

Context Effects, Self-Presentation, and the Self-Monitoring Scale

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Two experiments were conducted to examine if context effects occur when subjects respond to the Self-Monitoring Scale (Snyder, 1974). A situated identities hypothesis was offered to explain why context effects occur. In Experiment 1, the type of relevant identity expected to be conveyed was manipulated. Subjects completed the scale under standard testing conditions or with instructions that the scale measured acting ability. Males scored higher than females on the Self-Monitoring Scale in the standard testing condition. However, when told that the scale was a measure of acting ability, the average score of females was higher than in the standard condition, whereas the average score for males was lower than the standard testing condition. In Experiment 2, subjects responded to the scale after responding to questions about sexual deception. As compared to a standard condition, scores were significantly lower, also suggesting the existence of context effects. Suggestions are offered for avoiding context effects in the use of the Self-Monitoring Scale. © 1995 Academic Press, Inc.

There is evidence indicating the existence of "context effects" in personality research (Council, 1993; Council, Kirsch, & Hafner, 1986). Context effects generally refer to the phenomena where responses to one personality inventory influence responses to other scales or behaviors measured within the same testing session (Council, 1993; Schwartz & Sudman, 1992; Steinberg, 1994). If they exist, context effects could present a significant challenge to the way in which

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personality research is conducted and interpreted, as multiple personality measures are frequently taken in the same session. For example, Council (1993) noted that over 60% of the articles published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in 1991 involved multiple measures within the same testing session.

There are different schools of thought on the issue of context effects. Cognitive theories focus on the suggestion that responding to items measuring the same construct repeatedly will increase the accessibility of beliefs and therefore increase the reliability of responses (Hamilton & Shuminsky, 1990; Steinberg, 1994; Tourangeau & Rasinski, 1988). Studies of context effects using this approach have focused on order effects and positioning of items in a scale. Evidence has been provided that items which appear later in a scale are more related to the total score on a scale than earlier items (Knowles, 1988). Clearly, this represents an intrapsychic approach to the context effects issue, as all the processes are assumed to be occurring internally.

Council (1993) has defined context effects more broadly. Council (1993) presented evidence that context effects occur when subjects responded to questions about hypnotic responsivity. When measured in the same experimental setting, positive correlations were found between absorption (a personality variable measuring imagination) and hypnotic responsivity. When associations between these measures were not made explicit, as occurs in experiments using separate testing sessions, positive correlations between the measures were found less often. Council suggested that the causes of context effects could include social desirability, the need for consistency, and the desire to play the "good subject" role and confirm an experimenter's hypotheses. Council's approach to the context effect issue is broader than the strict cognitive approach, in that the social aspects of an experimental situation are taken into consideration. While we agree with Council's broader interpretation of the phenomenon, our purpose is to extend the current thinking in this area. It is our contention that all of the factors suggested by Council represent self-presentational concerns. Subjects often attempt to create positive identities within the context of experimental settings in order to gain approval from the experimenter (cf. Tedeschi, 1981). In particular, situated identity theory (Alexander & Knight, 1971) is relevant to the self-presentational aspects of context effects. While not originally written to explain the context effect phenomenon, we believe this theory has implications for research on context effects.

SITUATED IDENTITIES

Alexander and Rudd (1981) reviewed a program of research suggesting that in laboratory experiments, subjects perform those behaviors that present the best (or least worst) possible social identities given the constraints imposed on them by experimenters. They referred to these identities as situated identities. Alexander and Knight (1971) reported the effect of situated identities on responses of

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