which surrounds an object of interest and helps by its relevance to explain it.[4] If so, then how do we define what is relevant, and how does the weaving together of what is relevant actually help form an explanation? It appears that there have been many attempts to define what is relevant, and each such attempt appeals to a new sense of the meaning of context. Thus it is that we speak of cultural context, historical context, social context, political context, religious context, linguistic context, institutional context, and so on.

(2) Our suspicion is that context in evaluation is generally regarded much the same way as it has been in social and cultural anthropology. Namely, context is treated as self-evident, as a given attribute in the world; something that is stable, clear and sufficient, and not requiring any qualification of its own (this is referred to as the 'positivity of context').[5] However, in recent years this treatment of context as 'given' has been

---

[2] IDRC, "Knowledge Translation: A Research Matters Tool Kit" available at http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-128908-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html

[3] J.C. Greene "Context" in S. Mathison (Ed.) *Encyclopedia of Evaluation* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004).

[4] Sharfstein, 1989, p. 1.

[5] J. Fabian, "Ethnographic misunderstanding and the perils of context" in R. Dilley (Ed.), *The Problem of Context* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999).

questioned by scholars who regard context as socially constructed—that is, generated and negotiated in the course of social interaction and exchange. To give one simple example of why this distinction matters, consider the following:  Imagine we were examining the consequences of a state-mandated testing program for the work of teachers in a particular school. We might, on the one hand, say that the testing program unfolds in the context (setting) of a broad national, state, and local discourse of teacher and school accountability. And in so doing we might treat the context as given. On the other hand, if we regarded this discourse of accountability to be actually constructed yet made to appear to be given or self-evident, then we would want to know how this misrepresentation was achieved; in short, we would want to examine the politics of context construction.[6]

(3) Context is associated with the broader idea of *contextualism*—the view that actions, expressions, behaviors, and so on can be understood only with reference to a specific context. Of course, this creates some problems, for if we need to understand everything in context, then how do we arrive at general conclusions? This leads to the familiar problem of unproductive dichotomous thinking:  Either knowledge and understanding are inseparable from context, or knowledge and understanding can be (should be) divorced from context. This is relevant to what we are about here because, on the one hand, we might argue that the meaning of evaluation (or evaluation practice) is contextually relevant or constituted. While, on the other hand, we might argue that regardless of where evaluation is practiced there is a kind of universal rationality inherent in its meaning and practice—that is, for example, it is a kind of critical thinking: the skilled and active interpretation and evaluation of observations and communications, information and argumentation.[7]

(4) Finally, context is often understood in the broad terms of contingency theory. At the risk of oversimplification, contingency theory argues that there is no one best way to organize, lead, make decisions, evaluate, teach, and so on. Rather, one must fit the characteristics of the practice in question (i.e., evaluating, managing, etc.) to the contingencies that reflect the situation one is in. Here's an example: What strategy of sanctions should the UN Security Council adopt for crisis situations? A

---

[6] R.M. Dilley, The problem of context in social and cultural anthropology. *Language and Communication* 22 (2002): 437-456.

[7] A. Fisher & M. Scriven, *Critical Thinking: Its Definition and Assessment* (Norwich, UK: Center for Research in Critical Thinking, 1997).

contingency theory would argue that there can be no one best approach; rather, the Council should adopt different sanctions regimes in different crisis situations. The theory would then proceed to identify patterns of good fit between the situations (i.e., contexts) and the appropriate sanctions regime. This is eminently sensible. However, what often happens is that situations/contexts are often treated as given or fixed. Thus, in this example, we might talk about four different kinds of contexts—(1) interstate conflicts; (2) intrastate conflicts; (3) rogue and pariah states; and, (4) non-state sponsored terrorism. Categorizing contexts in this way often means ignoring that the context or situation in question is complex, dynamic and interpretable and that there may be contradictions within a particular context that makes no choice of a particular response evident or obvious. The lesson here is something like this—while it seems quite reasonable to argue that evaluation is context-dependent, we must be careful not to claim that we can neatly categorize contexts and then readily determine which evaluation approach offers the best fit.

Given these understandings of context, we want to explore very briefly the idea of evaluation in the so-called "context of Denmark"; an impossibly large task even if we had weeks to talk about it. We are not interested in using the idea of "evaluation in Denmark" as an example or counter-example for purposes of comparison to evaluation in the "US context". Rather, we would like to make a modest little exploration into the Danish sociology of evaluation: Consider the Danish societal context as a frame (to borrow a notion from Goffman) that surrounds the event called evaluation (including its meaning and its practice) and provides resources for its appropriate interpretation. Two aspects or dimensions of that frame are of particular interest to us—one aspect is language, the other the polity. Thus, there are two broad questions I have put to Peter:

(1) There is a constitutive view of language that says that it is impossible to have an understanding of reality apart from and independent of language because any understanding of reality already includes some sense of language. In other words, language in the broadest sense is that which makes intelligibility possible in the first place. How does studying some of the vocabulary of evaluation in Danish help us better understand the reality of evaluation in Denmark?

(2) The English term "polity" broadly refers to the politics and particular form of government within a society. How does the study of Danish polity help us better understand what evaluation means there?