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Main topics of research : activity-based workspaces, hybrid working, artefacts and mediations at work

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory as a tool for understanding the restructuring of a health call center

My interest in Cultural-Historical Activity Theory dates back to my PhD thesis (<https://hal.science/tel-01377939>). My doctoral research focused on the remediation of the activity of an inbound call center for three mutual insurance companies in France. The call center – Health Info – provided users with health information and referral to help them make better choices in healthcare and to reduce their expenses. To improve the service, the company redesigned the activity of the call operators. Some of the most experienced call center agents formed a new team (referred as the social team) which had the responsibility to process the information requests of users in need of financial support and different kind of allowances, within outbound calls.

In this context, I carried out a two-year ethnographic study. The results of this study highlighted two axes of contradictions underlying Health Info' development (<https://doi.org/10.1108/JWL-08-2016-0077>). The first was defined by the tension between the integration and evolution of existing services within the mutual insurance companies, in the one hand, and the emergence of Health Info as a provider of independent counseling to the clients of the mutual funds, on the other. The second axis of contradiction is inherent to the professionals' work perspectives: call center agents both provide information to the users and advise them on what decisions to make, provide them with social support. Furthermore, the study underlined the practical dimensions of Health Info' restructuring. The restructuring of the social service within Health Info through the creation of a specialized team played a crucial role in transforming work practices. In addition, the new environment resulting from the restructuring necessitated that the agents redefine their duties and the scope of their actions. The analysis of situated practices showed that works perspectives are grounded on salient configurations, which are both emergent in situ and collectively elaborated cultural resources. It also showed that understanding and doing

one's own work is inextricably linked to understanding and anticipating the constraints, potential difficulties, and organizational limitations of the others in a team.

In a nutshell, the thesis aimed at analyzing the work of the call operators as a collective, object-oriented, evolving activity system. The focus was on the possible tensions and complementarities between activity-oriented approaches of work and cognition on the one side and situated action and cognition on the other. CHAT provided a basis for considering the relationships of the psychological, social and organizational dimensions of human development through the concept of mediation.

The “transformative” potential of the Activity-Based Workplaces (ABW): towards a development perspective on the design and implementation of ABW

After completing my PhD I have joined the R&D department of a global real estate consultancy company where I have got familiar with the design of “activity-based” flexible work environments (<https://doi.org/10.1145/2788412.2788426>). My research interests were already much related to space as both a setting and an arena of human activity.

ABW real estate projects are expected to trigger outcomes such as innovation, collaboration, knowledge sharing and so on. None of these challenges however (better collaboration, greater agility, innovation and so on) appear as directly and immediately related to the spatial and functional characteristics of the office layout – they are all work and employment issues.

As workspace design and management are meant to support changes in both organizing processes and structures, they should be considered as an integral part of organizational life (not merely as way of improving workplace conditions). So, what kind of psychological and social resources do they offer to elaborate on one's activity? In what way, do they support the development of workplace activities - and in particular, the individual and collective sense of “being the author of one own's work”? (<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119808343.ch11>)

I have sought to work out these questions in the past 5 years (<https://hal.science/hal-03951812/>) in particular since 2016 when I joined the Center of Research on Work and Development (CRTD) in the Conservatoire National des Arts et des Métiers (CNAM) as Assistant Professor in the Clinic of Activity and Work Psychology team.

Developmental interventions at work: the Clinic of Activity and CHAT?

French-speaking ergonomics and work psychology have developed specific understanding of the concept of activity and its analysis which is both convergent and quite different from that of other activity-oriented approaches. Yet, activity-oriented approaches share at least two common characteristics: the reference to the founding works of Vygotsky and Leontiev (see for instance Leplat, 2008 ; Engeström, 1987 ; Cole, 2005; Clot, 1999) and the focus on the transformation of work practices.

In the Clinic of Activity' perspective the researcher is both an observer and an active part of this psychological process as he/she strives to «burden» the subjects involved in the intervention so as to enable them to think of work as embedded into a work collective, sharing a common history and experiences - including the experience of controversies on what makes “good work” in that particular work setting. The conflict – on work-related issues – is not the problem but the solution. The underlying assumption of such a statement is that, under certain conditions, dialogues, debates and controversies between professionals provide them with resources for developing their activities. The research focus is not so much on activities themselves than on the conditions of their development.

My current research is very much focused on intervention practices in the context of any kind of organizational change (spatial, technological, social). I am particularly interested the analysis of work in its practical, material and interactional dimensions. As people are continuously reinventing their work in practice, getting involved in realworld, mundane practices has powerful psychological and transformative implications.

References

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