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Reading Notes: Activity theory

Is the point of activity theory, as it's picked up here and applied to HCI, to provide a rich description of the user's relation to objects and tools, and at the same time explain the user's needs and goals? Because a consciousness-based theory, and one that doesn't even resolve the subject-object split it is built on, would be incapable of grounding social practices. I don't see how we could cover the use of technologies embedded in daily use and social practice without an accompanying social theory. And without social theory, you have only user and tool, which won't go far, as descriptive or explanatory theory. Technologies are dis-embedding and re-embedding w/r/t social practices. They need to be understood within the context of social reproduction, as it's only in terms of a dynamic that involves the individual's activity as member of society that one can describe routines, habits, interests and needs, and any other kind of motivation. Motivation involves meaning, and meaning can't be explained from the perspective of consciousness; meaning is social. Meaning theories demand a framework of human relations, social organization, communication and action.

- if the appeal of activity theory is its concept of mediation and tools, there are better theories
- there are vague resonances here with Martin Heidegger, but the thinking in activity theory is far inferior.... Even Hans Jonas could do it better!
- the focus on "consciousness" beliefs a naive view off human agency in which social structures and systems would seem to play no part.
- absence of a critique of power and institutions no theory of communication, and in particular no distinction between language and speech (which is critical, as communication technologies handle information as communication, and interaction, separately) no sociological

insight into the normative binding of social relations, and thus no model of social reproduction human, or individual agency is taken at face value. Subconscious motivations, social pressures, and other latent motivations are left unexplained or untouched. no theory of double-contingency, and no theory of meaning, its production, or negotiation. activity theory has to assume that individuals have no problem interacting through tools and that their mutual interests are simply transparent to each other.

[The Application of Activity Theory to Web-Mediated Communication](#)

Koo-Won Suh, Paul K. Couchman, Jong-Won Park, Helen Hasan. 2003.

"Activity Theory investigates human interaction with others through an activity, which is a basic unit of analysis for understanding human behaviour. Activity theorists have argued that human activity is not an isolated entity (Bannon, 1997). Rather it has the structure composed of three basic elements: a subject, an object and a tool. An agent who engages in an activity is called a "subject". A subject can be an individual or a group of people. More than one subject constitutes a community when they share an object. All human activities are driven by a certain purpose or motive, which is called "object". Vygotsky (1981) has emphasised that a human being does not directly react to others, but interacts with others through the use of tools and signs."

"In relation to WMC, Activity Theory encompasses three important principles, which distinguish human beings from animals, (1) object-orientedness, (2) mediation, and (3) social interaction through higher mental functions (e.g., cognition and affect)."

[Activity Theory and Human-Computer Interaction](#), Bonnie A. Nardi

"Even in the earliest HCI work we find concern with the user's consciousness. In 1972 Bobrow wrote that a programming technique "can greatly facilitate construction of complex programs because it allows the user to remain thinking about his program operation at a relatively high level without having to descend into manipulation of details." This is a succinct statement of the interdependence of the "how" and the "what" of consciousness: the user's attention is at stake, and at the very same time, so is the content of what he thinks about as he programs."

[Intention and Motive in Information-System Design: Toward a Theory and Method for Assessing Users' Needs](#)

James P. Zappen and Teresa M. Harrison

"In one of the founding texts on activity theory, Leont'ev [19, p22-28] distinguishes human activities, which are oriented toward objects and energized by motives; from actions, which are directed toward goals and guided by conscious intentions; and from operations, which are dependent upon specific conditions. According to Leont'ev [19, p22], the object of an activity may be either material or ideal but in either case is motivated by an unconscious desire or need. The goal of an action, in contrast, is guided by a conscious intention — "a conscious motive that is converted into a motive-goal precisely because it is conscious" [19, p25]. This conscious goal is the "intentional aspect" of an action [19, p26]."

"In activity theory, a design is not a conscious goal or aim, not even a singular object, but an ensemble of elusive and constantly changing objects, both material and ideal [7, p360-362; 9, p137-139]"

These reading notes were taken while researching source material and conceptual frameworks of potential use to *social interaction design*, an approach I'm developing for use in the development and design of social software, interaction tools, communication technologies and their applications.