

nature. The sign changes nothing in the object of the psychological operation, it is a means of psychological action on behavior, one's own or another's, a means of internal activity directed toward mastering man himself; the sign is directed inward. These activities are so different that even the nature of the devices used cannot be one and the same in both cases. (Vygotsky, 1997b, p. 62)

The basis of any analogy between tool and sign is their mediating function only. Vygotsky's point is that tools and artifacts are not psychic phenomena!

Vygotsky did not explain where the subject's capacity for self-stimulation by external stimuli came from. But he was aware of the problem and sharply, even gruffly, denied the simple attempts of his ideological enemies to walk off with the problem by sheer deduction from dialectical or historical materialism or even from the economic categories of *Capital*:

The *direct* application of the theory of *dialectical materialism* to the problems of natural science and in particular to the group of biological sciences or psychology is *impossible*, just as it is *impossible to apply it directly* to history and sociology. ... Like history, sociology is in need of the intermediate *special theory* of historical materialism which explains the *concrete* meaning, for the given group of phenomena, of the abstract laws of dialectical materialism. In exactly the same way we are in need of an as yet undeveloped but inevitable theory of biological materialism and psychological materialism as an intermediate science which explains the concrete application of the abstract theses of dialectical materialism to the given field of phenomena. (Vygotsky, 1997a, p. 330)

Unfortunately, Vygotsky was unable to realize this program of a meta-theory that possibly could have explained the coevolution of systems and media. Nevertheless, he seemingly speaks with Giesecke's words when he depicts the effects of a leading medium on individual and social systems, saying that the introduction of psychological tools "modifies the entire course and structure of mental functions" (Vygotsky, 1997a, p. 85).

Although Vygotsky was sure of this fundamental fact, he acknowledged only two kinds of media: natural and artificial. This is exactly the pattern of thought we know from the myths of book culture. Correspondingly, Vygotsky saw written text as the decisive divide separating the primitive epoch of humankind from that of civilization (Vygotsky, 1997b, pp. 131-148). Lack of contact with the European book society was "primitive." This bias is visible also in Luria's expedition to Uzbekistan and its assessment by Vygotsky (Van der Veer, 1996; Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991, pp. 251-253).

Also, the last of the aforementioned myths of the book culture, the linear understanding of history, is typical of Vygotsky, as can be shown with one more example, namely Vygotsky's (1994) essay "The Socialist Alteration of Man." Vygotsky distinguished between "primitive man" and "modern type" of man, describing a transition to the formation of a new type of human being in communist society. According to Vygotsky, the transformation would finally be realized by mastering not only psychic processes but all functions determined by human nature, and so finally by learning to consciously restructure even the "biological organization" of man. The linearity of thinking is obvious. What is changing is the form of behavior from direct to mediated, and the volume of conscious behavior from mastering the psychic to even mastering the physical processes. All this was seen as an effect of mediational means that would remain equal. Their form was irrelevant; only their function was important.

Vygotsky's theoretical framework assumes book culture and printing to be leading media. In this respect, we can describe this model of mediation as essentially unhistorical. At any rate, because of its dependence on the old leading medium, it can hardly serve as an adequate instrument for grasping the emerging new leading medium and for conceptualizing modern intervention strategies.

LEONT'EV'S SOLUTION OF THE MEDIATION PROBLEM

For Leont'ev, the problem of mediation was not sufficiently solved by Vygotsky. He clearly followed Vygotsky in supposing that the mediatedness of the relationship of humans with the world marks the peculiarity of being human. He also accepted the mediating function of signs;

The sign mediates the consciousness, because the sign has meaning. . . .
Sign is what matters. (Leont'ev, 2005, p. 451)

On the other hand, Leont'ev criticized Vygotsky – very early indeed – for taking signs and meanings as means of mediation that could not be questioned. Leont'ev's argument was that as long as the origins of signs and meanings cannot be explained, their emergence and function remain restricted to the social, more precisely linguistic, communication:

Consciousness is a product of linguistic, actually of mental interaction.
(Leont'ev, 2005, p. 457)

The social mind [determines] the personal and the personal mind determines the social. (Leont'ev, 2005, p. 325)

This means, according to Leont'ev, that Vygotsky's solution to the problem of mediation ends in circular reasoning, much as in "the classical circle of French sociology" (Leont'ev, 2005, p. 459):

The society influences the human being, and the human influences the society. (Leont'ev, 2005, p. 325)

According to Leont'ev (2005, p. 459), this conclusion meant for psychology "an affirmation of exactly that *cultural-historical theory*" that would be indefensible from the point of view of historical and philosophical materialism:

The history of consciousness joins only with the history of the societal mind, not with the material history of society, only cultural-historical facts prove to be determinant. (Leont'ev, 2005, p. 459)

Leont'ev preferred an alternative solution. Instead of sticking to linguistic interaction as the only mediating entity and thus considering the word a "demiurg" of consciousness, he suggested inquiring into "what stands behind interaction" (Leont'ev, 2005, p. 325). "Behind" the linguistic communication stands only the material activity itself (p. 247):

Vygotsky's thesis that consciousness is a product of the child's linguistic communication on the condition of his or her activity in relation to the surrounding objective reality, thus has to be reversed: The child's consciousness is a product of his or her human activity in relation to the objective reality, which takes place on the condition of speech, of linguistic communication. (Leont'ev, 2001, p. 304)

Leont'ev's experiments in Char'kov led to the conclusion that the appropriation of a meaning resulted not from communication but originally from the child's external activity with material objects in cooperative interaction. Thus, Leont'ev replaced the formula subject–sign–object with the formula subject–activity–object. This had consequences. The object now appeared twice: first, as a thing and then as a mediational means of activity. The tool concept lost its special Vygotskian function for four reasons:

1. Human activity is object oriented from the beginning. "The expression 'objectless activity' is devoid of any meaning" (Leont'ev, 1978, p. 52).
2. The mediating object appears either as a tool or as a goal or a motive of activity, according to its status within the system of an activity. "Objects themselves can become stimuli, goals, or tools only

in a system of human activity; deprived of connections within this system they lose their existence as stimuli, goals, or tools” (Leont’ev, 1978, p. 67).

3. The nature of tools is not psychic. “Obviously, a tool is a material object in which are crystallized methods and operations, not actions or goals” (Leont’ev, 1978, p. 65). This is true of all human tools; they are objectifications of operations.
4. Consciousness “is not the only existing, only possible, only imaginable form of psychic reflection” (Leont’ev, 2005, p. 443). Every human activity is mediated by psychic reflection, that is, by internal activity that has the same structure as external activity. Therefore, the “activity that is internal in its form, originating from external practical activity,” cannot be separated from the latter “but continues to preserve an essential, twofold connection with it” (Leont’ev, 1978, pp. 61–62).

Tracing mediating reflection back to material activity and genetically explaining reflection by activity itself rendered superfluous the immediate internalization of mediational means by communication and thus avoided the intellectualization Leont’ev saw in Vygotsky’s work. But this caused a new form of immediacy between activity and consciousness. Leont’ev (1981) solved this problem with the help of his strict historical analysis in *Problems of the Development of the Mind*. The central outcome of this book, with respect to our problem, is the difference between “reflection *within* activity” and “reflection *as* activity” (for a logical-systematic reconstruction of Leont’ev’s theory, see Messmann & Rückriem, 1978, pp. 80–133):

The animal’s activity, that links it *in practice* with objective reality, is understandably basic in this complex unity of reflection and activity; psychic reflection ... is secondary and derivative. (Leont’ev, 1981, p. 160)

On the basis of this assumption, Leont’ev formulated his own “basic law” of practical activity hurrying ahead and reflection lagging behind:

The evolution of animals’ reflection of their environment ... , as it were, lags behind the evolution of their activity. ... The development of the form of psychic reflection is thus ... a step downward shifted in relation to the evolution of the structure of the animals’ activity, so that there is never a direct correspondence between them (Leont’ev, 1981, pp. 195–196).

He, of course, then faced the same problem as that already pointed out in Vygotsky's case: the exigency of a philosophical foundation for his assumptions. In an unpublished manuscript, Leont'ev explicated his understanding of Vygotsky's claim for a psychological materialism:

The philosophical issue of consciousness has to be distinguished from:

- A. the issue of societal consciousness and
- B. the issue of the consciousness of societal man.

The first is the subject of analysis of the historical sciences, of historical materialism. The second is the subject of psychology. (Leont'ev, 2005, p. 443)

And once more he repeats:

This means: The theory of consciousness is necessarily a subject of psychology, but by no means does it and may it coincide with the theory of consciousness of diamat [dialectical materialism] or histomat [historical materialism]. To substitute psychological, that is, concrete scientific assumptions on consciousness by epistemological assumptions or by assumptions of historical materialism is grossly erroneous (Leont'ev, 2005, p. 444)

But Leont'ev held that psychology could achieve its scientific assumptions *within the framework* of historical materialism only, because it was the only way to argue for activity as an explanatory principle.

In reconstructing the genesis of consciousness, Leont'ev resorted to speech and, in attempting to explain the emergence of speech, harked back to gesture and "kinetic speech." He treated both as independent media that are not identical with labor (Leont'ev, 2005, pp. 241, 251, 263) and actually develop side by side in coevolution. However, monism forced him to deny this idea and to eventually subordinate gesture and speech to labor. Even though he occasionally conceded that "the appearance of phonetic language was a revolution" (Leont'ev, 2005, pp. 475, 481) and that written speech "together with book printing" transformed into one of the most important, even "predominant form[s] of human speech" and thus into "a capacious creative power" (Leont'ev, 2005, p. 481), such appreciation remained accidental in the end. Thus, Leont'ev only indirectly affirmed Giesecke's argument:

Modern book cultures tied "intrinsic," "true" information to human consciousness and gave to linguistic-conceptual knowledge a virtually absolute power over other, "inferior" forms of information. (Giesecke, 2002, p. 78)

Leont'ev (2001) focused on a "general psychology" only, which in itself had no need for a historical observation of itself. In describing the history of the psyche he therefore inevitably switched to the method of historical materialism, in other words, to a stance that regards activity and labor as identical. His periods of historical structures of consciousness match the well-known periodization of societal labor. The phase of "primitive, integrated" consciousness (Leont'ev, 1981, p. 245), not yet separated into external and internal or practical and mental activity (manual and mental labor), was followed by the phase of "disintegrated," that is, class, consciousness, characterized by alienation of personal sense from societal meaning, and finally by the phase of "reintegration" with its new relation between sense and meaning and with "a new psychological structure of consciousness" (Leont'ev, 1981, p. 268), caused by the liberation of human labor through communist society. But, according to Leont'ev, "class consciousness" is "*societal* consciousness" and thus is explicitly the subject of historical materialism, *not* of psychology. The reception of Leont'ev's work up to now systematically ignores the fact that, according to Leont'ev, activity and labor are not identical, and all categories of general psychology – activity, action, operation or motive, goal, condition or sense, and meaning– cannot be grouped together with, deduced from, or replaced by the categories of historical materialism or even the concepts of political economy:

Due to the existing relations between these sciences, which reflect the objective relations between their objects, such a substitution would make the psychology of consciousness not only lacking in substance [meaningless], but would restrict the potential for a further full development of the other sciences of consciousness. (Leont'ev, 2005, pp. 444–445)

Nevertheless, since Yudin's essential and useful distinction between activity as an object and as a principle of explanation (Judin, 1984; Yudin, 1978), which has been grotesquely misunderstood by Kozulin (1986) and taken as a fundamental methodological criticism, it has been rather common to argue that Leont'ev's psychology and activity theory are one and the same. Actually that is by no means correct, and Yudin's distinction is very helpful in making that clear. Indeed, the object of *psychology* is, according to Leont'ev, activity. But that can be legitimized only within the framework of a *philosophy*, using activity as an explanatory principle. This is exactly Vygotsky's "psychological materialism" (Vygotsky, 1997a, p. 331;

see also Keiler, 2002) as a philosophy or worldview, as Leont'ev expresses in an unmistakably clear way in his famous letter to Vygotsky:

Today the developmental logic of the system of C[ultural] P[psychology] makes it necessary to focus on the issue of philosophical understanding of its basic concepts and principles (Divergence between the actual content of analysis and the level of development [degree of understanding] of its philos[ophical] foundations, of its underlying world view. . . .)

This task ... cannot be accomplished by adapting the C[ultural] P[psychology] to the "standard", in other words, it may not be *mechanically* squeezed into this or that philos[ophical] context. – It is by itself a *philosophical system* (a *psychological philosophy!* – a world view!). (Leont'ev, 2005, p. 224; emphases in original)

In sum, Leont'ev, too, did not get beyond the limits of the leading medium. He remained – at least in his works before 1960 – within the boundaries of the book-printing medium.

LEONT'EV'S APPROACH TO INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

In his first publications about the psychological meaning of automatically controlled machines, Leont'ev came to a point of view that even at the time was much more open to digitalization than are the arguments of many contemporary scholars (Leont'ev & Panov, 1963). Above all, in his assessment of the psychological consequences, he freed himself of all restrictions of historical materialism and focused exclusively on the psychological components of activity and the possibility of their technical modeling.

According to Leont'ev, tools are externalized operations. This understanding lends the tool a conceptual extension far beyond Vygotsky's idea. On the one hand, to Leont'ev even computers are "just a technical means, ... a method to realize the productive activity" or "algorithmized" and 'automatized' actions." On the other hand, he considers computers to be "objectified *human functions*" (Leont'ev, 1964, p. 17). In operations "only those interrelations of the action structure have been retained and fused which replicate the objective relations of the objective conditions of their accomplishment" and therefore "as such can be uncoupled from man." Thus, "the forming of operations, metaphorically speaking, equals the death of formerly inventive actions" (Leont'ev, 1964, p. 18). In other words, such actions may in principle be modeled technically. So Leont'ev

did not balk at the then-revolutionary consequence that today remains frightening to many of his colleagues:

What today appears to human thinking as a not-to-be-formalized creative action could tomorrow already be changed into an operation. Thus, there are no limits to the development of always “smarter” machines. (Leont’ev, 1964, p. 19)

Hence, according to Leont’ev, all existing barriers to the technical modeling of actions are temporary. When he was asked to assess the limits of capability of computers, he always spoke of “presently *really existing* automatic machines” (Leont’ev, 1964, p. 5) whose “actual success ... lies ahead in the near future” (Leont’ev, 1964, p. 7; see also 1966, pp. 36–43; 1968, pp. 36–322; 1970, pp. 3–12; 1977, pp. 172–181; Leont’ev & Lomov, 1963, pp. 29–37).

Surprisingly, Leont’ev had already in the 1960s enunciated the idea that is customarily associated with McLuhan, namely that man by means of tools “by which labor is carried out, generates in a way new organs,” which “he adds to the vital organs of his body” and thus overcomes “the biological idleness of his natural organs, powers and abilities” (Leont’ev, 1964, pp. 10–11). Very much like McLuhan in his comment on the socialization process of people by media, Leont’ev writes:

While learning to use tools man subordinates his motions to the socially evolved system of operations, which is materially ingrained in them. The tool changes the behavior of people, it builds new abilities in them. (Leont’ev, 1964, p. 11)

What machines contribute to human activity by their work at the same time gives rise to the emergence of new abilities of man – of new functional systems of his brain, which appear like the ‘mobile physiological organs’ (Uhtomski) of those abilities. (Leont’ev, 1964, p. 19)

Leont’ev obviously supposed that with machines – seen as technically modeled former human operations – quasi-human “organs” are built and located on the outside – much as the brain today no longer serves the function of information storage to the extent that it used to because we can relocate our memory in a computer. Although Leont’ev viewed the state of affairs of the digitalization development rather skeptically, he anticipated the technical modeling even of brain functions, which today is available to anyone who has an Internet account and adequate media skills. Software developments of Web 2.0, such as social bookmarking and socially interactive memory stores, combine the memories of people concerning a special class of objects and make the combination available to everybody, much like a collective brain.

This characterizes, although only in general and implicitly, the basic dependence of consciousness as a totality of human potentialities on the actual social-historical system of human "tools." Even though the explicit concept of "medium" is still missing, Leont'ev's approach to computerization provides us with nothing less than a compatible and extremely important interface with actual media theory and media history, respectively, despite the understandable lack of concrete ideas of qualitatively new human abilities coming from the new medium and of their effects on societal practice. This lack is understandable, inasmuch as these developments will actually be manifested first by the societally general acquisition of the operative potentials of Web 2.0.

BACK TO ENGESTRÖM

Engeström makes use of both Vygotsky's and Leont'ev's models of mediation – more, however, of Vygotsky's than Leont'ev's. He does include in his theorizing some basic concepts of Leont'ev's activity theory, but neglects Leont'ev's distinction between psychology and historical materialism and the difference between the societal and the social nature of activity. Because of his special focus on collective activity systems, he identifies activity and labor – the latter being for him "the mother form of all human activity" (Engeström, 1987, p. 66) – and includes the categories of Marx's political economy – production, consumption, and distribution – as components of his psychologically oriented structural scheme of collective activity (Engeström, 1987, p. 78). In consequence, the contradiction between use value and exchange value, concepts of Marx's political economy, seems to be more fundamental to Engeström than is Leont'ev's psychological contradiction of societal meaning and personal sense.

Engeström seems to fail to take notice of Leont'ev's explicitly repeated emphasis on the strictly systemic nature of the components of individual activity. Instead, he stresses their hierarchical structure and so turns them into an ontological understanding. The psychological meaning of central concepts such as "subject" and "intentionality" inevitably slips into a sociological understanding of activity. The same happens with the concepts of "tool," as well as with "instrumentality," understood as a system that includes multiple cognitive artifacts and semiotic means that form a dense mediational setting. There is no theoretical understanding of why and how this complexity has been formed as an independent system and got to be more than an augmentation of the same.

Engeström, like Vygotsky and Leont'ev, comes rather close and much closer than many other activity theorists to a media-theoretical and media-historical understanding. But refraining from taking "the last step" he – like his predecessors – runs into problems with history. Vygotsky and Leont'ev referred to cultural tools as a specific repertoire and considered this as a whole. They both failed to conceptualize this wholeness as a consequence of a specific historical medium. Although they clearly saw that what Vygotsky called higher psychological functions depend on the existence of school as a societal medium, they did not understand that "low" and "high" or "primitive" and "advanced" are nothing but assessments based on the ontological generalization of a given historical medium. Although Leont'ev sometimes admitted the relative independence of speech from practical activity (Leont'ev, 2005, pp. 334–335), the consequences of this admission remained undiscussed.

In terms of political theory, it is ideological thinking to consider one's own way of thinking the only truly human way. In terms of media history, the equivalent is perpetuating and imposing an old medium on new phenomena. Engeström steers clear of that problem, but only by avoiding the periodization of societal formations in principle. To him historicity seems to be just the trajectory of developmental expansive cycles of activity systems (Engeström, 2005a, p. 32). But since he cannot acknowledge digitalization as a medium of societal transformation, the argument of societal transformation does not even exist as an idea. So Engeström is forced to consider the existing societal formation as the only possible one. At any rate, there is no discussion of the consequences of Web 2.0 as societally relevant changes, such as "crowd-sourcing" or the consumer as producer, the customer as distributor, the client as co-developer, and so on, which are widely discussed as ongoing processes of a revolutionary transformation, although, of course, not always in the sense of political economy or historical materialism.

To understand the limitations and differences of Vygotsky and Leont'ev concerning the problem of mediation – which are taken up again by Engeström himself and by his "third generation of activity theory" – it seems appropriate to argue that each generation of activity theory has thus far moved within a closed space of thinking that is finally based on the same fundamental problem of mediation, whose origin is historically far beyond the activity theory of the 20th century. This historical constellation fixed a boundary on the perception of the evolution of media, a boundary that restricts the attempts of modern activity theory to gain dependence and to re-adapt its methodology.

CONCLUSION

Activity theory in its basic structure depends on book culture but does not notice this dependency because of its lack of adequate instruments. During the ongoing transformation processes, we are still forced to stick to the epistemological and theoretical structures of book culture: "Such an anachronism is rather unavoidable" (Giesecke, 2002, p. 301). Following the period of "multivoicedness" of activity theory, we are entering a new phase. What we need now is a boundary crossing between activity theory, systems theory, and media theory. Activity theory should not stay in its closed space of thinking and only look "through the window" (Engeström, 2005a, p. 59) at the societal transformations taking place outside it. Activity theory should leave behind the conditions of that bygone or at least passing cultural historical formation and reformulate itself.

Clearly, Vygotsky could not be expected to have considered this issue, nor possibly did Leont'ev, given the ideological circumstances. But living activity theorists should very well be able to do so. If they don't want to lose touch not only with the ongoing societal transformation but with scientific research and theoretical developments, they ought to do so.

My conclusion therefore is short: To create a developmental strategy that is able to analyze and support transformation processes between the old and the new leading medium, I propose that instead of asking only, "When is a tool?" (Engeström, 1990, p. 171), we should ask, "Tool or medium?"

Contextualizing Social Dilemmas in Institutional Practices: Negotiating Objects of Activity in Labor Market Organizations

ÅSA MÄKITALO AND ROGER SÄLJÖ

In sociocultural and activity-theoretical perspectives, institutions are understood as communities of practice with intermediary functions; they regulate and handle conflicts and dilemmas between individuals and collectives in society. How institutional actors deal with such dilemmas, and what consequences their activities will have for the collective as well as for individuals, are important issues to explore (Engeström, 2005a; Engeström & Toivianen, in press). Through their rules and practices, institutions act as arbiters of opportunity, making decisions about how certain situations are to be interpreted in an ambiguous world of complex social activities (Mäkitalo & Säljö, 2002a). One interesting feature of such communities is how they accommodate the emergence of tensions and conflicts that challenge the institutional order and established practices. In this chapter we primarily address the notion of community in this sense, with a focus on how institutional agency is constituted at the local level.

A historically significant conflict in society is that between labor and capital. Many of the institutions that are responsible for health care, social welfare, or taxation, for instance, directly or indirectly intervene in such matters when making decisions as to whether individuals and groups are entitled to certain benefits. In times of societal transformation and changes in production, tensions may emerge in the labor market concerning the obligations and entitlements of workers and employers. During such periods of transformation, institutions have to respond to new challenges coming from the outside. The dramatic increase of reported illness, which

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in Sweden and other countries has been a matter of public debate over the past decades, represents one such challenge. In the following, we will analyze the local discussion of this dilemma and the discursive formation of it as it enters two institutional settings responsible for taking action. The two communities we followed represent the parties in the labor market: trade unions and employers, respectively.

Analytically, we will address the question of how a complex, highly contested social dilemma (Billig, 1996) is *locally constituted as an object of institutional activity*, that is, how it becomes part of an institutional order (Smith, 2005), which has no ready-made strategy for dealing with it. When a dilemma that is new to an institution arises, discursive work by the participants is necessary. The issue has to be negotiated and strategies articulated in order for it to become manageable and “fit into” established patterns of discourse and institutional accountability (Hall, Slembrouck, & Sarangi, 2006). The challenge, as we will show in the following, concerns how institutionally established categories and ways of arguing need to be reconsidered and transformed into new strategies and activities. In such processes, what Engeström (2007c) refers to as “stabilization knowledge” has to play a role, but there is also a need for “possibility knowledge” that can serve as an element of conceiving viable future strategies. In the following, we will give a brief introduction to the social dilemma addressed in our empirical study.

BURNOUT, STRESS, AND LONG-TERM SICK LEAVES: ACCOUNTING FOR A SOCIAL DILEMMA

“Burnout” and various kinds of “fatigue syndromes” have caused concern in the public debate. Such metaphors are commonly used by people sharing experiences in everyday life, in self-help groups, and in patient organizations (Bülow, 2004). In scientific discussions, however, where a more critical attitude to language is expected, there have been intense debates over the question of whether or not these conditions qualify as “real” ailments. Thousands of studies of burnout in fields such as neurobiology, psychiatry, occupational medicine, psychology, and the history of ideas have been conducted, and about 130 symptoms and factors have been used to characterize the syndrome and to explain it. Schaufeli and Enzmann (1998, p. 12) conclude that “these factors are interrelated and do not operate independently from each other. In one way or another all the factors are aspects of a global economic, social and cultural transformation process that has affected society as a whole.”

In scientific argumentation there is, it seems safe to say, no consensus about what constitutes burnout. Many even question its existence as an identifiable condition. Such argumentation about the essence of a matter is characteristic of what Billig (1996) refers to as a social dilemma. But, regardless of the essence, or whether burnout “really” exists or not, it does appear in the public debate, and in that sense it will have political, social, and material consequences. Institutions need to deal with burnout as a social fact; that is, they have to constitute it in discourse because it is of importance for their community. Politicians, health care staff, representatives of public and private health insurance agencies, employers, and trade unions are but a few of the stakeholders who encounter burnout as a practical and institutionally significant concern.

PUBLIC ATTENTION AND POLITICAL ACTION TO REDUCE LONG-TERM SICK LEAVES

The negative consequences of “burnout” for the individual, the workplace, and society as a whole have been publicly discussed since the mid-1980s in Sweden. Around the turn of the millennium, the debate reached a peak, and the issue emerged as a significant societal problem. The media frequently reported dramatic examples of people who “gick in i väggen” (literally, “walked into the wall”), who suffered from “extreme fatigue,” “memory loss,” “apathy,” and similar symptoms. The consequences were also obvious from the statistics, which showed a rather dramatic increase in people on long-term sick leave. The political debate turned to the economic and social consequences of the problems of poor health in Swedish society. The government, and the minister of working life at the time, pointed to the workplace as having a central role in attempts to reduce these kinds of health problems. Consequently, the issue of the increase in long-term sick leaves was framed as a problem of the organization of work, and it was argued that it needed to be handled primarily by the parties of the labor market:

Regardless the cause of a sick leave, it is from work you are on sick leave, and it is to work you are returning. (Minister’s speech at the Social Insurance Assembly in 2004)

In the government’s strategy, two issues were pointed out as significant:

1. Measures to *prevent* health problems in working life
2. Measures to create possibilities for those on sick leave to *return to* work

Resources were directed to union representatives responsible for safety and health issues and to projects at the regional level promoting health at the workplace. Employers, on the other hand, were obliged to account for sick leaves in their annual financial reports and to take on greater economic responsibility for people on sick leave. This should provide visibility to the problem and incentives for efficient action. Employers were also obliged to conduct a rehabilitation inquiry for every person on sick leave and to attend so-called check meetings in which the employee, the health insurance officer, and the physician who signed the sick leave certificate participated.

In the following, we will analyze how this particular dilemma is picked up locally and how the actors, when attempting to meet these political expectations, constitute it as an object of activity. We have observed discussions in two settings:

1. A trade union initiative launching a mentor project to deal with this issue
2. Representatives of employers from three companies engaged in a joint project to prevent poor health

Our analysis has thus focused on how institutional categories (Mäkitalo & Säljö, 2002b) are used in defining the dilemma in institutional terms, and whether existing categories are transformed to accommodate the tensions and challenges at the local level. Our questions can be formulated as follows:

1. What terms and thematic patterns are used in discussing the dilemma generally?
2. What institutional categories become productive in dealing with the dilemma locally?
3. What rhetorical tools are used in constituting the issue in locally relevant terms?

INCREASES IN POOR HEALTH: ENCOUNTERING THE DILEMMA IN LABOR MARKET ORGANIZATIONS

Initially, the discussion in both communities focused on understanding the increase in sick leave and the causes of this development. It incorporated a moral dimension of who was to blame and who should be held responsible. In neither community did such discussions result in any consensus. The participants seemingly passed from one argumentative premise and position, and from one thematic pattern (Lemke, 1990), to another without

noticing such shifts in how they discussed the issue. Their attempts to find a cause of the problem always ended up in cul-de-sacs. Participants often ended the discussion in resignation, with a collective sigh and a general comment to the effect that “that’s what the world is like.”

However, since the actors at this local level were concretely responsible for dealing with the issue and knew they were accountable for taking action, they sooner or later needed to address the immediate problems of how to handle sick leaves and sick leave compensation, how to organize rehabilitation programs, and so on. Such discussions were couched in terms of how the actors were to respond rhetorically to the concerns of important stakeholders to whom they were accountable within as well as outside their own community. In the following we will give examples of how this discursive work unfolded in the two settings.

CATEGORIZING LONG-TERM SICK LEAVE IN TRADE UNION DISCOURSE

In the trade union discussions we documented, local, regional, and central representatives participated. The regional and central representatives have administrative roles and are responsible for the strategic work of the union. They started a mentorship program with the explicit aim of decreasing the number of people on long-term sick leave. They were also in charge of the meetings. In the mentorship program, the local representatives were encouraged to actively involve politicians, employers, and employees in their area in a common effort to do something. The local representatives are employed by the municipalities and work part time for the union. They are the representatives to whom members normally turn when contacting the union. The data used in the following were gathered on two different occasions. The first was a meeting about two months into the program. The second was a two-day conference, where the work during past months was discussed alongside questions of how to continue.

The talk within the institutional frames of the labor union is from the beginning characterized by discussions about responsibilities, and it is carried out largely in moral and ethical terms. The discussion addresses their duties as union representatives and how far their responsibilities and concerns should extend in relation to members. The core problem is articulated and dealt with by means of a distinction between the institutional categories of what should be classified as “work-related” and “non-work-related” problems, respectively. This difference can be viewed as a tension in the system, in the sense that it is very difficult to be clear-cut about this

point. Are non-work-related health problems something the union and the employers should assume responsibility for? And there is, of course, also the intriguing issue of how one decides whether a health problem is work related or not in a specific case.

In this first example,¹ we show how the necessity for action is formulated by trade union representatives in terms of their responsibilities vis-à-vis members. The natural focus for trade unions in any kind of discussion is the well-being of members. It is their best interest that is the *raison d'être* of union work. But the limitations of the union's responsibilities toward members also have to be handled. After all, a labor union has its primary source of legitimacy in issues that concern the workplace, and it cannot assume responsibility for all spheres of the lives of members. Deciding exactly how to draw the line when discussing a dilemma of this kind is difficult. As we enter the conversation, one representative (Karl) has just told a story about a situation in which he faced a member threatening to commit suicide. The example serves as an illustration of the problems of deciding how far the responsibilities of the union should extend.

EXCERPT 1

320. RITA: you're on to something important here () that not everything *is* work related () and () it may sound a bit harsh () but sometimes we have to learn to limit our areas of responsibility () I mean when to take action and what we actually can do something about () it's also important to be able to support members and that's what I mean. It can be difficult to meet them when they threaten to take their lives () and it might be for completely different reasons than those connected to work () how do we talk to them? I think everyone () at least among us in the Southern District will discuss this.

¹ Transcript legend:

(()) Comments on nonverbal contributions, clarifications, and other interpolations

() Untimed audible pause

(1.5 sec) Timed pause

, Continuing intonation

? Question intonation

Underline emphasis

- Cut-off sound, interruption

Italics within quote marks Enacted speech

Rita, regional representative of a district, uses the distinction between work-related and non-work-related causes for sick leave to frame the discussion. She brings up the core question of their responsibilities toward members as union representatives. In this discursive work, the issue of how to categorize sick leave cases is central, and the distinction is introduced as an indirect suggestion to help define a limit to their responsibility in relation to members. Setting boundaries is a sensitive matter for a number of reasons. For instance, at the workplace Rita and the other participants in this discussion are both colleagues and union representatives of their members. So how do they handle this?

EXCERPT 2

322. ULF: yeah I sort of agree with you but I can also feel the way Karl expressed it when I start to think about our task () how far do our responsibilities extend? and I think it's important with guidance in terms of "*this is what you're supposed to take care of* –
323. RITA: m
324. ULF: *but not this*"
325. RITA: m
326. ULF: "*take care of this but learn to say no, this is not –*" so it – it would be great if we could have this basic –
327. RITA: well yeah I think you should be careful though in producing a manual but I also think this which I attempt – we attempt to do also concerns what attitude I have and how much of my person I engage in this () that is which part of me as a professional – I do this professionally so to speak

Ulf continues discussing the problem (lines 322–326) in terms of what their responsibilities include, that is, how much they should engage in members' problems. His argument is also an uptake of an earlier discussion initiated by Karl about the need for professional advisers. Ulf frames his statement as a wish for such advisers to set the limits on their responsibilities. What he is saying is that they need to learn how and when to say no to requests. This, in our terms, concerns the concrete question of how to categorize cases of long-term sick leaves. Rita does not believe in the usefulness of a written manual (line 327). Instead she refers to the decision of creating such definitions of the responsibilities for trade union representatives as an issue of professionalism. From an analytical perspective, this discussion illustrates tensions in the constitution of the object of activity.

The difficulties of formulating the task and deciding what falls inside or outside the local responsibility can be seen in the light of another significant party and adversary absent from the discussion. The voice of this other party, the employers, must be anticipated by the union representatives in their strategic formulations for future action (Bakhtin, Holquist, & Emerson, 1986; Billig, 1996). Arguing for, or against, a certain contested issue is a dialectic process that presumes at least one defined "other" (Smith, 2005). For the union representatives, defining their task only in relation to union members is insufficient. To position themselves discursively as union representatives in this situation, the issue needs to be related to the third party in the ongoing debate about the dilemma of long-term sick leave.

DEVELOPING A STRATEGY: ANTICIPATING EMPLOYERS' ARGUMENTS

The categorization of long-term sick leaves into work-related and non-work-related leaves, respectively, is also used as a resource for framing the next piece of interaction. In the preceding excerpt, the participants focused their attention only on dilemmas they faced in relation to members. The next excerpt shows how the mediating role of union work, by necessity, also involves another party, the employers. As we shall see, the anticipation of the employers' arguments provides a framework for distinguishing the premises for and principles of the union more clearly.

EXCERPT 3

338. BENG T: regarding the issue of what's work related and non-work related () it seems the employer wants to do less and less about what's not work related but they still as far as I know have the responsibility for rehabilitation () so where is our boundary then?
339. RITA: m
340. BENG T: I mean the member, the individual, is just an individual in need of support in general I mean (3 sec) can we draw a line () where we're fellow beings? (3 sec)
342. URBAN: you seriously don't mean that if you hear someone has broken a leg we're supposed to say "- we *don't care about you*," we still need to be of help that's what I think, but to answer your question
343. BENG T: yeah

344. URBAN: it can be equally difficult for that individual to come back to work as it is for someone who () you don't mean, if I understand you, that we should ignore you just because you didn't break your leg at work () but that's how the employer argues in their runthrough with the health insurance office () at every work site they find out just whether it is caused by work or not, and it just sounds in a way like () if it doesn't depend on work () we don't have to care
345. RITA: m
346. URBAN: but () in our municipality () we have our policy to inform the individual when there's a rehab meeting that the union participates in () so we have turned this around so to speak, now you have to make clear from the beginning if you don't want your union representative present.

Again, we can see how the distinction between work-related and non-work-related sick leave is used as a resource to frame the discussion about how far the responsibilities of the union extend. Bengt (line 338) for the first time points to the employers' use of the distinction, and he wonders where the "boundary" is to be drawn by the union. When suggesting that employers do not take full responsibility, Bengt implies that the union needs to engage regardless of the distinction and whether a sick leave period is work related or not.

By pointing to the fact that the employers are accountable for rehabilitation, the question of what task they as union representatives have is brought to their attention (line 338). Without some kind of working definition of the problem, or where the problem lies, there is no way to articulate strategies for future action. When the claim is made that the employers do not take full responsibility, the positioning and the arguments of the employers are invoked in their own discussion of responsibilities. As Urban engages in the discussion, he articulates how the employers usually argue (line 344). At this point it suddenly becomes obvious to the participants that the distinction they have been using up to this point really serves the interests of the employers rather than the interests of their members. This is a turning point in the discussion. The distinction they have been using to talk about limiting their responsibilities toward their members is no longer seen to be valid. Rather, they need to take the opposite stance.

Urban now emphasizes his claim about the employers' arguments and lack of responsibility for individuals, by giving an example from his professional experience (line 344). Bengt and Urban claim that the members must be considered to be in need of support irrespective of the causes of their