

Psychological Approaches to Proverbs: A Treatise on the Import of Context

T.B. Rogers

Volume 8, Number 1-2, 1986

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081428ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081428ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Rogers, T. (1986). Psychological Approaches to Proverbs: A Treatise on the Import of Context. *Ethnologies*, 8(1-2), 87–104. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081428ar>

Psychological Approaches to Proverbs: A Treatise on the Import of Context

T.B. ROGERS¹

In 1952, Edwin Loeb suggested that proverbs were “man’s first great attempt at abstract thinking.”² He argued that they evolved from more primitive cognitive approaches involving magic and eventually spawned deductive and inductive reasoning processes. Given their centrality in the evolution of human intellectual functioning, it is not surprising that psychology—with its interest in cognitive processes—has found proverbs to be worthy of study. In fact, over 200 citations have been located in the psychological literature which indicates considerable interest on the part of the psychological community. The goal of this paper is to outline the approaches that psychologists have taken to the study and use of these pithy sayings, based upon a reading of the available literature.

In great measure, the studies reviewed are derived from a position that defines psychology as a scientific activity—not unlike the kind of work one might find in the hard or natural sciences. As distinct from psychoanalytic approaches, contemporary psychology proceeds on the assumption that it is appropriate to analyse human behaviour using the technologies and epistemologies derived in the more established sciences. Focus is upon empirical observations and the man-

-
1. This article is based upon a paper read at the Folklore Studies Association of Canada Annual Meeting, Hamilton, Ontario, May 1987. I would like to thank Michael Boyes, Patty Rogers and Hank Stam for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper. Correspondence regarding the article should be sent to the author at the Department of Psychology, The University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2N 1N4.
 2. E. Loeb, “The Function of Proverbs in the Intellectual Development of Primitive Peoples,” *Scientific Monthly* 74 (1952), 100-104.

ner in which these confirm or disconfirm various hypotheses about humanity.

This review of scientific approaches to proverbs is instructive to folklore in two ways: (1) there are several useful ideas and applications that have evolved within psychology that merit sharing; and (2) because of several metatheoretical assumptions made by psychologists,³ it is possible to gain a sense of developments within folklore by examining work in psychology.

This second point follows when we realize that psychology has long advocated a natural science approach to doing its work. One of the assumptions that follows from trying to be scientific in understanding human behaviour is the devaluation of context. To quote Howard Gardener, an historian of psychology:

mainstream cognitive scientists do not necessarily bear any animus against. . .the context that surrounds any action or thought. . .in practice they attempt to factor out this element to the maximum extent possible.⁴

He suggests that this is a pragmatic decision, since taking factors such as context into account would render a scientific approach unmanageably complex at best, impossible at worst.

Yet, in folklore, the admission and valuing of context has been a major metatheoretic development. Exhortations of the then young turks like Ben-Amos⁵ stating that “no matter how defined, its (folklore’s) existence depends upon its social context” are characteristic of an important metatheoretical shift that occurred in folklore and radically reshaped the kinds of analyses one sees in the field today. Whether viewed in functional, rhetorical, structural or communication terms, context remains as the mainstay of contemporary folkloristics—standing in stark contrast to the natural science approach in psychology.

-
3. In its broadest, psychological sense metatheory involves the often unconscious assumptions that scientists make in their day-to-day lives, and the impact these have upon the work they do. These assumptions can range from epistemic to sociologically determined beliefs. An extended contemporary discussion can be found in H. Stam, T.B. Rogers, and K. Gergen, eds. *The Analysis of Psychological Theory: Metapsychological Perspectives*. New York, Hemisphere, 1987.
 4. H. Gardener, *The Mind’s New Science: A History of the Cognitive Revolution*. New York, Basic, 1985, p. 41.
 5. D. Ben-Amos, “Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context,” *Journal of American Folklore* 84 (1971), p. 5. See, as well, other important papers in this special issue of the *Journal of American Folklore*.

This difference in approach between psychology and folklore sets the stage for an interesting comparison between the intellectual yield of contextual and non-contextual approaches to a common topic—proverbs in this instance. In effect, by virtue of psychology choosing not to consider context, it is possible to gain a sense of how folklore might have looked in the 1980s if it had not undergone its metatheoretical, contextualizing revolution. Psychology becomes a comparison group against which it is possible to determine where folklore might have gone had it continued to hold to the product-oriented, non-contextual approach characteristic of the 1950s and 1960s. The comparison can be used to evaluate whether the young turks' advice was appropriate. At the level of metatheory, then, psychologists' approaches to studying proverbs can inform folklore about its own development.

Charles Briggs outlined two basic traditions of research dealing with proverbs:

One group of scholars, drawn mainly from the continent and Russia, have focused on the formal properties of proverb texts, their semantic content, and/or the logical relations between the component terms. Another group centered in Great Britain and the United States, has concentrated on the role of proverbs in communication and social life.⁶

The work in psychology, in the main, is drawn from the first of these traditions, treating proverbs as a type of linguistic material. It follows that a non-contextual definition of the proverb is congenial to psychological applications. By this definition, the proverb is a "short pithy saying. . . . popularly known and repeated, usually expressing simply and concretely, though often metaphorically, a truth based on common sense or the practical experience of mankind."⁷ Focus, then, is upon the surface characteristics of the proverb.

This "continental" approach has been revealed in psychology in a number of ways. The most popular application has involved tasks where a person is expected to give the abstract or general meaning of a proverb—devoid of any contextual consideration. In addition, several applications have emerged that focus upon proverb truth value (or lack thereof). These applications are reviewed below.

-
6. C.L. Briggs, "The Pragmatics of Proverb Performances in New Mexican Spanish," *American Anthropologist* 87 (1985), p. 793.
 7. K.C. Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form (2nd Edition)*. Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Louisiana State university Press, 1967, pp. 1-2.

Tasks Involving the "Truth Value" of Proverbs

Proverbs have been used in psychological research in a number of ways. Several applications involve having respondents make various types of evaluative judgements. Whether couched in terms of "agreement with," or "which proverb is best," the underlying rationale of these applications is an assesment of the truth value of proverbs. Several of these applications are reviewed below.

Perhaps the first place where the budding psychologist is apt to encounter proverbs is in early introductory classes. Citation of contradictory proverbs such as "Out of sight, out of mind" and "Absence make the heart grow fonder" has been used to promote a scientific approach to studying behaviour. For example, in their introductory text, McKeachie and Doyle present a number of contradictory proverbs and state:

A major weakness of . . . these . . . is that contradictory predictions and explanations are offered without any means for resolving the differences.⁸

This is followed by a detailed exposition of the scientific approach, indicating how it is superior by providing empirically verified statements.

While apparently convincing, this argument is reasonable only if one denies the effects of context, and looks strictly at semantic or abstract meaning. If one admits the effects of context, of course, it is entirely possible that both proverbs from a contradictory set can be correct. For example, "Clothes make the man" can be true in a job hunting situation, while its opposite "Don't judge a book by its cover" can be equally true in a collegial situation. Once context is admitted, there is no contradiction whatsoever. In using contradictory proverbs to debunk "common wisdom" in the interests of strengthening a scientific position, MacKeachie and Doyle have used proverbs as rhetoric. However, their failure to consider context not only weakens their argument, but also signals some of the problems that psychology encounters in trying to understand proverbs.

Another context-less application in psychology involves using them to assess personality. Freud and Jung were fascinated with proverb and included discussions in their respective theories. Henry Murray,⁹ considered the father of modern personality theory, sug-

8. W.J. McKeachie and C.L. Doyle, *Psychology (2nd Edition)*. Reading, Massachusetts, Addison-Wesley, 1970, p. 3.

9. H.A. Murray, *Explorations in Personality*. London, Oxford University Press, 1938.

gested that personality could be assessed using, among other things, what he called "sentiments." These were proverb-like expressions (e.g., "Goodwill subdues its opposite, as water-fire") with which the respondent was supposed to indicate agreement or disagreement. Agreement with a large proportion of selected sentiments was thought to be indicative of specific personality traits (e.g., the "goodwill" example from above was keyed to represent the trait "affiliation").

A more contemporary application involves having respondents rate whether they feel specific proverbs were true or false. This is a disguised personality test, and Bass found that some respondents tended to indicate that both proverbs and their opposites were true. He described such people as: "outward-oriented, insensitive, non-intellectual, socially uncritical individuals. . . unquestioning conformists to social demands."¹⁰ He formulated the "Babbit hypothesis" (from the Sinclair Lewis novel) to explain the personalities of these students who accepted the truth value of proverbs and their opposites. That these students could be sensitive to the contextual nuance of proverbs escaped Bass' attention, perhaps because of the anti-contextual framework in which he was working.

Proverbs have also been used for attitude measurement. Baumgarten¹¹ had respondents select the 10 best proverbs from among a larger set as a measure of employment satisfaction. The selection of proverbs indicative of a "pro-company attitude" was interpreted as indicating good employee attitudes. The observation from critical theory that psychological science tends to recapitulate prominent political values¹² is worth noting here. Very little empirical data have been cited to support Baumgarten's approach, yet it remains cited in the literature.

These three applications (introductory texts, personality assessment and attitude measurement) have been selected from a number possible to indicate that tasks focussing upon the truth value of proverbs have proven less than useful in psychological applications,

-
10. See B.M. Bass, "Development of a Structural Disguised Personality Test," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 40 (1956), 393-397, "Validity Studies of a Proverbs Personality Test," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 41 (1957), 158-160, and "Famous Sayings Test: General Manual," *Psychological Reports* 4 (1958), Monograph No. 6. Quotation from pp. 481-482 of the 1958 article.
 11. F. Baumgarten, "A Proverb Test for Attitude Measurement," *Personnel Psychology* 5 (1952), 249-261.
 12. See, for example, E.E. Sampson, "Psychology and the American Ideal," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 35 (1977), 767-782.

failing to demonstrate appropriate or enduring empirical results. In all cases the conceptual and empirical yield has not been impressive. This is due, in large measure, to the failure to appreciate the effects of context. The researchers generating these particular examples have, rather naively, assumed that proverbs are supposed to be generalized truisms—rather than contextually-bound articulations. Psychology's adoption of a non-contextual position has opened a number of such blind alleys—and the spotty empirical record is testimony to the futility of most of these applications.

The Proverb Interpretation Task

In contrast to the truth value research, one particular non-contextual application of proverbs has had enduring impact in the field. In 1906 a German psychiatrist named Finckh published a study recommending the use of proverbs to assess intelligence.¹³ It involved asking respondents to interpret proverbs such as "The early bird catches the worm" and "All that glitters is not gold." Intelligent respondents tended to give abstract or figurative interpretations, whereas those with a low IQ provided literal or concrete answers. For example, the "intelligent" response to the proverb "All that glitters is not gold" would revolve around the idea of not judging worth by exterior appearances, while the "low intelligence" response would focus upon gold and glittering without reference to the more figurative interpretation.

A relationship between performance on this task and the mental disorder schizophrenia began to emerge in the 1930s. Researchers observed "that many schizophrenics have great difficulty in giving the meaning of a proverb correctly."¹⁴ Here is an excerpt from a case history:

On one occasion the examiner attempted to explain that a proverb is applicable to different situations, pointing out that one may say "Don't cry over spilt milk" to some one who is worrying over lost money. The (schizophrenic) patient was then asked what the proverb would mean in this case. The answer was: "Don't cry over spilt milk because you can

-
13. J. Finckh, "Zur Frage der Intelligenzprüfung," *Zentralblatt für Nervenheilkunde* 17 (1906), 945-957, 1906; cited in D.R. Gorham, "Verbal Abstraction in Psychiatric Illness: Assay of Impairment Utilizing Proverbs," *Journal of Mental Science* 107 (1961), 5259.
 14. J.D. Benjamin, "A Method for Distinguishing and Evaluating Formal Thinking Disorders in Schizophrenia," In J.S. Kasanin, ed. *Language and Thought in Schizophrenia*, New York, Norton, 1944. Quotation form p. 72.

go to the store and get some more milk." Examiner: "But we were speaking about money." Patient: "Yes, maybe you have lost it around the building." The two situations remained isolated for the patient, since she never rose to the level of a general rule which could connect them.¹⁵

Benjamin¹⁶ published the first systematic investigation of proverbs interpretation with schizophrenic patients. He used proverbs for three reasons: (a) clinical experience indicating a high frequency of performance deficits, (b) the potential utility for demonstrating the nature of typical thinking difficulties, and (c) the ease of administration of the test. His test involved 14 proverbs which are read to the subject who is asked to explain their meaning. The easiest and hardest proverbs he used are: "When the cat's away the mouse will play" and "He travels swiftest who travels alone." The report concludes with some preliminary data that support the utility of proverbs interpretation with schizophrenic patients. Benjamin's work was instrumental in establishing proverb interpretation as an important part of the psychiatrist's tool box:

The impact of Benjamin's work was so great that if you ask an American psychiatrist about the use of proverb he is apt to say, "Oh, we've always used proverbs in mental status examinations."¹⁷

Soon a considerable amount of research was published using this task, prompting Gorham to develop a standardized version of the proverbs interpretation test.¹⁸ He offered the following reasons why proverbs are valuable: (a) they are interesting to the subjects, distilling the wisdom of culture into familiar sayings; (b) they are easily comprehended because of their reference to familiar objects and events; (c) subjects seem to easily understand the task of "telling the meaning" of a proverb; and (d) the task has considerable range of applicability, being useful from about the 5th grade upward. Gorham

15. E. Hanfmann, "Analysis of the Thinking Disorder in a Case of Schizophrenia," *Archives of Neurology and Psychiatry* 41 (1939), 568-579. Quotation from p. 571 (entry in parenthesis added).

16. Benjamin, 1944.

17. D.R. Gorham, "Verbal Abstraction in Psychiatric Illness: Assay of Impairment Utilizing Proverbs," *Journal of Mental Science* 107 (1961), 52-59. Quotation from p. 53.

18. See (a) D.R. Gorham, "A Proverbs Test for Clinical and Experimental Use," *Psychological Report* 2 (1956), 1-12; (b) *Proverbs Test: Clinical Forms I, II, and III and Best Answer Form Manual*. Louisville, Kentucky, Psychological Tests Specialists, 1956; (c) "Use of the Proverbs Test for Differentiating Schizophrenics from Normals," *Journal of Consulting Psychology* 20 (1956), 435-440; (d) "Additional Norms and Scoring Procedures for the Proverbs Test," *Psychological Reports* 13 (1963), 487-492; and (e) the citation given in footnote 17.

developed four tests (3 forms of open-ended responses, one multiple choice version) which were marketed as "Gorham's Proverbs Test." This test received relatively positive reviews. For example, the *American Handbook of Psychiatry* clearly endorses proverb interpretation in the clinical situation by recommending its inclusion in the standard psychiatric examination.¹⁹

A number of different applications of the proverb interpretation task have been noted. In all cases the more socially-valued end of what is being measured is indexed by providing more abstract (less contextual) proverb interpretations. Applications included here are: (1) as a measure of intelligence, being part of the Stanford-Binet²⁰ and Thrustone's Primary Mental Abilities,²¹ (2) as a measure of cognitive deficit for brain damaged²² and neurosurgical²³ patients, (3) as a measure to explore effects of drugs such as LSD²⁴ and anti-psychotics,²⁵ (4) as a measure of severity of psychotic disorder,²⁶ and (5) as a measure to monitor therapy.²⁷ Clearly the proverb interpretation task emerged as significant in clinical research.

However, as data accumulated the clinical utility of the proverb interpretation task was questioned. For example, on the basis of an extensive statistical analysis, Andreason suggests that proverb interpretation tasks

-
19. J. Stevenson and W.M. Sheppe, "The Psychiatric Examination," In S. Arieti, ed. *American Handbook of Psychiatry (Volume 1)*. New York, Basic, 1959.
 20. L.M. Terman and M.A. Merrill, *Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale: Manual for the Third Revision (Form L-M)*. Boston, Mass., Houghton-Mifflin, 1960.
 21. See L.L. Thrustone, *Psychological Tests for a Study of Mental Abilities*. Chicago, Illinois, University of Chicago Press, 1938, and "Primary Mental Abilities," *Psychometrika Monograph* 1, (1938), 1-121.
 22. M.F. Fogel, "The Proverbs Test in the Appraisal of Cerebral Disease," *Journal of General Psychology* 72 (1965), 269-275.
 23. G. Rylander, *Personality Changes After Operations on the Frontal Lobes: A Clinical Study of 32 Cases*. London, Oxford University Press, 1939.
 24. H.J. DeShon, M. Rinkel, and H.C. Solomon, "Mental Changes Experimentally Produced by L.S.D.," *Psychiatric Quarterly* 26 (1952), 33-53.
 25. W.J. Turner, "The Usefulness of Diphenylhydantoin in Treatment of Non-epileptic Emotional Disorders," *International Journal of Neuropsychiatry* 3 (1967), 8-20.
 26. E. Crumpton, "Persistence of Maladaptive Responses in Schizophrenia," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 66 (1963), 615-618.
 27. M. Harrow and D. Quinlan, "Is Distorted Thinking Unique to Schizophrenia?" *Archives of General Psychiatry* 34 (1977), 15-21.

...are of little value as an indicator of thought disorder and as an aid to differential diagnosis. . .they are therefore of little practical use. . .their widespread use should probably be discontinued.²⁸

Today it appears that the continued use of the proverb interpretation task rests more with tradition than it does with the available empirical record.

Proverb interpretation was also associated with research into the nature of the cognitive deficits associated with schizophrenia. For the most part it was felt that the test differentiated schizophrenics from normals because psychotics have an impaired ability to abstract. But as the research unfolded a number of alternate hypothesis were advanced. Included here are: overinclusion,²⁹ autism,³⁰ intermingling,³¹ information processing deficits,³² and, defensiveness.³³ As research into the mechanisms underlying intellectual deficits in schizophrenia progresses, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the proverb

28. N.C. Andreason, "Reliability and Validity of Proverb Interpretation to Assess Mental Status," *Comprehensive Psychiatry* 18 (1977), 46-472.
29. Overinclusive thinking is the inability to maintain normal conceptual boundaries which leads to incorporation of non-essential, apparently tangential, elements into the conceptual framework. See R.W. Payne and D.A. Frielander, "A Short Battery of Simple Tests for Measuring Overinclusive Thinking," *Journal of Mental Sciences* 108 (1962), 362-367; and R.W. Payne, W.K. Caird, and S.G. Laverty, "Overinclusive Thinking and Delusions in Schizophrenic Patients," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 68 (1964), 562-566.
30. In this application, autism refers to a tendency to give totally unrelated and unexpected responses to a wide range of questions, including the interpretation of proverbs. See A. Gregg and G.H. Frank, "An Exploration of the Thought Disorder in Schizophrenia Through the Use of Proverbs," *Journal of General Psychology* 77 (1967), 177-182.
31. Intermingling refers to a tendency to mix or blend material from one's current or past experiences into responses where they are not appropriate. See M. Harrow and M. Prosen, "Intermingling and Disordered Logic as Influences on Schizophrenic Thought Disorders," *Archives of General Psychiatry* 35 (1978), 1213-1218; and "Schizophrenic Thought Disorders: Bizarre Associations and Intermingling," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 136 (1979), 293-296.
32. H. Blaufarb, "A Demonstration of Verbal Abstracting Ability in Schizophrenics Under Enriched Stimulus and Instructional Conditions," *Journal of Consulting Psychology* 26 (1962), 471-475. In this study it was found that, if presented with three like-meaning proverbs, schizophrenics could produce figurative responses rather easily, suggesting that some aspect of the information processing system was implicated in poor performance to single proverbs.
33. Defensiveness, here, refers to the possibility that schizophrenics are capable of making figurative responses but avoid doing so. See R.C. Carson, "Proverb Interpretation in Acutely Schizophrenic Patients," *Journal of Nervous Disease* 135 (1962), 556-564.

interpretation task is waning in importance. To explore the intellectual losses, the need appears to be for experimental tasks and manipulations that are designed specifically to allow the evaluation of various hypotheses, rather than using clinical tools, such as proverb interpretation, which provide global measures. While proverbs have served an important part in the description of the deficit, they are of less significance as researchers probe causal explanations. This does not deny the rich qualitative data that can be obtained using tests such as Gorham's. Instead, it suggests that the task may not be a particularly appropriate instrument for the exploration of cognitive aspects of schizophrenia.

One of the approximately 100 studies dealing with proverb interpretation offers some insight into the effect of context. Susan Kemper³⁴ had students read short paragraphs following which a novel proverb was presented. The student was to decide if the proverb was a reasonable concluding sentence for the paragraph. Here is an example of her materials:

Paragraph

If you think size is important, you have to be wrong a lot of the time. A short person may be a great thinker and a poem only five lines long can have great beauty. You shouldn't overlook something because it appears little.

Proverb

Diamonds come in small packages.

The time required to decide if the proverb was the appropriate conclusion for the paragraph was recorded. In some cases the proverb presented was inappropriate (e.g. in the example above "Thick ice and thin ice look the same from a distance" instead of "Diamonds come in small packages"). In some cases, like the example above, the paragraph was related to the figurative meaning of the proverb. In others, though, paragraphs were related to the literal meaning, such as:

Paragraph

Frank gave Beth a present in a tiny box for their wedding anniversary. The box was tiny but the present was expensive. Frank wanted Beth to have a new ring so he didn't need a very large box.

Proverb

Diamonds come in small packages.

Kemper's students required significantly more time to accept proverbs

34. S. Kemper, "Comprehension and the Interpretation of Proverbs," *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* 10 (1981), 179-198.

used literally than when they were used figuratively. These data indicate that the figurative use of proverbs is easier (performed more efficiently) when a context is provided (i.e. the paragraph). She interprets these data as signalling that the comprehension of novel proverbs is guided by prior information in a linguistic context.³⁵

In another experiment, Kemper explored whether the amount of contextual material presented in the paragraph had an effect on the enhanced performance for figurative interpretations of proverbs. She argued that the provision of very little contextual information (i.e. one word) would diminish the advantage shown for figurative interpretation. Students should find figurative interpretations of isolated proverbs harder to make than literal interpretations. Instead of a paragraph, Kemper presented a one word context, and the subject's task was to decide if the object, situation or event named in the word was described by the proverb. For the proverb "Thick ice and thin ice look the same from a distance" the literal context was the word "skate" while the figurative context was "danger." Students required 4.06 seconds to determine a match between proverbs and the literal, one word context, and 4.69 seconds in the figurative case. This difference was statistically significant indicating that proverbs are harder to understand figuratively if very little context is presented. In sum, Kemper's experiments indicate that the ease of performing figurative interpretations of proverbs varies directly with the amount of contextual material. The more context, the easier it is to make figurative matches.

Despite the use of a contrived task and novel proverbs, Kemper's findings have some interesting implications. The proverb interpretation task, as used in the clinical realm, is fundamentally context-less—the respondent is given no situational background against which to extract the meaning of the proverb. In fact, the instructions for the test never explicitly indicate that an abstract interpretation is expected. This means that the proverb interpretation test is particularly difficult if Kemper's analysis is correct. It could be argued that the context-less interpretation of proverbs is an intentionally difficult task. This could hamper its utility as a measure of cognitive activity as it relates more to the ability to decipher what the test administrator wants than it does to activities which are typically considered intellectual abilities. Perhaps it should come as no surprise, then, that the utility of the proverb interpretation task in psychology is com-

35. Kemper, p. 187.

ing under increasing attack.³⁶ It is noteworthy that a reading of papers such as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's³⁷ analysis of proverb meaning would be equally instructive about the weaknesses of the proverb interpretation task as reflecting anything but an artificial and contrived cognitive task—thereby suggesting that the results from the task may not be particularly useful in the long term.

From the foregoing it would appear that the yield of useful analyses deriving from a contextless approach to proverbs is quite sparse. It is worth noting that about ten studies using proverbs as materials for memory experiments³⁸ could have been reviewed and revealed the same conclusion. Yet there are three areas within psychology that do demonstrate utility.

Development Psychology

Jean Piaget, who formulated a highly influential theory of the manner in which the intellect of children develop, used proverbs to demonstrate aspects of his theory. He found that his 9 to 11 year olds "did not understand the proverbs in the least; but they thought they understood them, and asked for no supplementary explanations of their literal or hidden meaning."³⁹ This confirmed Piaget's theory in that the kind of metaphoric reasoning underlying proverbs was associated with later-arriving stages of development. yet, even though they couldn't explain the proverbs, the children were able to match paraphrased sentences to proverbs. Piaget laboured with this finding eventually introducing a concept of "verbal syncretism" which suggested that the proverb/paraphrase matching was accidental.

Again, the issue of context raises its head as Piaget presented the proverbs without any indication of context. Perhaps his conclusions and theory have been lead astray because of the failure to consider the situational aspects of proverbs. Judith Pasamanick explored

-
36. See W.M. Phillips, A.M. Phillips, and C.R. Shearn, "Objective Assessment of Schizophrenic Thinking," *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 36 (1980), 79-89; and N.C. Andreason, "Reliability and Validity of Proverb Interpretation to Assess Mental Status," *Comprehensive Psychiatry* 18 (1977), 465-472.
 37. B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Toward a Theory of Proverb Meaning," *Proverbium* 22 (1973), 821-827.
 38. Several examples are: K.L. Higbee and R.J. Millard, "Effects of Imagery Value and an Imagery Mnemonic on Memory for Sayings," *Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society* 17 (1981), 215-216; J.D. Pratt and K.L. Higbee, "Use of an Imagery Mnemonic by the Elderly in Natural Settings," *Human Learning* 2 (1983), 227-235.
 39. J. Piaget, *The Language and Thought of the Child*. New York, World, 1969. See p. 143.

this problem by examining children's understanding of proverbs in a natural, social discourse context. She conducted proverb discussion groups with 6 to 9 year old children. Her results, which involved a context analysis of the various discussion groups, indicate a surprising degree of sophistication in these children's understanding of proverbs. Pasamanick states:

The children's fertility in drawing, from even the smallest corners of their lives, appropriate applications of the hugest concerns of proverbs, suggests a level of communicative and metaphoric competence with which they are seldom credited.⁴⁰

Pasamanick argues that young children are quite capable of dealing with proverbs "if they encounter them in some kind of situational context."⁴¹ Piaget, apparently, erred in his assessment of children's intellectual competence. The Pasamanick study is a fine example of a well-thought-out and important study of proverbs deriving from a psychological perspective. Not only does it underscore the point about the importance of context, but it also alerts us to a potential pedagogical application of proverbs.

Therapeutic Communities

Another application of proverbs involves a specific treatment approach to drug and alcohol dependency. Therapeutic communities, such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Synanon, involve setting up a social system intended to sustain the addict through to a drug-free state. Associated with this approach is the extensive use of proverbs and slogans such as "Water seeks its own level" and "It's better to give than to receive." While the evaluation data are not conclusive, therapeutic communities do appear to be one of the most effective treatment approaches for substance addiction, and proverbs and slogans are a significant part of their success.⁴²

It is interesting to note that the use of slogans in therapeutic communities tends to be dismissed with disdain by professional prac-

40. J. Pasamanick, "Talk Does Cook Rice: Proverb Abstraction Through Social Interaction," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 44 (1983), 5-25. See p. 18.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

42. A detailed review of this application is available in T.B. Rogers, "Rationalizing the Use of Proverbs and Slogans in the Therapeutic Community: A Multidisciplinary View," Unpublished manuscript, The University of Calgary, 1987.

tioners in the mental health field.⁴³ Detractors typically point out the questionable truth value of the expressions. For example, it is not difficult to find situations in which it is *NOT* better to give than to receive, thereby calling the expression, and presumably its clinical utility, into question. This argument, of course, fails to appreciate the contextual properties of proverb meaning and truth value outlined earlier.

As well, writers such as Abrahams have demonstrated that proverbs serve a rhetorical function⁴⁴ which makes them particularly potent agents of change. The proverb is an age-old technique of persuading someone to adhere to a group ethos which is exactly what the therapeutic community hopes to achieve. Rhetoric is particularly important for new recruits as therapeutic success is predicted by how long the new member stays in the group.⁴⁵ The application of proverbs and slogans to the therapeutic community represents an effective and useful psychological application, demonstrating, at the applied level, an understanding of the role and effectiveness of these sayings in helping people through difficult times.

A Cognitive Model of Proverb Instantiation

The third application that warrants discussion involves some recent work by Dick Honeck aimed at understanding how proverbs work. This approach, coming out of the tradition of cognitive science, focusses upon the manner in which the cognitive system must be working if proverbs are understood and instantiated in new situations.

A necessarily over-simplified view of proverb structure is that it represents a propositional statement, wherein a specified relationship is posited between two units. Thus in "A stitch in time saves nine" the *timely stitch* and the *nine later stitches* are units which are tied together by the relational verb *save*. The relationship between the units may be positive (e.g. Honesty is the best policy) or negative (e.g. Money isn't everything), and they can be tied together by verbs of causation (e.g. Absence *makes* the heart grow fonder) or equivalence (e.g. A little knowledge *is* a dangerous thing). While some proverbs escape clas-

43. A. Bassin, "Proverbs, Slogans and Folk Sayings in the Therapeutic Community: A Neglected Therapeutic Tool," *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 16 (1984), 51-56.

44. See, for example, R.D. Abrahams, "Introductory Remarks to a Rhetorical Theory of Folklore," *Journal of American Folklore* 81 (1968), 143-158.

45. See W.V. Collier and Y.A. Hijazi, "A Follow-up Study of Former Residents of a Therapeutic Community," *International Journal of the Addictions* 9 (1974), 805-826; and R.C. Brook and P.C. Whitehead, *Drug-free Therapeutic Community*. New York, Human Sciences, 1980.

sification by this schema⁴⁶ it is sufficiently inclusive to proceed with a model of how proverbs work.

Honeck conceptualizes the proverb as the first two parts of a four-part analogy:

. . .the proverb explicitly presents the *a* and *b* terms of a four-part *a:b::c:d* [*a* is to *b* as *c* is to *d*] analogy. . .the interpreter's task is to desymbolize these terms in a figurative way. This process amounts to constructing the *c* and *d* terms.⁴⁷

The *a* and *b* terms in the analogy are the two units specified in the proverb (e.g., in "A stitch in time saves nine" *a* = "stitch in time," and *b* = "saving nine stitches"). The relational verb in the preposition (i.e. "saves" in "A stitch in time saves nine") triggers the search for two corresponding units, and the eventual comprehension of the proverb is achieved by solving the analogy (e.g. "stitch in time" is to "saving nine stitches" as "fixing the noisy starter on the car now" is to "saving considerable grief by the car not starting when really needed"). The extension of the analogy to new terms (i.e. *c* and *d*) is fundamentally contextual as it involves searching for the appropriate terms in the intended situation.⁴⁸

While this model, in bare bones, appears to connote a rather sterile process, when inserted into a vibrant social context of the kind where one is apt to find proverb performance, it emerges as a useful analytic tool. The teaching of recruits in a therapeutic community using slogans can be seen as instruction in perceiving relationships and analogic reasoning. The potential pedagogic usefulness of proverbs with young children can be viewed in terms of their capacity to solve analogies in real social situations. Spontaneous performance of proverbs can be viewed as contingent upon effective analogic reason-

46. A detailed discussion of proverb structure, which discusses some of the instances where the two part definition does not fit, can be found in A. Dundes, "On the Structure of the Proverb," *Proverbium* 25 (1975), 961-973.

47. R.P. Honeck and C.T. Kibler, "The Role of Imagery, Analogy and Instantiation in Proverb Comprehension," *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* 13 (1984), 393-414. See p. 410, with entry in parentheses added.

48. The simiarity of Honeck's model with the one presented in P. Seitel, "Proverbs: A Social Use of Metaphor," *Genre* 2 (1969), 143-161 is notable. The Honeck and Kibler version has been presented here because the manner in which it is formulated enhances contact with the emerging psychological research on metaphor and analogy (e.g. R.W. Billow, "Metaphor: A Review of the Psychological Literature," *Psychological Bulletin* 84 (1977), 81-92).

ing, and perhaps can be analysed in terms of the propensity for using analogic processes. In sum, Honeck's model does carry some potential for folkloristics.⁴⁹

Some Conclusions

The yield of a context-less psychological approach to proverbs has been, to say the least, meagre. Studies concerned with truth value and interpretation have revealed little, if any, conclusive evidence or conceptual richness. However, when context has been introduced, some interesting applications have been noted. Among these are Kemper's documentation of the effects of context upon interpretation, Pasamnick's revision to Piaget by including context, the application of slogans to therapeutic communities and Honeck's cognitive model. These four examples have provided a degree of insight into proverbs.

The present review suggests that the analytic utility of propositions about proverbs increases with the inclusion of context. It is possible to articulate this conclusion even more forcefully; namely, analytic utility varies directly as the *extent* to which context is considered. This has been demonstrated by Briggs in his analysis of New Mexican Spanish proverb traditions.⁵⁰ He provided in-depth, detailed analyses of the textual and behavioural events surrounding actual proverb performances. Demonstration of techniques such as tying phrases and quotation-framing verbs indicates clearly when a proverb is to be performed, or when an utterance is intended as "proverbial." In other words, detailed consideration of actual proverb performance has yielded some useful information that informs us not only of the pragmatics of performance, but also makes it clear that proverbs are considerably more than text. This indicates that fine-grained analysis of context has considerable pay-off in coming to a full understanding of the pragmatics of proverbs as they exist in an actual social milieu. To be sure psychology can learn from this, but so too can folklore in questioning fundamental assumptions about the duality of text and context.⁵¹

Context is highly problematic for some scientific positions. For a scientific psychologist, the ideal case is an isomorphism between

49. Of particular note here is that the Honeck and Kibler formulation does not require the notion of a "general" or abstract meaning in order for a proverb to be instantiated in a new situation.

50. Briggs, 1985.

51. See Briggs, p. 806-807 for a discussion of this duality which he describes as a "bias of literate societies."

the world of observation and the world of theory. Specific observations ought to be tied uniquely to theoretical terms—*across all possible conditions*. Admission of situational factors threatens scientific progress, as theory-to-data predictions would vary with context. This suggests, among other things, that theoretical statements could be confirmed or disconfirmed by the manipulation of context.⁵² This, of course, challenges the “truth” value of the scientific enterprise. Not unlike the truth value of proverbs, theoretical statements could be rendered valid or invalid as a function of the context in which they are articulated. There is a sense of pending anarchy to such an admission of contextual factors which drives many natural science-oriented social scientists toward the search for context-less explanations. The victims in this search are a sensitive understanding of the extent to which contextual factors impinge on social reality, and the blind adoption of techniques that exclude consideration of contextual factors, such as proverb interpretation. This suggests a basic incompatibility between natural science approaches to human activity and other disciplines which have embraced context.

Yet context serves a critical function in understanding any kind of human interaction. Taken in isolation, any behaviour (verbal or otherwise) is subject to an infinite number of interpretations.⁵³ It is only when the surrounding situation and the intentions of the actors are taken into account that some semblance of understanding can be achieved. Context rules out large numbers of possible interpretations and creates a background or fore-structure that can be used to construct an interpretation. In essence, context serves as the primary cue for interpretation of any human activity, and failure to take it into consideration is destined to produce the kind of impoverished conceptual yield shown in the foregoing review of psychological approaches to proverbs.

This essay began by suggesting that the work in psychology could be informative about the utility of metatheoretic assumptions

52. For a particularly revealing example of how this obtains for even “hard” sciences see G. Maxwell, “Meaning Postulates in Scientific Theories.” In H. Feigl and G. Maxwell, eds. *Current Issues in the Philosophy of Science*. New York, Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1961.

53. Kenneth Gergen provides fine examples of this for specific behaviours (K.J. Gergen, *Toward Transformation in Social Knowledge*. New York, Springer, 1982) and personality description (K.J. Gergen, A. Hepburn, and D.C. Fisher, “Hermeneutics of Personality Description,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 50 (1986), 1261-1270.

made in folklore. What would folklore have gained if it had held to earlier, product-oriented, views that did not emphasize context? The poor theoretical yield shown in the first part of this paper (e.g., truth value and interpretation) indicates clearly that very little, if anything, would have been gained by adhering to a non-contextual view. *Au contraire*, the finding that there is some yield in psychological analyses that consider context speaks very positively about the utility of the contextual revolution that took place in folklore. In fact, it would appear that psychology can learn more from folklore than vice-versa—due almost exclusively to folklore's expertise in handling context. It is interesting to note that leading critics of psychology's positivistic metatheory are drawing progressively more heavily upon the styles of analysis and conceptual frameworks articulated a number of years ago in folklore and allied disciplines.⁵⁴ In sum, this review of psychological approaches to proverbs suggests that the young turks were right when they contextualized the study of folklore. Failure to do so would have resulted in the kind of impoverished conceptual yield that was reviewed in the first part of this paper. While it may be possible that the positivistic metatheory so prevalent in psychology is appropriate to some topics of investigation, it seems clear, at this point, that it is useless when applied to vibrant and dynamic topics such as proverbs which live and thrive in a real social matrix.

University of Calgary
Calgary, Alberta

54. For detailed discussions see H. Stam, T.B. Rogers, and K. Gergen, eds. *The Analysis of Psychological Theory: Metapsychological Perspectives*. New York, Hemisphere, 1987.