

Units and Motives in Activity Theory

Talk by Andy Blunden at University of Witwatersrand,
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1. Vygotsky's Method

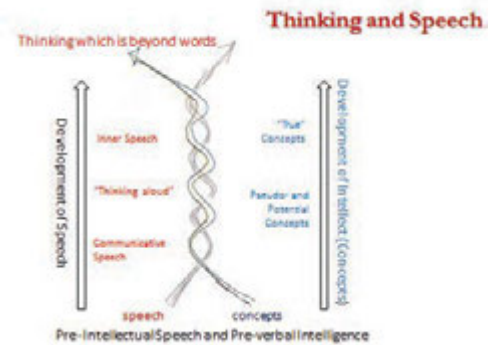
THE PROBLEM for which Vygotsky is most renowned is the problem of the relation between intellect and speech. Vygotsky showed that there is non-verbal intelligence before children learn to speak, and further that children use speech to gain assistance from an adult and subsequently to control their own actions, before there is intelligent speech. As Vygotsky put it: "At a certain point these lines [speech development and intellectual development] meet, whereupon thought becomes verbal and speech rational." By following the independent development of speech and intellect and then their combined development, it was possible to illuminate the processes underlying the development of the verbal thought.

VYGOTSKY determined that the unit of verbal thought was *word meaning*, the smallest unit of verbal thought which contained everything that was essential to verbal thought. The study then focused on tracing the development of word meaning.

As many writers have observed, though Vygotsky never spelt it out, "word meaning" is a special case of "artefact-mediated action." The general process of the acquisition of the culture and practices of a community can be represented as a single unit, namely, the use of one artefact, which is a part of the culture, in collaboration with another person who knows how to use it. All activity, in fact, is composed of such units, even though the second person who is collaborator may be present only by implication, and even when the artefact is produced by the action as well as mediating the action. Everything that is essential to human intelligence is present in this unit, well, apart from one factor which we will come to presently.

Even when we do something alone, when we enquire into the motivation of the action, there is always another person at the end of the line, someone whose needs we want to meet in some way, someone we want to impress or frighten or mobilise or whatever. And words count as artefacts just as surely if we speak them into the air, as when we write them or type them into our computer or carve them in stone. We use words to manage our own thoughts and activity, as for example when I type this into my computer, to organise my thoughts for a speech in will give in two months' time. Actions directed towards the self are a further development of actions which were originally learnt in order to control the actions of others, and the actions of one's self which we are controlling are themselves other-directed.

ALSO, and this is important, the artefact we use – the word, the automobile, the computer, the photograph – belongs to a specific culture. In order to use it we have to adapt ourselves to the way of acting and thinking that is indigenous to that culture. Archaeologists make a profession of reconstructing entire living cultures from the material culture they find buried in the ground thousands of years after they were used. The social practices of a society are inscribed in the artefacts they use. When we use them, we must orient ourselves to the goals and ways of the society to which the artefacts belong. So when we use an artefact to mediate our collaboration with another person, there is always a third party present – the whole cultural community whose language and material culture we use to mediate our collaboration. It is always a 3-way collaboration in that sense.



Vygotsky's Method

Thinking and Speech
Word Meaning



Vygotsky's Method

Thinking and Speech
Word Meaning
Joint, artefact-mediated Action



But this problem of the course and means of intellectual development by no means exhausts the problem of human development, and Vygotsky continued to investigate further problems of development and form a concept of them in each case. In each case, the formation of a concept of a problem of development entailed the identification of a unit of analysis. The next concept we will look at is *perezhivanie*.

PEREZHIVANIE is an untranslatable Russian word. Let us begin with “lived experience” or the German word *Erlebnis*. Both German and English distinguish between mass and countable nouns, but Russian does not. So Russians cannot answer the question: “does this mean experience as in ‘life-experience’, something one has more or less of, or experience as in ‘a dreadful experience’, an event”? I interpret *perezhivanie* as an adventure or life-changing experience. The point is that in this reading *perezhivanie* means an *event* which happens in the objective world, but is what it is only because of the *significance* it has for the subject. Individuals, groups and whole countries have life-changing experiences, adventures or traumas and the related subjective process of catharsis when you reflect on that experience. This raises the question of what are the components which together constitute a *perezhivanie*, what kind of adventure can generate catharsis? Is it enough to send a teenager into the wilderness for a week to generate the required development and turn a bolshie teenager into a well-adjusted adult?

Perezhivanie (переживаний)



IN HIS MANUSCRIPT on child development called “The Problem of Age”, Vygotsky defined the concept of “Social Situation of Development.” Here the social situation of the child is conceived of as a kind of *trap*, rather than a list of sociological factors. At some given stage of their development, whether at home with their carers or at school with other children and teachers, the child has certain needs and these needs are met in and through a series of collaborative activities in which the child performs according to a certain culturally defined role, deemed appropriate for their age and level of development. These expectations differ from one community to another, but every community arranges things in such a way as to enable itself to be reproduced in the next generation, and the series of stereotypical roles a person is supposed to perform in the course of their life, are such as to lie within the very elastic limits imposed by biology, and are consistent with the resources of the community and its institutions.

Social Situation of Development



The situation is this: in the course of behaving appropriately, the child develops *new needs* and new aims which cannot be fulfilled within the current system of activity, with the child treated in the way they are, as a child of a certain age; the very way that their needs are being met becomes a barrier to the meeting of their newly-felt needs which have been fostered within these very relations. A crisis ensues and the child tries to step into a role for which they are quite ill-equipped, which they know nothing about and in which they are not recognised by others who may not even themselves know how to treat them in this new way. It is this barrier which forces the child to make a development. If they succeed in making the transition to the new role, a new situation is created and they can act in a new way.



The way the child is treated and their needs met comes in the eyes of the child to be seen as an affront, an insult; but their efforts to step into the new role in turn often appear as an insult and affront to their carers. For example a teenager who is raised in a family of a certain social position, inculcated with certain social attitudes wants, at a certain point in their life, to find their own social position and opinions on everything. But they have no basis, no life experience, from which to criticise their parents; so they might simply refuse to give reasons for denouncing their parents and the values in which they have been raised. This is especially true where children have been raised in obedience and are especially ill-equipped to make rational criticism.

An example Vygotsky gives which illustrates how the social situation of development is both subjective and objective concerned a widow who became a drunkard. Her three children each responded differently. The baby was unaffected because it was not old enough to know, the child became extremely distressed and suffered developmental damage, whilst the oldest child, a young teenager, made a development and took on the role of head of the household and carer for her mother. Thus each child was in a different *situation* although each was formally in the same circumstances.

2. The General Concept of Activity

NOW I WOULD SAY that the foregoing account provides a coherent definition of activity, as artefact-mediated actions in a situation in which people collaborate towards shared ends. But to bring out the difficulties which arise here, let us briefly review the history of the concept of “activity” as it was received by Vygotsky. Activity has always occupied a left-wing position in which philosophers have used it in opposition to fatalism and determinism, domination and scepticism, and as part of a monist philosophy; its prominence in Vygotsky was no exception.

The first to introduce Activity as a concept in philosophy was the Romantic philosopher of history, Johann Gottfried Herder. Herder critically appropriated Spinoza’s monism which was tied to Descartes’ mechanical conception of Nature, and consequently locked human life into a mechanically determined fatalism. With the idea of a Nature filled with opposing forces, striving and conflict, Herder freed humanity from determinism without introducing an extramundane spirit or anything of the kind.

Johann Gottlieb Fichte was a critic of Kant who tackled Kant’s dichotomy between appearances and things-in-themselves by making his fundamental category Activity, or practice, Activity is both subjective and objective, and so Fichte overcame Kant’s dichotomy without resort to faith. A young follower of Fichte, Moses Hess, used Activity as a means of appropriating Hegel without recourse to a Spirit manifesting itself in human life. And it was from Hess that Marx adapted Activity as the substance of his philosophy, and Vygotsky acquired the concept from Marx. So Activity has a long and distinguished history, and each of the philosophers who have used it have further developed the concept.

But all these philosophers only used activity as the *substance* of human life: “human life is nothing but activity.” The point is: what is the *unit* of activity?

TO ILLUSTRATE this problem, recall that the Reflexologists who ruled Psychology at the time Vygotsky came along, held that “Everything is a reflex.” But this actually contributed nothing to the understanding of the behaviour of animals, except to give an assurance that it was all explainable without a life force or soul or any such extramundane force. It was only Pavlov who precisely defined the conditioned reflex, abstracted from all particulars, that allowed the S→R relation to become the foundation of neurobiology, though the concept has been greatly developed since.

The point is, it is one thing to identify Activity as the substance of a philosophy, a general view that “everything is activity”, but another thing to identify *units* of activity. The unit of “artefact-mediated collaborative action” is a unit of social life which also makes it possible to see how culture is acquired and recreated in the life of a community. But beyond that?

The General Concept
of Activity

Vygotsky's Concept of Activity

The General Concept
of Activity

Herder – Fichte – Hess – Marx



The General Concept
of Activity

“Everything is ...



3. Gadamer on Document and Tradition

NOW FOR A MOMENT I want to step outside the Marxist tradition and call on a concept from the founder of philosophical Hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer. It was Gadamer who coined the expression “Hermeneutic Circle.” Suppose you are confronted with a document, maybe an ancient manuscript or a letter from an old friend. You want to understand it, interpret it. Sometimes interpretation presents enormous problems and different people can get very different things from the same text. Speaking for myself, I have often returned to a work I long ago dismissed as worthless, only to find great wisdom in it! For the purpose of understanding a document Gadamer takes the context as the *tradition* in which the document is produced. It may have been written in certain social circumstances, but in order to understand it, what is important is the tradition to which it belongs, where the writer was “coming from,” so to speak. That tradition may be very different from the tradition in which the reader has been raised. I was raised as an atheist and I have some difficulty in relating to Christian literature, but it is not impossible.

“... When we try to understand a text, we do not try to transpose ourselves into the author’s mind but we try to transpose ourselves into the perspective within which he has formed his views. But this simply means that we try to understand how what he is saying *could be right*. If we want to understand, we will try to make his arguments even stronger.”

The Hermeneutic Circle goes like this: I read a sentence and it makes little sense to me, but I make an interpretation of its meaning based on a presumption of the tradition from which it comes, as I read on, something surprises me and I’m forced to revise my presumption of the tradition from which it comes, and then I have to *reinterpret* the sentences I have read; as I read on I may change my mind about this tradition; and so on. We go from the detail to the whole and back again until we have an interpretation which tallies with what we find in the detail. How we interpret the detail depends on what we take to be the tradition in which it is written, and we only get to know about that tradition from what we find in the detail. That’s the Hermeneutic Circle.

But that does not exhaust the problem of interpretation. If something is written from a point of view and based on assumptions that are foreign to us, how can we avoid everything produced in that tradition being foreign and useless to us? And yet our entire legacy is like this! And in fact, even that letter from an old friend is like that. We *all* speak from different assumptions, different traditions. How do we hear what others are saying? How do we get anything useful from a conversation?

The answer Gadamer gives is very wise. He says:

“... When we try to understand a text, we do not try to transpose ourselves into the author’s mind but, if one wants to use this terminology, we try to transpose ourselves into the perspective within which he has formed his views. But this simply means that we try to understand how what he is saying *could be right*. If we want to understand, we will try to make his arguments even stronger.”

Gadamer requires that some basis of *continuity* be found between the writer’s tradition and the reader’s tradition. Rather than by an act of imagination placing themselves within the writer’s subjectivity, a *real basis* for continuity, *common* concerns, be found within the reader’s own tradition which *actively furthers* some underlying aims and presuppositions of the writer’s tradition.

The task of Activity Theory is to solve a similar problem: how can we understand someone’s actions as rational given the activity or tradition in which they are acting. In this sense then we are using a concept of activity like the concept of “tradition” which Gadamer is using – the context of practice in which the actions people take make sense. And to make sense of people’s actions we have to understand the activity (tradition, culture, institution, project, concept) of which they are a part, and if we ourselves are not part of that tradition, dig down to something in it that *we too* support, so that their action makes real sense to us. On that basis then we can solidarise with them at some level, even if the concrete action they take either makes no sense to us or we oppose it. But any real, historical tradition is meeting the needs of its people in some way, and there is always some level at which we can solidarise with what motivates someone’s actions.

This is my introduction to the problem of motivation. Even though humanity is universal, and there are a basic set of needs we all have, different cultures go about things in quite different ways, different cultures have quite different needs and in turn, they will construe your actions very differently.

4. Motivation as a problem for Vygotsky

SOME OF VYGOTSKY'S followers claimed that Vygotsky had not accounted for motivation. It is all very well to show how someone learns a concept by using an artefact to complete some task, but what motivated them to complete that task in the first place? Surely what someone is trying to do is the central problem of understanding human activity and lack of motivation for a particular learning task the greatest barrier to learning. Isn't the generation of motivation to carry out the various tasks required for reproduction of the society central to the whole social fabric and organisation?

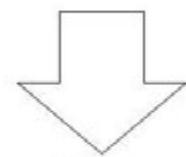
Motivation as a problem for Vygotsky



In the view of these critics it was necessary to form a concept of the societal *activity* which is the source of motivation for an action. Before entering into the sociological territory, let us look at how individuals become motivated.

THE STANDARD answer is that someone is motivated for an action because the action satisfies some need they have. However, all this does is shift the question from the action to the need. Now, we must grant that in respect to a range of biological needs this shift is warranted; we eat because we are hungry, we sleep because we are tired; and also, these basic needs extend beyond the immediate sphere of consumption. Meeting basic needs in a modern capitalist economy usually means finding a job (or some other vocation) and thus the meeting of basic needs does penetrate society. But this is actually a very limited sphere, and for example, it is unlikely that a child attends school in order to eat when they reach adulthood, nor is it likely that a writer writes in the hope that it will put food on the table. And insofar as motivation is provided by biology, it is rarely a problem for educators and psychologists. Nonetheless, in the long run any society that fails to meet the basic needs of its citizens for food, warmth, security and so on must perish. But there are many ways of achieving these ends.

An Activity



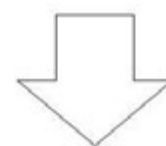
Object



But let us hazard a guess at a basic rule of thumb: in order to meet their needs, whether basic or not, a person must participate in *some* project which is able to sustain itself in the given social context. The problem of motivation is then shifted to the problem of what motivates a person to participate in some role in any existing project?

LET US TAKE IT as given that in lending their efforts to a project the individual does not know the *ultimate* aim of that project, or more generally, that the ultimate outcome of a project is in general unknown. The end of a project is *immanent in the project itself*, and everyone participating in it only learns as the project itself unfolds. Nonetheless, either the project fits in with a project the person can commit to, and they decide to join the project on its merits, or something must be done in order to entice or oblige the person to join.

An Activity



Immanent in the project itself



Equally, at the same time as offering motivation for a person to participate in some project, participation will entail demands being placed upon the person. Everyone participates in a project with 'their own agenda' their own understanding of the project.

The reason for using this terminology is to get away from the dichotomy of objective and subjective motives, which is a dead end. The aim is to approach this problem with a unit of activity which is both subjective and objective, and the idea of a project does this, provided one allows that the end of a project is not purely and simply given, but is emergent or immanent within the project, that the end of the project is subject to interpretation.

The fact is that in learning the concepts of a given community, one acquires the motivations which go along with them. How is that possible? Well, I think that every concept is a project at one or another stage in its life course, a twinkle in the eye of an agitator, a powerful social movement or a fossilised institution. To acquire a concept in a given social context is not just to understand it, but to acquire

also a motivational orientation towards it. When we learn something, we do not just acquire another word for our dictionary, but also develop in terms of motivation and will.

That said, we retain will and motivation that rests on pre-intellectual bases within the psyche, and we do not acquire new motivational resources on a blank page. But in general, motivation is formed in the cultural and practical environment, in fact, one could almost say that the motivational structure of a person is a projection of the life around him or her. It is impossible to disentangle subjective and objective.

So if we return to the question of whether Vygotsky provided an account of how people acquire motivation, it seems that he did more than he was given credit for. When people acquire a concept, in the context of a specific collaborative project, then they also acquire the motivational structures relevant to that concept. How can one acquire the concept of thief or holiday without also acquiring a motivational orientation in relation to them? Also, take some ideal that is supposed to provide motivation for someone – education, profession, prosperity, nation, or whatever – none of these ideals are empirically given to the senses, but can only be apprehended as concepts, through words. The intellect, which is the seat of all the motivations associated with life in modern society, knows only concepts of one kind or another, generalisations. The Nation for example does not exist as such, independently of its concept; if patriotism is to form any part of a child's motivation, it will only be through the words, images and other artefacts that they learn as concepts in collaboration with another, through “artefact-mediated collaborative actions.” We have no sixth sense to perceive such abstractions, but must perforce use concepts.

Nonetheless, the sociological dimension to the life of a community requires tools of its own, and we require a concept which is compatible with Vygotsky's units. But Vygotsky's unit of action does not lend itself to the solution of social problems properly so called. Let us take it that we agree that the substance of our philosophy is Activity, that is, “everything is activity.” But just as “everything is a reflex” solved nothing for neurobiology outside of Pavlov's study of the unit of neurobiology, the reflex arc, no progress can be made in social questions until we have a unit of activity. What is *an* Activity?

Before pursuing this question I will very briefly outline two of the most influential answers that have been given to this question, that of A N Leontyev and that of Yrjö Engeström.

5. Levels of Activity and Systems of Activity

ALEXEI NIKOLAYEVICH LEONTYEV developed a 3-level anatomy of activity. At the centre is the action, understood just as Vygotsky had proposed. An Action which has become ‘second nature’, such as stepping over a kerb or reading signs as you are walking along, is called an Operation, and is automatically adapted to the conditions required to complete the action. If something goes wrong, it is transformed from an unconscious operation to a conscious action. But all these Actions are always directed towards the completion of an Activity of which the Action is a part. The Activity is societal and includes the Actions of many people.

The motivational physiology is as follows. Operations flow autonomously from the will to complete the Action, and is selected according to conditions. The Action is oriented to the individual's *goal*, and collectively realizes the Activity. The societal Activity has an on-going social *motive*, independent of the will of the individual. The individual's goal may not coincide with the social motive, but the individual will be aware of the motive so as to coordinate his or her actions with others for the achievement of the motive of the Activity.

There are two classic examples which are given to illustrate these relations. The first is that of a primeval hunt in which a beater chases game away so that other members of the group may catch them. The beater's action only makes sense because they will receive a share of the catch as part of the social system of distribution. The activity is a hunt and its motive is said to be objective as it is a

Levels and Systems of Activity



motive of the whole community. The second is that of a factory worker who is aware of the product he produces, of its objective meaning (*Bedeutung*) at least to the extent required for him to be able to perform his labour functions in a rational way. But this is not the same as the personal meaning (*Sinn*) of his labour, which lies in the wages for which he is working.

Unit	Description	Object	
activity	individual participates and is aware of motive	has social motive, independent of the will of any individual	motive continues throughout, realized through various goals
action	consciously controlled by individual	oriented to individual's goal, collectively realizes activity	goal of action may not be same as motive of activity it realizes
operation	not consciously motivated	realization of action, selection depends on conditions	autonomously flows from will to action

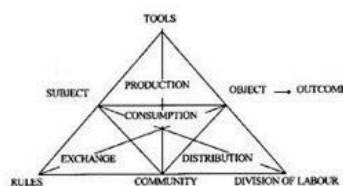
The problems I see with this are (1) that identification with a social group is not given as it is for the tribal group, but may arise only *through* participation in a common project, (2) that the idea of an objective social motive relies on the notion of a unitary society with a rational government determining the 'objective needs' of a community, whereas in fact the members of the government pursue ends of their own, and the same goes for capitalist employers; (3) the hired worker is presumed to be interested only in the wage as a means of purchasing means of enjoyment, and/or share in the objective motive in the case of the employer being the state. Altogether I think there is too much of a dichotomy and the motives of individuals, whether managers or labourers, seem to be taken for granted.

Further, I think there is no such thing as an 'objective motive'. But for A N Leontyev, 'an activity' is defined by its objective motive, so we get a picture of society very much resembling a centrally planned economy.

YRJÖ ENGESTRÖM has developed a widely used schema for activity represented in the following model:

Levels and Systems of Activity

This elaborate schema is developed by beginning with the relations between an individual subject, the community and the environment in which each mediates the relation between the other two, and then this mediation takes on an independent objective form through tool-making, social rules and a division of labour. This is called a "system of activity" or "an activity," which constantly expands through mediation, and transforms itself as each object is realised as an outcome.



Yrjö Engeström

The merits of this approach is that it provides researchers with a template which both allows them to ensure that all the relevant factors are taken account of and provides a continuity which binds all the researchers using this methodology into a community with common reference points. The problem I have with this model is that it has finally abandoned Vygotsky's approach of creating a base for the solution of any problem by identifying a unit of analysis or *concept* of the problem. Engeström's approach requires the researcher to identify a check-list of 11 concepts before the system of activity is complete, and it has to be said, this process of identifying the rules, community, subject, etc., is fairly much a routine business; it's a plug-and-play device. For the purpose of an already-established research program it is quite effective, but it is not going to provide new insights. It is quite consistent with the normal practice of positivist sociology.

There is a third current of Activity Theory which grew up in Europe – Germany and Denmark in particular – which makes its own criticism of Leontyev and does not agree with the Engeström’s current which has spread from Finland internationally. I know too little about this current to make any comment on it. Aside from this, many researchers use Vygotsky’s psychology within poststructuralist or other discourse models in lieu of a variety of Activity Theory.

While I have my criticisms of these currents, all represent powerful variations on Vygotsky’s original idea, but I want to make some suggestions in the light of what I see as the strengths of Vygotsky’s methodology which should be further developed.

6. What is *an* Activity?

THE FIRST ISSUE is the notion of *membership* of a group or community. This cannot be taken for granted in the way Leontyev in particular does. In modern capitalist society identification with the whole community is either absent or very weak. People identify themselves in a wide variety of ways. All modern societies contain a myriad of social groups of various kinds, sizes and strengths which overlap and compete for the loyalty of members. I don’t think it makes sense to assume that an individual belongs to one and only one such group, which provides the motive for all the activities a person participates in. Or if we allow that participation in a “system of activity” coexists with other loyalties, that this system is self-evident and coherent. Group membership is weak in modern societies, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world.

Moreover, it seems far more rational to me to begin from an Activity, and then trace the formation of group loyalty and culture arising from collaboration, whether in pursuit of a common end, or simply through collaboration as such. But I do agree that the only rational way of understanding what *an activity* is is the ideal or objective of the activity. So, adopting the word ‘project’ for ‘an activity’, we know that every project is oriented to the realisation of an ideal, but exactly what this ideal may turn out to be, that is, what is actually realised by the project, is not something given in advance; it is *actualised*. And in the course of the collaboration, everyone gets to know more about that ideal which is embodied in the project.

What we have then is not a society made up of one or a number of social groups, whether understood as ethnic communities or institutions of some kind, but a social formation whose fabric is woven of numerous threads, some emergent, some contested, and some institutionalised. The complex structure of motivation in a person’s mind is made up of the interplay of the various concepts reflecting these ideals.

AS SUGGESTED by Engeström, every research project analysing some situation must take account of the social rules. But these rules arise from multiple sources, some the same source as the object of the system of activity, but some are overlaid and have a different source. And if we were to demand that *all* the applicable rules be taken into account this would be unachievable. We have to accept that we cannot define a research domain without open boundaries; but that is in the nature of projects.

Projects are both subjective and objective. They are what they are and exist only because people perform them and are motivated by them, but nonetheless in the overwhelming majority of cases they are *joined* not created; that is, people find them in the world around them and lend their own energies to them.

What is *an* Activity?



What is *an* Activity?



Let us take a couple of cases which are of central concern for everyone here, firstly motivation for learning in the formal schooling system.

When a child is told that they must now go to school, who knows what that means to the child? Maybe it means that they are now old enough and as such is welcomed, or it means a chance to be with the older children they know who attend school, but maybe it means only exposure to dangers and separation from the home, a loss of freedom and subjection to new demands. Once they are fully participating in formal school activity, the child will form a more concrete concept of what school means and may be able to commit to the project. But in the meantime, the meaning of “school” will be framed within the constellation of meanings the child has formed within the social situation at home and the roles the child has experienced there. It depends on the concept they have of school and how that concept fits into the whole concept they have of themselves. For a young child who has not yet learnt to think in true concepts, the concept the child forms of school will take a form according to their intellectual development. In general, prior to attending school, this concept will be related to the child’s adoption of a new role, or more or less inessential attributes of attending school which affect their well-being or be identified with other similar activities the child has experienced. These are complex questions and I am not qualified to resolve them.

Another example is family. Family is a project, but its meaning changes throughout a person’s life course and differs between families. But there is no doubt that raising and providing for a family and identifying with its legacy and future is a major source of motivation for large numbers, maybe even a majority of people. Certainly family provides plenty of reasons for participation in most of the mundane projects which make life in any society possible. Family is an ideal which motivates people to participate in other projects as a means to an end, but which also gives a meaning to what would otherwise be mistaken for narrow self-interest. Indeed, as a source of motivation it is often impossible to separate self and family, so strong is the identification.

Like society as a whole, the individual mind is a fabric woven of threads, each of which is a concept, both a thought-form and an extended system of artefact-mediated actions whose coherence arises from the shared ideal of its collaborators.

7. Motivation under Capitalism

ALL CONCEPTS are inherently collaborative, and collaboration has norms which are well-known and carry impelling moral force. These are that participants in a collaborative projects **share the objective**, are **moral equals** and always consult one another insofar as it is feasible and make decisions by **consensus**. Quite commonly not everyone will have an equal stake in or commitment to a project and the norms are negotiated accordingly.

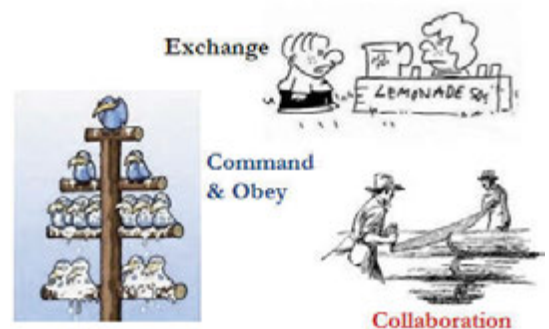
But there is such a thing as non-collaborative collaboration and certain limiting cases of collaboration which are ‘non-collaborative’ dominate our society. So let us outline three classic cases of collaboration.

The first is Collaboration as just described, and the other two are hierarchy and exchange.

Hierarchy solves all the problems entailed in running a project by a line management with the ‘owner’ of the project at the top, commands flowing down from the top. This is a perfectly respectable form of collaboration, and people readily submit themselves to it. It is the norm within any capitalist enterprise, and in times gone by the whole of a society was run in this way. In general, all societies have status orders of various kinds, and an element of hierarchy enters into even the most informal collaboration. There has been criticism of the hierarchical relation applying between teacher and student, especially since the *Zeitgeist* militates against young people accepting the superior status of teachers.

Exchange is the non-collaborative collaboration characteristic of the market. Here the two parties to the collaboration each use the other as a means to their own ends, and it is understood that both pursue separate and independent projects. Nonetheless, the norms of moral equality and honesty are strongly enforced in this relation. Recently, with the corporatisation of higher education, we have seen the

Motivation under capitalism



relation between teacher and student rendered as a customer-service provider relation. This is enormously destructive of education since teachers must teach in a way which is pleasing to students and pass them in exams whatever their performance, especially if the students have paid fees for their qualification. The whole concept of education is undermined by rendering it as a process of purchase and sale.

Collaborative learning is gaining in support among higher education teachers and students. This entails collaboration both between student and teacher and between students, and sometimes between teachers. Techniques such as project learning, problem solving, research and Socratic dialogue are used and have proved to be very successful. Collaboration is generally the norm for voluntary organisations but is increasingly to be found as a norm in family groups (within limits), in relations between client and carer in the health service for example.

These forms of collaboration are also to be found in capitalist society in situations where one form of collaboration is subsumed under another. For example, an employer may run his firm as a hierarchy, but finds it more effective to leave it to the coal-face workers to collaborate with one another. This has the advantage that provided that the workers are motivated, they are much better at managing their own work than managers, and learn from their mistakes, which managers rarely do. Collaboration sometimes applies at the top as well, as collaboration invariably produces better policies, but in such cases of course, collaboration is limited to a select club, and is often simply a mask to cover a hierarchy. Conversely, voluntary organisations may operate as collaborative enterprises but employ full-time staff on a wage for certain specialist tasks and of course, purchase goods and equipment from the market. This allows effective voluntary collaboration without the downside of amateurism. In the first case collaboration is subsumed under hierarchy and in the second case exchange is subsumed under collaboration.

Collaboration has strong normative force, and always leads to more intelligent work than exchange or hierarchical command. Of course in most cases, there is neither the desire nor any point in collaborating, and one party is happy to work for a wage and not get involved making decisions about the place and people are sometimes happy to let someone who has a large investment in a project to run it as they see fit. But other things being equal, the more collaborative a project, the healthier it is. That is why health services have adopted the norm in many countries, and why employers prefer their employees to collaborate, so long as they have the final say and the profits.

Marx has analysed in depth the outcome of running a society along the lines of the exchange relation. Today, even the hierarchical relations which have always been the norm within capitalist enterprises are more and more giving way to exchange with the use of franchising, outsourcing and one-line budgeting. And what cannot be marketized is so far as possible left to the collaboration of those directly involved. But the results of this process of subsumption of exchange under hierarchy are not healthy.

I WONDER what an analysis of society in which the dominant form of labour cooperation was collaboration would look like?

Any Questions?