

Contextualism and Understanding in Behavioral Science. R.L. Rosnow and M. Georgoudi (Eds.). New York: Praeger, 1986, 392 pages, \$49.95.

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This edited collection focuses on research on topics in social psychology, developmental psychology, and psychology of personality, all from the perspective of the contextualist philosophy. The contributions are all review articles, thus making this volume important reading for scholars who are interested in general contextualism, and social science in particular. There is no real reference to areas like memory, learning, perception or cognition—areas that are part-and-parcel of experimental psychology and have also recently manifested some contextualist inclinations (Hoffman, 1986; Hoffman and Nead, 1983; Hoffman and Palermo, 1988; Jenkins, 1975). The history of contextualism, to Rosnow and Georgoudi, is essentially a history of social, personality, and developmental psychology. In this sense, contextualism began as a discontent with the philosophy of mechanism, and was fueled by particular research findings, such as the classic "Hawthorne effect," Orne's (1962) "demand characteristics," and Rosenthal's (1966) "experimenter bias effects." Rosnow and Georgoudi did not intend to go beyond social personality and developmental psychology to other areas. Thus, the text's title does itself a bit of a disservice.

The first set of chapters (by I. Altman, J.G. Morawski, and R.E. Lana) focuses on the history of social psychology, including a summary of transactional theories, phenomenological approaches, hermeneutics, and other approaches as well. (Here, as well as in Rosnow and Georgoudi's introductory chapter, Rene Descartes comes out the bad guy, but that's another story.) The second set of chapters (by R.M. and J.V. Lerner, T.O. Blank, and R.A. Dixon) deals with developmental psychology, especially adult psychology and life-span developmental psychology. These papers discuss ways in which the results of modern research fit the contextualist view, and ways in which contextualism has implications for theories and methods in developmental psychology. The third set of chapters (by J. Veroff, J.S. Efran et al., and T.R. Sarbin and G.E. McKechnie) focuses on the psychology of personality. They deal with the role of contextual factors in shaping personality, the "interactionist" theory of personality, and the implications of contextualism for defining the abnormal personality and for establishing therapeutic methods. The fourth set of papers, ostensibly on language, deal mostly with theories of social communication. J. Shotter, J. Meyerowitz, and G. Gerbner discuss such topics as discourse processes, the role of media (as context), story telling, and television. Finally, in the overview section, W.J. McGuire looks ahead to further developments in contextualist social psychology, especially in the area of research methods and what he calls the "perspectivist" point of view. The very last chapter, by R.L. Rosnow, is really an introductory chapter in that it offers cogent

summaries of the other chapters. I recommend that it be read second, after the introductory chapter by Rosnow and Georgoudi.

I feel compelled to quibble a bit about the definition of contextualism that is offered in the first chapter, by Rosnow and Georgoudi. I think the details are important. The authors state that, subsequent to *World Hypotheses* (1942), Pepper modified his views into a theory he called "selectivism." It is important to know that this "ism" reflected the input of psychologist E.C. Tolman in discussions with Pepper at Berkeley. Pepper was troubled by the lack of clear examples of contextualist sciences, but, to the best of my knowledge, he never really "rejected" contextualist ideas.

Rosnow and Georgoudi state (p. 4) that contextualism has the premise that all knowledge is "perennially conceptual and conjectural," there is no "absolute truth." Well, it does presume this, but only in a sense. There are facts ("truths"); there are accurate, specific, verifiable knowledge claims. What contextualism presumes is that facts are about events, and that descriptions of events are always relative to the purposes and goals of the describing agent. Rosnow and Georgoudi's "premise" is actually a derivative of the basic premise of contextualism, that everything changes, everything is events. Contextualism does *not* assert that psychological facts are "inherently indeterminate" (p. 4). The point of contextualism is that psychological truths, lawful generalizations, never stem from decontextualized, aseptic experiments. They stem from research that somehow relates to real experience *as well as* to the manipulation of experimental conditions. An example of the style of research that contextualism objects to is that in the area of perception, in which an attempt is made to construct an entire theory of perception based on the idea that illusions are fundamental, and that perception consists of the analysis of static glimpses of the kind afforded by the tachistoscope. Certainly, perception is a complex of processes, and much headway can be made by studying illusions and by using tachistoscopes. But allow the human observer to move his/her head, use both eyes, and see real motion, and many of the laboratory-based laws either break down or become irrelevant to real perceiving (Gibson, 1979).

Another statement by Rosnow and Georgoudi with which I must quibble is that "we cannot know the world in full detail" (p. 5). Such an assertion presupposes all sorts of ancillary assumptions that go beyond the basic tenets of contextualism.

The moral here: you know that a school of thought has "arrived" when people start quibbling about details. One must hope that quibbles will not fractionate this "ism" too much. Despite my quibbles, Rosnow and Georgoudi have a good grasp of contextualism. For instance, they are careful to point out that contextualist analyses do not treat context as merely a set of separate factors or variables that describe external stimuli or their contexts. Another point they mention is one that is near and dear to my heart—the dissolution of the distinction between basic and applied research. This is another manifestation of contextualism, one that merits its own essay.

Despite the fact that the various chapters refer to different "isms" (such as constructivism, perspectivism, S-R interactionism, ethnomethodology, etc.), there is a unifying theme here. Surprisingly little forcing is needed to integrate these various "isms." In all, the book does a good job of summarizing the contextualist philosophy, its origins, and its relations to the current *Zeitgeist*. The book is more for the theoretician and those interested in theoretical integration of the available research. No new data are reported for the experimentalist, but that was not the editor's purpose or goal. Rather, the book intends to make a case that a paradigm shift is occurring, a "radical new position regarding the aims and methods of behavioral science" (p. 309). Hence, the focus on theoretical integration of available research results.

In my discussions in recent years with scientists in areas as diverse as social psychology

and artificial intelligence, I sense dissatisfaction with computer metaphors and information processing models (Descartes' legacy). Anyone feeling that dissatisfaction should find a foray into contextualism to be refreshing, challenging, and worthwhile. It offers ideas about methodology as well as about theory and philosophy, as the Rosnow and Georgoudi volume shows.

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