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Review of *Collaborative Projects: an interdisciplinary study*. Boston: Brill. Book edited by Andy Blunden

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In contrast to Andy Blunden's two previous books, *An Interdisciplinary Study of Activity* (Brill, 2010) and *Concepts. A Critical Approach* (Brill, 2012), *Collaborative Projects, An Interdisciplinary Study* is an edited book. The 26 writers include Igor Ariewitch, William Blanton, Michael Cole, Manfred Holodynski, Vera John-Steiner, Anna Stetsenko, and Helena Worthen. The book can be read in at least two ways. Firstly, it can be taken as a collection of research contributions that all are linked with but not limited to cultural historical psychology and the activity theory. I found this collection very inspiring and successful. The second option is to read the book with a focus on the concept of a 'project' as a tool for interdisciplinary human sciences. The editor Andy Blunden particularly emphasizes this perspective in the introduction and conclusion. Below, I will separately discuss these two ways of reading the book.

The main part of the book consists of 12 chapters, the authors of which report research in their own areas of expertise. They cover the micro-, meso- and macro-levels of human sciences, and the topics range from education, psychotherapy and social work to project management, social movement studies and political science. Innovation studies are lacking although, I think, the research of innovative developments in ordinary institutions (see e.g. Miettinen 2012) may have similarities with the investigations of activist projects. The first chapter by Kravtsov and Kravtsova, about the projective method in the Golden Key Schools in Russia, is one of the pearls of the book. The authors describe the experimental-genetic method of instruction, which aims to theoretically model children's developmental processes. The development work is aimed at the whole environment of children and adults' life, rather than at the individual child or group of children. The children first acquire contextual knowledge. Conceptual knowledge comes at a later stage of their development, which leads to the conception of human life as a project. Morten

Nissen presents his valuable theoretical approach with an example from social work with young drug users where, by collectives of artistic video-making, stigmatizing disease-orientation turns toward ‘user-driven standards’ of new identity narratives. Simultaneously, in Leontiev’s terms, sense is developed into meaning. Nissen discusses this practice and collective as a collaborative project, with topics of power, recognition and hope. The chapter by Anna Stetsenko and Igor Arieviditch present how Vygotsky’s theory evolved in line with its practical, political and civic engagement and commitment to social justice and change. They offer an alternative view to how Vygotsky’s project goes beyond the mentalistically understood enterprise of science. Lynn Beaton and Andy Blunden examine the long historical process during which asbestos, a substance with useful properties in the manufacture of many products and construction, was finally banned in Australia. The anti-asbestos movement evolved above all as collaboration between two existing projects – the trade union movement and the institutions of medical science – which together were strong enough to oppose the asbestos industry (p. 276). The legacy of this movement is the new *concept* of asbestos, which is objectified in new laws and regulations, work skills and knowledge. These are just examples of the many interesting chapters.

The chapters are then followed by 12 brief reflections. These were written mainly by the same authors after all 12 chapters were circulated to them and they were asked to submit short reflections on either individual chapters, or the concept as a whole. This seems to be a good way to deepen discussion in an edited book. (However, this deepening does not explicitly focus on the concept of ‘project’). Some new contributors were also invited to write reflections. Brecht De Smet criticizes the ‘flat’ conception of development embedded in the notion of ‘prefiguration’ in the alterglobalization movement, which fails to see how the project and its concept-end point are transfigured over time in the process of interaction with other projects. Mike Rifino, Keiko Katsura and Francisco Medina describe their participation processes in the activist learning community at Hunter College, New York, which aimed to overcome the gap between students’ learning goals and their overall life pursuits. The authors’ views of themselves, their college and the world around them were gradually transformed. The development of this activist learning community is related in a previous chapter by Eduardo Vianna, Naja Hougaard and Anna Stetsenko. Vera John-Steiner reviews some chapters from the perspectives of the notions of mutual appropriation and complementarity, which she introduced and exemplified earlier in her chapter. Michael Cole, referring to his chapter on the 30-year development of the 5th Dimension afterschool program, sketches a ‘mesogenetic’ methodology, which means, as I understand, “seeing the future from the perspective of the past” by turning to data from initial phases of projects after many years, and interpreting the seeds of their development.

The chapters and reflections are narrative and mostly written with an air of freedom. This sparks the reader’s interest by evoking a feeling of intimacy with the authors. It seems that this genre is needed, although often, the research reports lack transparency because they do not explain their methods. It is impossible in this brief review to acknowledge all the interesting insights of the chapters and reflections.

Now I turn to the second reading of the book, the concept of a collaborative project. In the introduction, the editor carefully depicts some of the history of the idea of a project. In activity theory, based on the work of Lev Vygotsky, one of its origins is the ‘life orientation’ or ‘commitment to a life-project’, as interpreted from the work of Fyodor

Vasilyuk (1988). Another is the concept of ‘psychological projection’ from soviet research in engineering design in the 1950s and 60s, which also took root in educational psychology. Most importantly, Anna Stetsenko utilized the concept of collaborative project in her writings in the early 2000s and broadened this to the micro-, meso- and macro-levels of the human sciences. The idea of ‘project’ also has roots in other Western social sciences: in the field of education (John Dewey, Paulo Freire), Husserl’s phenomenology (Alfred Schutz, Jean-Paul Sartre), and the Frankfurt school of Marxist humanism (Ernst Bloch). Andy Blunden argues that this combination of philosophical sediments, together with the popular everyday usage of the concept, makes ‘project’ a powerful tool for interdisciplinary science (p. 8).

The overcoming of the dichotomies of social sciences: between a person’s mind, their social and cultural contexts, and wider social formations and cultural constellations, is the reason and motive for proposing the concept of a collaborative project. According to Blunden, ‘project’ functions to theorize the connection between these, and facilitates scientific investigation at all levels of aggregation. It was this split that the founders of activity theory tried to overcome. One can ask, is not the notion of ‘activity’ already connecting between the levels?

In describing the ‘project’, Blunden leans on A.N. Leontiev’s conceptualization of activity and its object but sees its deficiency in making sense of the ‘societal motive’ as part of the object. The re-interpretation of Leontiev’s object of activity with Hegel’s notion of *immanence* is the editor’s solution to this: “individuals’ actions are directed by their conception of the collaborative pursuit of more remote, societally developed ends, but these ends are realized only in the unfolding of the project itself. The object is not external to the activity, but is immanent within it.” First, a project immanently develops a conception of its object. As the project unfolds and interacts with other movements and institutions, it experiences the effects of its own activity, and its conception of the object changes. The object emerges from the activity of the project itself, as its immanent goal and self-concept.

‘Project’, for Blunden, is the concept of ‘an activity’. ‘Concept’ here refers to the system of actions which are united by their orientation to a common purpose, “the ideal or normative form of that aggregate of actions which is implicit in the immediately given actions and interactions manifested in relation to some situation” (p. 9). I see this as similar to Jaakko Virkkunen’s usage of ‘concept’ (Virkkunen and Tenhunen 2010). ‘Project’ can encompass individuals’ ‘life projects’, projects in work as in everyday parlance, and historical projects such as nation-building or enlightenment. Ron Lubensky, in his chapter, presents public deliberation as an archetypal collaborative project. A social movement, whatever its size, and which can later become institutionalized, is also an example of a project. A ‘project’ seems to emphasize that individual and collective purposes, endeavors, agency and activism are in fact the central core of all activities. This is the humanistic ‘project’ of the book, and is also central to activity theory. Blunden views it as an alternative to social science approaches that treat human beings as automatons, without any insight into what motivates human life. Any methodological approach in social sciences, not only activity theoretical ones, Blunden argues, can inform us about ‘projects’.

Two critical remarks needs to be made. To my mind, the existence of objects also outside activities, such as asbestos in walls or in rock, does not diminish their internal role in

projects or activities. It is important to consider this in our interdisciplinary collaboration with natural sciences. By contrasting the concept of project with another unit of activity, the ‘activity system’ of Developmental Work Research (DWR, Engeström (1987)), Blunden argues that ‘project’ introduces the element of time to activity theory, which was previously absent. Time may indeed seem to be absent if we take the activity system model as only a mechanistic mnemonic and not as an outline for investigating the multiple *internal* mediations in dynamically changing activities (see Engeström and Sannino 2009 for a review of empirical studies in DWR). The activity system is not the only logo for ‘activity’ (see e.g. Kloetzer et al., forthcoming).

At first sight, it may look like Blunden is replacing ‘activity’ with ‘project’, and thus building a new Project Theory. However, this is not the case. Rather, he wants to connect ‘project’ to everything else that has been achieved in activity theory so far. Has ‘activity’ failed in fulfilling its potential to overcome the person-society dichotomy? Or, is activity too institutionalized (or too ‘practico-inert’, as Sartre says) as a concept; do we need new concepts such as ‘project’ to renew it?

As Pablo del Río and Amelia Alvarez (2007) write, the essence of the Vygotskian concept of zone of proximal development (ZPD) is the renewal of the theory itself. There is a risk of splitting activity theory between activities, organizations and history on the one hand, and subjects, actions and situations on the other (Engeström and Sannino 2009). Therefore theoretical renewal may indeed be needed in the ZPD of activity theory. The point of the internal development of projects and the immanence of the objects of the book is well taken and, I believe, has something to give us in the theoretical renewing of studies concerning activities and projects. The humanistic and activist message of the book is important. As Morten Nissen writes about the point of the book: “We take part in articulating hopes of the kind that build on tendencies yet suggest radical transformations”. However, I am not so sure about the power of the concept of ‘project’. The book does not make a deep connection between the empirical chapters and theory, and thus the reader is not yet convinced of the benefits of ‘project’ in empirical research. I feel that a similar kind of immanence and activism can also be studied with the notion of activity (see e.g. Seppänen 2004 for a case in organic farming). Does the distinction between the individual, particular and universal moments of a concept require the notion of ‘project’? As Blunden states, more theoretical and empirical research is needed.

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