Chapter 15
Modeling and Analyzing Contextual Influences

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ABSTRACT
Working practices rather than purpose or instrumentation defines workplaces as individually motivated or systems controlled units of analysis. In this chapter, analysis of religious work in spiritual organizations covers interview data on employees’ experiences of their organizations. Methodological consideration applies for comparison between concepts, models, and theories. Results on religious workplace characteristics emerge from applied activity theory and a model of literary analysis. Religious people perceive and conceive of their workplaces as self-controlled, purpose-driven, administratively structured, and multi-faceted environments. As their words come out during interviews, the data they supply differs from their perceived workplace impressions. Deployed activity and literary theory plus empirical data make up the means for analyzing the impact of setting, purpose, individual action, and collective activity.

BACKGROUND
Contemporary workplaces thrive on shared discourses, language in action and situated practices. Natural language is the primary means for establishing, upholding and developing relations between thought and language, form and contents, structure and meaning plus object and objective. A comprehensive display of relations between thought-language-action-activity is crucial to understanding human behavior. In narrowing down on relevant issues for activity theoretical research, Daniels and Edwards (2004) plus Martin and Peim (2009) suggest focus on (a) relations between individual acts and organizational practices plus (b) exploration of ambivalence over conceptualizations of agent (who), action (how, fast, carefully, honestly) and agency (how, by what means). As a result of studies into the interrelatedness between language and action, Enerstvedt (1971, p. 53) says “social action contains-reflects linguistic structure”. With the exploration of relations between social action, shared acts and natural language follow that singular human acts go beyond and produce natural language. On the other hand, natural language is a personal (autonomous) construct and collectively accepted (social) convention. What remains is that

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natural languages are functional instruments for defining the limits and impact of singular (speech) acts. By studying people’s work life experiences influenced by cultural characteristics and operating on routines, beliefs and environments I explore the dynamics of verbal communication as well as the contents of religious work. Analyzing organizational routines and problem solving among employees in religious settings (= i.e. the physical space that somebody occupies) forms a challenge, regardless if the object of study are religious or secular environments. Enerstvedt (1977, p. 61) characterizes religious discourse by claiming that believers reflect their “concrete experience of the world” (italics in original), e.g. “harmony” between religious purpose and social control. Also, employees’ reflection on workplace experiences are hidden from direct scrutiny. For employees in a spiritual organization, fellow citizens expect a specific code of conduct and a given role related to a religious mission. Engeström (1987) suggests rules and regulations, community plus division of labor for analysis of such an environment. What remains to cover for a study of religious behavior is application of an analytical “filter” that helps research describe how people experience of their job settings (management, task and working routine) and their objectives (future oriented aspiration).

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND PURPOSE

There are degrees of impact emerging from/exercised on relations between context, objective and activity. The researched issue is to decide on the degree to which e.g. division of labor and rules and regulations influence people’s perceptions of the main activity. Do analytical concepts and models do so to a different degree than do public objectives and private goals? Another purpose of the study is to sort out the impact of individual and collective influences on behavior among religious people, be it by physical setting or abstract objective. In doing so the explanatory power of Engeström’s (1987) theory and Burke’s (1970) typology of constituents of human motivation and behavior are applied to empirical interview data. There is, however, an important note on approaches to analyzing and understanding human behavior, for example as in this study during interviews or on people’s jobs. Burke’s use of the concept Purpose is near-synonymous with everyday words like aim, target and objective. However they differ from Engeström’s (1987) use of the analytical concepts Object/Objective (Foot, 2002). Leontev (2002) defines Object/Gegenstand as a tangible and an intangible object, a material “thing” and a psychological Purpose/Objective, especially so in relation to the concept of activity (Stetsenko, 2005). So Gegenstand/Objective exists in relation to other things – as a physical object towards which people exercise direct action. The conceptual pair is also an ideal abstraction, a reasonable purpose, a motivational target towards which people aspire. According to Leontev (2002, p. 56) the ideal Purpose/Gegenstand of e.g. religious activity “defines and changes the subject’s activity.” (transl. by this author) The ideal Purpose/Gegenstand of the activity is a product of reflective thought which emerges as a result of the subjects’ participation in a shared activity. Put differently, reflection is a dialectic process through which the material world influences personality, and the subject in turn influences the world by his actions. In order to pursue the given double objective, i.e. to characterize religious activity and to assess the validity of interview data, I have conducted a study on missionary work among US and Swedish missionaries in Norway, Latvia and Sweden respectively. The research questions cover aspects of: Who is the agent, how does s/he act, what is a “religious” action, what are the relations between setting and purpose? This study also turned out as an attempt at researching the validity of interview data.