Projects and the problem of Context

Talk by Andy Blunden at University of Witwatersrand, February 2011

1. Michael Cole's investigation of learning in context

IN 1963, a 25-year-old Mike Cole was called in to assist in a project to improve the education system in Liberia. He first went to a school in the interior where Kpelle children were reportedly performing very poorly in mathematics. Mike had no experience in field work, educational psychology or development or even knew where to find Liberia on the map.

Coming into the field as a complete outsider was probably an advantage as it turned out. The conventional wisdom among development workers was that African children suffered from a long list of intellectual and perceptual deficits, to the extent that they could not be expected to solve simple jigsaw puzzles and, if given a choice, would always resort to memorizing rather than understanding. Visits to schools seemed to confirm this belief, with children seen learning to recite by rote long passages of European poetry that they did not understand and even trying to memorize the answers to arithmetical exercises. But coming from the US at that time, when the Civil Rights movement had been vigorously challenging racial prejudices like this for more than a decade, Cole found the claim that these phenomena were the result of an intellectual deficit simply not believable. There had to be another explanation.

So Cole and his colleagues then closely observed the local Kpelle people in their daily life to see if they really were that dumb. They observed people rapidly and accurately carrying out complicated calculations in the market place, buying and selling produce in a range of units, taxi drivers bargaining with great skill taking account of a wide range of cost factors, players of a board game called *malang* exercising sophisticated strategies and the old men using arcane language skills and mobilizing logical arguments in exercising their civic duties in dispute resolution, etc., etc. Clearly the Kpelle were not dumb.

The team then set about trying out a variety of approaches to testing Kpelle children to find procedures in which their obvious intelligence would be manifested in a test environment. Tests used typically in the US were used, as well as tests devised to measure the kind of skills they had witnessed in action observing the Kpelle in their daily life, using both artefacts lifted from daily life and tasks which made sense in the local context. They incorporated the kind of tests which Luria had used in an expedition to Uzbekistan where the subjects had to complete abstract syllogisms. Cole was later involved in some 'reverse cross-cultural testing', asking Americans to do 'intelligence tests' designed using artefacts and procedures indigenous to the Kpelle culture.

The results of this work over a period of years were as follows.

In tests where the subjects had to estimate relative quantities of rice in a variety of odd-shaped bowls and tins, something Kpelle people have to routinely do in their marketplace transactions, Kpelle children and adults out-performed Americans. This seemed to confirm that using artefacts which were indigenous to a culture and carrying out tasks which were indigenous to their culture, people displayed the same level of intellectual skill as any other people.

A cross-cultural experiment was devised which used leaves from a variety of trees and vines, drawing on an ability to recognize, categorize and remember them. Groups of North Americans and Kpelle people were required to recognize and remember which were from trees and which were from vines, and could then use this knowledge as an *aide mémoire* in sorting leaves categorized according to fictional criteria. Unsurprisingly the Kpelle outperformed the North American subjects in all tests, but the Kpelle seemed unable to use their good knowledge of the leaves to recognize and remember categories based on *fictional* criteria. The North American subjects also proved unable to make use of the clues coded in the leaf taxonomy, even though experience of school had attuned these subjects to looking for such information as *aides mémoire*.

COLE'S TEAM concluded that "cultural differences in cognition reside more in the situations to which particular cognitive processes are applied than in the existence of a [cognitive] process in one cultural group and its absence in the other."

Undoubtedly differences in experience resulting from cultural difference could be reflected in specific cognitive differences. Schooling in particular induces people to organize disjoint information in order to remember it later. Even a few years at elementary school would foster school-like abilities which could be used in other contexts. Schooling also entailed training in skills using *counter-factual* data within a problem to provide counter-factual solutions to logical puzzles, and in general, familiarity with *hypothetical* situations. But the whole social set-up in a school which is built around such practices is foreign to cultures where formal schooling is not found. Parents in Liberia for example do not ask their children questions just to hear them answer. People do not make counterfactual statements just because they follow logically from other statements. School would to some extent impart an understanding of these skills and practices.

In bringing this to light, Cole's group began to see that their own test procedures, even when indigenous artefacts and practical content were used, were "covert models of schooling practices." Testing using these school-like test procedures would only reflect the degree to which people had been encultured to schooling. Likewise performance in school only reflected the degree to which the children had been encultured to school. This did not alter the fact, though, that schools imparted skills and inclinations which were *needed* for useful participation in a bureaucratic/industrial economy and social life.

This explained the problems Luria had had in his expedition to Uzbekistan in 1931. His testing had only measured the degree to which each individual had been exposed to schooling or modern industrial practices, but gave no further information at all about the cognitive capacity of the individuals.

A series of actions cannot simply be transplanted from one cultural context to another; if so transplanted, it would be either misconstrued or rendered altogether incomprehensible. A system of actions is essentially inseparable from the artefacts and modes of social interaction mediating the activity, and the social context in which the actions were situated.

THE PROBLEM REMAINED though: if Uzbeks or Kpelle or any groups systematically excluded from the dominant institutions in industrialized countries, were to gain access to the benefits of modernity, *how* was their native intelligence to be mobilized in the new cultural context? What was it about the context which rendered actions meaningful and how could differences in cultural context be overcome?

But the team did discover that however poorly the Kpelle children performed in their school tasks, attendance at school *did* have an impact on their thinking. Women who had attended school even for relatively short periods of time acquired enhanced skills in dealing with the various bureaucracies. As a result, their children experienced reduced infant mortality, better health and fared very much better at school than their mothers. The women still went into their traditional role as mothers and farmers; but the *second* generation *did* benefit from their mothers' schooling. What schooling had taught the first generation was not so much reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic, but the whole range of interpersonal behaviours which are implicit in industrial/bureaucratic societies.

Back in the U.S.A., Cole continued his efforts to find a way to introduce the benefits of education to those children in his own community who were being labelled with one or another disorder, as a way to explain why the teachers were unable to teach them. He gained permission for his research assistants to video classroom activity in a variety of settings. But this project came to a sudden end when the teachers refused to allow the researchers to record the dysfunctional conditions in their classrooms.

One of the conclusions which had to be drawn at this point was this: so long as researchers simply engaged in observing and testing children and teachers, they could hardly expect the children and teachers to commit themselves to the process; like laboratory rats, they are nothing more than objects for someone else's research. It was not only the artefacts and the style of practices which made up the context, but the *purpose* of the researchers' activity. The only way to learn about learning was to set up a school and help children learn.

Cole set about researching the different initiatives which had been tried over the years in the US. Some of them sounded extremely promising from the standpoint of his research. He found however

that in every single case, after operating for a while the new schools had failed and *disappeared without a trace*. Sustainability would have to be a key criterion for any new initiative.

HE ALSO REFLECTED that in Liberia: "As often as not the most visible consequence of schooling was alienation of the young from their parents and from the community's traditional forms of economic life." This story, of educated children becoming alienated from their parents and their hometown community, has been repeated countless times. Hardly surprising then that schools which try to offer an escape from the plight of the illiterate, soon fall prey to alienation from the community themselves, as well as the bureaucracy.

A further conclusion follows from these findings: the very idea that education is something that can be delivered to an individual is mistaken. An individual is a product and integral part of a certain community and its indigenous culture, and attempts to 'educate' an individual in a culture where such practices are not indigenous, amount to kidnapping them, even if with good intentions. In relation to both the research and the education, Cole was also concerned with the issue of 'ecological validity' - to what extent is what happens in a laboratory or classroom replicable in any other environment? This is another angle from which the problem of the context-dependence of learning is raised.

In the light of this, it is of some significance that Cole's next initiative has managed to last for more than two decades and replicate itself into a network of centres. In 1987, Cole set up Fifth Dimension, an after-school centre that children attend voluntarily, staffed by graduate students from the neighbouring university. The first Fifth Dimension opened after researchers and community participants spent more than a year discussing needs and goals and exploring various alternative forms of activity before it was agreed to use the Fifth Dimension as an open afterschool centre. The aim was to involve an elementary school, a day-care centre, a library and a Boys and Girls Club, and great effort was expended in trying to fit the management of the centre into the requirements of these groups. Everyone wanted 5D to succeed but the operations of the centre would not fit into the institutional demands of the school, day-care centre and Club and in the end only the library continued their commitment. In other communities, different arrangements have worked. The activities in the centre appeal to the children as a rewarding mode of self-directed play, and children attend voluntarily, but considerable effort was and continues to be expended in ensuring that the centre fits into the demands of the relevant institutions.

Only by making Fifth Dimension a collaborative project involving the children and the other members of the community affected by their education, could the project succeed. Young researchers have unique and often transformative experiences interacting with children with experiences very different from their own, parents have their children kept safe for free after school, the schools get better performing and better behaved children. It was only to the extent that everyone was able to integrate Fifth Dimension into their own projects and interests that people continued to support the project. And educational outcomes have been sensitive not only to the children's need to gain access to the dominant culture, but also to the parents' needs to remain in touch with the raising of their own children.

2. What is Context?

THE PROBLEM that Cole was investigating he took as 'context'. Learning was apparently very sensitive to context. This sensitivity to context was manifested in a wide range of issues: the artefacts used needed to be indigenous to the culture a person has been raised in; the practices used by teachers had to make sense in the students' culture; the tasks set by teachers needed to fit into the culture, including subtle aspects of teaching style which may differ widely from the expectations of children at home; the teacher's aim had to be one that the children understood and supported and the whole community and the funding sources had to support the learning activity and the outcomes had to be consistent not only with the life aims of the child and teacher, but their parents and other members of the community as well, including government bureaucracies.

Placing this problem in the context of Vygotsky's notion of 'unit of analysis', Cole remarked that "there can be no unit of analysis that is not sensitive to the context," posing the problem of *inclusion* of the context in the unit of analysis.

THE RESEARCHER who first raised this issue is Yuri Bronfenbrenner, who coined the term 'ecological validity' in 1974. Ecological validity refers to whether a psychological test carried out in a controlled environment can be replicated in the context in which the test is going to be referred to. Bronfenbrenner defined context by the *microsystem* (such as the family or classroom); the *mesosystem* (which is two microsystems in interaction); the *exosystem* (external environments which indirectly influence development, e.g., parental workplace); and the *macrosystem* (the larger socio-cultural context). He later added a fifth system, called the *chronosystem* (the evolution of the external systems over time). Each system contains roles, norms and rules that shape psychological development. This is often illustrated with a series of concentric circles, which graphically illustrates the fact that in order to understand someone's psychological development everything in the universe may have to be taken into account. In other words, that context is an *open-ended totality*. There is no circumstance in the world which may not have an impact on a person's psychological development. For example, my own development was affected by the Vietnam War, McCarthyism, Sputnik and so on. Bronfenbrenner reminded us that it is impossible to put a boundary around the context. It is open-ended.

AND AS RENE van der Veer pointed out, context is: "... not just the physical and socioeconomical environment with all the possibilities and tools that it affords but also ... the intellectual environment in the sense of available ideas, traditions of thinking, and so on. The physical, technological, socioeconomical, and intellectual environments and their complex interdependency determine the individual's possibilities."

But the point surely is not just that we have to think of everything! How do we form a concept of psychological development which is sensitive to context? How do we form a concept of the context? I put it to you that "joint artefact-mediated action in context" is not a unit of analysis or a unit of anything else, but an open-ended totality. Context must be taken account in research as a major determinate of results, but to include it in a "unit of analysis" is a misconstrual of the notion of "unit of analysis." The research subject and the relevant context must be conceived together by means of units of analysis, the relations between which are open to analysis. Thus, "the context" is not necessarily a single coherent entity, but may be itself an aggregate of diverse units.

FURTHER, as van der Veer has said: "what may be an inhospitable environment for one organism may be an El Dorado for another," so that 'context' is in that sense a *relative* concept, and he further notes that individual and environment "mutually shape each other in a spiral process of growth." In other words, the notion of 'context' is both subjective and objective, or as Hegel might say, a subject-object.

There is always going to be a problem that some unforeseen and unpredictable event is going to have an impact on someone's psychological development, and you can never draw a boundary around things. A researcher is going to have to approach research situations in a forensic kind of way, following the threads of effect and cause back to their roots. The point is, though, that if we are to avoid an empty truism, that anything and everything must be taken account of, then we have to have a concept of the person in their environment, a concept which captures the essential relation of a person to their social environment. Vygotsky's work had already established the foundation of intellectual development in 'joint artefact-mediated action', but the connection of the elements of this unit to the social and cultural context is far from obvious. On the other hand, simply adding "in context" to this *unit* destroys the whole idea of a unit of analysis: a singular, indivisible thing which exhibits the essential properties of a class of more developed phenomena and existent phenomenon.

The word Vygotsky used to capture the idea of context is *situation*. Situation is a concept of the relation a person has to their environment, inclusive of the expectations of those around them and their behaviour in relation to the person and the abilities and needs of the person and the relation between the two. This takes the form of a puzzle or a kind of trap, as in the word 'situation' when you go to the "Situation Room" in the White House, or when you phone your mother late at night and tell her "Mum, I'm in a situation here."

IN A DIFFERENT CONTEXT he used *perezhivanie* or a life-changing experience or adventure, a word which also conveys a relation of a person to their environment, having a mind to the significance of the experience to the person.

But these concepts are suitable only for resolving a certain class of psychological problems, and are still very focused on the individual's immediate environment. If we are to understand how to relocate a 'joint artefact-mediated action' from one cultural context to another, how do we know what to take account of? How do we take account of different degrees and kinds of jointness? We need a unit which is *a unit of analysis for the cultural community as well as for the individual and their immediate circle of interaction*, and gives us a concept not only of the relation of a person to their environment, but of the individual and their activity taken together, as a subject-object.

MIKE COLE summarizes the search for a unit which includes the 'context' in this way:

> "1. There is a basic unit common to the analysis of both cultures' and individuals' psychological processes. 2. This unit consists of an individual engaged in goal-directed activity under conventionalized constraints. This unit is variously designated as 'activity', a 'task', an 'event'. ..."

Mike Cole here makes reference to the notion of 'activity' as known to Activity Theory of the A N Leontyev and Yrjö Engeström, to provide the cultural context for a unit, relevant to learning and development. But I think this still fails to achieve its aim; it is too vague.

3. Conceptions of Context from other currents

LET US BRIEFLY review the range of concepts which have been used in other theories to conceptualise the psychological context of action.

Environment

FIRSTLY, this term 'environment', understood to mean 'everything that could affect the person'. This is an utterly non-conceptual approach. Precisely because it omits nothing, it gives no guidance at all and introduces no structure into our understanding of the context. It is of course our starting point – just the mass of possible events and conditions which may or may not have an effect on a person's psychological development.

The normal, mainstream positivist approach from here is to survey the environment and measure the various *factors* which have a bearing. So for example, we would observe the child's age, gender and sibling order, the parents' income and employment and marital status, the district where they live, availability of support services, extended family, nutrition, school attendance, health, and so on, and we shall be sure (so it is hoped) to identify all the relevant factors. If we measure all these factors for a large sample of children and test the children's psychological or educational performance, then we can use statistical factor analysis to determine the basis for educational performance. The result invariably tells us what we already knew but with a greater or lesser amount of blurring and statistical variation ... and absolutely no understanding.

Tradition

TRADITION is the context in which a text is produced in the theory of Hang-Georg Gadamer, the founder of philosophical hermeneutics. This is a fine concept for the work for which it was designed – the interpretation of texts, but it translates perfectly well to understanding people's action in some social context. Tradition has a meaning similar to 'culture' in the common meaning of that term, as the entirety of social mores, practices and ethos of some community. But for Gadamer, tradition has some important nuances of meaning. Firstly, tradition *motivates*, secondly tradition *develops*, and thirdly tradition *restricts*.

One of the most important aspects of the context is how it motivates an action; an action is meaningful – indeed it is an action only insofar as it pursues some end other than its immediate object. And the various purposes and aims, the pursuits which are to be found in a tradition and the appropriate means of pursuing them are what make up a tradition. Sometimes this is understood as the *values* of a tradition, what it holds dear and finds worth pursuing, and thereby provides motives for actions.

A tradition is not to be understood as something static. A tradition retains what is worth keeping in its past, but also discards what it sees as contingent. It is in constant change while retaining what is essential to it as a tradition. Gadamer sees this as the key to understanding a tradition and the actions

it motivates: it is necessary to find in one's own values and norms how one is able to find a continuity with that tradition, standing in relation to the tradition in the way it stands to itself. This is to be contrasted with standing aside from a tradition and simply accepting it as foreign to oneself. Only by finding something in the tradition with which you can solidarise is it possible to understand it.

Traditions also restrict the actions which are to be sanctioned within the tradition; traditions have norms and rules and certain things are prohibited and others are simply unknown. These exclusions are also necessary to understanding actions and the extent to which actions can be understood 'out of context'.

Gadamer concluded (translating into our language) that actions can only be understood in relation to their tradition, and traditions can only be understood in relation to their actions; so one must work back and forth between the two in order to understand either.

Genre

THEORIES OF GENRE go back to antiquity, and originally referred to the various modes of expression to be found in literature and the arts, in which artistic production is regulated by relatively fixed conventions for each genre. A poem is different from a novel which is different from a newspaper report, and so on. Mikhail Bakhtin further broadened the idea which has become widely used in recent decades. It has been pointed out that choice of genre is determined by, or responds to, a *rhetorical situation*. That is, a set of rules and conventions that will govern someone's words and actions is created by a situation, how the person is 'treated' by an interlocutor, what expectations they face, the circumstances and so on. With a gesture or a word, one person can flip the genre that another person must conform to: an argument? an excuse? an invitation? a rebuke? a compliment? So verbal interactions, for example, involve a level of interaction in which it is not so much what is done or said which is at issue, but what kind of exchange it is, what rules are applying at any given moment. And this determines how actions are to be interpreted, and are thereby effective.

Those who make a business of analysing genres like to categorise them, and one of the interesting things about genres is that they are as diverse as concepts themselves. They cannot be neatly categorised into a hierarchical taxonomy, and new genres are constantly being invented as social life itself develops; they are more like *archetypes* or *paradigms*.

Difficulties in communication can often be traced back to mistakes in understanding the genre, and like tradition, genre must be understood if a person's actions are to be understood.

Frame

RELATED TO the notion of genre is the idea of Frame. The frame is defined as what surrounds an utterance which affects the meaning and efficacy of the utterance. This idea was developed independently by Mikhail Bakhtin and Erving Goffman. Like the terms we have referred to above, Frame is mostly used in literary criticism, but it is a notion that has proved to be very powerful in analysing political speech: politicians try to frame a debate in a way which prejudices the discussion in ways that suit their own purpose. If, for example discussion of the social welfare system is put into the frame of who is deserving or not deserving, or about labour force participation rates, or public spending, you get a different kind of discussion than it is framed in terms of social justice or poverty alleviation. Once the discussion has been framed in a certain way, it is difficult to move it into a different frame. This is because every frame brings with it a different set of prejudices, norms and tacit assumptions.

Narrative

CONTINUING with this kind of concept of context which mostly originate in the world of literary criticism, I want to mention narrative. There is no doubt in my mind that narrative is the most powerful manner of presentation of an idea or concept. If you want to explain an idea, rather than offering a dictionary definition of it, if you can tell a believable story which conveys the idea, so much the better. We live our own stories and we imagine ourselves as minor players in other people's stories, and we understand almost everything that is real to us in terms of "Once upon a time ..." Even if, when asked to explain what we mean by some word, for example, we give a definition, all the implications and assumptions contained in the meaning we give to a word, is grasped by our minds as

a narrative. That's why people can memorise long lists of random objects by placing them into a well-known story.

This is also how Marx understood politics. In the *18th Brumaire* he showed us how political figures dress themselves up in the costumes of heroes in narratives that are *available* in the given society and try to persuade people that they fit the character and convince other people to cast themselves in the appropriate supporting roles.

So context can be powerfully conceived of as narrative, either fanciful or factual. What has happened in the past and the plot which is unfolding in someone's life at that moment, determines their action; the story which they tell themselves and the place of the current chapter in that story, make sense of their actions.

Discourse

A RELATED TERM is 'discourse', a term widely known through the work of Michel Foucault. An institution is often seen as a certain set of laws, members of the institution, its property and buildings, and the set of practices associated with the institution. But this approach does tend to down play the concepts which are supported by the institution. The notion of 'discourse' is identical really to the notion of 'institution' but it has the great advantage of emphasising, on the one hand the power of words and ideas to make real what is just thought, and on the other, the slender foundation on which our great institutions rest. It also highlights the subversive power of discourse and *changing* discourse, how challenging the words and assumptions used in an institution can, under the right conditions, bring about the utter downfall of an institution. Discourse does underplay the role of material culture outside of language, and this is its main downside.

So discourse is another way of conceiving context. A person acts as they do because they are in the thrall of a certain discourse. But they can be disenchanted.

Field

NEXT we come to the useful term provided by Pierre Bourdieu, the French sociologist: Field. A field is an institution in which there are a set of rules to abide by, membership criteria and rewards to be won and lost. People then enter the *Arena* (arena is another term, somewhat less tightly defined) and fight for the rewards. For example, academics qualify to work at a university and fight for academic promotion, reputation, prestige and so on all according to a certain set of rules. These rules are relatively inflexible and change only under severe pressure.

Finally, a related concept of Figured World, introduced by Dorothy Holland, is much the same as Field, but Holland joins this concept, which is similar to Bourdieu's sociology and Foucault's discourse analysis, to Activity Theory and cultural psychology. And this approach is not unique to Holland and her colleagues. Because Cultural Psychology and Activity Theory has long been weak at the societal level of analysis, other theories, particularly poststructuralism, which has some synergies with Activity Theory, have been used in conjunction with Vygotsky to make up for deficits at the macro end of his theory.

HOWEVER, while I think it is very productive to appropriate other theories, such as those I have just mentioned, for the purpose of conceptualising context, I believe that Vygotsky's method can be extended in a way which is true to itself, to deal with context on the scale of whole societies, without setting up a dichotomy. I think that once we set up a dichotomy between the individual and their social context at the level of theoretical tools, then we cement in place the dichotomy that people feel in their lives: on one side, a small world of family and friends where you have an equal say (if you're lucky) and the big wide world of great institutions – the government, the economy, big corporations and so on – where you have no voice and no power. We need a conception of context which captures the fact that *people are participants in the affairs of the world*.

One of the other defects of all the theories I have mentioned is that like structuralism, they are all to a greater or lesser extent objectivist; they place the motivation for action in social structures of some kind which are more or less *invisible* to the individual who is subject to them. Some do lend themselves to smaller scale interpretations but in the main they are concerned with values and concepts which the subject more or less unconsciously absorbed from the environment.

4. Collaborative Projects

WHAT I WOULD like to suggest is that the unit of social life be taken as a *collaborative project*. This phrase is a redundancy really as all projects are collaborative and collaboration always involves a shared project. The unit of intellectual life remains 'a joint, artefact-mediated action' but by joining the action to a collaborative project we answer the question of *why* a person is doing something, or if you like, *what* they are doing, as well as defining a norm for the jointness of the 'joint, artefact-mediated action'. The action as well as the artefact and the mediation are part of some project.

This allows us to understand someone's actions as both subjective and objective. Subjective because it is after all what a person is trying to do, and is really motivating them, but also, a project exists in the world, it involves other people both as equal participants and in other respects. People generally *join* projects, rather than just deciding to do them. They find them in the world around them and lend the project their support. A project is closely connected to a narrative; it is a real narrative whose plot is still unfolding and the person is casting themselves as a character in the narrative. And in fact, *all* the ramifications implied in all the above conceptions of context are manifested by projects: projects have their own discourse, they frame everything they see in their own frame, they reward and govern the actions of participants as if they were a field, etc., etc. But they are *real and observable*.

The idea of collaborative project does not have a personal motive on one hand and an 'objective motive' or field or structure on the other, of which the person is not conscious. The point is that none of the people involved, whether sociologists, political leaders or new recruits to a project have a God's eye view of a project, its final destination or its 'real' motivation. The outcome of the project is immanent in the project itself. The process of collaboration is a learning process, and as the outcome of the process realises itself, and as a person becomes more involved in a project, people reframe their own motivation. So the motive of a project is not authoritatively given to an experienced sociologist and nor is it given in the eyes of the new recruit. The project is a process in which a concept is realised.

WE ALL participate in a myriad of intertwining projects, which together make up the fabric of society. As Mike Cole pointed out, the word context derives from the Latin word *contextere*, 'to weave together'. We can see society has a fabric woven together of millions of overlapping and intertwined threads. The unit for understanding a person's psychological development then is a 'joint artefact-mediated action in some collaborative project'. The collaborative project participates in mediating the action and the relation between people in and through the artefacts used in the action. The project is thus implicit in the words, images and other tools used. The project is also a unit of social formations: not social groups or institutions or individuals, but projects, realised narratives.

Hegel took concepts to be the unit of a social formation, but some writers today interpret Hegel's concept as a project. This figures both with Vygotsky's conception of a concept as a system of artefact mediated actions, and the fact that for Hegel a concept is neither static nor a subjective thought-form, but rather a subject, that is, a social movement or subject which always has implicit in it the drive to realise itself, a means and end; it is not just an image of something, but in fact, a project. The use of project as a unit of social formation opens the possibility of integrating Vygotsky and Hegel, with the rich intellectual material that can be gained from Hegel's philosophical work, together with the Vygotsky's materialistic psychology.

Finally, no unit, like collaborative project, excludes the possibility of an unforeseen factor in the environment having an impact on someone's psychological development. But it does provide a reference point. How does a traumatic event interfere with someone's life-project, the way they see their life unfolding? Does it provide an opportunity for the person to take up a new project? Any relationship could feasibly have an impact of a person's psychological development, by whatever projects in which a person is collaborating with someone that the impact of such an event will be judged. That is to say, taking collaborative projects as units of a person's social life does not put a boundary around the environment, but it gives us a frame of reference from which different factors and events can be judged. Itself, a project is not an open-ended totality.

5. Ethics, Identity & Agency and Collaboration

FINALLY, one of the benefits of collaborative project as a unit of activity is this. None of the other sociological and literary concepts which give us a lens through which to view social context, give us an ethical perspective. This is part of the objectivism which rules social science and literary criticism. But actually, it is impossible to understand a tradition, a style of social life and how it motivates people, unless we have a view of its ethical life in relation to which (as Gadamer required) we can position ourselves.

A collaborative project bears within it an ethical norm which governs people's expectations for how others share their decisions with them, consult them and share the benefits and burdens involved in a project. There is a range of possible modes of collaboration corresponding to different ethical principles, but there is a central norm which is implicit within the very concept of collaboration: that participants share the controlling, producing and enjoyment of a project *equally*. There are variations on this norm, but variations which have to be justified by some rationalisation which is always capable of being challenged. Broadly speaking there are three modes of collaboration. Apart from voluntary collaboration there is purchase-and-service-provision, which is the dominant relation in the market, and there is command-and-obey, which is dominant within hierarchical institutions.

The fact that collaboration is both an ethical and a scientific concept means that it provides a means to both understand a social situation from the outside, objectively, and from the inside, as a participant. Collaboration is not a norm which can be justified by appeal to religious beliefs or science, but is a rational norm which rests the basic principle of the moral equality and self-determination of all human beings. For a scientific concept to have ethical purchase as well as having scientific insight gives the concept additional strength. Most concepts in the domain of the human science do have ethical content, but this is usually implicit. In the case of collaborative projects, the ethical content is explicit.

Collaborative projects are also the source of identity for the participants, and a form of identity which is neither individualist nor communitarian, but places the individual's identity as an agent within the social process. Collaborative projects are also the only way of making sense of agency. No individual is an agent as such. Only by means of engaging others in their project can a person exercise agency.

So we can see that collaborative project is a very rich concept, and one that has received very little attention.

[Andy Blunden's Home Page](#)