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## Contemplating Context

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## 9. Contemplating context

### J. Thomas Wren and Elizabeth Faier

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In the following dialogue, historian J. Thomas Wren and anthropologist Elizabeth Faier, both original members of the General Theory of Leadership group convened in 2001, embark on a journey to ‘contemplate context’ within a general theory of leadership. As discussed in Chapter 1 of this volume, initial discussions within the general theory group exposed rather deep rifts concerning the importance and role of context in the leadership relation. These early debates inspired Wren and Faier to sit down and reflect more thoroughly on the troubling issue of the role of context. As the ensuing exchange makes clear, the two have some basic disagreements. It is evident that the more traditionalist Wren and the more constructivist Faier diverge in their approaches with regard to the role of context. Wren perceives context as an environment in which leadership takes place while Faier considers context more abstractly, as a space constructed by participants through performance. Despite the disparate starting points, Wren and Faier approach some middle ground through the creative exploration of metaphors and applications. The ensuing dialogue is a conceptual piece, designed not to establish authoritative answers but to lay bare essential questions regarding the ways in which context might inform theoretical thinking about leadership.

\* \* \*

T. OK, Liz. We have decided that the best way to approach our topic of the role of context in leadership theory, given our different perspectives, is by having a dialogue. The working title is ‘Contemplating Context.’ We’ve come up with our title, so let’s contemplate.

L. I was thinking – even though I’ve been trying not to think about this – I was thinking this morning about one of the problems we face in beginning this discussion is the same problem you face in considering context itself, which is that it is very hard to jump into something. I think such a discussion will treat context as a container, and you’re either *in* it or you’re *out* of it. And so in some ways, you know, if you’re in the discussion or out of the discussion it is like the

false reality of context being bounded, because obviously you have to start somewhere and through the starting you create something, but of course something exists already.

T. I find it ironic that our constructivist has been thinking about this conversation ahead of time, while I have not. But let's start with the boundedness.

L. But I'm an empiricist; don't forget that.

T. OK. Let's start with the boundedness that we were talking about. You say that the context boundedness is like a vessel. I'm always the historian. I've perceived the context of a surrounding situation as a vessel if you will, within which things happen – although I think we are going to come to some middle ground where players interact with that surrounding vessel. I believe that there are these long-term political, social, economic and intellectual forces that create opportunities and constraints for people who operate within them. Knowing something about these long-term forces helps one to perceive what the leadership possibilities are between leaders and followers. I'm not sure that I would call that some vessel or container like you perceive it, but I certainly perceive a more traditional way of viewing context than you do, so that might be a starting point for our discussion. Ultimately, of course, we have to think about how we would fit our conceptions into a theory of leadership.

L. Let me back up. I'm not sure that a vessel is quite fair. I tend to think of context as a membrane, and there's movement in and out. For example, when I think about doing research on leadership as an anthropologist, I think about going to another context. So context is often some kind of conflation of geography and people. But at the same time it is very hard not to recognize my own participation in the creation of context because it is an artificial construct that I make, in saying that this is my community. But it's also hard to not recognize that lots of things are going in and out of this membrane. I move in and out of the context and my subjects move in and out of the context. It seems to me that one of the problems with me thinking about context and culture is that it suggests or it puts the brakes on those types of flows. So context at the same time becomes something *out* there but also something produced. I think the same thing, for me, when I think about history. I don't know if you've read Michel-Rolph Trouillot. He is either a cultural historian or an anthropologist of history, I'm not sure, but he is very critical of both the positivist approach and the constructivist approach. He tries to chart a happy medium by saying that in history we are both actors and narrators, and so the historical object is somewhat elusive. You have the narration, but every time you retell the story we recreate, you know, the context, but in a slightly different way. I guess my final thought is after

reading Trouillot and after hearing you talk about what does it mean to do history and think about leadership; I'm as unclear when history begins as when cultural difference begins. I'm unclear when we move from one context to another and I'm unclear, for example, how perspective affects that. So obviously if you did history of Jefferson and Jefferson's time period it might look different, right? Than today, or not?

T. I'm not exactly sure what you mean. Jefferson's time period is certainly different from our time period.

L. I mean if you were a historian, how does the historical object or the way we think about context change depending on who is looking at them?

T. I think that historians long have acknowledged that every generation rewrites history, as they sometimes say, because you're looking at issues. You choose issues that are important to you and you interpret them in light of things that seem important to you. So it depends on what is going on in your own age. Historians choose differing topics and things of that nature, so that I don't think there's any doubt that it is acknowledged widely that when historians look at things it is not an *objective* pursuit, it is in many ways a *subjective* pursuit. But I guess the goal is to move toward some kind of objectivity or something along those lines if that's possible to do.

L. That's what we anthropologists do, by the way, too. You're dealing with archives and people and we're dealing with people and observations of people. It would be nice if it isn't simply our own story.

T. Right, right, that's why historians amass all the detailed sources and the citations and things, so that theoretically people could go back and retrace the same track. Nobody ever does because there's too much to do but ...

L. That's why we don't call ourselves postmodernists. I believe in the empirical trail of something.

T. Well, we may be getting somewhere then. We may have more in common than we first believed. I don't think any historian would have any problems suggesting that the kinds of trends that I mentioned before, when traced forward, become the building blocks of what you call culture; indeed, become the culture. If one defines 'Culture' as that which is learned, shared and transmitted, the things that are learned and shared and transmitted certainly, to historians, link back to the types of things that have gone on in the past. So in some ways we're probably talking about two related facets of the same phenomenon. But it seems

to me that one issue that we should be talking about before we get done, is the issue of human agency and the interactions between humans and their surrounding context. As a historian I'm comfortable saying that we have this sort of context that surrounds us, although it is an immensely complex type of thing. But we also need to understand how each individual has to interact within that context, and there is where the agency is. Now I would say I do think that the historical context does make some actions or reactions less likely to occur because it just doesn't fit the possibilities in that context. But it doesn't deny that any individual *could* react in any certain way. So I guess my point is that any human agent can do anything he or she wishes, but that the context makes some actions more likely or, perhaps, more 'rational' than others.

L. I think much to our horror we are going to find out that we are much closer than we ever thought at some levels. Are you suggesting then that context is not deterministic but creates a framework in which agency occurs and perhaps even agency structures?

T. Yes, I think that's exactly right; I think we do agree on that. Where we may differ more is in our emphasis. I might think that the surrounding context probably may do more in the way of structuring than you do. That may be where we have some difference of perspective on things. But both interpretations may be important as we think about how we work this into a theory, ultimately.

L. Can I jump in? Do you mind if I interrupt for a second?

T. No.

L. Are you sure? One of the reasons I'm so hot under the collar about context is because when people talk about culture, it doesn't account for movement, doesn't account for agency. To me it's just a reductionistic, deterministic approach to context and it is important for me in thinking in terms of humans actively engaging with and shaping their context.

T. Well that may be a good starting point to go on further down the path. Maybe we can ultimately determine, be thinking about what that ultimately means, in theoretical terms. We need to see if we can consider the implications for a human relation like leadership.

L. One thing that might be interesting to think about – and we've already started talking about it – is the relationship between the individual actors within specific – can we say spaces, or contexts?

T. Yeah, spaces is, again, not something we historians talk about. Context is something historians are comfortable with.

L. OK. So we can think about how different people in contexts construct their inner vessel, so to speak, and how it relates to the outer.

T. And your inner vessel is?

L. Well I'm using your terms.

T. I don't think I said that.

L. No, we have proof, Tom.

T. I'll be drummed out of the historical profession if I said inner vessel.

L. When I do interviews I'm essentially tapping into people's perspectives. [Authors' subsequent annotation: According to Liz, 'inner vessel' and 'outer vessel' refer to the relation between different frameworks. For example, gender might be an inner vessel context while nongovernmental organization might be the outer vessel context. 'Inner' refers to a more personalized yet still socialized construction of context.] For anthropologists the inner vessel is not a psychological inner vessel and I think probably for you, too, it is not a psychological inner vessel, is it?

T. I'm suspicious of historians who try to get into the psychology of people because there's not enough proof for it.

L. So let's get down to basics: Do we think that context is socially constructed or socially produced?

T. It might be a semantical problem that we struggle with when you say socially constructed or socially produced. To me, not knowing what either of those terms really mean, 'socially produced' sounds more logical to me than 'socially constructed.' My sense of context is that the world happens around you and it shapes you. One of the jobs of a historian is to look at that world to see what has happened and why it has happened and who has been involved in creating what. And ultimately we get to the point where it has some impact on somebody in real time.

Let me suggest one thing – and I'm gonna play to your strength and away from mine because you'll know more about this. As a demonstration, let's think in leadership terms about what is occurring in Iraq. Let's compare how a his-

torian and an anthropologist might study leadership there. Maybe we'll come up with something that will be useful that we can translate into theoretical terms.

As a historian, if I were to go to study Iraq, I would look at long-term things like their religious beliefs, their cultural beliefs, how men and women interact with one another, the roles of families, how they look at leaders and how they perceive the role of followers and things, but I'd also be looking at the long-term economic factors, and all these things that go in to make modern-day Iraq. And then I would say OK, now the leadership challenge for these Iraqis is that they are encountering, or having imposed upon them, the opportunity for democracy of some sort. So, the historian's analysis of this context would go like this: As a historian I would essentially say, OK, these people are dealing with democracy but they are constrained by their long history of belief in a certain religious order and their economic situation, and so on and so on and they also have, perhaps, some possibilities. What I would do is look at the long-term situation that brought them to this point. Then, I would assess the likely impact of the surrounding circumstances, to ascertain how they shape possible responses to the challenge facing a leader or a follower, or some participant in this situation. So to me it is, I think it is – not dangerous, that's too strong – but it is not wise, when we are thinking of theorizing, or thinking about predicting leadership, or thinking about integrating ideas about leadership, to ignore those longer-term things that create the circumstances within which our actors participate. If that makes any sense at all.

L. Yeah. I'm gonna disappoint you in a second.

T. It will be the first time you ever disappointed me, Liz.

L. I also have *that* on tape. I agree with just about everything you say. If I were to go and address leadership in Iraq, I would do it in a similar fashion. I'm not fond of people who use context in a predictive or a deterministic manner. I am much more comfortable when they use it in a suggestive manner, as you do. Does that make any sense? I would do probably the exact same thing that you would do. I would talk to people, I would take note of the changes in political structure, social structure, I'd look at specific events, I would look at specific discourses and how they've changed over time. I would look at the role individuals have played. I would give agency a pretty strong role there. And I would do much of what you were discussing in terms of trying to address whether democratic procedure or democracy is what is in store for Iraq given its turbulent history. At the same time, though, I would try to address or I would try to compare and contrast Iraq with other cultural contexts that might be appropriate. Normally when people say cultural contexts they mean other geographic areas

where there are similar peoples. When talking about Middle Eastern culture, I may actually be talking about Iranian dissidents in France, I may be talking about other Middle Eastern spaces or communities. I would look at how they also dealt with some of these issues and then I would look at the ways in which people negotiate meaning.

I constantly battle the question of context. It is very clear to me that context matters but what is unclear to me is how do you get a handle on it? I don't believe in context being only the here and now, but at the same time I think that context constantly shifts. I think it matters, but I think it is constantly being shaped and I'm back to the old discussions of agency and structure.

T. OK. Can I... Whenever I hear things I'm always synthesizing them in my head, so let me say what I've been hearing and thinking as we've been talking here and where I think we might be.

L. We're doing great.

T. It seems like there are lots of areas of agreement here. I think we both see context as suggested rather than predicted, [L. Yeah.] which is good. Neither one of us is deterministic about it. We both, I think, see a role for human agency within the context – we're all on board there. But there's a couple of differences that are important, that I see, and that we might want to have to play out a little bit more.

One is the extent to which our views of context are capable of being generalized; in other words, whether our approaches to context are so idiosyncratic to each particular study that it is impossible to make any grand statements about the role of context (which, of course, is our ultimate goal here). Historians, for example, are quite skeptical about their ability to make generalizations. They're just interested in their particular chain of events and causation of things and so they wouldn't worry about taking the next step. In fact that's one reason that historians tend not to like leadership studies because leadership studies tends to try to make this kind of connection to things. But if you're going to look at context in leadership terms then I think you have to go beyond the pure historian and think about using some generalization you can make or else again you run into problems. The issue is: Can we generalize in a theoretical way? And this is where you hit your anthropological stumbling block, you know.

L. Sure.

T. If context is purely only localistic, then the theoretical possibilities I think are limited. We might be able to come up, at the most, with some structured



way to think about context. That may be as far as we can go, however, if it is truly localistic, and if it is impossible to make any generalizations from the study of a particular context.

In terms of making a theoretical statement, I don't know if we can get there. The pure historian also tends to be, in your terms, localistic, saying: 'All I can say is what I have found through the study of these documents. I am not comfortable making any further claims.' But, if we both acknowledge that context is important as part of the leadership relationship, we need to get beyond such narrow thinking. It seems to me that somehow it would be nice if we can come up with a way that people can think productively about context as they look at interactions that could be deemed leadership interactions. Otherwise we marginalize ourselves into this corner and say, well, if you want to know about this particular thing, hire me for 12 months for several thousand dollars and I will give you a study on that, and you would do the same thing – you'd probably charge more.

L. Less ... we're cheap.

T. But anyhow, you see my point. And so I guess we're at the stage of our conversation where we can begin thinking about whether we can make a contribution to this project [i.e., creating a General Theory of Leadership] in those terms. Now, let me just shut up and let you talk.

L. OK. A couple of things came to mind. I think it's one thing to talk about context as being locally specific. The question is, I'm going to use slightly different language.

T. You may have to define your terms.

L. I'm going to start speaking to you in Arabic.

T. I wouldn't know the difference.

L. I know, exactly! Let's see if we can proceed in this way: It seems to me that context is not completely constructed. That is, it is not completely the creation of the participants.

T. Right.

L. Here is one way to think about it. Look at this pretty egg yolk diagram.

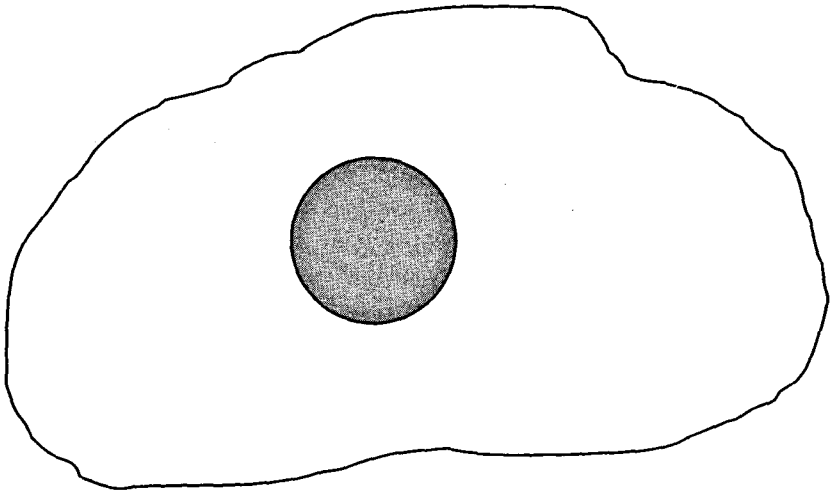


Figure 9.1 Egg yolk drawing

We have the subject here [pointing at the center of the yolk], and it has some kind of personal immediate context [the remainder of the yolk], and we have some sort of larger structural context that has porous boundaries [indicating the white of the egg]. This larger context, it seems to me, could be the values of a time period, could be political events, whatever.

T. Those are all defined as structural for you?

L. Yeah.

T. OK.

L. Or at least structural in that they provide a parameter in which our little subject guy [the center of the yolk] can bounce around in the bigger picture [the remainder of the yolk and the egg white]. Our theoretical problem, it seems to me, is: How do we convey the importance of context as a 'thing,' yet still enable people to engage it in a dynamic way? That is the crux of things from both our perspectives.

T. OK, let me build on that a little bit because you're right, and I like your idea of the egg with the yolk in the middle. One time my students and I came up with what we called the leadership amoeba, which is a similar type of thing to what you're talking about.

L. Yeah.

T. But instead of having yolk in the middle we called them ‘L-cells,’ meaning ‘leadership cells’ – I know, I know, amoebas don’t have cells, they were really vacuoles or something – but the point was that the amoeba was being pushed into different shapes by the surrounding fluid [context], and the L-cells were being re-arranged accordingly. This image, I know, is too passive for you, and it needs more active engagement, but it was in some ways the same type of metaphor. But let’s stay with your egg and yolk things.

L. I like the amoeba.

T. Well maybe we can end up with the amoeba, but let’s just talk now. Your yolk is the... Well let’s start with the white. The white is the structural, political and social context that we talked about. The yolk is the individual or group that exists within that context. What happens within the yolk is what I understand as personal agency. That is to say, the individual has free will to interact with his or her surrounding context in an infinite number of ways [in theory], but the reality is that the surrounding context makes some actions more ‘rational’ and more likely than others. That is represented by the shape of the boundary between the egg white [context] and the yolk [personal agency within that context]. What I’m saying is that although we cannot predict with precision how any specific individual will act within a given context, we can nevertheless construct a rigorous way in which we can analyze the context and can thereby identify the parameters within which each actor in the leadership relation operates. This doesn’t get us to the level of a theoretical statement, but it does give us some organized way to think about context and its effect.

L. Yeah, and I’ll explain it to you more in a second. I just realized what I actually meant. Go on.

T. OK. But if that’s so, we’re thinking in theoretical terms about what we can say that’s beyond somebody’s personal case study [which is a step in the right direction]. One way that you could think about it is, well, is there a set of standard questions that we could devise that participants in the leadership relation [or, for that matter, observers] could ask. This would get to the structure part. It might not get to our agency part. You might ask, for example: ‘What is it about the economic and social and intellectual context that seems to be important?’ This gets us to the constructivist aspect of context, and should satisfy your constructivist genes. Because I do agree that much of what we are talking about is perception, and not some sort of fixed ‘reality.’ If something doesn’t seem to be important to an individual, s/he is unlikely to respond to it or take it into ac-

count. Of course, the traditional historian in me insists that there are some objective things, I guess. You are in Iraq, not in Iowa. You know what I mean; there are some things like that. But what I suggest is that we ask some questions about people involved in the leadership relation, to try to articulate what it is out there and how they perceive its impact upon them and things.

L. Mm hm, right.

T. But anyhow, there may be some potential here. It is nowhere near the point of theory, maybe, but at least it may suggest useful ways of going forward, of using and drawing upon our insights about the importance of the context.

Now I'm a little less clear about how we can generalize about agency, because by definition it is so individual. But even here there might be some theoretical potential. Everybody engages in it, I think we've both agreed on that. That is to say, we both agree that everybody acts, and that their actions are not determined; that is, it's not a deterministic type of thing. There might be a way we can get at that too in a way that's productive.

L. Two thoughts. I like the question idea. As academics, we begin with questions. But we need to take care that we devise the appropriate questions. What's unclear to me is, how do we structure questions so that they're not so broad, that you don't have to take on everything. In other words, how do we begin to question? We need to determine what part of the context or the structure is influential either on the actual agent or in making certain things more important.

So let's think more deeply about the 'agency' part; that is, how we can better understand an individual's response to the surrounding context. There's a theorist named Pierre Bourdieu, who wrote a book called *The Outline of a Theory of Practice* in the 1970s. He was trying to play with the structure and agency thing, and what he basically said was that the structure is out there; it is all the different things that influence human agency but every individual has what is called a mini-structural habitus – it is a nontranslatable French word – but it basically suggests that all of these points of influence created by the larger context create a kind of a microstructure that is unique to each individual. Within that we all engage in what's produced by our own experiences that are reflective of larger structural pieces out there.

T. You sounded like a psychologist – be careful.

L. No, it's experiential. So for example let's say that in a larger structure [context] we have racism, and then the ways in which our subject experiences racism begins to create a microstructure that's much more immediate in his or

her actions. So one's actions are reflective of his or her experiences; this is the stuff that really shapes the agency of the subject. I'm not so comfortable with Bourdieu because his outside structure is fixed. What happens is that his inside structure is constantly in flux in response to this subject's interaction with the larger structure. I would argue that the larger context is also in a state of flux, but I do like his idea that we constantly learn context.

T. There is still, I fear, a disagreement between us. I thought we were moving toward some kind of consensus, but now I hear you suggesting that one's interaction with the surrounding context is so individualistic as to defy any valid generalizations. Our disagreement may come regarding how much agency a person has within that surrounding context. Can a person invent their own reality? I'm not sure. I don't want to take that too far. My thinking is that, as a general rule, context kind of constrains how they respond. I acknowledge that anybody can do anything they want, although it may not be rational in terms of the context, but, like I said, as a general rule context *does* structure the possibilities.

L. But it seems to me that you are missing something here. Even if context can be constraining, you ignore the possibility that individuals can be spurred by the context to rise above it, and even change it. If you think about leadership, one way of talking about leadership is people as change agents. And then we have to think about the ways in which agency breaks open structures and reconfigures them.

Let me give an example. I'll use one of my activists (in my study of Palestinians who are citizens of Israel). She told me that she'd bought her daughter a double bed. Not a big deal in our society, but in that society it implies that someone else is going to be sleeping in that bed, and that becomes an issue, a public concern if it's a daughter.

T. We're trying to sell books, huh? Let's get some sex in here.

L. Yyyeah. It's actually in my book that came out in October. So ... but for her it was a natural way of changing the larger structure of her community. So. Let me back up again. Let me shift.

T. Before you leave that example, I want to ask a question. By buying that double bed, she was acknowledging what she was doing but she was accepting the meaning of what it meant to have a double bed. She was constrained by her cultural beliefs and expectations. By buying that double bed she was acknowledging that that double bed had a specific meaning within her culture and her world, and so in a way the structure was imposing itself upon her. I mean she was being the agent but she was accepting or acknowledging...

L. I think I see your point. On the one hand change agents recognize that there is a surrounding context and generally accepted structures. They reaffirm the meaning of certain structures while at the same time trying to challenge it as part of the change.

T. I'm OK with that. I think we can agree on that one.

L. Let's talk about agency and its relationship to the surrounding context, to see how much we disagree.

T. Good. That gets us back to the theoretical plane.

L. You go first.

T. Let me just say that in my work I build up an elaborate historical context within which people operate. All I'm saying is I cannot predict what any one individual will do in response to that, to their perception of that context, which is their agency. They can choose to be totally conformist, or they can choose to be change agents, or any other level of response to the contextual cues and constraints. That to me is their agency. As a historian I can look back to choices already made and try to explain what people did, and, hopefully, why they did it. But as a leadership scholar all I can do is to suggest the contextual constraints and opportunities in which individuals operate. That's the best I can do; I can't predict what any individual will do, given agency as I have described it.

L. OK. But we're both interested in how we convey the importance of context. So we are both suggesting that context is not simply background. It is influential, but at the same time it is not foreground; it is not the main story, but it is important in – I don't know – something. I guess another way of putting it, and I'm not comfortable saying that context is deterministic, but I think it's influential.

T. I will agree with that.

[In a separate session sometime after the preceding dialogue, the authors reconvened and agreed upon the following as an appropriate conclusion]

L. & T. So, it is time we came up with something that might help those who think about leadership with some way of integrating the construct of context into 'theoretical' discussions of leadership. Permit us to propose some tentative conclusions, and to suggest a way that contextual aspects can be addressed in a prospective manner.

First, let us summarize (which we trust draws faithfully from our discussions):

1. The surrounding context does create both opportunities for and constraints upon the actions of individuals.
2. The influence of context upon actors is not, however, a one-way street, with the context impinging upon passive individuals. In dealing with the surrounding context, individuals are more-or-less (within reason) free agents to respond to its cues as they will. As suggested in (1), above, however, the context will make it more likely or less likely that any leadership action will succeed.
3. Nor do individuals just react to contextual realities. They can also be proactive. Our conception of context does not obviate the possibility of change agents. Even here, one can view the surrounding context as being the instigator or catalyst for such change. But it also suggests that actors can shape the context just as much as vice versa. However, this implies that those who seek to confront an existing or hegemonic context will face formidable challenges.
4. We are rejecting a purely constructivist interpretation of context. Although we acknowledge the centrality of an individual's interpretation of the surrounding contextual cues, we are at the same time suggesting that there are sufficient observable features of the context that an outside observer – say, a theorist – can use to suggest or understand behavior.

This brings us to our suggestions for ways in which contextual factors in any leadership situation can be taken into account – which is as close as we can come to a theoretical statement about context. As we suggested above, this can be accomplished by positing a set of questions about any leadership situation:

- a. *What are the interests or aspirations of the respective actors in the leadership situation? Only by knowing (or deducing) these do we gain a baseline from which to gauge the impact of the surrounding context.*
- b. *What aspects of the surrounding context stand to enhance or impinge upon such interests and aspirations? This requires the insights that can be provided by the analysis of historians, sociologists, and the like.*
- c. *How does the actor in question perceive these contextual attributes? This portion of the assessment looks to the 'interior rationality' of the actor. That is, it seeks to view the surrounding context from the perspective of the actor, irrespective of whether that view appears 'rational' to the observer. For example, even terrorists respond to their contexts in ways they think are rational. This helps us to uncover the individual perceptions that are so important.*

These queries lead us to a consideration of context in a theoretical sense, and bring us to the final question of our protocol:

- d. *How does or can our knowledge of these matters help explain/predict the impact that context might have on a particular leadership relation?* This question simply calls upon the observer to pull the above observations together into a conclusion that advances our understanding of the role of context.

Upon reflection, we think this is about as far as we can go in addressing the role of context in leadership. It is not theoretical in any pure sense. But if you think about it, what we have accomplished is not too shabby. We have created an interesting dynamic of agency and constraint, of context and constructivism. It seems as if we are thinking about context with more clarity than prior to our debate here.

\* \* \*

As the preceding dialogue makes clear, Wren and Faier differ in their approach to the role of context in the leadership relation, yet find much common ground. As their exchange illustrates, historians and anthropologists tend to pursue different objectives in their examination of context: the former uses context to create a web of surrounding institutions and influences within which to place actions and events, while the latter sees context as an inherent element in the construction of meaning. Despite this fundamental disparity in perspective, both scholars acknowledge surprising similarities in the dynamics of their respective models. Neither views context as deterministic, but instead elaborates a vision of individuals with agency interacting with (and to some extent creating) the context that shapes the leadership relation. Both acknowledge that the context can be constraining, yet also offers opportunities for conduct and, for some change agents, catalyzes action. These similarities ultimately allow them to agree upon a protocol of questions that can help bring understanding to the role context plays in leadership.

In the process of achieving this result, Wren and Faier confronted several challenges that have significance for developing a theory of leadership, which in turn generated corresponding lessons for anyone who aspires to theorize about the role context plays in leadership. It is worthwhile to briefly summarize these here.

First – and again, partly due to their disciplinary differences – language posed a problem for the two scholars. As the dialogue proceeded, Wren and Faier had to grapple with how to speak about context. They had to negotiate a shared understanding of such constructs as agency and structure, objectivity and



subjectivity, and the role of rationality. For those hoping to incorporate context when thinking theoretically about the leadership relation, this suggests the importance of articulating with specificity the understanding and use of such constructs.

A second challenge that follows from Wren and Faier's discussion relates to the extent to which one can generalize theoretically about the role of context. It is almost a truism that all contexts are distinct, and that individual agents will interact with such contexts in unpredictable ways. Yet Wren and Faier recognize that an inability to generalize at some level beyond the idiosyncratic and the localistic dooms any pretence to a theoretical statement about the role of context in leadership. The two scholars eventually agreed that grand deterministic statements about the role of context are not possible. They must content themselves, ultimately, with that protocol of structuring questions that help the analyst perceive the dynamic interaction between the individual and her/his context. While falling far short of a theoretical statement in any traditional sense of the term, this nonetheless does provide a technique for understanding the role of context more thoroughly.

This dialogue between Elizabeth Faier the anthropologist and J. Thomas Wren the historian, spurred by the difficulties the idea of context posed for a theory of leadership, becomes one more thread in the complex tapestry that is the quest for a general theory of leadership.

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