

# Editorial

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One has to be proud of the privilege of introducing this first issue of *Outlines. Critical Practice Studies* produced in the Open Journal System format.

If one regrets that the transition meant a reduction to only one issue in 2009, then there is more than enough compensation in its quality.

Of course, the present collective of 14 editors representing 11 groups in 12 countries only emerged in 2009 and we still have to develop our routines. This includes ways of organizing proof-reading, lay-out etc., and it is likely that the meticulously deficit-oriented reader will find satisfaction in many small typos and strange format variations for some time yet.

But contents matter more (we hope).

Although this was not produced as a special issue, it almost has the character of one. We might suggest the common title *A critical examination of objective activity*. Allow me to defend this interpretation as a way of reflecting on this collection of virtual papers.

In our "[focus and scope](#)" description, we declare:

The journal is interdisciplinary with a background and focus at the intersections of social and human sciences and philosophy which are established

around the idea of practice (in its various forms: Praxis, activity, praxology, process theory etc.). This makes sense because practice, as both material and discursive, both form and process, both subjective and objective, both collective and individual, relays in a distinct way otherwise quite diverse disciplines, traditions, and positions.

One important tradition that has worked on just this focus, and which has filled our pages, is cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT)<sup>1</sup>. It is this tradition, which is debated, overturned, reconstituted, superseded, developed and realized here - and in particular some of its core concepts and approaches, notably the subjectivity and objectivity of activity.

While the other 3 papers explicitly take up core CHAT theorems and theorists for discussion, Rainio appears to only apply it in the special field of gender in play pedagogy. But, characteristic for CHAT, application requires critical revision. As in many recent studies inspired by Yrjö Engeström's work, Vygotsky's discussion of

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<sup>1</sup> When referring to CHAT, I usually feel the need to emphasize the diversity of this tradition which the acronym seems to deny and some renderings ignore. This diversity is so obvious in this issue that this reminder is redundant except for those who would take a glance only at the editorial. For them, a footnote will suffice.

“double stimulation” in an experimental setting is profoundly reinterpreted as a general lever for recognizing and facilitating subjective agency: The constraints of a certain (socially given) situation are countered by a creative use of certain cultural artifacts, including, in this case, narrative and discursive forms. This “breaking away” from the given situation and from given habits is then seen, in Holzkamp’s terms – but proposing their revision – to be possible whether the agency (“action potency”) is restrictive or generalized; according to Rainio, this is important because Holzkamp ignores that in some situations, generalized agency just isn’t achievable.

It is not the task of an editorial to judge the fairness of this critique; perhaps it can be viewed in the light of earlier discussions of whether a dichotomy of the twin concepts lies in their theoretical construction or in a skewed reading of them, or both (e.g. Haug, 2003; Nissen, 2006).

But more to the point (that I wish to make) here, the backdrop of this search for subjective agency – with the help of a certain reading of Vygotsky – is the objectivity of activity. And this is also the case, in other ways, in Blunden’s, Rey’s, and Jones’ articles.

The objectivity of the play activities that Rainio documents so vividly is primarily seen through the looking-glass of the social categories that structure gender inequality, as e.g. boys are given the more agentive roles, teachers approach some girls as stereotype “horse girls”, etc. The critical feminist agenda exoticizes this objectivity in a way which calls forth the impetus for transformation.

In the other contributions to this issue, however, the critique falls, in a way, on the messenger: A.N. Leontiev’s development of Vygotsky’s psychology into a “theory of activity”, including its structure and the ways it mediates objective social requirements. It is this theory – along with its reception by Engeström and his followers – which is the target of critique as mechanical, functionalistic and at the same time utopian.

I am not saying it shouldn’t: In so far as the “messenger” fails to take seriously the suppressive nature of these structures and requirements, this makes sense.

Yet, speaking of sense, I personally do not take the critiques of Leontiev presented by the three authors to mean that his theory should be classified as simply objectivistic. Perhaps this is because I read them on the background of a more German-Scandinavian reception in which one of Leontiev’s main intentions was actually to recognize subjectivity as personal sense, motives, needs. It is this tradition which led Holzkamp to dedicate his founding of what he called “subject-science” to Leontiev (Holzkamp, 1983).

This appears to be very different from a roughly Anglo-Finnish reading. Blunden presents this latter unusually clearly, e.g. when he writes:

As a result of division of labor, we have a separation between the goals of an individual’s action and the *objective motive* of the activity, which is deemed to be the meeting of some human (i.e., social) need. (p. 4)

I have always wondered in the face of this idea of an objective motive, or as in the Engeströmian tradition, “the object-motive” of activity. I remember discussing this heatedly with Yrjö Engeström sometime in 1992, not quite knowing how to reconcile my respect for this great scholar with such an obvious misreading of his most important theoretical source. Did not Leontiev himself write clearly that

If in the consciousness of the subject external sensitivity connects meanings with the reality of the objective world, then the personal sense connects them with the reality of his own life in this world, with its motives (Leontiev, 1978, 92-3) - ?

Was it not exactly the point of his structure of activity to link the objective side: action-goal-meaning with the subjective side: activity-motive-sense (anchored in needs), so that through

understanding activity one could find the psychological significance of any externally observed actions with given goals – e.g. that of reading a book (Leontiev A.N., 1981, 229 & 400f.) - ?

But of course, Engeström, Blunden and many others have not simply misread. Now many years later I have come to accept the validity of *both* readings, even though they are directly opposite, not least because some scholarly effort has been put into the matter (see e.g. Keiler, 1997, or the whole issue of *Mind, Culture & Activity* 12:1, 2005, which is dedicated to the problem of how to understand the concept of the “object of activity”). This is not because Leontiev was simply hiding unreflected self-contradiction behind the veil of dialectics; nor is it reducible to the – quite considerable! – problems in translating key concepts such as “object” between relevant languages.

In their very different ways, all three of Leontiev’s critics in this issue point in another direction: The *functionalism* that defines his standpoint, politically and theoretically. The subjectivity he recognized still always had to somehow subject to objective requirements; the needs that anchored motives were socially specified and basically always either organic or mere reflections of society’s demands (as “higher cultural needs”, see e.g. Axel & Nissen, 1993; Miettinen, 2005; Osterkamp, 1976).

In Rey’s words, Leontiev stuck with a mechanistic view of the psyche, ignoring the recognition of subjectivity present in Vygotsky’s early and late writings, even though he sometimes declared the opposite:

That paradoxical style, in which an underlining statement is contradicted some pages later, was characteristic of Soviet authors investigating certain “hot” topics of doctrinal character, as was the case of reflection in psychology. Leontiev flew in “a circle” over the same question (p. 64).

One can read Rey’s main point as the proposal to supplement Leontiev’s objectivist psychology by unfolding the subjective side that Vygotsky could only indicate with concepts like sense or “perezhivanie” (emotional experience). But the two possible readings of Leontiev could teach us that this is in fact what Leontiev tried to do himself. Adding subjectivity does not do the job if functionalism prevents the understanding of its mediation with objectivity. The implications of Rey’s critique are more far-reaching.

As Rey describes with his “circle flying” metaphor, and as both Blunden and Jones make clear, Leontiev’s functionalism was probably connected with the political-ideological implications of the theory. Soviet ideology broke away from Marx by asserting this “new society” as a classless domain where the universal properties of human activity directly described activities and provided an approach to their management (and tacitly assuming another, more real state of affairs). When this procedure is then transported to capitalism, all it seems to require is to add a feature of certain specific “contradictions” as a kind of dysfunction. It is characteristic of functionalism, east or west, that the subject and the practical, political relevance of the analysis itself are – perhaps conveniently – blocked from view. The critical thrust – like the feminism in Rainio’s approach to the objectivity of her girls’ play activities – is replaced with a descriptive or perhaps moralizing standpoint. Subjectivity becomes another object that must be added (rather like the little monkey on our cover image).

Jones and Blunden both point to the fundamental problem in taking universal qualities of human activity (labor, practice, praxis etc.) as a utopian approach to real activities in capitalism (or for that matter in any other specific kind of society). No doubt, play pedagogy must take account of patriarchy, educational institutions, etc.; health care practice cannot be conceptualized without regard for welfare state, medical professionalism, etc., and in both cases, the struggles around privatization, New Public Management, or

the whole ideology of a “competitive state” acting on a global market etc. are probably important. Of course, as these examples show, “capitalism” is already too general and too narrow. It is no surprise that, 142 years after the publishing of Capital began, a science that reflects itself in cultural-historical terms breaks away from some of its defining generalizations.

But the question remains how to set our conceptualizations of the universally human to work in specific circumstances. Jones concludes that Marx’ conception of activity was an

...affirmation of the human potential for creative, life-affirming communion and transformation which had grown up inside (...) capitalist production (...). It was not a model of activity under existing conditions but a call to arms, a call for social transformation, which was heard by the pioneers of the cultural-historical tradition and (...) is of vital significance for the development of our tradition today (p. 56-57).

A potential and a call for social transformation. Does this exhaust the relevance of theorizing it? If so, how far does it reach? Is it in fact quite sufficient with the global characterization Marx already gave?

Or should we indeed go on to discuss and develop such interdisciplinary conceptualizations of activity, as does Blunden, who offers the “germ cell” notion of “project collaboration” as something which “has both normative and descriptive force” (p. 24)? This would certainly be continuous with the position CHAT has occupied in the landscape of critical psychologies: Not only using psychology in social critique, nor just criticizing psychology (as ideology etc.), but offering positive theoretical conceptualizations alternative to ruling ideas.

Perhaps the intersections of normative and descriptive forces have a wider impact than we often imagine. Potentials and calls for transformation need not be peripheral to life in capitalism. We could think of CHAT as continuous with

Ernst Bloch’s (1967) emphasis on anticipation and hope, not just as remotely relevant in fields such as art or utopian politics, but as the red thread in all kinds of human activity, emotion and thinking in everyday life.

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