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Revealing Relational Work

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I would say that my involvement comes from individuals. It's an immediate, initial thing that happens, a connection that I make each time when I work with someone with whom I find some common ground, some shared ways of thinking about things. If I don't have that connection, it's tough for me to get going working with them. – Architect

(Kahn, 1990, p. 707 in Grant & Parker, 2009)

INTRODUCTION

Most professional interactions involve relational work, sometimes visibly and sometimes hidden. It is explicitly part of the interactions of business consultants with their clients (Lambrechts et al., 2009); but is often invisible in the attention to the other that marks the caring professions (De Frino, 2009). It is frequently regarded as a kind of backstage way of lubricating working relationships (Fletcher, 2001); and is increasingly and overtly recognised as a secret of successful leadership (Helstad & Møller, 2013). Yet, despite the growing interest in the relational aspects of getting work done, as these examples show, it is usually seen as a resource for taking forwards one's particular intentions as a practitioner. In this book, the focus on working together is slightly different.

All the contributors are interested in how different specialist expertise is brought to bear on both interpreting and responding to a complex problem. Joint interpretations are crucial to ensure that as much of the complexity as possible is revealed and the best resources available are used to work on it. This book is therefore about collaboration, mainly across practice boundaries, to reveal and respond to complexity. It is not about heroic boundary crossing, but is about how practitioners are able to

contribute their own specialist expertise to work on difficult problems alongside the expertise offered by others, including clients and potential users of research. It is also deeply ethical as it allows for creative responses that stem from what is important for each individual, at the same time connecting people dialogically to each other and to a common good by, in Taylor's terms, by "bind[ing] us to others" (Taylor, 1991, p. 67).

Collaboration comes in many forms. It includes the alignment of effort involved in moving a heavy piece of furniture; the interdependency of a football team; and the quick response of emergency services to a road accident. It is often embedded in everyday rituals such as clearing the dinner table; telling a bedtime story with a young child; or packing the car for a weekend away. What all these interactions have in common is a sense of mutuality, an alertness to what the other person is likely to do and an awareness of why he or she might do it. Yet these capacities are often invisible until their lack causes problems, the piano falls or no one packs the picnic.

In this collection, researchers from across the world show how they have made capacities for relational work visible in a wide variety of settings, from family support services to globally distributed networks in the technology field. The practitioners in each research site have been tackling problems that require more than one kind of specialist expertise where, for example, early educators work with dentists and doctors in hospitals, or researchers negotiate projects with research participants. In explaining how these collaborations are accomplished, the authors have, in different ways, drawn on three ideas: relational expertise, common knowledge and relational agency.

These concepts arose and have been developed in my own work on interprofessional collaboration over the last fifteen years (Edwards, 2005; 2010, 2011, 2012; Edwards et al., 2009). In this collection, the authors take the concepts further, refining and refashioning them in use in their projects within and across different national settings and policy discourses. For those of us who work with the Vygotskian legacy of cultural-historical theory, observing how conceptual tools are refined in use is utterly fascinating. Consequently, the book has two aims: the first is to demonstrate the usefulness of these conceptual tools when deployed for different purposes in research and in development projects; the second is to capture how they have been refined as they have been used. Let us therefore start by outlining the origins of the three conceptual tools in the work of both Vygotsky and his colleague, A. N. Leont'ev.

VYGOTSKY, TOOL USE AND PRACTICE

For Vygotsky, concepts were tools that have cultural origins and that are used in ways that are valued in the culture. Over time, we learn to use these tools in order to work on the world and make it a better place. His was a distinctly modernist agenda, arising in Russia during the 1920s. He saw psychology and education as a means of individual liberation and the route to a modern and successful society; the more robust the conceptual tools at the disposal of citizens and the better they were able to use them, the more effective they would be in taking society forward (Vygotsky, 1987, 1997).

The Vygotskian researcher is therefore interested in the use and development of conceptual tools. We can follow this interest in two ways. If we are concerned with how well someone understands an existing practice, such as mathematics or social work, we can examine how they use the concepts that are valued in that practice. We can follow their actions, in activities, in the practice and perhaps ask them to reflect with us on why they worked in a particular way. If, however, the practice is new or changing, we may become interested in how existing concepts are refashioned in use and how new concepts arise as the new forms of work are undertaken. We still follow actions in activities, but these activities may not be in existing practices but in newly forming ones. Here the researcher focuses on what these new concepts are, whether they have only local relevance, or if they can be labeled and tested in other settings to assess their wider currency. If they can be made visible and tested, can they also be used to inform and develop the new ways of working?

While the first approach helps us primarily to understand human learning, the second line of enquiry also leads us towards conceptual clarification in relation to new forms of work and changes in and across practices. The ideas to be discussed in this collection fall into the second category. So let us do a little more conceptual ground clearing before discussing them in detail.

The chapters all focus on work, what people do as practitioners. The practices that experts inhabit, and their motives as they work in these practices, therefore feature across the contributions. The term *practice* has a distinctive meaning in the collection of chapters. Practices are seen as ‘knowledge-laden, imbued with cultural values, and emotionally freighted by the motives of those who already act in them’ (Edwards, 2010, p. 5). They are inhabited by practitioners, are usually historically formed and sustain relatively stable professional identities through a dynamic of person and practice. The values and motives that are carried in practices provide

the emotional glue that holds together professional identities, and these identities in turn mediate or shape how practitioners navigate and achieve mastery in these practices. But people are not merely products of the practices they find themselves in; they are agentic and have commitments. Archer puts it succinctly: ‘... we are who we are because of what we care about’ (Archer, 2000, p. 10). Enacting expertise is therefore very tightly connected with what matters to people in the actions they take in the practices they inhabit, whether that is sustaining the family network in social work or maintaining the school attendance of a vulnerable child in teaching.

I shall be mainly using the term *what matters* rather than *motive* in this chapter, partly because the word *motive* has come to be associated with individual needs, but also because of the connection Taylor makes with recognising what matters and a sense of authenticity in one’s actions and identity. He argues: ‘I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter. But to bracket out history, nature, society, the demands of solidarity, everything but what I find in myself, would be to eliminate all candidates for what matters’ (Taylor, 1991, p. 40). To eliminate these demands would, he argues, create a trivial version of identity.

A cultural-historical approach to motive is based in a collective notion of what matters to others as well as oneself within a particular practice. Its roots lie in the work of Leont’ev, who offered a different way of thinking about motive. The terminology he uses when discussing motive, *object of activity* and *object motive*, was an important element in his efforts to overcome what he saw as a dualistic psychology that separated motives and societal conditions. His dialectical premise was therefore similar to the line taken by Taylor, arguing that ‘society produces the activity of the individuals forming it’ (Leont’ev, 1978a, p. 7). But he has helped us to operationalise the dynamic when working in the field. The key to the dialectic between people and activity in society was what he termed the ‘object of activity’, what it is people are working on.

His thesis was that the dialectic of *person in activity in society* gives rise to the object motive, which in turn directs the participation of the actors in activities. He explained object motive, somewhat opaquely, as follows: ‘The main thing that distinguishes one activity from another, however, is the difference in their objects. It is exactly the object of activity that gives it a determined direction. According to the terminology I have proposed, the object of activity is its true motive’ (Leont’ev, 1978a, p. 17).

Let’s unpack this statement and take as an example a goal of reshaping a child’s trajectory to shift it away from risk of harm to safety and social

inclusion. The object of activity, what is being worked on, will be the child's trajectory, but it will be seen differently by practitioners from different practices. The social worker will perhaps work on strengthening the family and the teacher on the child's school attendance. These foci of attention are different aspects of the child's trajectory and they are selected by each practitioner according to what matters for them in their specialist practice. That is, each facet of the object of activity, family networks or attendance, contains within it the professional motives of the practitioners who are acting on it.

Two things are happening here. First, the understanding of the trajectory is being expanded so that more of its complexity can be seen. This expansion is valuable because the teacher can't easily tackle attendance if she is not aware of problems at home. Second, we begin to see how what matters for each practitioner is objectified, and what matters for a profession becomes part of the object of activity. Leont'ev explained this process of objectification as a dialectic of person and object of activity: 'The object of activity is twofold: first in its independent existence as subordinating to itself and transforming the activity of the subject; second, as an image of the object, as a product of its property of psychological reflection that is realized as an activity of the subject and cannot exist otherwise' (Leont'ev, 1978a, p. 7).

This dialectic of person with object of activity in the responsive work done by professionals, such as social workers and teachers, recognises the extent to which their nonroutine work involves doing knowledge work, working on the object of activity to reshape it by using their professional knowledge and expertise. It is no surprise that Leont'ev refers to the connection that Marx made between cognition and practice when writing about the object of activity:

A profound revolution brought about by Marx in the theory of cognition is the idea that human practice is the basis for human cognition; practice is that process in the course of whose development cognitive problems arise, human perceptions and thought originate and develop, and which at the same time contains in itself criteria of the adequacy and truth of knowledge

(Leont'ev, 1978b, p. 2).

However, Leont'ev's notion of the object of activity that not only objectifies what it is that is worked on in an activity, but also the needs, emotions and feelings associated with it, takes Marx's focus on practices much further. First, it recognises that objects of activity exhibit

Entity	Process	Dynamic
Society	Political economy	Societal needs/conditions
Institution (e.g. a school, department, team, family...)	Practice	Values/motives/objectives
Activity setting (e.g. a lesson, meeting, evening meal ...)	Activity/situation (with potential for individual learning)	Motivation/demands
Person	Actions in an activity (which may or may not give rise to learning)	Motive/intentions

FIGURE 1.1. *Planes of analysis (after Hedegaard, 2012).*

motivating forces. Second, it reminds us that the relationship between person and object of activity is never direct but is always mediated by what matters in a practice.

I have already begun to indicate that practices are made up of activities and that the actions that people take in the activities are shaped by their sense of who they are as a social worker or teacher. For example, social work will consist of several activities, family case conferences, home visits, writing statements for magistrates' courts and so on, and the way these activities are accomplished will be shaped by the training received by the social worker, the priorities of her team and her personal professional values.

This example returns to Leont'ev's concern with articulating the relationship between motivated actions and societal conditions. Hedegaard has addressed these concerns using Leont'ev's attention to object motive, to produce a way of framing the potential linkages between societal conditions, practices, activities and actions. Figure 1.1 is just one version of the framework, which is under continuous development. It is presented here as potential planes of analysis. It is a way of guiding a research focus without losing sight of, for example, how activities are located in practices that mediate national or regional policies and provide constraints and affordances for individual actions within activities. There may not be alignment between what the political economy is requiring, what matters in a team or organisation's practice, how work activities are interpreted and accomplished, what people do and why they do it. This framework therefore also offers a useful way of revealing these differences and pointing to the need to analyse how they are negotiated by actors.

Hedegaard is a developmental psychologist with an interest in both learning and development. This framework is based in the Vygotskian view of learning, which allows us to see that an activity in an activity setting, such as doing homework, will offer a child a potential situation for learning, but doesn't guarantee it. Learning will occur only through a dialectic in which the child recognises and engages intentionally with the demands inherent in the activity. Although the framework was originally designed to explain how children act intentionally at home and school (Hedegaard & Flear, 2008), it is also useful for designing studies of professional work and has been used in several studies over the last few years as the basis of a reflective tool for practitioners (Edwards, 2015).

One reason for introducing Figure 1.1 is because it shows just how difficult it is for people to collaborate across practice boundaries. Intentional professional action is usually bound up in activities that are shaped by institutional interpretations of regional/national/international priorities. Addressing complex problems requires actors to sustain their specific expertise and what matters for them as professionals in order to use them when interpreting and responding to the problem.

While studying work at the boundaries between professions, it became clear to me that the most successful work occurred not through boundary crossing, such as placing a social worker in a school, but in work at sites of intersecting practices. These sites were not always places. They could be virtual networks or scheduled meetings, but they were task-focussed, working on the needs of a child, family or neighbourhood. As I tried to make sense of what led to successful task accomplishment, despite the pull of professional identities so firmly located within specific practices, I began to see the exercise of a form of expertise that augmented, but did not replace, the specialist expertise practitioners brought to the sites. In the next section, I describe that expertise by drawing on the Vygotskian and Leont'evian ideas outlined in this section.

RELATIONAL EXPERTISE, COMMON KNOWLEDGE AND RELATIONAL AGENCY

These three concepts will weave their way through the contributions to this collection. In brief, they are the labels I have given to the aspects of the expertise exercised by the practitioners who accomplished effective interprofessional work that strengthened children and families. They capture a capacity to recognise, respect and work with the professional motives and therefore what matters in the professional practice of

potential collaborators. In this section, I illustrate the ideas with examples from my own research, but the chapters that follow will indicate their wider relevance.

Elsewhere I have referred to the three concepts as gardening tools that have been used to build, nurture and sustain the expertise needed for collaborations across practice boundaries (Edwards, 2012). The metaphor reflects the comment from two Norwegian researchers in the field of public management, that horizontal working between agencies needs ‘... cooperative effort and cannot be easily imposed from the top down’ so that ‘the role of a successful reform agent is to operate more as a gardener than as an engineer or an architect’ (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2007, p. 1063).

The first and overarching concept is *relational expertise*, which is a capacity to work relationally with others on complex problems. Crucially, it involves the joint interpretation of the problem as well as the joint response. The object of activity needs to be collectively expanded to reveal as much of the complexity as possible.

Relational expertise therefore involves knowing how to know who can help. Lundvall, discussing the ‘Learning Economy’, described the importance of know-who, to augment know-what, why and how (Lundvall & Johnson, 1994), in the following way: ‘Know-who involves information about who knows what and who knows to do what. But especially it involves the social capability to establish relationships to specialised groups in order to draw upon their expertise’ (Lundvall, 1996, p. 6).

His basic premise was that knowledge is a collective asset that can be shared, and therefore we need to create the conditions in which that sharing is possible. Crucially, sharing in his definition of know-who involves recognising that each collaborator will have different expertise, and he is careful to say that lists of potential experts are not what is needed. Instead, systems need to be designed to enable flexible forms of collaboration.

Highlighting know-who or knowing how to know who as a capability to establish relationships is useful. My own work has shown that people may be good at working relationally across practice boundaries, based on old friendships and years of trust building, but these relationships may not be the most relevant when tackling a new problem. Knowing how to recognise the expertise of others and to be able to make one’s own expertise explicit is therefore crucial. It involves being professionally multilingual, recognising the meanings that different practices give to words and their importance in each practice discourse. From a cultural-historical perspective, knowing how to know who is a capability that can

be broken down into being able to (i) recognise the standpoints and motives of those who inhabit other practices and (ii) align motives mutually in interpreting and responding to a problem.

Relational expertise is therefore an additional form of expertise that augments specialist expertise and makes fluid and responsive collaborations possible. A practitioner once described it as follows: ‘it is only a matter of adjusting what you do to other people’s strengths and needs’. But it is also more than that. Nowotny, discussing knowledge flows that do not dilute ideas, has indicated the need to design for knowledge exchange in the following way: ‘Experts must now extend their knowledge, not simply to be an extension of what they know in their specialist field, but to consist of building links and trying to integrate what they know with what others want to, or should know and do’ (Nowotny, 2003, p. 155).

In order to understand how to build these links, we turn to the concept of *common knowledge* (Edwards, 2010, 2011, 2012). The common knowledge that was relevant to smooth interprofessional work was not knowledge of how to do each others’ jobs; that route would have led to hybridity and the loss of specialist expertise. Instead common knowledge, in the sense used here, is made up of what matters in each profession, the motives that shape and take forward professional practice.

Common knowledge, a respectful understanding of different professional motives, can then become a resource that can mediate responsive collaborations on complex problems. In this sense, common knowledge is what Vygotskians would recognise as a second stimulus. In brief, the first stimulus is the problem being worked on, and the second is made up of the cultural resources or tools available to interpret and work on it. The second stimulus provides possibilities for action and enables the actors to control their behaviours as they tackle the problem. In experimental designs, how the second stimulus is used gives the researcher access to how the acting subject is thinking. But even in experimental settings, as Engeström (2011) observes, the agency of the subject comes into play in how and why the tools are used. The second stimulus is therefore a resource that is constructed and reconstructed in use on problems while it mediates actions on the problems.

For example, knowledge of each others’ motives allows the teacher to recognise why the social worker needs time to strengthen the family before key decisions are made. Likewise, the social worker can begin to see links between school attendance, attainment and social inclusion, what matters for the teacher. In brief, the motivated interpretations and intentional responses to problems of practice, which are made by practitioners from different practices, are brought into alignment through the use of shared

understandings of what matters for each collaborator. Through that process, work on complex tasks is accomplished.

Common knowledge does not arise spontaneously; attention needs to be paid to the conditions in which it is built. My own work suggests that it is created over time in interactions in sites of intersecting practices, which overtly emphasise the following:

- Recognising similar long-term open goals, such as children's well-being, as some kind of affective or value-laden glue that holds all motives together
- Revealing specific professional values and motives in discussions, by legitimising asking for and giving reasons for interpretations and suggestions
- Listening to, recognising and engaging with the values and motives of others.

Here is another practitioner who outlined the process of building common knowledge quite succinctly:

I think the very first step is understanding about what the sort of issues are. . . . Professions have very, very different ideas about need, about discipline, about responsibility, about the impact of systems. . . . So I think the first step is actually to get some shared understanding about effective practices and about understanding the reasons behind some of them.

The final sentence in this statement crucially points to motives, what matters in each practice. Attempts at surfacing the 'whys' of practice can, of course, be seen by others as challenge rather than interest. Understanding reasons therefore won't easily happen unless some ground rules are established as part of the design. Recently I have begun to draw on Derry's work on 'the space of reasons' (Derry, 2013, p. 230) to examine what makes for successful interactions in sites of intersecting practices. Derry argues that discursive spaces where the asking for and giving of reasons are expected are where what is important, yet perhaps not articulated in the 'rough ground' of practice, can be surfaced and scrutinised (Edwards, 2015). At the very least, sites of intersecting practices, where reasons are given and considered seriously, are places where common knowledge, the knowledge of the motives in the potentially collaborating practices, can be made visible.

Common knowledge is of course important when planning support for a family over time, but it is perhaps most crucially important when action