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ABSTRACT

Scientific researchers traditionally have held that the use of data represents a test of hypotheses or theories. Social psychologist William McGuire has developed a contrary position, arguing that instead of testing hypotheses and theories, research merely specifies their limitations, generality, and assumptions. McGuire's contextualism suggests that all hypotheses and theories, even contradictory ones, are both true and false in different situations. Such an approach implies a partial resolution to the empirical/humanistic debate over mass media effects research. As an empiricist, McGuire maintains that data are needed to evaluate theory; as a humanist, he holds that data do not represent the only source of knowledge. Mass media researchers have long used strategies consistent with contextualism, and it does not necessarily imply numerous and dramatic changes in methods of those who have recognized the transitional and processual nature of mass communication. It does suggest relatively profound changes in the interpretations researchers place on empirical evidence, however. Because of the complexity of social phenomena, time and space often will limit the applicability of research findings. Therefore, researchers of media effects should exercise caution in the answers they offer to questions of applied social importance. A 7-page reference list is appended. (FL)

# IMPLICATIONS OF A CONTEXTUALIST APPROACH TO MEDIA-EFFECTS RESEARCH



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# IMPLICATIONS OF A CONTEXTUALIST APPROACH TO MEDIA-EFFECTS RESEARCH


## Abstract

Scientific researchers traditionally have viewed empirical data as a means of testing hypotheses and theories. Social psychologist William McGuire has developed a contrary position, his version of contextualism. Researchers should assume all theories and hypotheses, even contradictory ones, true a priori, but only in a limited range of situations. Research still is needed to specify the contexts in which a given theory or hypothesis is an approximation of the truth and those in which it is not, according to McGuire. This paper argues that such an approach implies a partial resolution to controversies between humanistic and empirical mass-communication scholars concerning the nature of knowledge. It also illustrates that media-effects researchers long have used some techniques consistent with contextualism. The paper includes a discussion of contextualist implications for changes in research practices and in the answers media-effects researchers give to questions of applied social concern.

# IMPLICATIONS OF A CONTEXTUALIST APPROACH TO MEDIA-EFFECTS RESEARCH

During much of the history of research into the effects of mass communication, several controversies have existed. Critical and other humanistic scholars often have criticized empirical research for an inattention to social context (for example, Slack & Allor, 1983) and for an authoritarian belief that empiricist verification represents the only source of truth (for example, Ewen, 1983; Thayer, 1983). Empirical researchers have responded by saying they include measurable proxies for context, such as socioeconomic status, in research designs. They also tend to claim that without empirical test, theory is polemic (for example, Stevenson, 1983).[1]

In addition, members of the general public have claimed that important media effects of various sorts occur (Roberts & Maccoby, 1985), but social scientists who have studied these claims often have reported a failure to corroborate them (for example, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948). Even when research generally has demonstrated effects, such as the impact of exposure to televised violence upon aggressive behavior in young people, media influence often appears weak (Kenny, 1984).[2] Laypersons, however, may rely upon anecdotal evidence or intuition, instead of scientific data, in forming their judgments.

Underlying the position of empirical researchers is an assumption that the use of data represents a test of a theory or hypothesis. Social psychologist William McGuire, however, recently has argued against

the assumption. McGuire's version of a theory of knowledge, contextualism (McGuire, 1983; 1985), maintains that scientists should change the way they view the relationship of a hypothesis and empirical data. They should make an a priori assumption that all theories and hypotheses, even contradictory ones, are both true and false,[3] in different situations. Therefore, instead of testing theories and hypotheses, research specifies their limitations, generality, and assumptions.

Such an approach implies a partial resolution to the empirical/humanistic debate over research. As an empiricist, McGuire maintains that data are needed to evaluate theory. Like the humanistic scholars, he does not claim that empirical data represent the only source of knowledge.[4] His contextualism also suggests a way of resolving popular intuition and research evidence. Popular opinion about the media is not wrong, but correct only in an unknown range of situations.

Social psychology long has influenced mass-communication research. McGuire's epistemological ideas also likely will affect mass-communication researchers, probably soon after they become more-widely adopted in social psychology. This paper will summarize both contextualism generally and McGuire's version. Writing in The Journal of Communication, psychologists Marianthi Georgoudi and Ralph Rosnow (1985a) argued that contextualism is arising from a revolutionary metamorphosis in social science. It will be argued here that media-effects researchers long have used empirical strategies consistent with it, and decades-old conceptions of mass communication as a transaction between sender and receiver are but a few evolutionary steps removed from it. The present paper also will discuss certain implications of contextualism, particularly of McGuire's version, for the way media-effects researchers view and interpret their work, for

the methods they use, and for the answers they provide to questions of applied social concern.

## Contextualism

American pragmatists such as Charles Pierce and William James provided the roots of contextualism. The formal contextualist world view, as discussed by Pepper (1942) and applied to social psychology by Georgoudi and Rosnow (1985b), begins with the root metaphor for science of the transitory historical event. Events are historical not in the common usage of the word (i.e., in the past), but because they are changing continously and point both to past antecedents and to future outcomes. Change itself is viewed as categorical; therefore, knowledge always must remain provisional and relative (Georgoudi & Rosnow, 1985b). Researchers are cautioned against trying to explain phenomena with reference to covering laws and static axiomatic systems, and contextualism implies an acceptance of pure chance and intentional human action. Therefore, researchers should specify carefully the contexts in which they make claims for knowledge (Georgoudi & Rosnow, 1985b). Contextualists do not ignore, however, "the possibility that some forms of change are much slower than others so as to give the impression of timeless structures or qualities in the events examined" (Georgoudi & Rosnow, 1985b, p. 11).

During the last dozen years, the term contextualism has appeared not only in the literatures of communication (Georgoudi & Rosnow, 1985a) and of social and personality psychology (Georgoudi & Rosnow 1985b; Mancuso, 1977; McGuire, 1983, 1985; Sarbin, 1977; Veroff, 1983), but also in cognitive psychology (Jenkins, 1974). In addition, prominent psychologists such as

Lee Cronbach (1975), Kenneth Gergen (1973), and Donald Campbell (1973) have adopted positions substantively consistent with it.

Although differences exist among contextualists, they tend to share certain themes. Contextualists have developed a supposedly nonmechanistic view of psychology, as opposed to the machine-like analogy of the field embraced by earlier, positivist-influenced social scientists (Georgoudi & Rosnow, 1985b). Mechanism had its roots in physical scientists such as Newton, and psychologists using it viewed the human being as analogous to a push-and-pull machine that responded to stimuli in its environment (Rosnow, 1981). In contrast, McGuire and others with similar views:

> ...all seem to emphasize the active, intentional nature of human behavior; to view the human subject as actively engaged in the construction of social knowledge; to treat the scientist as participant rather than as 'detached observer'; to urge the use of methods to uncover the diachronic structure and intentional nature of social phenomena; and to treat these phenomena as parts of a wider sociohistorical context. (Georgoudi & Rosnow, 1985b, pp. 6-7)

## McGuire's Theory of Knowledge

This section contains a summary and interpretation of McGuire's contextualism, based upon two recent publications (McGuire, 1983; 1985). He does not cite other contextualist formulations, but uses the term because it emphasizes that empirical data are "an aid for discovering contexts in which a given theory leads to useful insights and contexts in which it is misleading" (McGuire, 1985, p. 573).

Contextualism represents a logical successor to several previous epistemologies for scientific disciplines. Among these are the positivism associated with August Comte and Herbert Spencer and, more recently, the logical empiricism of Rudolph Carnap and Herbert Feigl.

Positivism suggested that all knowledge comes from direct sensory experience, implying that theory should be constructed after research evidence is available. Logical empiricism (sometimes termed logical positivism or neo-positivism), on the other hand, stresses the need for scientists to derive hypotheses from theory before testing them.

To a contextualist, knowledge and theory always are distorted representations of reality. The degree of distortion in a given theory varies from situation to situation. Therefore, widely different guiding-idea theories in social psychology, ranging from consistency theories such as cognitive dissonance to social-learning and repetition theories, all provide a partially accurate description of people. None, however, applies in all contexts, or perhaps even in most. In fact, any theory or hypothesis should be assumed true a priori, but only in some situations. Theories and hypotheses will differ greatly in how generally applicable they are.

This suggests changes in the way research is reported. A student preparing a doctoral dissertation or professor attempting to publish a research article begins with a hypothesis. The tenets of logical empiricism, which stress empirical confrontation as a <u>test</u> of the hypothesis rather than as a <u>discovery process</u>, suggest a need for the researcher to corroborate his or her prediction. This generally will not occur with the first research effort, however. The researcher then will modify the design and, if she or he is tenacious enough, eventually will find evidence consistent with the prediction. Typically, only the corroborating study is reported fully in the dissertation or journal article. The earlier, noncorroborating studies, however, may contain important information about limitations in the applicability of the

hypothesis and about the implicit assumptions the researcher has made in developing it.

Contextualism has several implications for the way research is conducted. On the one hand, scientists should develop several different theoretical explanations that are consistent with an individual hypothesis. All these explanations may be approximations to truth in different situations. For example, a hypothesis that exposure to violent television content leads to aggressive behavior is consistent with explanations involving disinhibition, response availability and others (McGuire, 1983, p. 27). A scientist also should construct theory suggesting an opposite hypothesis, such as a prediction that exposure to mediated violence may have a cathartic effect, inhibiting aggression (Feshbach, 1961).

Because of this, contextualism suggests that research methods classes devote too much time to tactical decisions a person makes in conducting a given experiment or survey. Instead, the creative process of theorizing and generating hypotheses and ways to plan a series of studies designed to define the limitations of a theory or prediction should receive more attention. For a scientist to conduct a series of studies pertaining to a given hypothesis no longer should be seen as a sign of creative deficit, according to McGuire.

McGuire urges that researchers use diverse methodological strategies in constructing theory, some consistent with the research-before-theory position of positivism and others with the theory-then-research position of logical empiricism. As positivism suggests, researchers should make greater use of exploratory data-analytic techniques in generating theory, such as multivariate fishing expeditions and the inclusion of variables in experimental designs for discovering unexpected interaction. Consistent

with logical empiricism, structural-equation models, in which the researcher imposes theory on data, also are recommended. McGuire calls for a systems style of research, using multiple and bidirectional causal paths, to approximate the complexity of the real world.

Georgoudi & Rosnow (1985a) argue that contextualism represents a break with the mechanistic influence of physical science on social science. This change is needed in part because of artifacts present in research with human subjects, such as demand characteristics. Contextualism does not necessarily require a total abandonment of mechanistic influence, however. In the future of social psychology, for example, McGuire predicts the emergence of a theory "based on the broader information-processing conceptualizations that have evolved from the computer analogy, but augmented by a fuller appreciation of motivational aspects and of memory limitations and costs" (McGuire, 1985, p. 586).

McGuire also claims (1983) that contextualism is as much a philosophy for physical as for social scientists:

> The contextualist proposition that empirical confrontation involves hypothesis discovery and clarification rather than hypothesis testing is not a prescription needed only by the social and behavioral sciences because of their purportedly more complicated or value-laden subject matter, or their less manipulable or more hidden variables, or their peculiarly unpredictable or reactive units of observation, or whatever. Rather, for the physical scientist as well as the social scientist, empirical confrontation is and ought to be a discovery procedure to make explicit hidden assumptions more than as a testing procedure to discover if the original hypothesis is or is not true. (p. 17)

## Contextualism and Past Media-Effects Research

Georgoudi & Rosnow (1985a) tell us that unrest in communication research "...reflects revolutionary changes subversive to established

ideals in the naturalistic vision of the social sciences" (p. 76). One might conclude that we are in the midst of a contextualist scientific revolution a la Thomas Kuhn (1962), in which assumptions about important questions and appropriate methods change radically. In some ways, however, contextualism represents a more-limited evolutionary step for media-effects researchers.

During much of the history of mass-communication studies, researchers have used diachronic methods, which involve the study of changes over time. For example, Paul Lazarsfeld used panel studies to look at media influence on voting intentions (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948) and upon consumer behavior (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) in some of the earliest media-effects research.

Experimentation, popular with media-effects researchers during the 1960s, has declined in usage since (Rogers & Chaffee, 1983). During the 1970s and early 1980s, media-effects researchers used a variety of diachronic methods, including panel studies (for example, McLeod, Brown, Becker, & Ziemke, 1977) and cross-lagged correlations (for example, Atkin, Galloway, & Nayman, 1976), consistent with process models of communication effects. Even diachronic experiments, designed to study communication process, were not unknown (for example, Bybee, 1978). Although the one-shot, cross-sectional survey perhaps is the most-common method used to study media effects, increasing emphasis on the importance of process has been evident.

Contextualism's axiom that the truth of hypotheses varies with different people and in different situations and its emphasis on the intentional nature of human behavior have been at least implicit in the mass-communications literature for virtually as long as researchers have

measured effects. At different points in the past, according to standard media-effects histories (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1975; Bauer, 1965), models assuming powerful and uniform and those assuming limited effects dominated academic discussions of the mass media.[5] The popular notion of powerful effects guided researchers during the 1920s and the 1930s. The limited-effects model resulted from early efforts to measure media impact and dominated academic discussions during the 1940s and the 1950s. The most important, but sometimes overlooked, result of early experimental research involved the varied effects of communication on different people (Bauer, 1964, p. 320). In The Effects of Mass Communication, a well-known summary of the limited-effects position, Joseph Klapper (1961) recognized that powerful media effects may occur under some conditions, an idea that many also have overlooked (Roberts & Maccoby, 1985).

The limited-effects model also is consistent with contextualist emphasis on the purposive nature of human behavior. Taken to an extreme, the model suggests that any mediated message can have any impact that an audience member desires (McLeod & Becker, 1974). As investigators stopped limiting research questions to purely mechanistic concerns about what the media do to people, they came to view communication as a transaction between the media and audience (for example, Bauer, 1965; Davison, 1959). An early realization that important media-effects questions might include consideration of people's motives for attending to the media (Waples, Berelson, & Bradshaw, 1940) suggested a conditional approach. Because people differ in their reasons for using the mass media, effects may vary for different people (Kline, Miller, & Morrison, 1974). Both transactionism and this uses and gratifications approach to mass-communication research (Blumler & Katz, 1974) clearly are consistent with

contextualists' emphasis on the active and intentional nature of human behavior.

A variety of factors other than audience gratifications also might influence media effects. These could include variables preceding media exposure (McLeod & Reeves, 1980), which may represent social structure. For example, the extent that exposure to television violence contributes to aggressive behavior in children may depend upon how realistic the child believes the content to be, a psychological intervening variable, and also upon the socioeconomic status of the child's family, a structural factor. Such approaches imply that researchers must use more-complex methods and that science potentially can isolate the very specific and sometimes-rare situations in which important media effects occur.

Based upon experience with research, such as that conducted to determine if violent television content contributes to aggressive behavior, one prominent mass-communications theorist (Tichenor, 1981) notes that repeated tests of of a hypothesis often suggest the existence of a large number of conditional relationships. In some conditions, according to Tichenor, a hypothesis may receive support. Under others, it often will not, and an opposing idea may be supported.

> If and when such conditions are specified, the answer to the question 'Which theory is correct?' will become increasingly complex. Also, however, the state of knowledge will be much more complete. Specification of complexity is a common outcome of the pursuit of knowledge. (Tichenor, 1981, pp. 26-27)

Tichenor, however, stops short of proclaiming all hypotheses and theories empirically valid, a priori.

Mass-communications researchers also have emphasized context. Social scientists such as Lazarsfeld have been called contextual social

psychologists (Pettigrew, 1981). The contextualists differ from both experimental and symbolic-interactionist social psychologists because of the contextual group's "consistent simultaneous use of individual and social variables in both its theory and research" (Pettigrew, 1981, p. 308). In addition, Pettigrew notes that contextualists are least identified among social psychologists with any specific research method, clearly consistent with McGuire's call for methodological ecumenicism. The influence of one contextualist, T. M. Newcomb, on mass-media researchers is clear, for example, in Chaffee and McLeod's (1973) comparison of individual and social predictors of information seeking and in research concerning family communication patterns and coorientation (for example, Chaffee, McLeod & Atkin, 1971; Chaffee, 1972; Tims & Masland, 1985). Studies such as these generally attempt to look at mass communication as a part of, and sometimes as an influence on, people's overall communication behavior.

Contextualism describes the scientist as an active participant in knowledge construction, rather than as a detached observer, leading to a rejection of the traditional dichotomy of basic and applied research (Geourgoudi & Rosnow, 1985a). Many media-effects investigators will not quarrel with such a position. Funding for effects research generally has resulted from public concerns about mass communications rather than from theoretical considerations (McLeod & Reeves, 1980). Effects investigators often have not seen themselves as pure scientists seeking to uncover knowledge without considering its practical implications. As a result, they often have participated in policy debates by writing articles for popular magazines, testifying before legislative bodies, and appearing on public-affairs television shows.

Investigators recently have recognized the importance of historical

context in interpreting data. For example, many now argue that certain limited-effects phenomena occurred only in the 1940s (Rogers & Chaffee, 1983), before television became important. The media-dependency model (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976) makes certain contextual, historical predictions, for example that media will have a high potential for effects during times of structural instability in society. Others have said that in an era of rapid innovation of communications technology, current media-effects theories soon may become as dated as the limited-effects model.

## Implications for Future Media-Effects Methods

To assert that all hypotheses are true, but only some instances, implies that much research should involve a search for what statisticians call interaction, which occurs when the impact of one thing on another depends upon one or more additional factor. Interactions can lead to inconsistent findings <u>across</u> studies (Downs & Rocke, 1981),[6] for example when social or historical contexts modify the effect of mass communication on people. They also can operate <u>within</u> a study, when people with different motives for using the mass media respond differently to their messages, for instance. Interactions represent qualifications to general scientific laws, leading social scientists away from studying shared characteristics of all people or social groups and toward the humanist's concern with the uniqueness of individual people and societies.

Students of mass-media effects often complain about the conflicting evidence available concerning virtually all widely researched questions. One can easily locate published research indicating that exposure to televised violence either increases and defuses aggressive behavior in

young people, for instance. Such inconsistency doubtlessly has contributed to the recent shift of interest among graduate students away from effects research (see Wilhoit, 1984, for evidence of this trend). Social-science students may feel, along with Lave and March (1975, p. 2, as quoted in Downs & Rocke, 1981, p. 281), that "God has chosen to give the easy problems to physicists."

Contextualism implies that inconsistency is challenging, not disturbing. That the legalization of sexually explicit films and magazines is followed by an increase in sex-related crimes in one society and a decline in another is to be expected, for example. The crucial task of the researcher is to measure and identify the variables reversing or modifying a possible causal relationship.

In some cases, interactions with unmeasured factors also may cloud results obtained within a study. For example, assume that experimental exposure to televised violence makes relatively aggressive people more aggressive and relatively nonaggressive people less aggressive. An experimenter studying this might find no average difference between a randomly assigned group exposed to televised violence and a control group that viewed only nonviolent content. He or she might conclude, incorrectly, that the televised violence had no impact. An exploratory technique similar to those McGuire recommends would suggest what is really happening, however. Members of the group that viewed violence would be less uniform in aggressiveness than would members of the control group. To detect this, the researcher could compare the variances within each group. The presence of heteroscedasticity, unequal dependent-variable variances at different levels of an independent variable, suggests neglected interaction (Downs & Rocke, 1979; Perry, 1985). In addition, homoscedasticity, or

equality of variances among different groups, is consistent with, although not necessarily conclusive of, an assumption of lack of unidentified interaction within a study (Perry, 1985). Because the impact of exposure to mass communication typically may vary for different people, media-effects researchers routinely should look for heteroscedasticity. When they find it, additional research is needed to identify what types of people are affected in what different ways.

Problems can arise when the number of variables interacting with say, media exposure, is quite large (Downs & Rocke, 1981). For example, exposure to violent television programming may either increase or reduce aggressive behavior in adolescents, depending upon how 30 characteristics of the young person and her or his environment are combined. Should this occur, such a research question may become virtually unanswerable using standard techniques (Downs & Rocke, 1981) because of the sample size needed and interpretation difficulties. For example, interactions involving only four or five factors present severe interpretational difficulties for experimental researchers. One can only hope that complicated interactions, when they occur, are trivial, in terms of explained variability.

Certain process models offer a means of dealing with excessive interaction. In this regard, Downs and Rocke (1981) recommend simulation models discussed by Cyert and March (1963), Crecine (1969), and Larkey (1979). Such techniques involve tracking a process through a number of steps, which represent contingent conditions affecting the outcome of the process.

Contextualism differs from the ideas of most modern media-effects researchers in its denial that research tests hypotheses. This could imply that researchers should not use tests of statistical significance. By

referring to these techniques as tests, statisticians describe them in a language consistent with the logical-empiricist view of research. Not surprisingly, McGuire (1985) advocates a deemphasis of inferential statistical tests, and Cronbach (1975) seems to call for their elimination in research. One can abandon viewing research as testing whether theories and hypotheses are true without eliminating statistical tests, however. Despite their name, they remain useful in indicating whether, for example, an observed correlation between exposure to televised news and public-affairs knowledge could have resulted from sampling error.

Contextualism does have an implication for the way researchers use inferential statistical techniques. If they routinely develop opposing a priori predictions, such as that television exposure can both increase and lessen antisocial behavior, researchers will employ two-tailed test statistics more often. Formally, researchers will not want to exclude the possibility of significance in the opposite direction of their primary expectation.

Viewing all hypotheses as true a priori also suggests that researchers can infer media effects from analyses of media content, contrary to established social-science doctrine (for example Wimmer & Dominick, 1983). One can even assume that certain effects occur, based upon descriptions of media structures, as critical scholars sometimes are accused of doing. Additional research, however, still is needed to specify how general such effects are. It also is needed to identify the conditions in which different effects occur.

For example, the recent New International Information Order debate has featured complaints by spokespersons for the developing nations that the Western news agencies cover these areas of the world in a sparse and

negative, unrepresentative manner (Masmoudi, 1979). Almost all the empirical work concerning these complaints has used content analysis, with effects, such as negative audience images of developing countries, largely assumed. Although such research has at times provided support for the claims about content (see a discussion of this in McNelly & Izcaray, 1984), effects research suggests that a complicated relationship exists between content and audience response. One survey, for example, found exposure to world news associated with more-positive feelings toward a variety of developing and developed countries (McNelly & Izcaray, 1984). Such a finding is consistent with certain psychological theories, such as Zajonc's (1968) idea that mere exposure leads to favorable attitudes. To a contextualist, finding that media exposure was associated with more-positive feelings toward other nations does not invalidate or falsify content-derived hypotheses about effects, but merely calls the generality of these assumed effects into even greater doubt. What we do not know is the conditions under which world news of different types produces positive and negative feelings toward different countries.

An abandonment of experimentation, in favor of field-experimental or correlational designs, is an implication of contextualism that one is tempted to draw. If experimenters can engineer contexts that corroborate any theory or hypothesis, perhaps natural observation is called for. Contextualists such as McGuire and Rosnow (1981), however, have not advocated an end to experiments, but only their supplementation with a variety of nonexperimental methods. Eliminating experimental designs will not stop a possible tendency of researchers to conduct a variety of studies under different circumstances until a correlational hypothesis receives support (McGuire, 1973).

The importance of replication does not change for contextualists, but its role does. Social scientists often have avoided literal or operational replications of studies because journal editors would not devote space to such efforts. Nevertheless, unreplicated research findings were regarded as suspect, under logical empiricism. From a contextualist point of view, repeating a study in different contexts specifies its limitations.

It also suggests a reason for journal editors to publish null results, quite apart from the traditional claim that existing policies lead to widespread Type I errors in articles. Editors often hesitate to publish null findings, in part because such findings indicate that a study may have been conducted improperly. A null result can indicate an incorrect theory, inadequate sample size, or invalid operationalization, according to traditional logic. If one is willing to assume that even theories that predict no media effects sometimes are true, then publishing null results makes sense. This is especially the case for studies that use adequate statistical power and properly validated operationalizations.

Considerations of construct validity perhaps represent the greatest potential barrier to the acceptance of contextualism in the social sciences. Data that corroborate a hypothesis also provide evidence of the validity of the measures used. Researchers do not avoid reporting noncorroborating studies because they necessarily wish to suppress evidence inconsistent with their theories or hypotheses. Instead, they are likely to feel that their operationalizations may be invalid. Hence, they will strengthen or alter an experimental factor or questionnaire until they obtain results suggestive of construct validity. This clearly could raise a thorny question for contextualists. In assuming that all theories are

true, can one avoid assuming that all operationalizations are valid?

A key to dealing with the problem lies in realizing that measures and manipulations never are totally valid and seldom have no validity. Like the contextualist's conception of truth, validity is relative. Social scientists should realize this and evaluate research accordingly. Researchers should develop conceptual definitions carefully, perhaps by using persons who have specialized training in this, analytic philosophers (Alston, 1985). They then can closely evaluate the logical isomorphism between their conceptual and operational terms. Once social scientists demonstrate a logical basis for validity, they can move forward. An inability to reject a null hypothesis in one research setting should not necessarily imply a lack of validity. Rather, to contextualists, only repeated null results would suggest relative invalidity, because their metatheoretical orientation assumes that the null hypothesis is at least approximately true, on occasion. In fact, one of the originators of construct validation, Lee Cronbach, has noted that the original idea is rooted in outdated assumptions about human phenomena (Cronbach, 1975).

Contextualism also means, obviously, that media-effects researchers need to make additional efforts to include measures of context in their work. To an extent, previous researchers (for example, Chaffee & McLeod, 1973) have used social variables measured at the individual level as indicators of context. Although seldom used in media-effects research, contextual analysis (Boyd & Iversen, 1979) offers another means of measuring context. Developed by Lazarsfeld, it involves the use of both individual- and group-level variables[7] in an effort to explain individual attitudes, knowledge, or behavior. For example, one might predict a person's political knowledge using measures of both the person's media

exposure and of average media availability or usage in the person's community or neighborhood. Measures of average media exposure might provide insights into the interpersonal transmission of mediated information, for example. One European sociologist (Allardt, 1968) has argued that contextual analysis can provide a basis for merging European, philosophical macro-sociology and American, empirical micro-sociology, two traditions comparable to the critical and empirical schools of mass-media research.

In at least one sense, attention to context can have a revolutionary, rather than evolutionary, impact on the way media-effects researchers view their work. If context cannot be fully represented by using antecedent or intervening variables, as Slack and Allor (1983) and Georgoudi and Rosnow (1985a) argue, it strikes at one of the most-important assumptions media-effects and other social scientists researchers have made, that their theories, in principle, can be generalized across time and place. In this case, researchers need to recognize that they share a great deal more with historians and with humanists than they have thought previously (Cronbach, 1975). Media research may be as much an idiographic as a nomothetic field.

Perhaps the most important implication of contextualism for media-effects research is one of modesty. Due to the importance of changes in historical and social context, researchers can no longer expect to develop invariant laws that apply across time and space. The most one can hope for is contextually qualified laws. To the extent that unforeseen, uncontrolled, or unmeasurable outside factors modify media effects, social scientists' ability to predict the future is limited severely.

Cronbach (1975) put it well:

> Once we attend to interactions, we enter a hall of mirrors that extends to infinity. However far we carry our analysis--to third order or fifth order or any other--untested interactions of a still higher order can be envisioned. (p. 119)

## Applied Considerations

Contextualism has clear implications for the way researchers answer questions of social concern. Without mentioning contextualism, Donald Campbell (1974) offers advice consistent with contextualist epistemology of social science "as history" (Gergen, 1973, p. 309). "The job of the methodologist for the experimenting society is not to say what is to be done, but rather to say what has been done" (Campbell, 1973, p. 72). Interactions preclude generalizations of laboratory findings to the field, according to Campbell, and social scientists need to both qualify their advice and show interest in what happens when society follows it. One can also note that, as society changes, additional variables may appear that render current knowledge obsolete.

The generality of various theories and hypotheses is of paramount importance in the sort of applied concerns that lead to much mass-communication research. If one assumes that society evolves, or revolves, rather slowly, one will not want to throw out well-established research findings almost as soon as they are in print. In fact, harmful effects of televised violence probably will not disappear purely as a result of their transmission via new telecommunications technology, for example.

Contextualism also suggests that investigators can find situations in which generally-harmful stimuli are beneficial. If researchers look enough, they may be able to identify people who are less likely to exhibit

anti-social behavior after exposure to mediated violence or even to develop lung cancer after years of smoking. The average, overall effect, however, may be a crucial implication for policy makers to rely upon, at least until researchers can specify and control factors that make generally harmful stimuli beneficial instead. From a theoretical point of view, unusual reversals may provide the key to a much greater understanding of phenomena, with possible associated applied benefits. Such theoretical mechanisms may be particularly useful in applying media-effects research because of the constitutional protections of content (McLeod & Reeves, 1980).

In summary, contextualism appears to contain both evolutionary and revolutionary implications for media-effects researchers. It does not necessarily imply numerous and dramatic changes in methods used by researchers who have recognized the transactional and processual nature of mass communication. It does suggest relatively profound changes in the interpretations researchers place on empirical evidence, however. Because of the complexity of social phenomena, time and space often will limit the applicability of research findings. Therefore, researchers should exercise extreme caution in the answers they provide to questions of applied social importance.

Notes

[1]For additional discussion of this controversy, see Gerbner (1983).

[2]Scholars associated with both the critical (Gitlin, 1981) and empirical (Noelle-Neumann, 1983) schools have at times sided with popular intuition and challenged certain limited-effects interpretations of data, however.

[3]This paper uses the terms true and false, with reference to a theory, in a relative rather than absolute sense. This is consistent with McGuire.

[4]It is no accident that both McGuire (1985, p. 575) and Thayer (1983, p. 90), who takes a humanistic position, quote Blake: "Everything possible to be believ'd is an image of truth."

[5]These historical interpretations are not accepted universally. For instance, Wartella and Reeves (1985) challenged them with reference to research concerning media and children.

[6]Interactions are a common, but not the only, cause of inconsistent results. Different operationalizations of the same concept may behave quite differently empirically, due to the multidimensional nature of the concept. Sampling error also can produce inconsistent findings, especially when scientists use small samples (Tversky & Kahneman, 1971).

[7]See Lazarsfeld and Menzel (1972) for a discussion of differences between individual and collective properties.

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