
OUTLINES - CRITICAL PRACTICE STUDIES

• Vol. 14, No. 2 • 2013 • (01-06) •
<http://www.outlines.dk>

Special Issue on “Transformative Social Practice and Socio-Critical Knowledge”

Guest Editors: Ines Langemeyer^a and Stefanie Schmachtel-Maxfield^b

^aInstitute for Educational Science, University of Tübingen
Tübingen, Germany

^bSchool of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh
Edinburgh, UK

Introduction

Certainly, the theme “transformative social practice” echoes Marx’s thesis ad Feuerbach, not to interpret the world, but to change it. Yet, the purpose of addressing this theme is awkwardly reflected in this contrast. When are we really to decide between the former and the latter? We are involved with both all the time. “Transformative social practice” addresses this involvement and is therefore *not* a theme that unfolds simply around an ideal notion of practice which is powerful and revolutionary counterposed to a peaky and colourless notion of theory. The focus on “transformative social practice” that we present in this special issue neither conveys prioritising practice over theory nor engages with political action before thinking.

The purpose of devoting a special issue to this theme is more modest on the one hand, and more demanding on the other. It is more modest with regard to the message that we initially had in mind, that is, to remind peers in academia that scientific research makes a difference, since it does not simply register the world the way it is – even when it seems to do nothing else. The reason is that science itself is a practice entangled with many other societal practices. Science is not only influenced by the latter, it also works on solving *their* epistemic problems. And it is not an exception that the outcomes of scientific investigations are followed by the search for their practical application.

However, the entanglements between science and social practice run even deeper (cf. Langemeyer 2011). And therefore the task of dealing with “transformative social practice” is more demanding than engaging with political action before thinking. Whether it is

oriented towards political action or theoretical thinking, it always requires a reflection on the stances within scientific or political or social work – stances that are often covered and opaque especially when doing science is declared to be in principle value-free. Thus, the research on “transformative social practice” is always a theoretical and practical struggle to identify the possibilities of transforming the conditions by which we are estranged, patronised, oppressed, exploited – yet also enabled and empowered. The topic of “transformative social practice” envisions the attempt to develop an emancipatory, i.e. critical and self-reflective, form of science in which self-determination and intervention against social injustice play a major role. But such issues are not just ‘secondary’, moral issues, so to speak, subordinated to the ‘primacy’ of scientific matters; this division and subordination is questioned in the first place. *Scientific progress and progress in social justice are rather seen as two sides of the same coin.*

This argument which was well articulated by Lev Vygotsky in his book on “the historical meaning of the crisis in psychology” (1927/1987) is however likely to be misunderstood. A simplification of it would be prioritising the moral over the scientific. The question is not so much how to evaluate scientific projects and engagements in the light of ethical problems, we are rather challenged to develop within the manifold entanglements of scientists an adequate moral stance – i.e. ways of taking a stance by which we are capable of making not only a distinction but also a difference.

The cultural-historical approach as it is presented in this issue does not only serve as a pool of critical insights or useful tools, but is itself explored as a model of ‘doing science’. Here, science is not seen as a power ‘from outside’ impinging on practices with the intention to transform them. Instead, doing science is conceived of as an integral part of societal transformation. Most importantly, this socio-critical science can therefore never be a kind of knowledge of a completed form. It has to be understood in itself as a cultural-historical product, as ‘philosophy just in time’ (Jensen 1999), which is drawn upon, reproduced and changed by researchers in their local research processes. Thus, science can only ever be partial; it needs to be developed, as Vygotsky maintains, in many contexts and by many people. There is no end, no predetermined objective and no ultimate solution. We need to be dialecticians – addressing the challenges of a changing world each time anew (cf. Langemeyer & Roth 2006). Yet, hardly addressed, these challenges can be transformed depending on the forms of scientific cooperation that we develop.

Furthermore, the topic “transformative social practice” does not address changes in terms of socio-political trends or shifts only. Rather, this perspective is interested in taking a cultural-historical stance towards these changes to understand the challenges we are facing when we search for “transformative social practice” in our own research. With this perspective we can also try to understand the paradigmatic nature of societal transformations and reflect critically our own perception of the current times and the ways we anticipate change, the ways we hope for betterment and how we envision our future. This also implies to critically and self-reflectively scrutinise how the public and scientific discourses inform the ideas and concepts that we draw on and that we might take for granted.

This special issue brings together contributions that address and reflect upon the interventionist and political impetus inherent in cultural-historical research – often addressed in this issue as cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) or more broadly as

socio-cultural-historical activity theory (SCHAT) – in which ways it can be further developed, criticised, and rethought.

Anna Stetsenko undertakes a critical revision of some of the grounding assumptions of CHAT in their implications for how we understand and study human subjectivity and the mind. She tackles some rifts that have occurred within CHAT splitting it into somewhat separate research directions. Her main argument is that subjectivity, including phenomena of thinking such as concepts, cannot be understood as some inherently private, self-sufficient processes that are ontologically distinct from collaborative activities out in the world. “Transformative social practice” is therefore the concept of an “*ontology of collaborative praxis* in its materiality and historicity”. It highlights individuals’ actions as enactments of “projected futures of community practices”, as “*the making of the future in and through the presently ongoing activities and actions*”. This implies among others the unity of developments of knowledge, self, and identity.

An exemplary research project that puts this theoretical approach into practice is reported by Naja Berg Hougaard. She has conducted in-depth interviews with nine American first generation community college students who participated in an extra-curricular learning activity, asking how the students from diverse cultural family-backgrounds make sense of their experiences as learners. She found out that students mainly drew upon a vocational discourse towards education – pursuing academic learning primarily as a means to get a stable job and achieve financial security – accompanied by an understanding of learning as rote learning (i.e. memorisation and acquisition of skills). Furthermore, the analysis highlights that the stigmatisation of community colleges led the students to adopt a transitional positioning towards the community that they were part of, being faced with the challenge of belonging to an institution while simultaneously negating this belonging. Berg Hougaard calls for a reformulation of the concept of belongingness away from an adaptive notion of fitting in in education psychology towards a dialectical CHAT informed conceptualisation that plays emphasis on transformation.

Nissen’s article starts with a critique of SCHAT of not reflecting how it is in itself constituted by power and hope. Following the paradigm of scientism (the understanding of science as something elevated above everyday struggles but which holds claims of truth and better life), SCHAT assumes its own innocence, which leaves it caught in a position between functionalism and utopianism. Nissen points out that post-structuralist theories that do address the issue of power in the production of knowledge, such as Foucault and Latour’s work, equally fail to apply their own principles to themselves; they adopt a cynical standpoint that is solely defined by what they negate, missing out on reflecting what this negativity produces. Rediscovering Marx’ Hegelian legacy, Nissen puts forward a theory that frames Hegel’s notion of recognition in a participatory way. His theory is geared towards revealing “real possibilities” (Bloch 1967, 1995) for transformation through the collective production of self-reflective ideology critiques in interventionist research settings. To exemplify his theory, he applies it to his current field of research of social work with drug users.

Corresponding to Nissen’s approach, Mørck et al. discuss the principles of praxis development in relation to gang conflicts in the Copenhagen area in Denmark. The authors unfold three interrelated concepts relevant to the praxis development in this field: relentless criticism; praxis development as dialectical process; and interpellation. Exemplified at the cases of individuals who are involved in gang cultures and engage in

the context of the Grundtvigs Højskole's gang seminars and other community activities, the article shows how the researchers and co-researchers together with the local practitioners and volunteers created common third activities which allow all participants to mutually transform their praxes. By collectively dealing with the double bind situations they face, the participants were able to move beyond the dual thinking transported through powerful actors who position them in a marginalised position (e.g. media, police, politicians) towards achieving an expansive interpellation.

Tiina Kontinen's article engages with the existing critique around Engeström's organisational intervention approach of Developmental Work Research. Following Jean Lave's (2012) recent call for revolutionising cultural-historical research agendas by drawing on Gramsci, she introduces key Gramscian ideas to reformulate the concept of contradictions, power and the role of the researcher in Developmental Work Research. In particular, Kontinen suggests drawing on the notions of transformism, hegemony and dialectic pedagogy to reformulate particular practical and theoretical elements of Developmental Work Research when conducting organisational interventions.

In the search of analytical tools to assess the transformative achievement of social movements, Dorothy Holland and Diana Gómez Correal introduce Gibson-Graham's (2006) "A Postcapitalist Society", a theory of transformation that resulted from participatory action research and focuses on the micro-political dimension of everyday life in local spaces and activities. They derive a set of criteria from this theory and apply it to the analysis of two movements: the feminist movement of Bogotá in the 1970s and '80s and the contemporary local food movement in North Carolina. Based on their analysis they refine these criteria, pointing out the need to collectively reflect of the structural features of the broader cultural and social context that social movements are embedded in and internalise, and that restrict their transformative capacity.

Anja Marschall's article focuses on the transformative potential of conducting research with children. At the example of studying children who spend their everyday life in time-sharing arrangements as a result of their parents' divorce, the author asks how children use their participation in a research process as a way to transform their understanding of themselves and their life arrangements. She introduces Life Mapping as a dialogical research method which provides a space for (joint) reflection in which children can explore different ways to understand themselves, their families and their everyday lives, and find new ways to respond to the challenges they encounter. With her article, Marschall aims to challenge adult assumptions on time-shared children through the issues, possibilities and dilemmas that children bring up in such a process. She emphasises the importance of using child-relevant methodologies for children to be able to make a connection between the research process and their everyday life, as well as the need for the researcher to modify their approach and challenge their own assumption with regard to the often shifting agendas of children for participating in research.

Charlotte Mathiassen explores how persons who experienced bullying in their childhood move across situations and settings in order to follow a process of potential transformation or change and develop "transformative intentions". She argues drawing on Agamben that there is transformative potentiality in individuals' experiences with childhood exclusion and bullying, which is intimately connected to the individual's different life settings, specific challenges, discourses, etc., in their life. Two cases of her empirical study with 36

adults of an age between 20 and 65 are presented to show that a transformative process does not reside within the individual, but takes place as a dynamic process.

We would like to thank all authors and reviewers for their stimulating discussions on the manuscripts. Without their engagements, this issue would not have been completed. In addition, many duties and burdens of the past year were not planned, so that we eventually came once in a while into conflicts with our editorial work; therefore we would like to thank all authors as well for their patience with us.

References

- Bloch, E. (1967). *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Bloch, E. (1995). *The Principle of Hope*. Cambridge, Mass, USA: MIT Pres.
- Jensen, U. J. (1999). Categories in Activity Theory: Marx' Philosophy Just-in-time. In S. Chaiklin, M. Hedegaard, & U. J. Jensen (Eds.), *Activity Theory and Social Practice: Cultural-Historical Approaches* (pp. 79-99). Aarhus: University Press.
- Langemeyer, Ines (2011). Science and Social Practice. Activity Theory and Action Research as Socio-Critical Approaches. In: *Mind, Culture and Activity*, 18 (2) (pp. 148-160)
- Langemeyer, I. & Roth, W.-M. (2006). Is Cultural-Historical Activity Theory Threatened to Fall Short of its Own Principles and Possibilities as a Dialectical Social Science? *Outlines - Critical Practice Studies*, 8, 20-42.
- Lave, J. (2012) Changing Practice. *Mind, Culture and Activity*, (19), 156–171.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1927/1987). The historical meaning of the crisis in psychology: a methodological investigation. In: R. W. Reiber & J. Wollock (Eds.), *The collected work of L.S. Vygotsky. Vol 3. Problems of the theory and history of psychology*. (pp. 233-343) New York: Plenum Press.

About the authors

Ines Langemeyer is a full professor for educational sciences with a special focus on adult education/further education. Her research is focused on changes within learning and working connected to a new scientification (or epistemification) of work. She is presently executing a research project on work relations of advanced training staff (funded by the Ministry of Education and Research) in cooperation with the German Institut of Adult Education (DIE), the German Institute for Vocational Education (BIBB) and the Chair for Economic Pedagogics and Vocational Education and Training of the University of Duisburg/Essen.

Contact: Prof. Dr. Ines Langemeyer, Lehrstuhl für Erwachsenenbildung/Weiterbildung, Institut für Erziehungswissenschaft, Universität Tübingen, Münzgasse 11, D-72070 Tübingen, phone: +49 (0)7071-29 72868.

Stefanie Schmachtel-Maxfield's research centers on educational governance with a focus on the implementation of integrated children's policies. After being a postdoctoral researcher at the Edinburgh School of Social and Political Science she is now a visiting scholar there. She wrote her PhD thesis at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark, Department of Psychology, in which she examined the collective strategy-building process in a German education partnership.

Contact: Dr. Stefanie Schmachtel-Maxfield, 11/8 Moncrieff Terrace, Edinburgh EH9 1NB, UK, phone: +44 7425082188, mail: Stefanie.schmachtel@gmx.net