

THE RELEVANCE OF THE CONTEXT

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Once, a number of blind men encountered an elephant. Every one of them touched one of the parts of its body with his hand and imagined the animal in his mind. Then they turned away. The one who had touched the leg said that the shape of the elephant was long and round like the trunk of a tree or a palm tree. The one who had touched the back thought that its shape was similar to that of a high mountain or a hill. The one who had touched its trunk described it as something smooth without any bones. And the one who had touched its ear thought it to be of a large size, thin, and constantly moving. In that manner, each of the blind men described that part of the animal that he himself had sensed. At the same time, each of them said something different from the others and accused them of misjudgement and inaccuracy in relation to the elephant's shape as sensed by himself.¹

KEYWORDS:

*context, contextualization,
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ABSTRACT

Taking into consideration the different discussions of the problem of context, the author has tried to draw out some main facts without which we cannot discuss context or use it as an analytical framework:

(1) Context is inseparably interconnected with the meaning of the particular cultural phenomenon or practice that we are researching. If the context is changed, then the meaning is also changed.

1 Translated by Ulrich Marzolp from the oldest Arabic version in Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi's *al-Muqababat*, Marzolp, Ulrich. "The Migration of Didactic Narratives across Religious Boundaries," *Didaktisches Erzählen*, R. Foster and R. Günthart, eds. (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 180.

- (2) *The relevant context that a researcher uses in their interpretation of some cultural phenomenon or practice is a result of that researcher's pre-existing knowledge and the meaning that they want to find, i.e., the hypothesis they want to prove.*

The author emphasizes that we should try to grasp which contexts is relevant for our interlocutors and what kind of meanings they are giving to our object of investigation. If we are trying to interpret and find a meaning in only one "relevant" context, we are actually preventing the multiplicity of the meanings it can have, and in that way making it inexplicable.

Regardless of our disciplinary background most of us in the social sciences and humanities research and interpret something in a context. When writing a paper or presenting one on a conference we are asked to give a short geographical, historical, social, cultural, personal, disciplinary, etc. context of our paper. But, what does it mean to contextualize? If there are so many different contexts, which one is the most relevant? Every cultural context differs geographically and historically, and vice versa. Moreover, depending on the perspective and our disciplinary methodological approaches we can take different contexts as relevant and produce different interpretations of the same practice, process or object of our research. As in above quoted story, it seems to me, that we are like those blind men seeing only one small segment and interpreting it in our own way, completely convinced that our way is the right way and that our context is the most relevant context. The interesting thing is, like those blind men, we are all probably right, but most of us are not aware that our context is only one of the possible relevant contexts, only one perspective that could easily be changed. We are also not aware that by changing the perspective, the relevant context, we are bound to change the interpretation and give different meanings to perhaps the same research focus. In this paper I want to argue for awareness of the importance of context in research and writing. My aim is to present how different disciplines approach the problem of context, how at the same time they are not that different, and that there can be a few general conclusions on which we can build and further develop the discussion of the importance of context.

How different disciplines problematize context as a concept

It is almost impossible to find and present all the papers, books and approaches to context in the social sciences and humanities. Moreover, a large number of papers that in their title or in keywords have the notion of context do not actually discuss context *per se*, they just use it as an analytical framework. I have tried to be selective but also inclusive in order to try to get to a broader picture of approaches to the context. For this reason, I

have included works that go beyond the social sciences and humanities. In these kinds of discussions on concepts that are omnipresent, drawing lines between disciplines and fields are limiting without any particular reason.

Psychologist Susan Engel uses context in her research on memory and argues that, among other things, the process of memorialization depends on social context because most of our memories include transaction, i.e. the way we share, negotiate and present our personal memories is the result of our remembering collectively with or because of other people.¹ According to her, all features of context play a formative role in the process of remembrance and memory.² There is no memory that stands alone since we are never remembering outside of some specific context - a situation that forms what we know and understand as a memory.³

Geographer Clive Barnett has problematized the relationship between the deconstruction and the conceptualization of context within textual interpretation.⁴ Barnett considers context through a perspective that enables the conceptualization of context in relationship with text and interpretation.⁵ Barnett actually is criticizing the conceptualization of context within geography as a way to explain and interpret the object of the research.⁶ Geographers consider context as a way to observe how general processes are embedded, adapted and reproduced in some individual localities. This is connected with the critique of universal epistemologies. He argues that representation and theory are closely connected with the particular context in which they have been designed. In human geography the context is taken for granted and there is very little reflection on what actually constitutes the context (1999: 280).⁷ According to Barnett, in human geography, there is a consensus about the way in which ideas, discourses and representations must be observed in an historical, economic or social

1 Engel, Susan. *Context is Everything: The Nature of Memory* (New York: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1999), 9.

2 Ibid., 11.

3 Ibid., 52.

4 Barnett, Clive. "Deconstructing Context: Exposing Derrida," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 24:3 (1999): 277.

5 Ibid., 280.

6 Ibid., 277.

7 Ibid., 280.

context if we want to interpret, explain and critique them.⁸ Barnett emphasizes that there are two features that are implied when we contextualize something: fixing it, and giving it a meaning. First, contextualization is an act of localization, bringing the object back into its original situation or original place. Second, contextualizing something (no matter whether we are discussing a place, a time period, or a linguistic communication) includes drawing boundaries that serve as a frame within which we can include otherwise unrelated texts.⁹ According to Barnett, text is considered the most usual medium within which we transfer meaning, but text is a medium that is susceptible to appropriation. Every event is irretrievably lost as soon as it is articulated, it is irreversible in its unique and original form.¹⁰ If there is no meaning without context, then context cannot be closed (defined). Context always has to be open in order to function as a context.¹¹ The meaning of texts and statements in fact depends on their multiple, unexpected re-contextualizations.¹²

Philosophers have also discussed the meaning of context. Lenn Goodman, like Barnett, observes context in relation to text. Goodman emphasizes that every sentence has a core meaning that can be differently interpreted in different contexts.¹³ He uses an example of a dialogue between two burglars, where one of them said: “the policeman is behind the corner”. The core meaning is the fact of the location of the policeman, but this sentence can imply other meanings as well. For example, it can mean that the policeman are very close to the burglars so they will have to hurry. Goodman agrees that there is the core meaning of the sentence, but he argues that the sentence can have more than one core meaning even though the context is the one that constitutes the core meaning of the sentence. Likewise, the phrase: “behind the corner” can have different meanings in different contexts.¹⁴ Another philosopher, Daniel Adler, views context as

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 287.

11 Ibid., 288.

12 Ibid.

13 Goodman, Lenn. “Context,” *Philosophy East and West*, 38:3 (1988): 308.

14 Ibid., 309.

a phenomenon, considering its role in different situations.¹⁵ Adler argues that context is not fixed beforehand, but is actually changing through process.¹⁶ Observing context as an effect, Adler considers that context is being felt by the agent and in that way is being adapted by the agent's subjective approach. Context is unavoidable, but it is possible to decide to ignore some of its parts (features). Sometimes, it is possible to change perspective or purpose, and context depends on perspective.¹⁷ According to Adler there can be as many understandings of context as there are types of situations.¹⁸ Context can be whatever a particular situation becomes in relation to our expectations, considering that "becomes" refers to the observer's subjective view. Adler, nevertheless, considers that context is not totally subjective. Although it is a situation seen by an individual, it is still possible to have an objective description of context, at least in theory.¹⁹ It seems that context depends on the researcher's expectations, which are being imposed on a certain situation to form what the researcher considers to be a context.²⁰ Context is in a certain way infinite. Any cognitive process includes an infinite set of mutually interconnected facts from which almost everything can become part of its context.²¹ Moreover, if we accept the hypothesis that every context can be a part of some other bigger context, we can also conclude that there are an infinite number of contexts. That kind of context is not practical, because it is impossible to take into consideration every possible feature of some context.²² Because of this, according to Adler, we are actually using only a narrow conception of context that is dependent on our idea of a "normal context",²³ The reader knows that if there is no problematization of context, then context is not problematic. This is sufficient for the reader to accept the offered conclusion from the text. In that manner, the reader and the theoretician

15 Adler, Daniel. "Is Context a Problem?," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 93 (1993): 284.

16 *Ibid.*, 286.

17 *Ibid.*, 288.

18 Adler, Daniel. "The Normativity of Context," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, 100:3 (2000): 276.

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*, 279.

21 *Ibid.*, 281.

22 *Ibid.*, 282.

23 *Ibid.*, 284.

are depending on a mutual feeling of “normal” context.²⁴ One of Adler’s major ideas is that when the context changes, even if everything else stays the same, the result (the activity observed), also changes.²⁵ The observed event is what defines the context, and that context, together with other external influences, is what defines the event.²⁶

Context as a concept and analytic framework is probably best developed within folklore studies. Alan Dundes is considered to be the “father” of the contextual approach in folklore analysis. Aiming to encourage a new debate on the definition of different folklore forms, in his 1964 paper titled *Text, Texture and Context* he suggests three levels of folklore form analysis: of the text, texture and context.²⁷ Analysing texture means focusing on language (phonemes and morphemes); the text would be one version of the story or one recorded narrative; while the context would be a social situation in which a particular folklore form is being presented/used. He argues that the context should be differentiated from the function of the folklore form because the function means abstracting based on several contexts, so the function is actually a researcher’s interpretation of the possible use and function of some folklore form.²⁸ This debate was further developed by other folklorists. Dan Ben-Amos produced maybe the most theoretically elaborated interpretation of context in folklore studies. According to him, folklore is an integral part of a culture which means that extricating it from its “original” place, time and society leads to qualitative changes.²⁹ Ben-Amos lists a series of variables such as the social context, cultural context, rhetorical situation, talent of the individual, audience, etc. all of which could influence the structure, text and texture of a particular folklore form.³⁰ Ben-Amos concludes that for the analysis of the particular folklore form, performance is the most relevant context,

24 Ibid., 285.

25 Ibid., 288.

26 Ibid., 289.

27 Dundes, Alan. “Tekstura, tekst i kontekst,” *Folkloristička čitanka*, Hameršak, Marijana i Suzana Marjanić, ur. (Zagreb: Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku; AGM, 2010.), 93.

28 Ibid., 95.

29 Ben-Amos, Dan. “Prema definiciji folkloru u kontekstu,” *Folkloristička čitanka*, Hameršak, Marijana i Suzana Marjanić, ured. (Zagreb: Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku; AGM, 2010.), 122.

30 Ibid.

because any and all variables can and do influence the text.³¹ Using and observing context as an analytic model, Ben-Amos claims that contextual analysis does not explain folklore, rather it interprets it. The contextual analysis is not restricted to text but rather examines the entire experience of folklore in some society and/or community, which means that the analysis must take into consideration the cultural, social and situational context. The meaning of text here is its meaning in context, which means that transferring any folklore text into some literary, historical or cultural context changes the meaning of the text. Ben-Amos argues that folklore text does not have just one meaning, and that every use of the text includes other (former) contexts as a constitutive part of its meanings. The only real interpretation is the interpretation of the text in context.³² The interpretive function of context is particularly valuable in comparative analyses in which fixed texts, framed motives and narrative patterns are present in different cultures. Their meanings and significance are dependent on the context. Their performers and holders are not familiar with their diffusion, for them, they have a very particular meaning. In every event context functions interpretively, attaching to performances the meanings which performers and the audience sees in them. When the text is a stable form, and the context is variable, then the context influences the meaning that a text can have. In that way the context is functioning as an interpreter of the text.³³ On the other hand, folklore forms that have a greater textual variation could have a stronger stability of meaning in different contexts, however, the broader cultural context can affect these kinds of texts as well. These texts are equally connected with ideologies, historical knowledge, ways of thinking, aesthetic principles, etc.³⁴ Ben-Amos concludes that the concept of context is free of designated values; there is no privileged contextual situation, they are all equally important and influential, which means that every research situation constitutes its own context.³⁵

Another folklorist, Katherine Young, has focused on the multiplici-

31 Ibid., 123.

32 Ben-Amos, Dan. „Context“ in Context,” *Western Folklore*, 52:2 (1993): 210-211.

33 Ibid., 212.

34 Ibid., 213.

35 Ibid., 219.

ty, differentiations, and constitutionality of the context. She claims that everything that surrounds some event does not have to be contextual for that event, i.e., the context is a matter of relevance.³⁶ That is why it is necessary to specify the relationship of the particular context with the particular event. Contextual analysis, according to Young, should problematize the relationship between the context and the event, and not between collections of contexts.³⁷ Events are dependent upon context in two ways: (1) the context is the context of some event. Every context brings a different perspective on the event, and the event presents itself differently in different contexts. The number of contexts that can influence that event is countless, but they are not all influential at the same time. The contexts change with the view of the observer and they are not the same for other observers, which means that, (2) the context is the context of the observer.³⁸ Young argues that the context can perfectly fit in order to correspond with the goals of the observer, likewise with the goals of the analysis and interpretation. Different analyses reference different contexts and so the choice of the perspective directs the analysis towards the events that function as a context. That means that the same event in a different context is actually a different event. The events and contexts are intertwined.³⁹ Young concludes that every context draws out different aspects of the story, likewise, different aspects of the story enter different contexts. The stories are not a constant in different contexts, neither are contexts fixed constellations around some story. The stories and contexts are inter-dependent; stories change and contexts are multiple.⁴⁰

One of the most important discussions and interpretations of context derives from anthropology. In anthropology context is used to define different characteristics and environments. Context can be cultural, social, political, ritual, religious, economic, ecological, interactional, historical, etc.⁴¹ According to Ladislav Holy, context has been and always will be the

36 Young, Katherine. "The Notion of Context," *Western Folklore*, 44, 2 (1985): 116.

37 *Ibid.*, 117.

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*, 122.

41 Dille, Roy. *The Problem of Context* (Oxford; New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 26.

key anthropological concept.⁴² Across the history of the discipline of social/cultural anthropology, different characteristics and/or features were considered relevant context. According to Dilley we are actually talking about theoretical paradigmatic changes in the discipline – from function to meaning, and from structure to process.⁴³ Culture becomes, for many anthropologists, the key context,⁴⁴ however, while the concept of the culture was problematized, criticized, redefined, the concept of the context was considered clear and unproblematic.

Since Bronislaw Malinowski, who is considered, by many authors, to be the pioneer of the contextual approach in anthropology,⁴⁵ anthropologists are using their “mantra” of “putting” some social or cultural phenomena in the context as an analytic strategy to give meaning to their ethnographic material.⁴⁶ There are two key notions that are fundamental for anthropological contextual analysis, and both are framed by Malinowski: (1) the context of the culture, and (2) the context of the situation. The context of the culture refers to shared knowledge of the performers, their convention of the behaviour, religious systems, linguistic metaphors, historical awareness and ethical principles. This cultural context is the broadest frame for the perception and interpretation of folklore. The context of the situation is the narrower context and refers to the direct situation in which the folklore form is being performed.⁴⁷ Malinowski designed the situational context in order to deal with the circumstances in which language is being used and articulated. He argued that the meaning of the words should always be searched for within the culture, and should not be considered as something passive.⁴⁸

The only, as far as I know, anthropological publication focused on context *per se* is a 1999 volume edited by Roy Dilley with the simple title *The Problem of Context*. The editor starts with the fact that context itself is a problematic notion, and that it is a result of previous interpreta-

42 Holy, Ladislav. “Contextualisation and Paradigm Shifts,” *The Problem of Context*, Dilley, Roy (ed.) (Oxford; New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 48.

43 Dilley, *The Problem of Context*, 3.

44 *Ibid.*, 4.

45 Ben-Amos, “„Context“ in Context”, 215; Dilley, *The Problem of Context*, 25.

46 Dilley, *The Problem of Context*, 1.

47 Ben-Amos, “Context“ in Context”, 215.

48 Dilley, *The Problem of Context*, 25.

tions.⁴⁹ Dilley emphasizes that one of the main features of social/cultural anthropology is the interpretation in the context,⁵⁰ which binds the two key notions of anthropological methodology: interpretation and context.⁵¹ To interpret means to interconnect, and the context likewise includes connections but also incoherence. When we interpret an object we are actually putting it in the context, respectively, connecting it with relevant relations in its environment.⁵² According to Dilley, context is a set of links interpreted as relevant for somebody or something, or a particular problem.⁵³ However, there are questions that Dilley raises that were taken for granted by other anthropologists: What does it mean to place something in the context, and/or take something out of the context? What is the difference between being in the context and outside of it? How do you design a relevant context that you use in your analysis?⁵⁴ Dilley considers that our own anthropological knowledge is included in our construction of those contexts that we consider relevant for particular problems, i.e., we choose the appropriate context for the analysis of other people's practices. This is, according to Dilley, a serious problem with very significant implications for anthropology in general,⁵⁵ and for other disciplines I would add. Behind this "simple" notion of contextualization that gives the form to our interpretations, there are important questions: What actually is the context? How do you define it? And who chooses it? Dilley emphasizes that the interpretation in the context demands a pre-interpretation of the relevant context that we then use in our next interpretation. He links his ideas with Ricoeur who argues that if we want to understand the text we have to understand the context, but to understand the context, we first have to understand the text.⁵⁶ The very act of interpretation, using one frame rather than the other, is an act of power.⁵⁷ Somebody has the power to impose their definition of the relevant context, which for Dilley is he-

49 Ibid., 2.

50 Ibid., ix.

51 Ibid., x.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid., 2.

54 Ibid., xii.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid., 15.

57 Ibid., 35.

gemony.⁵⁸ For Dilley, the task of the anthropology should be to investigate the possibilities of the relevant context not just according to our knowledge, but also according to the knowledge of the native interpreters and commentators. The anthropologists should try to get these positions in a dialogue.⁵⁹ Dilley concludes that we should never lose sight of the fact that the context is relevant for a particular individual who is socially and historically situated.⁶⁰ According to him, we cannot actually make some final conclusion regarding the problem of context, we can only raise our awareness about the articulations and connections that we make in the process of contextualization.⁶¹ Ladislav Holy argues that we need to address more attention to contextualization in order to understand why we interpret some phenomena as we do.⁶² The best we can manage to do, according to Holy, is to portray context metaphorically, as does Erving Goffman, who considers the context as a frame that surrounds phenomena that we need to understand and interpret. In this argument context is an environment, background, perspective and a stage on which the observed phenomenon has the central position.⁶³ The problem of defining context Holy tracks in the fact that the relevant context (and the meaning) of some phenomenon is constructed through interpretation,⁶⁴ and the problem of defining what exactly is relevant context for our interpretation is a result of a fact that our relevant context comes actually from our interpretation. This means that the meaning is equally dependent on the context as much as context is dependent on the meaning we are trying to find.⁶⁵ In trying to find the meaning of a certain phenomenon, anthropologists have, according to Holy, neglected the relationship between meaning and context and tried to find a solution to the problem of meaning by concentrating only on the impact of the context on the meaning. The context, therefore, has been taken for granted, while it was the meaning that was considered

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid., 38.

60 Ibid., 39.

61 Ibid., 38.

62 Holy, "Contextualisation and Paradigm Shifts", 49.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid., 50.

problematic and was subjected to analysis. Phenomena were observed as inseparable from their context, but that context was reduced only to identifying it. We have easily forgotten the fact, argues Holy, that the context of some phenomenon does not actually exist somewhere there, but is also a result of our interpretation.⁶⁶ According to Holy, the phenomena we are trying to explain are defining the ways in which we perceive the contexts in which we place them, so the relevant context we choose depends on the meaning we are trying to find. That means that the context is not a result of the analysis, it is actually evoked.⁶⁷ The phrase “relevant context” means that there are multiple contexts in which we can observe something, but only one of them is relevant for our interpretation.⁶⁸ Holy argues that nothing has a meaning *per se* – the meanings and contexts are inseparable, and meanings are subject to manipulations. The same goes for the context. If meanings are dependent on the context, any kind of manipulation of the meanings results in the manipulation of the context as well. Since the context is constructed for different reasons, defining the context is a useless act.⁶⁹ Holy concludes that when our analysis is focused on finding some meaning in one particular context which produced the meaning we are trying to find, our analysis actually abolishes the multiplicity of the meanings, and at the end makes the phenomenon inexplicable.⁷⁰ According to Holy, the problem between anthropologists and their interlocutors is the misunderstanding of the conceptualization of the context. Anthropological interpretations are formed on a theoretical level, while the informants always, at least partially, draw from practice. Anthropologists are researching the culture of the informants; the informants live in it, create and re-create it. All of them can interpret the culture, but from different perspectives, and for different reasons and different audiences. Anthropologists have the capacity to place things in a broader context, but they are also in a position to create relevant context.⁷¹ According to Holy,

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid., 52.

68 Ibid., 53.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid., 56.

71 Ibid., 57.

anthropologists have to direct their attention towards the informant's contextualization that comes from their everyday lives.⁷²

Some historians dealing with oral history are also aware of the issues of power and hegemony, the relationship between the researcher and the researched, the researcher reflexivity and transparency. Their considerations of intersubjectivity and power relations between interviewers and interviewees, led to the concept of "shared authority" that redefine and redistribute intellectual authority (Smith⁷³). However, I did not find any historian's paper dealing with the problem of context that could be raised within the discussions on oral history or any other historical archive research. Choosing a particular document and consciously or un-consciously neglecting some other is also power act and context defining moment.

I have left probably the most systematic and most comprehensive discussion about context for the end of this walk around disciplines: two books by Teuna van Dijk, *Discourse and Context: A Sociocognitive Approach*⁷⁴ and *Society and Discourse: How Social Context Influences Text and Talk*.⁷⁵ With these two books he develops a new theory of context. He claims that he considered and analyzed linguistic, sociolinguistic, cognitive, psychological, sociological and anthropological approaches to context and developed his multidisciplinary theory.⁷⁶ His contextual analysis of discourse goes beyond grammatical, textual, and interactional analysis and understandings. In other words, for van Dijk, understanding the discourse means understanding the text in its context. This means that the analysis of the discourse must define what is relevant context and how the relationships between that context, text and discourse should be analysed.⁷⁷ Van Dijk claims that he, unlike other approaches to the context, observes the context as subjective definitions of interactional or communicational

72 Ibid., 58.

73 Graham Smith. *The making of oral history: Sections 1-2*, http://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/oral_history.html.

74 Van Dijk, Teun. *Discourse and Context: A Sociocognitive Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

75 Van Dijk, Teun. *Society and Discourse: How Social Context Influences Text and Talk* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

76 Van Dijk, *Society and Discourse*, vii.

77 Van Dijk, *Discourse and Context*, 3.

situations.⁷⁸ Context, according to van Dijk, can draw out many features of a social situation, on different levels, that can influence the production, structure and understanding of the discourse, whether the participants are aware of that or not, and whether the analyst is capable of detecting that or not.⁷⁹ Van Dijk limits and defines context as those features of the communicational situation that are relevant for discourse, either for those who produce the discourse, or for the recipients. As one of his most important conclusions, he highlights the idea that defining the context as a relevant feature of the social situation means that the context actually does not influence the discourse. He claims that there is no direct connection between different aspects of the social situations and discourse and that the sociolinguist has wrongly assumed that gender, race, age, and social status influence the way we speak, since, according to van Dijk, social features are not directly involved in the cognitive process of discourse production and understanding.⁸⁰ In other words, contexts are not objective, they are subjective. They are not a relevant choice of the objective social features of some situation, rather they are a subjective definition of that situation. Context is what participants of the situation define as relevant for that social situation.⁸¹ Because of subjective mental models that derive from personal representations of some particular events, based on personal perspectives, interests and emotions, and framed on personal past experiences, different people who participate in some event, or are witnesses of that event, will have different versions of the same event. However, even those subjective models of the specific event are not just personal, they also have a social intersubjective dimension caused by earlier interactions and communications.⁸² Contexts are mental models. They are subjective, they represent personal experiences, and they embody the knowledge about a social and communications situation that we share with other participants.⁸³ The context is not a part of the social situation, rather it is a

78 Ibid., 16.

79 Van Dijk, *Society and Discourse*, 3.

80 Ibid., 4.

81 Ibid., 5.

82 Ibid., 6.

83 Ibid., 7.

subjective mental model of that situation. For every communication situation, the mental models of the participants define which part of the situation is relevant for each participant.⁸⁴ People react based on the environment in which they are situated, and how they see, understand, interpret and assess their environment. Van Dijk questions how people are capable of understanding the complex environments in which they dwell. He claims that it is a result of their basic understanding of the environment. They already have some pre-existing knowledge about the way they need to act and the actions they can perform in particular environments.⁸⁵ Van Dijk continues and takes into consideration other possible aspects of the environment such as temperature, noise, silence, smells, purity, pollution, colors and decorations and asks whether these features of the environments can also be a part of the participant's definition of the context?⁸⁶ He concludes that only some aspects of the environment, such as the social definition of space and place, can influence discourse that defines a relevant context.⁸⁷ Van Dijk differentiates two levels of context: (1) the context of the situation, and (2) the cultural context. The context of the situation is a local context that includes the participants of the face-to-face communication and is situated in a specific environment. The cultural context is more global and includes members of the entire community and their features such as knowledge, norms and values.⁸⁸ At the end of his second book, van Dijk summarizes and simplifies his hypothesis and frames some definitions of context. According to him, contexts are everyday experiences, interpretations of everyday events in which we personally participate. As such they are as unique as our experiences are, but they are equally interconnected with the knowledge that we have as members of the group, community or culture. In that way they are becoming experiences that can be partially shared and that enable our mutual understanding.⁸⁹

Although van Dijk has interesting and relevant observations and hy-

84 Ibid., 4.

85 Ibid., 58.

86 Ibid., 59.

87 Ibid., 60.

88 Ibid., 154.

89 Ibid., 201.

pothesis, on a theoretical level, if we take the ideas of the other authors presented here into consideration, he does not actually move these debates forward. The fact that he, independently, comes to more-or-less similar ideas and conclusions as other authors, supports the results of others. It seems to me that he has stayed too much framed within a linguistic perspective on context, and that is too limiting if we want to develop the new multidisciplinary definition of context that he is trying to design.

Concluding Thoughts

All the above-mentioned authors who, from different disciplines and with different approaches, have dealt with and discussed the concept of context, actually agree on many features, problems and facts regarding the context, even though they do not address each other's work, or are necessarily familiar with others' results. In almost all social sciences and humanities context is taken for granted, but at the same time it is being used as one of the main interpretive frameworks. Taking into consideration the different discussions of the problem of context, I have tried to draw out some main facts without which we cannot discuss context or use it as an analytical framework:

- (1) Context is inseparably interconnected with the meaning of the particular cultural phenomenon or practice that we are researching. If the context is changed, then the meaning is also changed (Lozica,⁹⁰ Holy, Adler⁹¹).
- (2) The relevant context that a researcher uses in their interpretation of some cultural phenomenon or practice is a result of that researcher's pre-existing knowledge and the meaning that they want to find, i.e., the hypothesis they want to prove (Young; Goodman; Adler;⁹² Ben-Amos; Engel; Barnett; Dilley; Holy; Dundes).

90 Lozica, Ivan. *Izvan teatra: teatrabilni oblici folkloru u Hrvatskoj* (Zagreb: Hrvatsko društvo kazališnih kritičara i teatrologa, 1990.).

91 Adler, "The Normativity of Context".

92 Adler, "Is Context a Problem?"; Adler, "The Normativity of Context".

We can conclude from this that the researcher using their pre-existing knowledge about some phenomenon or practice frames a hypothesis and begins their research. In order to have their research accepted by others, they employ as an analytical framework, among other things, context - contextualization. However, out of any number of possible contexts, meanings and functions that this particular phenomenon or practice could have for the holders – our interlocutors, in different spatial and time frameworks, the researcher chooses only one “relevant” context that is relevant for them and for the audience for which they are writing. Choosing this particular and specific context as the most relevant for interpretation, they consciously or un-consciously, find arguments, evidence and artefacts that will support their claims and hypothesis. If some new elements surprisingly appear that do not fit into the framework and relevant context that have already been established by the researcher, then they are likely to be discarded as context that is irrelevant to the context in which the researcher is working. Such discarding or exclusion of other contexts constitutes an act of power and hegemony.⁹³ Moreover, important issue is the researcher’s reflexivity and self-awareness. If we imagine that the main source of the information’s is an interlocutor we have additional factors to be aware of. Besides our perspective and selection of information, there is also the perspective and selection of our interlocutors. Research process is always a two-way street, we receive those information’s that our interlocutor wants to share with us. So, our selection is selection of the selection. And then, at the end, both our perspective and our interlocutors, is influenced by broader cultural, social, political, etc. context.

These facts should be a starting point in all social sciences and humanities research and interpretations. I agree with Roy Dillely that we cannot reach any final conclusion and/or solution of the problem of the context. The best we can do is to be aware of the problem⁹⁴ and try to take it into consideration in our research and interpretations. This means that we should not frame our hypothesis *a priori* based on our former knowledge, but rather include the knowledge of the people whose culture, practices or

93 Dillely, *The Problem of Context*, 35.

94 *Ibid.*, 38.

phenomenon we are researching (Jackson 1989: 50;⁹⁵ Dilley;⁹⁶ Holy⁹⁷). We have to try to grasp which contexts are relevant for them and what kind of meanings they are giving to our object of investigation. If we are trying to interpret and find a meaning in only one “relevant” context, we are actually preventing the multiplicity of the meanings it can have, and in that way making it inexplicable.⁹⁸

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95 Jackson, *Paths Towards a Clearing: Radical Empiricism and Ethnographic Inquiry*, 50.

96 Dilley, *The Problem of Context*, 38.

97 Holy, “Contextualisation and Paradigm Shifts”, 58.

98 Holy, “Contextualisation and Paradigm Shifts”, 56. I have used these ideas and conclusions in my research, interpretations and writings several times, for example of some recent work see Katić, Mario. “Historical Contextualization of Oral Tradition,” *Literary History* 158 (2016): 223-236; Katić, Mario. *Smrt u dalmatinskom zaleđu: mirila od rituala do teatra* (Zagreb: Naklada Ljevak, 2017.).

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RELEVANTNOST KONTEKSTA

KLJUČNE RIJEČI:

kontekst,
kontekstualizacija,
relevantni kontekst,
značenje konteksta

SAŽETAK

Uzimajući u obzir različite dostupne radove o kontekstu autor iznosi dvije važne činjenice bez kojih ne možemo raspravljati o kontekstu ili se njime koristiti kao analitičkim modelom: (1) Kontekst je nerazdvojivo povezan sa značenjem određenoga kulturnog fenomena ili prakse koji istražujemo. Promjenom konteksta mijenja se i značenje; (2) Relevantni kontekst koji koristimo u interpretaciji nekog kulturnog fenomena ili prakse rezultat je istraživačeva prethodnoga sa/znanja i značenja kojeg ona/on želi pronaći, odnosno hipoteze koju želi dokazati.

Autor tvrdi da moramo pokušati dokučiti koji su konteksti relevantni našim sugovornicima i koja značenja oni pridaju našim objektima istraživanja u njima relevantnim kontekstima. Jer, ako tražimo željeno značenje u samo jednom „relevantnom“ kontekstu, time dokidamo mnogostrukost značenja koju istraživani objekt može imati, i samim time ga činimo zapravo neobjašnjivim.