

On Activity Theory

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Chaiklin, S., Hedegaard, M., Juul-Jensen, U. (eds.) (1999). **Activity Theory and Social Practice**. Aarhus University Press

Chaiklin, S. (ed.) (2001). **The Theory and Practice of Cultural-Historical Psychology**. Aarhus University Press

People working with qualitative research might have knowledge of activity theory, and people working with activity theory, more often than not, have knowledge of qualitative research. In fact the similarities between different qualitative methodologies and activity theory, for instance in viewing theory and praxis as complementary, could easily be worth exploring further. For these reasons it is relevant with this review of books on activity theory in the present newsletter for qualitative research.

Activity theory or Cultural Historical Psychology has been shaped by dialectical materialism and concrete social problems. The chapters in the two reviewed books mostly stem from revised contributions from the 4th International Conference on Cultural Research and Activity Theory held in Aarhus in 1998. I was participating myself and it was therefore with great excitement that I read the two books.

Activity Theory and Social Practice

This book is a compilation of 18 works written mostly by psychologists, philosophers, and anthropologists. The late Vasily Davydov writes one very interesting and thought stimulating account. The chapter extends Leontiev's concept of activity. Davydov's use of history and ontogenetic processes gives the reader a feel for cultural-historical dimensions in relation to central psychological topics such as emotion, imagination, and attention. This significant work needs more pondering on my behalf to fully grasp Davydov's understanding of the cell of conscious activity, but it proved a highly interesting read.

The philosophical framework of the concept of activity is elaborated many different places in the book most notably by chapters by *Bern Fichtner*, *Peeter Tulviste*, and *Lektorsky*. Fichtner views activity in relation to genetic development and Bateson's system theory. However, he leaves some doubt about the different conceptual uses of the term in his discussion about activity as structure or as object. Tulviste provocatively suggests that there will be no need for cultural psychology once it has been established that higher mental functioning can only be explained through culture and not nature. I do not buy his point, but his outline of an agenda of developmental psychology is definitely relevant.

As I finished reading the above chapters on the philosophical underpinnings of activity theory I wanted action. Luckily I could get it with a chapter by anthropologist *Terence Turner* on activism and the global expansion of capitalism. This chapter together with philosopher *Martha Nussbaum's* long but riveting chapter on feminism and India are positive surprises. Turner uses a concept of commodity and capitalism directly inspired by Marx. Nussbaum distinguishes between capabilities and functioning, which is central in Vygotsky's work. Yet in their chapters I would have liked to see more explicit references to central tenets within activity theory. Another point that can be read out of e.g. Nussbaum and Turner's work is that social issues are of greater concern to anthropologists and philosophers than to psychologists. I am tired of hearing this. Though this is an often-proposed statement it should not automatically be accepted. The roots of cultural historical psychology actually bear witness to the contrary. The possibility exists that anthropologists have just been better in selling their message to the public and the research community and at the same time using positivistic experimental psychology as a straw man for their criticism. But this is another matter not relevant here.

A substantial contribution in the direction of expanding on Vygotsky's ideas comes from *Anna Stetsenko*. She is concerned with three central tenets in Vygotsky's theory: social interaction, cultural tools, and zone for proximal development. She discusses learning and effective cultural tools that are learning materials. She gives a scholarly account on scaffolding and the concept of activity. Yet I could not figure out how she thinks that the mastering of cultural tools gradually is interiorized?

There were many ideas in the book that I had trouble following. *González Rey* points out that the challenge for the concept of personality is to overcome the different dichotomies in personality psychology. He introduces a new term, namely "social subjectivity" to address the subjective character of any social space in present and historical time in its own individual and societal history. I can clearly follow him so far as to stating that the social is more than discursive practice. I can see why he uses Vygotsky to further the understanding of development as open and endless and differentiated process. But I am not sure that I see where this leads in terms of qualities of current social relationships. González Rey sketches a way to go, but I could not follow him all the way. I wish he was more specific as to the unity of the subjective and the objective as a concrete unity. Another account, however highly fascinating, that is somewhat difficult to grasp in my opinion, is by *Álvarez and Del Rio*. They are concerned with cultural identity and how the social-cultural consciousness system is a situated mediated activity. They do a good job in describing the main ideas and assumptions that guide their work on the identities of the Castilians. They manage to end up with a differentiated theory about identity reflecting changes in the social sphere. However, the chapter would probably have been easier if the authors had put the method's section first.

For the reader interested in qualitative research there are some interesting analyses. Most notably *Mariane Hedegaard* analyses Turkish parents' conceptions, attitudes, and expectations to their children in Danish schooling and future. She makes some poignant qualitative analyses of Turkish parents. Finally there is the contribution by *Yrjö Engeström, Ritva Engeström and*

Tarja Vähäaho. Their study arose out of a need to make health care units more flexible. They describe knot working as the active construction of ever changing combinations of people and artifacts distributed over time and place. Thus it is a movement of tying and untying otherwise separate threads of activity. They offer an example of a qualitative analysis based on the concept of knot working. The analysis is illustrative and uses many schematically smart representations in illustrating the knot-working trajectory. These activity diagrams are used as tools for analysis and may serve to make the many interrelations clear. Even though, a few details are not clear, such as the use of italics to denote future action, the strength of this representation is that a single individual's activity can be combined along several complementary dimensions.

Most chapters are highly relevant. But I could easily live without the chapter about Vygotsky, written by Vygotsky's daughter *Ghita Vygotskaya*. At the conference I remember feeling that this contribution was a bit out of place. Just because science is created in a social, historical context I fail to see why the reader should be bothered about biographical details on that level. Furthermore the chapter by *Jerome Bruner* is, quite frankly, a disappointment. It gives a personal account of psychology embedded in culture. Bruner gave an eloquent speech when he visited the Music Hall in Aarhus. But the chapter is lightweight compared to the other contributions in this volume.

The Theory and Practice of Cultural-Historical Psychology

This book consists of 15 chapters written by psychologists or social scientists with strong ties to my own subject: psychology. Probably for this reason I find that the chapters in this reviewed book generally are more interesting and less uneven than in the above reviewed book. This book in particular does a fine job in developing the practice of activity theory in the line of thought of Vygotsky in particular, but also Leontiev, Luria and others.

The chapters can be divided according to whether they are reporting an empirical study or not. The theoretical chapters are mainly concerned with the concept of activity and unit of analysis. The empirical studies in this book are in general concerned with the study of everyday cultural practices.

To take the theoretical chapters first there are three chapters with a strong inclination towards philosophy. The chapter by *Falk Seeger* looks at how humans get to master their own behavior. This leads to a discussion of artifacts mediating theory and praxis. Seeger manages to give an informative overview of the sources of philosophy underlying cultural historical psychology and guides the reader with interesting examples. *Charles W. Tolman* traces the philosophical origins of the activity concept in the work of Kant, Fichte, Hegel and Marx. *Zinchenko* discusses the issue of external (visible) versus internal (invisible)– and the use in psychology of such ill-defined and vague notions. He argues that they are not congruent and suggests that the terms objective and subjective should be applied instead. I think something interesting is happening here, but must admit that I did not understand his argument very well.

Then there are two chapters concerned with personality. *Chaiklin* discusses how the concept of personality should be understood within cultural-historical psychology. He proposes the hypothesis that personality is not in the same category as basic psychological functions and uses the Hegelian analysis of concepts to derive a notion of personality, where the individual and the social relations are integrated in the concrete individual. The big question is then how social relations are integrated in the concrete individual? This is interesting and I think the author (rightly) take it to be an empirical question. Fariñas León takes up the question about personality. She is concerned with extending the study of learning to a higher level of what she calls “auto regulation”. She analyses the system of conditions necessary to develop mental actions and thus learning. The text is highly relevant since it is concerned with activity theory and positivism, her point being that activity theory has not given much attention to the subjective sides of learning. But I could not always follow her argument, which I blame on the highly specialized references to Cuban and Soviet psychology (e.g. type III orienting basis).

Elhammoumi provides the explicit criticism in pointing out that much sociocultural research has not sufficiently headed to its materialistic foundation and the principles of e.g. ownership, production, and distribution of wealth. In my view, this is a bold but somewhat one-eyed criticism. I do not quite agree that all mainstream psychological sociocultural authors such as Cole, Rogoff, and Engeström have ignored the macro perspective of socially organized practical activity. Engeström for instance has been explicit about terms of e.g. division of labor.

The second chunk of chapters explicitly reports on empirical work. The themes circle around thought and language and semiotic mediation and it is impossible to do them justice in this limited review. However, one chapter by *Angela Uchoa Branco* starts out by noting that educators often do not give adequate attention to questions pertaining to development of social goals. She refers to different experiments with triads of children carrying out tasks of work and play involving either cooperation or competition. I very much liked her experimental courage, but I wonder where all this leads. Thus since her point is that it is meaningless to talk about social interactions as belonging exclusively to one class/category or another and since social processes are dynamic she might end up caught in a mess that no ordinary experimental logic can get her out of.

Concluding comments

The two books can be read sort of like handbooks on the cultural historical school of Activity theory. Here the interested, skilled reader can find valuable information about state of the art work on e.g. activity, communication, theory and praxis, collective, emotions, needs, desires, tasks, actions, operations. But as handbooks should probably not be read from one end to the other, these books, are hard to read in such a manner. Since the contributions are written by – and to – a specialized scholastic community, the articles are at times difficult. The authors do not yet again have to explain basic concepts that otherwise would have been fine to refresh.

A few minor details could have added to the clarity of “*Activity Theory and Social Practice*”. For instance the specific ordering of the different contributions could easily have been

different. More importantly a list of glossary or a summary as to how the different concepts are used could have helped. Also the book could benefit from more cross-referencing. These are minor points, since the book clearly illustrates significant areas where activity theory can contribute to social science, and perhaps to our lives as human beings.

Due to the diversity and the sheer magnitude of the project of putting philosophical concepts to social action, it is hard to get a hold on every single idea that is dealt with. But it definitely pays off to read the books carefully in order to get a rewarding insight on the status of a field concerned with worthwhile concerns. My own understanding of psychology was challenged many times and I learned new things about the philosophy and history of my profession. The two books deal with many questions. One, I think, underlying project is to find one single unit of analysis for psychology. Clearly this is a highly important question – if answerable at all. Given the serious attempts in the two books to found cultural historical psychology theoretically, I think it manages to overcome many dangers in answering the question such as the futility of relativism.

In conclusion the merit of two books is that they manage to go onwards following a particular line of thought, and yet at the same time deal with great diversity of content. This, not accidentally, is in line with Vygotsky's belief that psychologists should be as open and interested as possible towards all problems that may fall into their discipline.