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The concept of context in parent-child interaction :

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**The Concept of Context in Parent-Child Interaction:
A Selective Review and Interpretation of the Literature**

by
Jo Anne Matthews

**A Thesis Presented to the Graduate Committee
of Lehigh University
in Candidacy for the Degree of
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in
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Certificate of Approval

This thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirement for
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To J.M.M., P.A.M. and E.C.H.

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Abstract

This thesis selectively reviews and interprets the concept of context in the literature on parent-child interaction and suggests that only through understanding the context in which behavior occurs can we begin to define behavior.

This thesis examines numerous approaches to the concept of context which exist in several areas of literature on parent-child interaction and reviews the child development literature, child abuse literature, the child neglect literature and the attachment literature. These perspectives have emphasized the importance of the quality, quantity, or appropriateness of behaviors within the interaction, thereby imposing a definition on the context and on the behaviors themselves. However, each of these perspectives seems to address and capture only a part of the concept of context. A more complete understanding and definition of context and of behavior can be achieved through an integration of current perspectives; specifically by viewing the context of parent-child interaction as a dynamic developing system which is created by both external social factors and internal psychological factors, and by incorporating the concepts of the internal working model, meaning-making and current research on emotion and perception into the concept of context in parent-child interaction.

In order to define behavior we must first understand what the behavior means to the individuals involved in the interaction. This understanding should begin with focusing on understanding the reciprocal effects of context on behavior in terms of the individual's internal working model and ways of making meaning from behavior. Perhaps then researchers can begin to understand what behaviors mean to the individuals who are expressing and

interpreting those behaviors.

Introduction

The importance of examining and understanding the concept of context in parent-child interaction is illustrated by the notion that a paradox exists in psychological phenomena which concerns the difficulty in predicting event-outcome relationships (Campos, Barrett, Lamb, Goldsmith and Stenberg, 1983). When applying this paradox to parent-child interaction, we note that seemingly identical child behaviors often result from very different kinds of parent behavior, and seemingly similar types of parent behavior often result in very different kinds of child behavior. Child outcome is difficult to predict and parent behavior is often difficult to interpret.

This thesis proposes that problems researchers face in predicting the relationship between behavior and outcome in parent-child interaction might be explained by focusing on the context of the interaction. Researchers need to know more about what behaviors actually mean to the individuals expressing and interpreting those behaviors and how context and behavior reciprocally and dynamically influence one another. This may be explained in part, by utilizing the concept of the internal working model (Bowlby, 1951) and by the concept of meaning-making (Kegan, 1982). In addition, current work on the effects of emotion and perception (Campos, Barrett, Lamb, Goldsmith and Stenberg, 1983) might be useful in more fully understanding the construction of the internal working model and its influence on defining behavior in parent-child interaction.

The internal working model (Bowlby, 1969) is the mental representation of the world, others, the self and relationships with others. This model guides the individual's appraisals of experience and behaviors. The internal working model is actively constructed by the individual and once organized, resists change

(Main and Kaplan, 1980). The internal working model also influences the individual's process of meaning-making (Kegan, 1982) and the individual's ways of interacting with the environment.

Meaning-making (Kegan, 1982) refers to the psychological process through which each individual constructs his/her own truth or reality. Meaning-making involves striking a balance between subject and object, and between self and other.

The initial problem posed by this thesis suggests that a great deal of the literature to date has explained parent-child interaction by externally "making meaning" and imposing a definition on the context of emotion and behaviors in an interaction without questioning how that context was established and what the behaviors mean to the individuals involved in the interaction. This paper will discuss how the literature has defined context in different ways and will suggest that future research examine context by questioning how individuals make meaning from behavior and how behavior and context influence one another.

Background

The concept of context in parent-child interaction has been approached by the literature in several ways. Research in each of the following areas has captured a part of the importance of the concept of context in parent-child interaction and has attempted to define the behaviors in parent-child interaction.

The psychoanalytic perspective addresses how the external becomes internal and creates context. The child development literature explores how context is established cognitively. The child abuse literature defines context by imposing meaning on the quality of interaction and the child neglect literature defines

context by imposing a meaning on quantity of interaction. The attachment literature imposes a meaning on quality, quantity, as well as appropriateness of behavior as the context of interaction.

Context and behavior must first be understood in order to be defined. This understanding can be achieved through an integration of current perspectives in child development, child abuse and neglect, and attachment, in addition to emphasizing a more focused examination of how the individual makes meaning through the internal working model. Current work on the effects of emotion and perception (Campos, Barrett, Lamb, Goldsmith and Stenberg, 1983) should also be included in our understanding of the construction of the internal working model if context and behavior are to be understood.

Definition of Context

The term, "context", refers to the embeddedness of life events within temporal, psychological and social situations which determine meaning for the events and the individual's way of dealing with them (Eckenrode and Gore, 1981).

The context of parent-child interaction can be defined as the dynamic developing system in which interaction occurs. This context is established through the reciprocal dynamic influence of perception, emotion and behavior on the interaction, (Campos, Barrett, Lamb, Goldsmith and Stenberg, 1983) as well as through the influence of developmental, social and cultural factors (Aber and Zigler, 1981). For the purposes of this thesis we will incorporate systems theory into the concept of context (Minuchin, 1967; Sameroff, 1983).

The term system refers to transactions between these life events as parts of a whole. Basic principles of system theory view the whole as more than the

sum of its parts, demonstrate the integrity of sub-systems within the system and stress the homeo-static function of systems; that of adaptive self-stabilization (Minuchin, 1967; Sameroff, 1983). Systems theory also addresses the development of the self and how the external becomes internal based on transactions with others on different levels. The constructs of meaning-making (Kegan, 1982) and internal working model (Bowlby, 1958) will be used to discuss context of interaction as a system.

Many researchers in child abuse, child neglect and attachment have imposed a definition on behavior in parent-child interaction thereby posing the question of measurement validity. Before attempting to define parent and child behaviors as positive or negative, sufficient or insufficient, and appropriate or inappropriate we must understand what the behaviors mean in terms of the context of the interaction.

This can be achieved by incorporating current research on the effects of emotion and perception on interaction with previous perspectives and then beginning to define behavior. The processes of constructing the internal working model (Bowlby, 1951) and of meaning-making (Kegan, 1984) should be more fully investigated within the context of parent-child interaction and context should be more fully investigated and understood in order to begin to understand behavior and outcomes in parent-child interaction.

Definition of Parent-Child Interaction

Current research stresses that it is within the context of the individual parent-child interaction that each member of the interaction behaves and responds in a certain manner (Herrenkohl and Herrenkohl, 1983). The context which develops from interaction is the reciprocal dynamic influence of a variety of factors. Context reflects the dynamic system which develops from the match or mismatch between parent-child needs, temperament and contributions to the relationship, and the impact of the environment in which the interaction occurs. The tendency of a pattern of interaction to develop into a positive, fulfilling emotional relationship or a negative frustrating one, depends in part upon the behaviors and temperament of each caregiver and child (Kadushin and Martin, 1981; Thomas, Chess and Birch, 1968), and very much upon the ability of each individual to interpret and adapt to the characteristics of the other. Adaptation in an interaction refers to attending to the needs of another and adjusting to meet those needs. From a systems perspective, the concept of alternation and synchrony, of "taking turns" (Kaye, 1982) implies commitment to the system and the shared recognition of obligations to the maintenance of the system (Kaye, 1982). Adaptation also depends on interpretation, and interpretation can be influenced by a variety of factors.

The following studies illustrate examples of how the interpretation and adaptation between parent and child can affect their relationship. For example, studies by Bell and Ainsworth (1972) have shown that the mother's ability to inhibit the crying of her infant is important to the maintenance of a successful relationship during the first year of life. Some infants are difficult to soothe or simply present unclear cues about their needs, making it difficult for the mother

to respond appropriately. Some mothers are simply unskilled at taking care of the infant and unable to respond appropriately (Korner, 1974). In either case, the breakdown of the mother-child relationship may occur and contribute to the likelihood of abuse later in life as a result of this breakdown (Bell and Ainsworth, 1972).

Even when the mother is skilled at caring for the infant and when the infant is sending clear signals regarding his/her needs, mismatching in terms of preferred modes of interaction may occur. Some mothers prefer a very reactive responsive baby, others prefer a more placid one. Some babies enjoy cuddling; some mothers prefer to hold the infant at somewhat of a distance (Bretherton, 1981). Therefore if mother and infant are either unwilling or unable to adjust and adapt to the needs and preferences of the other, mismatching has occurred. This mismatching has been demonstrated to contribute to the likelihood of the child being abused (Steele and Pollack, 1968). Through this match or mismatch, emotional and behavioral patterns of communication and context are established and maintained resulting in ongoing interpretation, adaptation and interaction between parent and child (Ainsworth, 1971).

In terms of the concept of internal working model and meaning-making, it is believed that unfulfilling parent-infant interaction limits the infant's ability to progress developmentally and to establish a cohesive sense of self (Mahler, Pine and Bergman, 1975). The development of sense of self involves the infant's process of separation and individuation from a symbiotic state with the mother. The success of this process parallels developmental progress. Dissatisfying, dysynchronous interaction between caregiver and child results in the infant's inability to pass through task-specific developmental stages. Failure to master

these stages and tasks results either in a psychopathological reaction or regression to a developmentally lower level (Mahler, Pine and Bergman, 1975). These developmental accomplishments are believed to profoundly affect the child's future development and social interaction.

Child Development and the Context of Parent-Child Interaction

One view of child development suggests that an initial developmental task of the infant is to make sense of "the bloomin' buzzin' confusion of his world" (James, 1892). The ongoing task of the parent is to provide a nurturing, guiding environment in which the infant can grow and develop (Lidz, 1970). Infant knowledge is accumulated through behavioral responses to the parent and through the gradual differentiation of self from other (Kegan, 1982; Mahler, 1981).

In order to understand behavior, we must first examine how individuals make meaning from the behavior in an interaction. This is accomplished through the construction of internal working models (Bowlby, 1951) which facilitate the activity of meaning-making (Kegan, 1982).

A psychoanalytic perspective discusses context in terms of how the child constructs his/her own internal world. Bowlby (1958) suggests that by the end of the first year the child busily constructs working models of his/her expectations of others' behavior and others' interactions. These expectations and the resulting internal working models are based on how the child has perceived and evaluated past experiences and information. To be useful, the working model must be constantly kept up to date and modified based on the processing of new information. Problems occur when the internal working model is outdated, unmodified or inconsistent because these internal working models

will bias how the child processes future experience and information. Future development depends then on how valid or distorted and adequate or inadequate these working models are (Bowlby, 1958).

Kegan (1982) supports the importance of the internal working model by stressing that being a person involves actively making-meaning of our surroundings. He suggests that what is important for us to know in order to understand another person and that person's behavior is not what someone else's experience was, but what the experience means to that person. In other words, how does the individual construct truth?

Kegan (1982) notes that the individual's way of dealing with events can be interpreted in two ways; from his sociologic; that is by accumulating interpretations, information and behavior based on external events. The individual can also respond from his/her psychology which represents how the individual has constructed meaning and made the external become internal. Kegan emphasizes that the process of constructing meaning is evolutionary, dynamic and psycho-social, meaning that it is evolved through psychological processes, as well as social experiences.

The child development literature addresses the issues of emotion and perception in establishing context from the perspective of infant development and views interaction as dynamic. The developmental literature examines context of interaction in terms of how and why the infant establishes context.

From Piaget's perspective, examining the parent-child interaction from the onset of the interaction focuses on how the infant assimilates information from, and accommodates to, his environment. Piaget views cognitive and emotional development as a process of adaptation to the environment, and considers affect

and intelligence as inter-related (Piaget, 1964). In using Piagetian theory to understand emotions and cognition it is stressed that all knowledge comes from the interaction between subject and object. Through continuous interaction the infant develops simple cognitive structures which become increasingly more complex. It is through this process that context is established. In this manner, the infant adapts to the external world, and develops a "progressive harmony between internal organization and external experience" (Piaget, 1937, p.356).

Further support for the importance of meaning-making as contributing to the dynamics of context is illustrated by other investigators. Sroufe, Waters and Matas (1974) were among the first to identify the need for a theory of the context dependence of behavior and emotional expression. Sroufe's theory elaborates on Piaget and suggests a relationship between emotions and cognitive development. The developmental literature attempts to discuss the effects of emotional interaction between child and parent in terms of the emotional level of the child. Sroufe (1977) suggests that context evolves from the interaction between emotion and developmental level. Emotional responses, therefore, are relative to cognitive skill level. From Sroufe's perspective, initially, the infant responds automatically to certain environmental stimuli based on three inherent emotional states: (1) pleasure-joy, (2) rage-anger, and (3) wariness-fear. As the infant becomes representational he/she constructs schemas based on these automatic learned responses. Since the infant's cognitive skill level is newly emerging, he/she interprets only the simplest signals and constructs schemas based on these automatic learned responses. These schemas contribute in part to context and this is the context from which the infant responds from the internal developmental level.

As the infant advances cognitively, the ability to process more complex signals emerges and the infant discerns discrepancies and ambiguities which do not fit the existing schema. Therefore as the infant progresses developmentally, the context from which he responds becomes more complex. The context changes in that the infant can process and interpret signals which possess several related or even unrelated characteristics. The ability to process more complex signals then, represents developmental progress. A more complex concept of context results from this progress. Consistent parent behavior refers to a simple signal which has repeatedly evoked an automatic learned response in the past. Consistent parent behavior is easily processed by the infant, inconsistent parent behavior is not. The discrepancy produced by inconsistent parent behavior creates disequilibrium, and elicits the wariness-fear response, which limits the infant's ability to respond positively. Low levels of child affection then reflect two aspects of the child's response; the degree of disequilibrium induced by the inconsistent behavior relative to cognitive level, and the existence of a given cognitive construct which emerges to accommodate the disequilibrium. As this disequilibrium is assimilated and accommodated it becomes part of the infant's repertoire of emotional responses. Sroufe (1977) emphasizes that there are developmental variations on this theme in that more complex schemas result with developmental progress.

Further support for the notion that the infant strives to make meaning of the world is illustrated by research on differences in facial expressions. Parke (1978) notes that the infant is capable of a variety of perceptual and cognitive feats, such as possessing the ability to differentiate among differences in facial expressions. These accomplishments demonstrate that not only does the infant

possess the ability to perceive differences, but that he/she may also be able to interpret those differences and in turn integrate them into a developing context. As the infant begins to differentiate among expressions and behaviors, he/she adapts and responds in certain ways. It is this process which readies the infant for further social interaction (Kadushin and Martin, 1981; Parke, 1978).

Related to this, the social referencing phenomenon (Klennert, Campos, Sorce, Emde, and Svedja, 1983) illustrates another way that context and interaction influence one another. Social referencing suggests that when a person faces an ambiguous event, he/she seeks cues in the form of facial, vocal and gestural displays of emotion. The interpretation of the emotional expression provides clues about how to behave in the unfamiliar situation (Campos and Stenberg, 1981). Again this process illustrates how context is established and used depending on interpretation of emotions through behavior.

Using systems theory to explain the concept of internal working model and behavior in parent-child interaction necessitates that we emphasize the adaptive self-stabilizing function of the system that re-organizes to maintain the integrity of the system. In the parent-child interaction, both parent and child are constantly adapting to various aspects of the context which influences them. Adaptation depends on what aspect of context assumes priority for the individual at a given time.

Systems theory can be used to explain how individuals influence behavior and how context is created. Viewing parent-child interaction from a systems perspective emphasizes that what develops between parent and child is really a relationship between system and system member (Kaye, 1982). This relationship involves specific situational factors, unique interpersonal patterns and patterns of

socialization. Rather than focusing on so-called traits, it might be more beneficial to describe properties of the system within the context of a given interaction (Ainsworth, 1969; Bowlby, 1969; Kaye, 1982; Sroufe, 1979; and Sroufe and Walters, 1977).

Sameroff (1983) also proposes a systems model of understanding interaction. This model stresses the importance of reciprocal dynamic transactions among the parent, child and environment and discusses the effect on the child's development. The model also stresses that how the environment responds to the child's characteristics at a given period in time must be examined based on the dynamics occurring between the child and the environment (Sameroff and Chandler, 1975). Again, this research addresses the notion of context as dynamic, fluid and ever-changing.

In order to predict and understand child behavior we must examine context. How much does the context in which a parent behavior occurs influence the child's response? Also, what effects do different contexts have on child behavior? How does child maltreatment affect the internal working model and subsequent child development? How are outcomes affected by when the maltreatment occurs developmentally?

Child Abuse and the Context of Parent-Child Interaction

The child abuse literature emphasizes the deleterious effects of maltreatment on the internal working model and on future meaning making and style of social interaction. The child abuse and neglect literatures address the issues of context in terms of personality factors (Bell, 1974), the environment (Gil, 1970; Gelles, 1970), and social and cultural factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1974) which affect the outcomes of parent-child interaction primarily by imposing a

definition on behaviors and attempting to classify them.

A sociological definition of child abuse defines the quality of parent and child behaviors based on social deviance criteria and implies social solutions to social problems (Gil, 1970, Gelles, 1970, 1980). Certain parent behaviors are defined as good and appropriate, certain other parent behaviors are unacceptable and inappropriate. In the child abuse literature, quality of interaction has been suggested to define parent behavior and influence child behavior and child outcome. The positive or negative emotional expressions conveyed within the context of the parent-child interaction have been suggested by the literature to represent the quality of the interaction. This quality influences and shapes the child's development throughout the lifespan (Herrenkohl and Herrenkohl, 1983). Thus, the child's emotional, social, cognitive and physical development are affected by early interaction between infant and caregiver, as well as by subsequent interactions (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters and Wall, 1978).

Within the child abuse literature attempts have been made to define the context in which abuse occurs in different ways. The child abuse literature traditionally has concentrated on the effects of quality of parent behavior on child outcome, specifically by attempting to demonstrate that the effects of negative parent behavior or abuse are clearly negative. In relation to the concept of the internal working model, it is believed then, that effects of child maltreatment result in unsatisfying parent-child interaction during infancy and create a distorted working model from which subsequent interactions and interpretations emerge.

The child's sense of self has been linked with the concept of internal working model when discussing child development and the child's social

interaction (Bowlby, 1961; Bretherton, 1981). Since the infant's sense of self and other and the process of development of the self occur in relation to interaction with the caregiver, these early unsatisfying interactions are believed to affect the child negatively throughout development. For example, studies by Schneider-Rosen and Cicchetti (1984) examined the infant's sense of self using the rouge-mirror tasks of Brookes-Gunn and Lewis (1979) to examine the concept of the child's sense of self. Children were believed to demonstrate a stronger awareness of self as subject if they noticed the difference in their reflected image when rouge was surreptitiously wiped across their nose. Researchers found that maltreated infants demonstrated more anxiety and a less secure sense of self when exposed to their own reflection with a rouged nose than without. They also related visual self-recognition to affect and quality of attachment. They found a significant relationship between non-maltreatment and security of attachment and found that non-maltreated infants displayed more positive affect toward the rouged image than maltreated infants did.

Research in child maltreatment has taken into account an increasing number of internal and external factors when examining the circumstances surrounding maltreatment. Many of the early efforts to discuss behavior within the abusive interaction were diagnostic in an attempt to evaluate characteristics of potentially abusive interactions.

The "battered child syndrome" (Kempe, Silverman, Steele, Droegemuller and Silver, 1962) was used to describe harmful events and physical injuries believed to be intentionally inflicted on children by their parents. Thus began an effort to classify behaviors in hopes of facilitating intervention and a direction in child abuse research which defined and diagnosed behavior based on

sociological criteria and generally expressing the belief that positive and negative behavior between parent and child can be assessed through external observation. However, as noted by Kempe and Kempe (1978), although there is little question that there are negative consequences of physical abuse, negative parent behavior is difficult to define, except in the extreme circumstance, and outcomes of positive and negative parent behavior are extremely diverse.

In an attempt to understand the causes of child maltreatment, researchers turned to psychological and sociological explanations. Early research attempted to place the "blame" for maltreatment of children alternately on the parent, as a pathological abuser or the child as provocative victim (Sgroi, 1947) however, later work has stressed the responsibility of both members of the interaction for the outcome of that interaction. The reciprocal aspects of behavior and the bi-directionality of parent-child interaction have been explored by Kadushin and Martin (1981). Additionally, the importance of the social and contextual environment has been examined (Gil, 1970; Straus and Gelles, 1980).

The interactional approach to child maltreatment stresses the concept of bi-directionality of parent and child behavior in contributing to the outcome of an abusive incident. Parent-child relationships are viewed in terms of the dynamics each member brings to the interaction in order to elicit a response from the other (Kadushin and Martin, 1981). Specifically involved in this transaction is the ongoing process of mutual perceptions, adaptations and behaviors between parent and child (Rosenthal, 1979). Rather than viewing the child as passively receiving the parent's behavior, many researchers believe that the development of the parent-child relationship involves mutual adjustment and accommodation to the emotions and the behaviors of the other. This

perspective addresses the concept of the dynamics of interaction and begins to address the impact of the meaning of behavior on the interaction.

The development of the "ecological" perspective of child abuse integrated child development with family and community processes in order to understand the environment in which abuse occurs (Cicchetti and Rizley, 1981; Elmer, 1977). The ecological approach to child maltreatment suggests that quality of interaction, can be more fully understood when examined within the context of a given interaction, and emphasizes the effect of context in terms of social and environmental influences on the development of the family (Belsky, 1980). Implicit in the ecological perspective is the ongoing change in the social environment and in which the interaction occurs, and a broad consideration of the effect of the social context.

Cicchetti and Rizley (1981) have proposed a transactional model of parent-child interaction. They examine risk factors for abuse by categorizing three dimensions of context: the caregiver, child and the environment. Researchers also emphasize the inter-relationships among these factors and suggest that from an ecological perspective; the quality of and satisfaction with the parent-child relationship reverberates into other aspects of social functioning. The quality of the parent-child interaction, therefore is related to both the etiology and intergenerational transmission of abuse (Cicchetti and Rizley, 1981; Herrenkohl and Herrenkohl, 1981).

Social and environmental influences affect the family in a variety of ways. For example, research has shown a relationship between socioeconomic status, parent/child dispositions and stress factors when focusing on the causes of physical violence toward children (Gelles, 1975, 1980; Gil, 1970; and Kempe,

1978). Specifically, Gil (1974) has proposed the cumulative stress model of abuse. This model proposes that lower socioeconomic classes appear to experience greater amounts of stress than other groups, and that stress and frustration elicit child abuse (Gil, 1970). Elmer (1977) has suggested a relationship exists between low socioeconomic status and abuse, and states that membership in a lower income class is as detrimental to child development as is a history of abuse. Pelton has also stated a strong relationship exists between poverty and child maltreatment (Pelton, 1981).

Most researchers agree that the effects of maltreatment are negative. These negative effects, however, vary greatly in terms of specific developmental outcomes. Beyond the obvious injuries due to physical trauma or gross neglect, the information on the effect of maltreatment on the child's social and emotional development is inconclusive. This may, in part, be due to the different ways researchers have defined abuse. We need to know more about the context in which interaction occurs. It also may indicate that we need to know more about interaction in terms of the internal working model of relationships and how individuals make meaning from behavior to understand that context.

Maltreated children are characterized by a variety of behaviors believed to be consequences of their maltreatment. For example, abused children can be described as silent, passive and underachieving, but possessing an extreme sensitivity and ability to perceive what is going in the environment. (Ounsted, Oppenheimer and Lindsay, 1974). This "frozen watchfulness" is the result of the child fearing the next abusive attack and trying to anticipate and circumvent its occurrence (Ounsted, Oppenheimer, and Lindsay, 1974). They

are also characterized as negative, hostile and aggressive (Martin and Beezly, 1977). In addition, they are also often unhappier, less achieving, less outgoing and less affectionate than children who have not been maltreated. However, abused children have also been characterized as compliant, easy to get along with and accepting of whatever happened (Kempe and Kempe, 1978). Although some researchers have indicated that maltreatment affects learning abilities, Elmer (1977) found tremendous variation among scores on learning variables in her research and concluded that factors other than abuse might account for the variation.

In contrast to the belief in the negative consequences of abuse, the phenomenon of the invulnerable child exists in the research. These children appear to have suffered few ill-effects as a result of maltreatment and are often quite well-adjusted (Garmezy, 1983). This unexpected adjustment has been explained in terms of individual task competency and constitutional factors of the individual (Anthony and Koupernick, 1974). These children counter the premise which is often implicit in the study of child abuse; that the effects of negative parent behavior are negative for the child.

A systems perspective addresses the concept of the invulnerable child in terms of how invulnerability relates to competent functioning of the system. Task competence indicates that the child is invulnerable, which means the child has not developed emotional or behavioral disorders even under extremely adverse circumstances. The nature of invulnerability differs under different circumstances and may be explained by the demands of the parent-child interaction at the time. Invulnerability may really be describing the child's ability to tolerate frustration or an unusually undemanding disposition which

shelters the child from trauma (Silvern, 1981). Invulnerability therefore may be a requirement of healthy system functioning, taken on by the system member with the capacity for dealing with the task. The concept of invulnerability should be explored by examining context in order to understand the individuals' construction of the interaction.

Outcomes of child maltreatment are diverse. Although the child abuse literature emphasizes the importance of quality of parent behavior on child outcome research has shown that a multitude of factors must be examined when discussing parent-child interaction. The child abuse literature assumes the internal working model and the infant's process of meaning making are negatively affected by unfulfilling infant-caregiver interactions.

However, behaviors which appear negative to an outside observer may not be interpreted as negative by the child, particularly if they are within the realm of typical behavior for that parent. Diverse conclusions regarding outcomes of maltreatment might be attributed to the lack of attention paid to the child's interpretation of the parent behavior and supports the notion that despite society's definition of certain acts, the child's social, emotional, cognitive and physical development may or may not be harmed (Aber and Zigler, 1981).

Child Neglect and the Context of Parent-Child Interaction

The child neglect literature stresses the context which develops from a lack of nurturing and caretaking and the impact on the child's development. Rather than focusing on the positive or negative quality of the emotional interaction, as in the abuse literature, the neglect research emphasizes what context develops when there is an absence of physical and emotional interaction between parent and child.

In the neglect situation the parent-child relationship lacks physical, emotional and social stimulation. The parent very likely is either physically unavailable or emotionally so self-engrossed that he/she is unable to provide the child with interaction of any quality; positive or negative.

In terms of the internal working model, the neglected child lacks a relationship with a caregiver who was accessible, responsive and loving and therefore development proceeds atypically. Given the hypothesis that early mental representations evolve out of experiences of need fulfillment and the development of the infant's first schemata, the neglected child does not experience need fulfillment. Caregivers are perceived as alternately good or bad, depending on whether they gratify or frustrate infant needs, therefore the caregiver is perceived as bad and the relationship between caregiver and child is less than fulfilling.

Bowlby (1969) studied the effects of lack of emotional interaction on infant development. He found that a warm, intimate and continuous relationship with the mother or caregiver was essential to the healthy functioning of the child. Bowlby also found that the lack of maternal care and bonding due to the mother's absence affected responses and styles of interacting throughout the child's life (Bowlby, 1969).

Spitz (1946) studied the effects of lack of physical and emotional interaction on institutionalized infants. When separated from the mother, these children were characterized by initial protest then despair, and finally depending on the length of the mother's absence, the children withdrew and became emotionally detached from their surroundings. In addition to the physical consequences of the "failure to thrive" syndrome (the infant failing to grow and

prosper physically), the emotional implications of lack of physical touching were devastating. Neglected infants suffered from apparent depression, withdrew from their surroundings and responded with disinterest at attempts to soothe them (Spitz and Wolf, 1946).

Polansky has also studied the effects of neglect on children. The social impoverishment and isolation of neglectful families from support systems was intertwined with "the apathy-futility syndrome". This syndrome is characterized by withdrawal and social estrangement which pervades the lifespan (Polansky, 1972). Polansky has suggested that as a result of the lack of interaction between parent and child the neglected child's emotional development progresses in a variety of ways: the child may respond to neglect with passivity, flat affect and withdrawal behaviors, or may be hostile, angry and aggressive. These children also typically had behavior problems, difficulty establishing and maintaining close relationships, and were unable to effect a sense of control over their surroundings. They were also characterized by hostility, aggression, withdrawal, lack of emotional response, and low self esteem. However, significant differences exist in these outcomes and may be attributed to the diversity of home environments as well as the individual incidences of parental behavior (Polansky, 1972).

Explanations for inadequate care in the neglect situation have been suggested to be due to the social isolation of the family, the absence of adult peers for referencing and accountability for behavior and a lack of awareness by caregivers of appropriate and necessary parenting practices. However, along these lines, research by Polansky and Williams (1978) with socially isolated families reveals that although there are class differences in definitions of optimal

child rearing, there appears to be agreement when it comes to the definition of adequate care (Garbarino and Sherman, 1980; Polansky, 1976).

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Related work on the effects of neglect and social deprivation by Balla and Zigler (1975) and Harter and Zigler (1974) suggests that a history of social deprivation sharply increases the child's need for adult attention. The conflict between desire for attention and affection, and wariness of adults might result in difficulties in behavior problems and difficulties with displaying affection. This phenomenon of disruptive behavior and attention-seeking has also been identified in the child neglect literature as a way that the neglected child actively attempts to pursue his /her needs for affection and nurturance (Polansky, 1972). However, problems arise because the child's need for adult attention and efforts to fulfill this need may interfere with the accomplishment of other important developmental tasks appropriate to the child's age. These tasks are then neglected in lieu of the child's attempts to seek affection and nurturance from an alternate caregiver.

Other researchers have approached neglect from the perspective of emotional deprivation. For example, Egeland and Sroufe (1981) found that children of psychologically unavailable parents showed a pattern of declining functioning over time. In a differentiation between mothers who were physically neglectful of the child's needs as opposed to physically attentive but psychologically unavailable mothers, they found significant differences. Children who were raised by neglectful rather than psychologically unavailable mothers displayed more negative and less positive affect. The children of mothers labeled as psychologically unavailable appear to have suffered the severest consequences of the two groups. These children showed a pattern of declining

functioning over time, meaning that scores which indicated competence on most variables such as feeding, play, and attachment behaviors were lower than those of the neglect group. These children were described, as being angry, hostile, frustrated, non-compliant and emotionally unresponsive (Egeland and Sroufe, 1981). This finding suggests that the effects of neglect impact differently depending on when the neglect occurs developmentally, and suggests a difference exists between the outcomes of physical and emotional neglect which should be examined in future research.

Attachment Theory and the Context of Parent-Child Interaction

Attachment theory provides a way of synthesizing into context the emphasis on quality of interaction, from the abuse literature, quantity of interaction, from the neglect literature; and adds a third dimension which we will refer to as appropriateness of interaction, in relation to the developmental level of the child. For our purposes, appropriateness of interaction describes how attuned the members of the interaction are to one another. Implicit in the insecure/secure categorizations of toddlers using the Strange Situation is a judgement of the appropriateness of the mother's response to the child's needs.

The concept of the internal working model has been demonstrated to be an integral part of the attachment behavior system. The structure and characteristics of the internal working model are supposedly reflected by the infant's secure/insecure behavior in the caregiver's absence (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters and Stayton, 1974).

Attachment is the term which is applied to the infant's enduring feeling or bond to a specific person, usually the caregiver. Attachment behaviors are behaviors designed to maintain proximity to this caregiver. Attachment theory

contends that differences in display of attachment behaviors have positive or negative implications about the feelings of security within the caregiver-child relationship. The criterion used to measure the degree of secure attachment is whether or not a number of children studied exhibit one type of behavior or another in a given situation.

Studies of early mother-infant interaction stress the importance of the quality of the emotional bond between mother and child in facilitating the child's future development (Ainsworth, 1971; Bowlby, 1954). Ainsworth's studies on attachment behavior (Ainsworth, 1971) classified toddlers as securely attached, insecure/avoidant or insecure/ambivalent. The secure attachment behavior was related positively to the mother's ability to respond appropriately to the toddler's signals. The securely attached child was able to give and receive affection, and able to move away from the immediate proximity of the parent and become involved in play. Insensitivity by the mother, or inappropriate behavior, resulted in insecure or avoidant child behavior. Insecure and avoidant behavior includes a lack of affection shown by the child toward the parent. The child expresses little joy or excitement at seeing the parent, and often avoids the parent's attempts at cuddling and holding. Insecure/ambivalent children simultaneously seek affection and nurturance while avoiding and rejecting the parent.

Attachment theory raises many developmental questions concerning children's approach/avoidance behavior. Ainsworth suggests that before age two, withdrawal behavior is actually two tendencies; extreme avoidance and lack of effective approach (Ainsworth, 1971). This observation demonstrates the need for further investigation of developmental differences in attachment behavior.

Some researchers have begun to examine attachment from the perspective of atypical populations. The investigation of maltreated infants and the attachment process examines the impact of extreme fluctuations in the caregiving environment. Some research hypothesizes that extreme stress is characteristic of maltreating environments and affects attachment behavior (Cicchetti and Rizley, 1981; Egeland, Breitenbucher and Rosenberg, 1980).

In a study by Schneider-Rosen and Cicchetti (1984) it was predicted that a relationship would exist between abuse and security of attachment. Specifically, they predicted that physically abused infants would be classified as anxious/avoidant, and physically or emotionally neglected infants would be ambivalent or anxious/resistant. However, no significant relationships emerged between quality of attachment and type of maltreatment. This might be explained by a developmental approach to the internal working model. Perhaps, maltreated or not, the infant's attachment behaviors are constantly being reorganized in relation to the stressors and demands of the environment.

Infant attachment behavior and infant adaptation should be viewed in terms of the emergence of new cognitive, social and affective skills and in terms of how meaning is made at a given age. In support of the theory of context proposed in this paper, we note that the maltreated infant may respond to the interaction in a variety of ways, depending on how context has affected meaning-making. The maltreated infant may adopt a mode of behavior intended to minimize the abuse. In the same fashion, the maltreating parent may adopt styles of parenting which minimize interaction with the child. Interpreting the meaning of these behaviors through observation would be difficult. While the interaction might appear stable, it probably lacks emotional

and affectionate involvement. On the other hand, depending on the developmental level of the infant, it may simply indicate an ongoing reorganization of behavior.

From a systems perspective, when viewing attachment as a set of interpersonal skills between infant and caregiver, display of affect is associated with the degree of competence and adequacy the infant feels within the interaction (Kaye, 1982). Therefore, the child who shows stranger anxiety in response to an unfamiliar person does so because his sense of competence is threatened. We might speculate that the child displays less affection not because he/she is insecurely attached, but because he is unable to identify the appropriate schema for the interaction (Kaye, 1982).

The weakness in attachment theory, as noted by Sroufe and Waters (1977) is that it is based on the assumption that approach/avoidance behavior is a valid measurement of secure and insecure attachment. Rather than viewing behavior and attachment in terms of a contingency system between parent and child, emphasis should be placed on organizing behavior into various contexts, as context changes with the internal working model. This would establish a more meaningful typology of behavior and attachment.

Emotions, the Developing System and the Context of Parent-Child Interaction

The focus of this review, as previously stated, is to discuss how the concept of context has been utilized in the literature in the past, and to emphasize the importance of including the individuals' construction of the interaction in terms of the internal working model, meaning-making, emotions and perceptions as a dynamic developing system when discussing context in the

future. Parent-child interaction must be viewed in terms of the context of that interaction in order to understand what certain behaviors mean to the individuals involved in the interaction.

The context of parent-child interaction can be best explained by viewing the parent, the child and the interaction as a developing system (Aber and Zigler, 1967). To support this idea, the developmental literature stresses the concept of the child as an individual developing system (Flavell, 1970; Piaget, 1967), and current adult developmental research is exploring the changes which occur in adults over the lifespan (Baltes and Schaie, 1973; Flavell, 1970; Levinson, 1974).

The following perspectives represent additional areas in interaction which are currently being explored and which should be incorporated into our understanding of how context is developed through the internal working model and meaning-making. For example, researchers in social development are exploring the relationship between emotions and interaction in order to integrate emotions and perceptions with developmental, social and cultural factors. The social development approach emphasizes that emotions serve a dual function as both "goal and monitor" of interpersonal interactions, and establish a context in which interaction occurs (Campos, Barrett, Lamb, Goldsmith and Stenberg, 1983). Taking this a step further, relating to an interactional approach, McArthur and Baron (1983) propose an ecological theory of social perception which shifts the emphasis from the phenomenal experience of emotion to experience produced by the action consequences of emotion.

The emotion-interaction perspective focuses on interaction and how emotions are translated into action. This perspective suggests that, if in an

interaction, we shift the emphasis from the behavior itself, to the emotion conveyed within the interaction, and the emotion perceived within the interaction, a truer contextual picture emerges. Therefore, how emotion is demonstrated by behavior depends in part upon how we perceive behavior.

In perception, there exists a growing realization that individual differences in the ability of each member of an interaction to read the emotional signals of the other and to respond according to those signals, produce behaviors which control and regulate the interaction (Lamb and Campos, 1982), and establish the context in which interaction occurs. However, there appears to be little systematic research on the elementary level of behavior perception. Instead, the focus has been on descriptions and explanations of observed behavior. Researchers should examine the area of perception in greater depth. Stressing the importance of perception of emotion, dictates that we examine not only the parent behavior itself, within an interaction, but also how that behavior was perceived by the parent and child.

The impact of emotions on the context of interaction might also be explained by the organizational approach to emotions (Emde, 1980a, 1983; Sroufe, 1979, 1979b). This represents a systems approach which stresses the adaptive role of emotions. Rather than viewing emotions as causally determined by behavior alone, and as disruptions of cognitive structure, a systems perspective emphasizes the contextual role emotions play in regulating interaction within a system. Thus, under varying circumstances, emotions can be adaptive, disruptive or play a minimal role in organizing behavior, depending on the perception of the individuals involved (Campos, Barrett, Lamb, Goldsmith and Stenberg, 1983).

As demonstrated by the preceding material, attempts are being made by the various literatures to address an ever-increasing number of external and internal issues when examining the context of interaction. In future studies, incorporating an emphasis on the individual's emotions and perceptions in the development of context through the internal working model and the process of meaning-making will be helpful in understanding behavior. It is through an understanding of these issues that we can determine what different behaviors and emotional expressions mean to the individuals involved.

The context of interaction must be examined from the perspective of parent and child emotion and perception and developmental status, as well as from the perspective of the interaction as a dynamic developing system.

Suggestions for Future Research

When examining parent-child interaction, what then becomes most important in establishing a context from which to derive meaning? Is it quality, quantity or appropriateness of interaction which affects how the child responds to the parent? Is it social cognition and social influence, or is it the individual's internal process of meaning-making? This review proposes that it is all of the above, in relation to the the individuals' emotions and perceptions which establish the internal working model and construct the ongoing, developing dynamic context in which the interaction occurs. Future researchers should investigate parent and child definition and interpretation of these components of context.

When focusing on the effects of the internal working model, meaning-making, emotion and perception on developing the context of parent-child interaction, it becomes essential to explore several factors:

1. How and why were certain patterns of behavior and response established and maintained by parent and child?
2. How were the behaviors defined by parent and child?
3. What is the context that results?
4. What are the effects of these parent-child patterns of behavior on the ongoing transaction?
5. How does this context influence the behavior between parent and child?
6. How can these patterns of behavior be altered to produce a more mutually productive parent-child interaction?
7. What change in context results from changes in behavior?

These questions affect the development of context as well as the potential to alter and influence context and improve the quality of the parent-child interaction.

Many factors influence the development of context. In order to make meaningful statements concerning how parent and child behavior affect one another we must examine the parent, child, and the interaction from the developmental, emotional, and social perspective of the developing system.

Conclusion

The internal working model of parent-child relationships is believed to be formed from the history of infant-parent interactions. These interactions organize experience, regulate behavior and influence outcomes of behavior. Knowledge of self and other becomes embedded in event-based relationships.

Parent-child interaction results in a wide variety of parent-child relationships. The quantity, quality and appropriateness of interaction have been addressed by the child abuse, child neglect and attachment literatures.

These literatures have also implied that quantity, quality and appropriateness of interaction affect the child's internal working model and style of meaning-making. The child development literature has begun to examine how the process of meaning-making occurs. Current studies on the effects of emotion and perception on interaction may be helpful in continuing to understand meaning-making and behavior in parent-child interaction. However, as long as infant and caregiver, parent and child, self and other are interacting, observers can only infer meaning from the behaviors.

Current researchers stress that the power of emotional expression influences interpersonal interactions of all types, and creates the context in which interaction occurs (Campos, Barrett, Lamb, Goldsmith and Stenberg, 1984). Perception and emotion influence context and context influences perception and emotion. Individuals vary greatly in how they express and interpret emotions and the context which develops reflects this emotional expression and interpretation.

When examining behavior in parent-child interaction, it is important to stress that the behavior produced within the parent-child interaction is the result of the emotional signals conveyed by the parent and child, and how these signals are interpreted by parent and child. Interpretation of these emotional signals varies greatly among individuals, depending on individual personality factors, the developmental level of the individuals, and the context which influences the individuals. Rather than viewing the effects of emotion, perception, society and culture as static, these influences should be incorporated into the concept of the context of the parent-child interaction as a dynamic developing system. Future studies should more fully address the implications of

parent and child emotion and perception in the development of context and integrate existing theory and research in social and developmental psychology in order to understand the internalized concepts which guide behavior.

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Vita

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She attended Kutztown University and received a B.A. in Art Education in 1983. She received recognition for "Ms. Muffet" an animated cartoon depicting Little Miss Muffet overcoming her dread of the spider, and for "I'm Fine ...and You?" a spoof on social roles and social expectations.

She began graduate study at Lehigh University in the Department of Social Relations in 1984 and acted as a teaching assistant in the areas of Social Psychology and Human Sexuality.

She received an Alumni Fellowship in 1985 and worked as a graduate assistant at the Center for Social Research on the Roseto Study: A Study of Community Social Change and Mortality, under the direction of Dr. Judy Lasker and as an interviewer for the Roseto Family Study, under Dr. Roy Herrenkohl.

She has been employed as a merchandise manager for Hess's Department Store, a drawing, painting and ceramics teacher in the Bethlehem Area School District, as a caseworker with HeadStart of the Lehigh Valley, and most recently, as the Co-ordinator of the Employability Outreach Program in Marvine Village. As co-ordinator she also received special recognition from her peers for promoting a democratic and co-operative work environment.

She lives in Bethlehem with her sons, Joshua, age fourteen, and Peter, age, thirteen.