

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS:
AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO
INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOR STUDY

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Abstract

Conventional methods of analyzing individual behavior and attitudes have their limitations. On the one hand, micro-level analysis, using only individual-level factors, has yielded inconsistent results, and, thus, low explanatory power. On the other hand, macro-level analysis, dealing with factors at supra-individual level, though having more consistent findings, can not be applied directly to individual level. Otherwise, it would result in ecological fallacy. Inadequate and inappropriate research design, which ignores the effect of group and its structure on individual behavior and attitudes, was proposed as one of the factors responsible for the unsatisfactory situation. Consequently, contextual analysis was suggested as an alternative approach. Contextual analysis was viewed as a method designed to take into consideration both the individual- and group-level variables. By systematically combining simultaneously both the micro- and macro-level variables into one model, contextual analysis may hopefully be able to enhance the explanatory power and policy relevance of individual behavior research.

This paper first discussed the sociological importance of contextual analysis. Then, it explicated the basic model of contextual analysis and the statistical techniques suitable for measuring the total group effect and the partial contextual effect. Contextual analyses of fertility behavior were used to illustrate the application of contextual analysis. Finally, the special implication of contextual analysis to rural sociology was discussed.