

4th International ISCAR Summer University
Moving *with* and *beyond* Vygotsky:
Developing Cultural-Historical Methodology
July 1–7, 2013



SUBJECTNESS AND THE REVITALIZATION OF A TRADITIONAL CRAFT:

Activity-theoretical analysis of wooden ship and boat building
On the power of the object:
History-making in wooden boat building



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Outline

- The whole research in brief
- One of the research sites
- The object of activity
- The power of the object and drivenness
- Data collection and data analysis
- Results
- Conclusion and discussion



Abstract of the research plan

- Studying the features and development of **subjectness** among craftsmen
- Three settings where **wooden ships and boats** are built or replicated in Finland, India and Russia
- The theoretical focus on the subjective-developmental approach of **S. L. Rubinstein**
- Subjectnness [субъЕКТНОСТЬ] not subjectivity [субъЕКТИВНОСТЬ]
- Subjectness and agency - ?



Wooden boat building: An endangered skill



- Historical transformations of work producing “deskilling” or “destruction of skills
- Wooden boat building in Finland as an example of such endangered skills:
 - Almost no professionals
 - Students graduating from specialized boat building schools seldom pursue this vocation



Description of the site: The Suomenlinna shipyard



Overview of the Suomenlinna dock

Different vessels are repaired, restored and constructed on the premises of an association focused on preserving, developing and supporting knowledge and skills in this domain

Suomenlinna: maritime fortress and its tradition of building and repairing wooden boats and ships



The current project of a gunboat replica



Subject and object

- Rubinstein's approach: understanding of **activity as a transition of subject to object**
- The second "point" of activity is a **relation from object to subject**. Subject is formed in the process of objectification
- Overall, dialectical relation between subject and object





The object of activity: The key concept in activity theory

- The concept of object “helps us understand not only what people are doing, but also **why they are doing it**” (Kaptelinin, 2005, p. 5)
- Object as a translation of the Russian word *predmet* in opposition to *object* refers to a selection process through which specific phenomena become a comprehensive unity of focus for human beings in their activities and thinking (Leont’ev, 1978, 1981)
- For Rubinshtein (2005) things, which exist regardless of a subject, become **objects only when subjects relate to these things in cognition or action.**



On drivenness and the power of the object

- When a need becomes objectified and **a simple object becomes the object of activity**, it then carries motivation and gains its real power to drive people:

From this arises the possibility of the reversal of terms that allowed K. Lewin to speak about the motivating force of objects themselves (Aufforderungscharakter). (Leont'ev, 1978)

- Engeström and Blackler (2005), following Baudrillard (1996), discussed the **power of the object** – objects act as a source of desire and passion, as carriers of exchange value and use value.
- In an object-oriented relationship the subject appears as driven by the object. **Drivennes** is understood here as a movement of attraction which mobilizes the subject in the pursuit of an object which can satisfy his/her need and can at the same time support the development of an activity (Sannino, 2013).



Data collection and data analysis

- Interviews conducted for a **project on the role of concepts in activity**, focusing on how complex wooden vessels are built without blueprints
- **8 semi-structured interviews** (December 2011-March 2013) with a shipwright (SW), the manager (M) and an apprentice (App).
- While the interviewees opened up aspects of their skills, several **threads of history** became apparent in their discourse. The threads were identified with the help of a basic **thematic analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2006).



Four threads of history



1) Personal history of the craftsmen

2) History of the wooden boats community

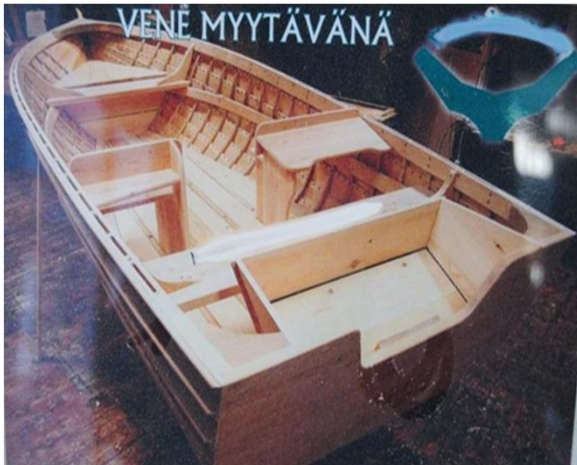
3) Political history of nations and their relations

4) History of the boats themselves



Category 1: Personal history

Category filled with:



Advertisement for one of the boats on sale

- The pride of the acquired skill,
- The pleasure of exerting the skill as much as possible as a creative agent,
- Statements about boats as objects which resist due to lack of customer demands
- Difficulties of making a living with boat building
- The constraints of a trade which requires complete devotion



Category 2: History of the wooden boats community



Descriptions of the Finnish community of boats and shipbuilding as a small community on which economic strain is becoming heavier and heavier



Category 3: Political history of nations and their relations



References to the great history of nations using wooden boats and ships as objects of political power and means to influence relationships between countries



Category 4: History of the boats themselves



References to material and technical aspects of the process through which specific boats are built in line with their prospective use

Aspects of the relationship between the shipwright and the object as it becomes crafted by his hands on a daily basis

Aspects of a continuous dialogue between the past and the present to turn historical boats into modern use



Overlapping categories as indicators of the interconnectedness of the four threads of history

Codes	Total number of segments	1. Personal history	2. History of the community	3. History of nations and their relations	4. History of particular vessels	Total number of overlaps
1. Personal history	41	-	20	1	10	31 (75.6%)
2. History of community	34	20	-	2	10	32 (94.1%)
3. History of nations and their relations	11	1	2	-	5	8 (72.7%)
4. History of particular boats	35	10	10	5	-	25 (71.4%)
Total	121	31	32	8	25	96 (79.3%)



Examples of overlapping categories

SW: I wrote a book for ship-owners that they don't...when they replace wood they don't destroy the very few ships that in Finland has left. ... And we have lost over 10 ships during this time, I've been restoring. (T:5, L:174-184, OC:1, 2)

M: We have been here since 1987 (2). And he (points to MH) has been making major constructions, reparations ... (1). Kind of mentally ready. And this waited for the suitable moment. And now when Ehrensvärd ...when did he died? They want to lift the history between Finland and Sweden. (3), (T:2, L:32-35 – OC:1, 2,3)

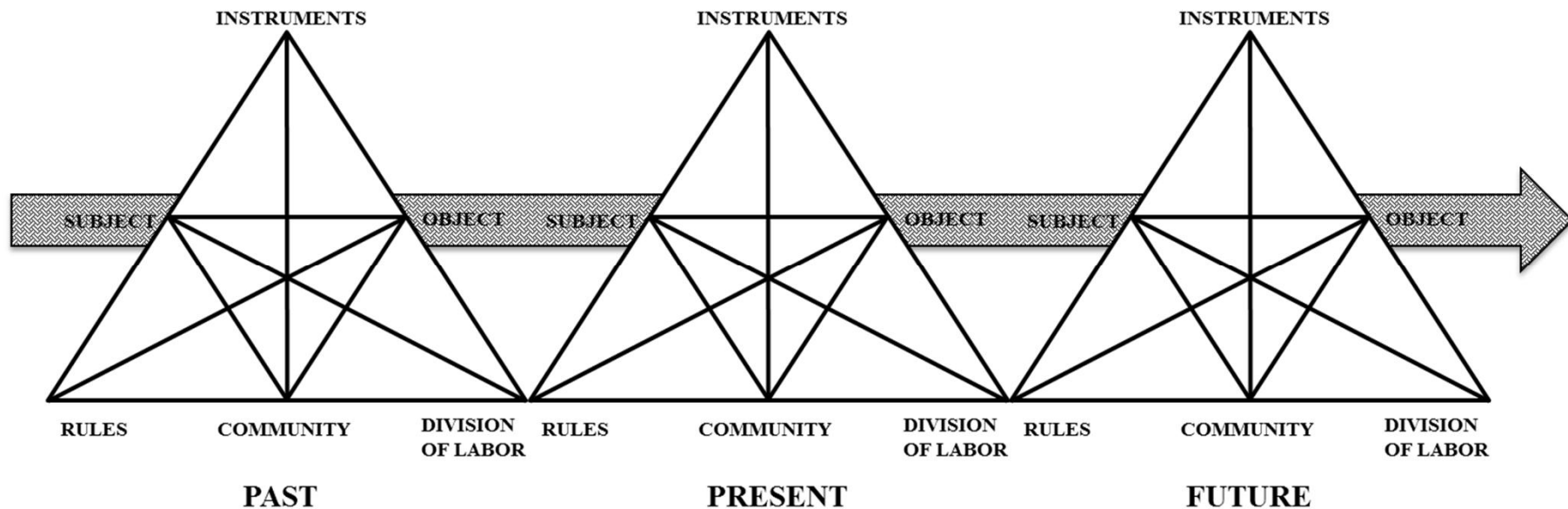
SW: They were broken, like these ribs here... Seven or eight from the back...They were... They have been driving too fast. If you go with this motor boats... and bang it against the waves, the... the ribs, the broke...So uh... you have to be careful...I know that some of the smaller boats has... have been destroyed or... or lost...But it's better I don't hear... Yes, they are there ...

R1: Let it go.

SW: Yes. They have paid it
(T:8, L:666-704; OC:1,2,4)



Conclusion: Threads of historicity and the power of the object in the activity of wooden boat building



The activity of wooden boat building appears as a dense formation of interwoven threads of history which mobilize human efforts in the pursuit of an object



Conclusion



- The history-making efforts consist in reviving a skill which has nearly been lost and bringing back to life.
- The objects works through subjects, drives them to engage in history-making beyond their immediate personal and situational concerns.



Thank you for your attention!

