

MOTIVATIONAL PROCESSES IN CONTEXT

People exist in a web of psychological and environmental forces that envelop them in a given moment, what Lewin (1939) called the "life space." There, psychological processes and the proximal environment give rise to behavior. The environment, or context, affects psychological functioning in at least two ways. First, it determines whether a psychological process is activated or not. Second, the context provides constraints and resources that channel the behavioral expression of a process in both the short and the long term.

For example, when people are presented with information that their behavior puts them at risk for a serious medical condition, they tend to respond defensively. They challenge the validity of the information and even forego opportunities for medical screening (see Cohen & Sherman, 2014, for a review). However, if the same environment provides them with seemingly minor self-affirming experiences, people can better rise above a threatening event, their default defensive responses curbed.

It is not the act of reflecting on a personal value that is powerful, *but the process it triggers* (Brady, Reeves, et al., 2016). The act gains causal force from the self-affirmation process it sets in motion. The context also provides psychological states with constraints and resources that channel their behavioral expression. An institutional goal such as encouraging employees to save for their retirement produces a psychological energy, a motive. People come to think that they must at least consider this as important, and, at the very least, weigh the pros and cons of the options available for reaching the goal.

The concept of "nudges," in which access to a contextual channel is facilitated and the link between a motive and a particular course of action strengthened, has proved one of social psychology's most influential exports to social policy (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009). For example, employees are much more likely to sign up for a retirement savings account *if they are automatically enrolled and can "opt-out" than if initially given the opportunity to "opt-in"* to the same account.

In another study, *when parents of poor children received timely texts on their mobile phones reminding them of concrete ways that they could practice literacy skills with their children, the children earned higher year-end performance on a literary exam* (Loeb & York, 2016). A parent who wants his or her children to succeed read to them, praise them, criticize them, or let them fend for themselves.

The possible actions are innumerable. Contextual channels guide whether and how people turn general motives into specific actions.

Because of the psychological forces in the life space, there is a fundamental fact about the social context that is hard to appreciate. What appears to be the same situation can in fact be very different for different actors, or for the same actor at different times (Asch, 1952). The psychological experience, the meaning or construal of an environment, can be qualitatively different. Two children presented with an apparently identical academic challenge, may see it differently. For the child who believes that intelligence is fixed, the experience is more likely to be seen as evidence of low ability and thus lead to disengagement (Dweck, 1986). For a child who believes that intelligence *is expandable, the experience is more likely to be seen as an opportunity to learn and thus lead to continued engagement.* Differences in persistence largely reflect differences not in the children's willpower or character but in the nature of the situation as each perceives it.

The right message "falls" into a person's life at the moment it matters (Jung, J 952). Because this confluence would seldom occur under the status quo, it can activate assets that were previously inert. For instance the status quo view in education is that underperformance reflects deficits in students' skill or motivation.

The status quo policy that follow to place underperforming students in remedial programs to address their presumed deficits. However, underperformance can also be a by-product of the school situation. Some students, labeled as "limited," are cutoff from positive messages and opportunities. This new view has led to *interventions* that do virtually the opposite of the approach that predominates under the status quo. They place underperforming students in an honors program. Such programs convey the message that students do not lack skill but rather are seen as capable of reaching a higher standard.

Interventions using this high-expectation approach have yielded remarkable gains in the academic achievement of at-risk youth. Here the intervention is an inflection of the standard situation, *the effect of which is to activate previously hidden potentials.*