

Let's harness IT for our purposes...!

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Abstract. This workshop discussion statement contains a partial embedded outline of the double concept of objectification-appropriation as proposed by Critical Psychology.

1 Introduction

This workshop discussion statement contains an embedded outline of the double concept of objectification-appropriation. The outline is "embedded" in the sense that a number of related concepts from the same theoretical frame are introduced. The theoretical reference frame is Critical Psychology. Critical Psychology, which was mainly developed at the Free University in West Berlin, is a school of thought in the tradition of Activity Theory that was most influential in the 1970s and 1980s (cf. Holzkamp 1983; an introduction in English is provided by Tolman 1994). The version of the double concept presented here

- is a condensed and partial summary of the author's reading/understanding of this double concept in Critical Psychology,
- is meant to serve as discussion impulse for clarifying what we actually refer to when we talk about "appropriation" and
- comes together with an outline of the kind of research and development process the author thinks is both beneficial and sustainable.

For the purposes of this (necessarily extremely reduced) embedded overview, I will only depict particular aspects of the meanings of selected Critical Psychology

concepts, namely agency, (inter-) subjectivity, reasons, meaning, functionality and objectification-appropriation.

2 Agency

Agency (Holzkamp 1983, especially chapters 6.3 and 7; in English sometimes referred to as "action potence") denotes the kind, and extent, of presence and personal availability of, possibilities for acting and influencing phenomena in a way that is relevant for the individual. Each person's agency corresponds with the relation between, on the one hand the general pool of possibilities (and restrictions) that are available and attainable under particular historical-societal circumstances and on the other, the way these given circumstances with their generally available possibilities are subjectively apprehended by the person.

3 Subjectivity, intersubjectivity

For the purposes here I will refer to Critical Psychology's concept of *subjectivity* (ibid, pp. 233 ff) mainly as a concept that denotes differences between individuals, e. g. in their ways of experiencing, interpreting, reasoning and having reasons. Subjectivity (including subjective reasons) is grounded in each person's respective specific socio-material conditions - but cannot be derived from studying them together with the person's movements, expressions etc. Hence, according to Critical psychologists such as Holzkamp (1983), it is never possible for one person (or group of persons) to appropriately grasp, predict or change another person's subjective experiences, reasons or »world«. Rather, this has to be reconstructed and »approximated« from each subjective standpoint, possibly by interleaving several individuals' perspectives in *intersubjective* exchange (ibid, pp. 233ff and chapters 7 and 9).

4 Meaning

In Critical Psychology, the concept of *meaning* (always meaning related to a specific phenomenon; ibid, pp. 172-174 and chapter 6.3) is closely linked to purpose and denotes what »one« can do (with this phenomenon). Two aspects of meaning have to be distinguished: meaning in its generalized aspect and in its specific aspect. *Generalized meaning* refers to the »societal average« meaning, the prevalent, widespread or common meaning of a phenomenon. *Specific meaning* (ibid, chapter 7.5) denotes the societally mediated meaning of a phenomenon in contingency to specific circumstances: location, historically specific constellations and situation as subjectively experienced by specific

individuals or groups. Here, it is central to keep in mind that most phenomena of every-day relevance have been created by humans, exactly for serving specific purposes (or sets of purposes). A purpose is usually a purpose for a person or a group of persons themselves; but often it is also expected that this purpose is generalized in the sense that the purpose will emerge as an issue for other people as well. People then create a new phenomenon (e. g. artifact, work means, computer application) - one that serve this purpose that has not yet been served before - for future application by themselves and possibly by others, and this new phenomenon may later be used by other people who face the same limits and who have not yet had anything available that has served this purpose.

5 Functionality

The concept of *functionality* of means (e. g. computer applications) as used here (and elsewhere, cf. Törpel 2004a, b) has not yet been a focus of Critical Psychology; it is always related to some specific means, in a way that denotes the meaning of the means: what can be done or achieved with a means, what purposes it serves. The central point of this concept of functionality is that what can be done »with« a means, is often not entirely »contained in« the means itself, even though functionality, especially of a computer application, often becomes attributed to the artifact itself (for critiques of attributing distributed functionality to individual artifacts see e. g. Suchman 2000, Latour 1999). Instead, the actual »functionality-in-active-use« that is ascribed to the means emerges in an interplay between the means (e. g. computer application) and other (historically grown, co-developed and differentiated) phenomena, such as

- further devices, work means, artifacts, infrastructures which are actively in use and in which a new means becomes integrated,
- characteristics of the actors (or actor groups) who want to develop, introduce, harness, make use of etc. a specific new means,
- purposes, needs, desires, agendas, objectives of the actors for the development, introduction etc. of the means,
- the actors' specific practices and
- the involved actors' social structures in which they act, e. g. organizations, circles.

In this way, the functionality attributed to computer applications is framed as always being a *distributed and dynamically evolving functionality in use*.

6 Objectification-Appropriation

The double concept of objectification and appropriation becomes relevant in connection with any activity-theoretical consideration of meaning (of phenomena,

artifacts, means, computer applications created by humans; cf. Holzkamp 1983, pp.176-178). Phenomena (as created by humans) and their meanings develop further over time, or rather: humans develop them further. This may be seen both from a generalized and a specific point of view. Any individual human or group of humans does not have an alternative to acting (also: perceiving, experiencing, interpreting etc.) from their subjective standpoints. A phenomenon may have a generalized meaning - but there is no authority (such as a »generalized meaning assessment committee«) that ultimately and objectively can assess, arrive at a conclusion and enforce what this generalized meaning is at one given point in time. Informed guesswork (interpretation) cannot be avoided. Nevertheless, when someone creates a phenomenon (e. g. a means) that serves a specific purpose, helps do a specific job, overcome a limit - after the experience of not yet having been able to serve this purpose, get this job done - this often implies that the creators assume that this limit will be faced by others as well. Yet - nobody can ever be sure that another person's or group's specific circumstances provide in fact »a case« of the kind of circumstances that resulted in the development of the original phenomenon (solution, artifact, means, computer application). This can only be investigated by the new human or group themselves.

The local specific inquiry and the harnessing of the phenomenon (artifact, means, computer application) in its meaning/functionality is what I refer to as *appropriation* (building on Leont'ev 1973, Leontyev 1981, Holzkamp 1983). The altering and codifying aspect of discovering, harnessing and realizing new possibilities, meanings, functionality of phenomena that results in new (versions of) phenomena that serve new generalized purposes is what I refer to as *objectification* (building on Leont'ev 1973, Leontyev 1981, Holzkamp 1983).

7 What is needed...

In my view, the double concept of objectification and appropriation, as further developed by Critical Psychology can provide a powerful reference concept for developing technologies from the standpoints of the affected subjects. What is needed are operationalizations and practical guides for beneficially and responsibly objectifying and appropriating notions related with or attributed to the functionality of computer applications. Another way to put this is that I think we somehow need processes, methods and devices that support reflective and creative development practices of computer applications toward the improvement of the participants' quality of life. An objectifying process could then be interpreted as a process of giving notions, concepts, practices that are in use a more »solid«, durable, generalizeable and pervasive form when they become incorporated in computer applications than when they remain in other forms, such as oral or written forms. Regarding the aspect of appropriation, I think we are in need of processes, methods and devices that support practices of understanding, utilizing,

re-capturing, re-inventing, questioning etc. of existing IT work means (durable, generalizeable and pervasive forms of notions, concepts and practices that are in use) that are in use.

8 How could we proceed in research and development? - The double concept of objectification-appropriation utilized for an emancipating role of research and development

In the view of the author, an appropriate way of approaching research on and development of computer applications could be one that is geared toward finding, exploring, and realizing possibilities of fulfillment and enjoyment that are within and beyond the current possibilities. This includes becoming familiar with, grappling with, and overcoming one's own limits, as well as (and in relation to) the limits of the currently existing conditions of one's life. In most societies this also implies the need to address those relations of power that on the one hand »build a frame« around people's every-day lives and on the other manifest themselves as immediately experienced, concrete, relations of possibilities and restrictions.

Such approaches to research and development would hence primarily be geared towards improving the participants' quality of life by extending spaces of possibilities, in the sense that wider conditions are improved (or at least taken into consideration) as part of the improvement measures. As in some other research programmes (e. g. ethnomethodology), the research programme of Critical Psychology requires professional researchers to be interested in those of their own practices and life conditions that they at least partially share with other people who are not professional researchers, and whose practices and conditions are scrutinized during the research. People who participate in research, but are not professional researchers, must be considered as either already qualified to be co-researchers or to receive support by the professional researchers in their progress towards becoming co-researchers (Holzkamp 1983, chapter 9).

The kind of approach to research and development that is proposed here is very research-oriented, yet not necessarily in the sense of academic research, but in the sense that people are interested in understanding, and possibly overcoming, the current conditions, practices, limits and possibilities of their every-day lives. This implies seeking to understand how current phenomena have evolved and how, given the way they are, they might further develop. It also implies seeking to discover how things could be totally different than they currently are; how oneself, maybe together with fellows (e. g. peers, colleagues, allies, fellow-

sufferers), could influence historical trajectories in a beneficial direction. From this viewpoint, *causes*, *historical trajectories* as well as *reasons* (from the standpoints of the subjects) are all assumed as important constituents of individual and societal reality. In short, such an approach would be inquiring, communicative, alliance-oriented, understanding, improvement oriented, active, activating, fulfillment oriented, and full of respect towards, history, feelings, meanings and reasons (of one's own and others).

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