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## Contextualizing experience



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### ABSTRACT

This paper extends the discussion of Luke and Banerjee published in an earlier issue of this Journal by suggesting that psychologists studying the effects of stressful experiences on a later outcome do not always acknowledge the possibility that the experience might be correlated with conditions that are necessary for the outcome. This essay argues that the victims of a stressful event are not a random sample of the population and often belong to gender, class, or ethnic groups during particular historical eras that contribute to the outcome. The properties of these groups represent causal patterns that should replace the usual practice of examining the relation between a single independent and dependent variable.

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### Introduction

Luke and Banerjee (2013) published a meta-analysis of the relation between childhood maltreatment and measures of social understanding in *Developmental Review*. The studies reviewed typically related a category of presumably similar, threatening experiences to a restricted outcome. This strategy, which is common in the psychological literature, rests on the questionable assumption that some experiences can account for a considerable amount of variance in an outcome without being an element in a pattern that includes other correlated conditions. The reasonableness of this claim is contained in a sentence toward the end of the Luke and Banerjee article: “We must reiterate the key point that the child’s subjective experience of the maltreatment context as a whole may be just as important, if not more important, than the specific instance of maltreating behavior.”

The Luke and Banerjee caveat to any claim of a reliable relation between childhood maltreatment and an undesirable psychological outcome is the basis for this brief essay. I argue that no experience, as a camera would record it, has a univocal effect on all individuals because of the variety of private interpretations which depend, in turn, on the context in which the presumed formative experiences

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occurred. These contexts include the child's social class, ethnicity, cultural background, historical era and the extent to which membership in these categories marginalized the child in his or her community. More than 80% of the studies that Luke and Banerjee reviewed involved only children being raised in American homes during the past half dozen decades. There was no study that involved children from Latin America, Africa, Scandinavia, the mid-east, or South or East Asia. Gregor (1977) reported that adults belonging to the Mehinaku Indian group of central Brazil, who are generally indulgent with infants, treat an act of disobedience harshly by grabbing the child's wrists, sloshing a dipper of water on the legs, and vigorously scarifying the child's calves and thighs with a fish tooth scraper while the child screams in pain. This practice meets the American criterion for maltreatment. But because this punishment is predictable and perceived as just it does not appear to have malevolent consequences in this community. These kinds of observations explain why Rogoff (2011) and Rogoff and Angelillo (2002) have insisted on the importance of a child's culture, defined as a distinctive pattern of values, beliefs, and habits which children exploit when they interpret their experiences.

More to the point, I suggest that a childhood victim of parental neglect who had an affectionate grandmother or aunt living nearby would be at a lower risk for developing a mental illness than one with no supportive relative. Similarly, the consequences of being bullied because one is the smartest child in the class should differ from the consequences experienced by victims who are minimally competent. High school youths who reported being bullied were likely to be different from the majority of their peers in some way, either not conforming to the appropriate gender stereotype, small for their age, over or under-weight, from a poor family, or performing poorly in school (Hepburn, Azrael, Molnar, & Miller, 2012; Roberts, Rosario, Slopen, Calzo, & Austin, 2013; Schuster & Bogart, 2013; Blashill & Traeger, 2013). Hence, a relation between being bullied and a later trait is often confounded with other traits that may have made a contribution to the maladaptive trait. The seminal claim is that the outcomes of a salient experience depend on a person's pattern of properties. That is why Luke and Banerjee found that some maltreated children had superior levels of social understanding.

More generally, every event, including a corpus of empirical evidence, occurs in a particular context. One of Niels Bohr's great insights was the recognition that the context of observation is an integral part of the observed phenomenon. The term context usually refers to the details of the procedure and the social setting in which evidence was gathered. However, this term is also used to refer to a person's family, neighborhood, community, nation, or historical era. Sotomayor (2013) graduated Cardinal Spellman high school in the Bronx at an unusual moment in American history. Elite colleges were for the first time trying to admit more capable minority students from poor families in the service of affirmative action. Had Sotomayor been born only 20 years earlier to the same family in the same Bronx neighborhood of Puerto Rican immigrants it is unlikely she would have been admitted to Princeton and, therefore, unlikely to have had the opportunity to display the exceptional talents that led first to a position in the district attorney's office in New York City and years later to a position on the Federal Bench. The probability that a seventeen-year-old with Sotomayor's unusual abilities and resilient temperament would become an associate justice of the Supreme Court was considerably lower in 1950 than it was in 1970. The monastery in Moravia that Gregor Mendel joined in 1843 was the only one within 1000 miles of his home that was led by an Abbott with intellectual interests who recruited many naturalists as monks and established an excellent herbarium where Mendel could perform his groundbreaking experiments with pea plants (Litis, 1932). The popular saying, "Chance favors the prepared mind" often means being in the right place at the right time.

Many psychological explanations are not sufficiently attentive to the context in which an observation of interest occurs. The high incidence of chimpanzee aggression recorded at the Gombe Stream field station was due, in large measure, to the fact that the food staff members placed each day near the station attracted many baboons and chimpanzees to a small area at the same time. This level of crowding, which does not occur under natural conditions, provoked the aggression (Reynolds, 1975).

The variation in poverty rates in each of the 50 states tracks closely the variation in the prevalence of teenage pregnancies and type 2 diabetes due to obesity. All three conditions are high among residents of the Southern states and lowest among residents of New England and the upper Midwest. By contrast, the incidence of violent crimes is highest in the western states, where gun ownership is high, and lowest in states where a small proportion of citizens own guns. Even a professional diagnosis of childhood ADHD is far more likely among children who live east of the Mississippi than among those

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