Chapter 21
Reflections on the Theory of Activity

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ABSTRACT
Activity theory is a “productive” resource for shedding light on the functioning of traditional and innovative activities. In discussing theoretical-methodological problems related to a valid theory of activity, the author puts forward the hypothesis that singular references to the Vygotskian school lead to an unproductive confinement of activity theory. First of all, there are problems concerning terminology and concepts. Second, there are issues related to the roots of the activity theory and the cultural-historical school. It is a common mistake in Western Europe and in the United States to regard cultural-historical psychology as the basis for critical psychology and to regard both schools as identical with activity theory. Embracing such a point of view is a mistake and a serious matter.

INTRODUCTION
There is a lot to be said about critical psychology, cultural-historical psychology, cultural-historical school and activity theory. In Western Europe and in the USA miscellaneous psychological currents develop and thrive. Proponents coin and use a variety of terms and concepts. This development is part and parcel of a broad liberation movement, e.g. student riots in Paris in 1968. On the one hand, the terms and concepts demonstrate a productive variety and diversity. On the other hand, people communicate easily in everyday life by using the same words for the same concepts. This human convention or semantic agreement of ours is required in order to enable for scientific discussion, cooperation and development of a research community and a research tradition. Such is the situation today as we attempt to create a basis for understanding what activity theory means and what it is. A common vocabulary is a prerequisite to the achievement of a developed scientific level of discussion eventually enabling for us to see the rise and successful implementation of a (new) paradigm. Of course we use different words for the concept of activity in different languages. But the crucial question remains to be answered: What is activity?

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CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

The English word *activity* is a general term and there are many conflicting activity theories around. Due to these facts, the terminology reflects an unfortunate choice. Etymologically, the German word “Tätigkeit” means “doing” in English. The latter term was embraced by Dewey’s pragmatism, for example as in Learning by Doing. In Scandinavia, *activity* translates “virksomhet”, “verksamhet” etc. However, for some Scandinavian researchers the word *activity* is similar to or the same as “aktivitet”. Here I discuss the theoretical implications of crucial phrases, expressions and utterances – for example concepts like activity theory, cultural-historical school, internalization and interchange. I also argue that the concepts enable for different approaches, analyses and understandings in the scientific community. Fortunately, in Scandinavia we use the word “aktivitet” (*activity*) to denote that life is activity as well as movement. When I use the word “virksomhet” I do so with the purpose to describe a particular contextualized human activity. The theory I have in mind is the one Scandinavians label “virksomhetsteori” or “verksamhetsteori”. I propose that we use this term rather than the translation from English, “aktivitetsteori”.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Most of the literature on cultural-historical psychology and activity theory in Western Europe and the USA refer to Vygotskian ideas as the only historical source worth mentioning. Furthermore, activity theorists argue the hypothesis that Vygotskij is the one and only reference to activity theory. However, in the former Soviet Union there was S. L. Rubinstein’s school of activity theory too. Also, there is a discussion of fundamental theoretical-methodological problems in the theory of activity, mainly the Rubinstein – Leontjev controversy on internalization. Finally, there are relations to explore between dialectics and activity theory. It takes a comprehensive model of the individual and society defined as activity to clarify the relation.

ACTIVITY THEORY AND THE CULTURAL-HISTORICAL SCHOOL

I start off with a reference to Karl Marx (1818-1883). The Feuerbach Theses has had an undisputed impact on contemporary understanding of activity theory. The connection between Marx and Feuerbach is well known. It is, however, important to emphasize that there are different lines of reasoning about Marx. One of them suggests a structural interpretation called “the logic of capital”, i.e. an alternative interpretation of the human subject understood as object of capital. Another line of reasoning emphasizes the subject in capitalism, the creative, active personality operating in/on suppressing market-controlled conditions. In order to separate between the double lines of reasoning, the Feuerbach theses suggest that by changing the world, surroundings, environment, context, setting etc. man is able to change identity and personality. Marx’s interpretation forms a foundation for, or a cornerstone of activity theory.

Origins

Very few people would contest the proposition that activity theory and the cultural-historical school originated and developed in the Soviet Union. But the question remains: by whom? Let’s have a look at the Marxist theory of Psychology in the former Soviet Union. Vygotskij’s school of activity theory emerged in the 1920s. His contribution to social science formed far from a homogeneous, negotiated, agreed and institutionalized paradigm. It was more like miscellaneous and temporary cooperative initiatives among several researchers. On this basis, however, close teamwork developed – for example between Luria (1902-1977),