

Context vs. Holding Environment: What's Power Got to Do with It?

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The study of leadership has, arguably, evolved as an exercise in making distinctions. Indeed, one might say that the basis of analysis in leadership studies has been premised on the capacity to distinguish one construct from another. Beginning with a parsing of traits (Stogdill, 1948), such exercises in creating distinctions have branched out into distinguishing orientation to task vs. relationship, separating management from leadership, determining the difference between holding authority and exercising leadership, and ascertaining informal as opposed to formal authority. Yet the distinction between the broad notion of *context* and the not wholly separate yet particular notion of *holding environment* – a construct emanating from child developmental psychology that has been extrapolated into an idea of a more tightly bounded context – has yet to be articulated in the literature. We approach this topic in the vein of critical leadership studies in that we see the two ideas as “interwoven” with one another as well as with dynamics of power (cf., Collinson, 2014, p. 37).

The notion of context has been a part of the discussion of leadership studies for over 70 years (e.g., Fairhurst, 2009; Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939). Recently, Kellerman (2014) has emphasized the role of context as unequivocally related to the study of leadership, while Fairhurst (2009) has discussed it as discourse. Whole journal issues have been devoted to the subject (see, for example, *Human Relations* 62(11) *Special Issue: The context of leadership* published in 2009). Yet the notion of *holding environment* has been discussed in more limited ways (though it is more broadly discussed in the psychoanalytic literature). This term, which originates with Winnicott (1960), has begun to seep into the literature of leadership studies. Both Kegan (1982) and Heifetz (1994) have employed this concept in their writing, and are largely responsible for introducing this idea into the

realm of leadership literature. Others such as Kahn (2001) and Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010) have used the term to articulate nuances of organizational leadership.

Context has numerous definitions and implications, and may be defined as anything from geographical terrain to co-created social realities (cf., Fairhurst, 2009). The definition of a holding environment here offered is viewed as a more precise kind of context, a subset. Drawing on strands of the literature that explore this construct, we offer a simple definition for the purposes of this paper: *A holding environment is a container that fosters growth.* Acknowledging that this is a wholly positive definition, we intend to explore what a negative holding environment would look like as well.

Examples of a holding environment might be: the laws of an emerging nation; policies governing a university; traditions surrounding conflict resolution in a primitive culture. As mentioned above, the notion of a holding environment has evolved from views on how an infant is held in the nursery to the client-doctor relationship in the psychoanalytic or therapeutic session to constructs governing the family dynamic (cf., Shapiro & Carr, 1991). More recently, holding environments have been viewed as descriptors of institutional atmosphere (cf., Kahn, 2001; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010).

Into the diptych of context as opposed to holding environment we introduce the notion of *power*. Notions of power provide, so to speak, the third panel of analysis, and power has long been seen as an inescapable part of the conversation in leadership studies, as it is in society (for contrasting definitions of power see Foucault [1980] and French & Raven [1958], among others). Pioneers of adult development theory such as Jack Mezirow (2000) have imagined power-free zones in which genuine dialogue might take place, although Foucault (1980) and others would have disputed this notion. In the framework of this discussion, we consider power as a key variable when looking at the difference between holding environments and contexts. While it is assumed that both of these two constructs contain an element of power within them, the difference between the two lies in the capacity to exert control (clearly an exercise of power), or, at the very least, to influence.

In the leadership literature, the word *influence* has been used widely to denote the relationship between leadership and power (cf., Nye, 2004).

A holding environment is here defined as a more precise version of a context, more malleable than a broadly given context—and, as such, stands in contrast to the notion of context. Examples of such malleability abound: The Honor Code in a university is created and implemented by the authority figures in it; the hierarchy of an organization such as the military was largely created by and for men charged with protecting borders and interests; a wedding may allow for anyone in the audience to object to the union of two people in matrimony. A narrative may be a form of a holding environment— e.g., Churchill’s exhortations to the citizens of London in 1940 or DeGaulle’s utterances to France in the same period. All of these examples demonstrate the contours of a holding environment.

Building on the work of Winnicott, Heifetz, and others, we narrow the idea of context as an ineluctable component in the analysis of leadership by focusing on the notion of the holding environment as it pertains to leadership. To do so, we will discuss contrasting scenarios: the public’s response to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination in 1968 in Washington, DC, and in Indianapolis, Indiana (Shesol, 1997). The first will be discussed as an example of the poverty of a holding environment, and the second will be discussed as the richness of one. In a common context, then, narrative as holding environment will be examined. While uses of power are implicit in the discussion of the two cases, in a more abstract formulation of these distinct but related constructs we propose that a critical factor that separates context from holding environment is that of leverage.

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