



Double stimulation in everyday work: Critical encounters between home care workers and their elderly clients



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ABSTRACT

What are the key characteristics of double stimulation in an everyday work activity facing transformations? We will present and test a conceptual model of the critical encounter as a potential site of double stimulation at work. Our data consist of 26 videotaped home care visits understood as critical encounters. The home care workers and the elderly clients faced the challenge of implementing a new practice called the Mobility Agreement, aimed at integrating regular mobility exercises in the daily routines of the client. Our findings support the assumption that critical encounters are fruitful breeding grounds for double stimulation in work activities. Critical encounters seem to generate special kinds of micro-contexts in which artifacts are actively employed to deal with the challenge at hand. These micro-contexts may be described with the help of two dimensions, namely the dimension of restrictive vs. expansive use of artifacts and the dimension of incidental vs. planned use of artifacts. Our findings call attention to two additional features of double stimulation in mundane work. The first one is the interactional nature of the generation – and inhibition – of double stimulation. The second feature is its longitudinal, multi-phased and iterative nature in work activities.

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1. Introduction

Vygotsky's (1994, p. 208) principle of double stimulation has mainly been studied in experimental contexts and classroom interventions. To our knowledge, the occurrence and functioning of double stimulation in mundane work activities have not been rigorously analyzed. Yet, especially as a foundational principle of the formation of will and agency, double stimulation is of great potential importance for work activities and organizations facing transformations.

Transformations in work require volitional actions. The aim of this article is to analyze the process of double stimulation in a mundane work activity facing transformations. We aim at uncovering how volitional change actions emerge and take shape in such processes of double stimulation “in the wild.” Thus, our research question is: What are the key characteristics of double stimulation in an everyday work activity facing transformations?

Sannino and Laitinen's (2015-this issue) model of the phase structure of double stimulation points out that full-blown processes of double stimulation are triggered by a conflict of motives. In work activities facing transformations, such conflicts of motives are typically intensified when novel practices and instruments are introduced and implemented. In such situations, the participants of the activity commonly struggle between resisting and embracing the novel possibilities. Resistance often comes from fear for additional work and new competence demands; embracing often comes from visions of enriched and more meaningful work. Furthermore, such conflicts of motives typically surface in interactions between key actors in the work activity, for example between practitioners and clients, between managers and workers, or between practitioners representing different domains of expertise and responsibility. In

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such interactions, the conflict of motives typically appears at two levels, namely as external tension between the intentions and aspirations of the two actors, and as internal tension between the motives of each individual actor.

We call these conflictual interactions at work *critical encounters*. In order to understand double stimulation in mundane work we need to identify and analyze critical encounters. To accomplish this, we will present and test a conceptual model of the critical encounter. We see our model as compatible with and complementary to the foundational model of the phases of double stimulation proposed by Sannino and Laitinen (2015-this issue).

Double stimulation is accomplished by making use of an artifact as a second stimulus in a conflict situation. When we look for occurrences of double stimulation in everyday work, the uses of artifacts are therefore the main clue to follow. This is why much of our analysis will focus on different uses of artifacts and the consequences of these uses in the critical encounters.

We will seek answers to our research question with the help of data from the municipal home care services of the City of Helsinki in Finland. The data consist of videotaped home care visits understood as critical encounters. In the visit, the home care worker and the elderly client faced the challenge of implementing a new practice called the Mobility Agreement, aimed at integrating regular mobility exercises in the daily routines of the client. The introduction of this practice may be seen as collective formation of a new concept of mobility (Engeström et al., 2012).

In the next section, we will introduce our model of the critical encounter and its constituent theoretical concepts to be used in the analysis. After that, we will describe our research setting and data, as well as our methods of analysis. The actual data analysis begins with a section that gives an overview of the ways artifacts were used in the critical encounters we analyzed. In the following sections, we will first analyze two cases of predominantly restrictive uses of artifacts in critical encounters, then two cases of predominantly expansive uses of artifacts in critical encounters. In the final section we summarize our findings and present our overall interpretation of the characteristics of double stimulation in everyday work contexts.

2. Theoretical framework

A *critical encounter* is an event in which two or more relevant actors come together to deal with a problem that represents a potentially shared object and at the same time a conflict of motives. In such a critical encounter, there is both complementarity and tension between the actors. To resolve the problem, the actors may use mediating artifacts to take volitional action and to try and conceptualize the situation. In this sense, critical encounters are generic sites of learning, understood as formation of transformative agency and formation of emergent concepts. A general model of an ideal-typical critical encounter is depicted in Fig. 1.

While composed of factors discussed in the literature, the model depicted in Fig. 1 is as a whole a novel synthesis aimed at understanding how volitional actions and conceptualization efforts emerge in organizational encounters driven by conflicts of motives. The model should be read from bottom up, as if climbing a Christmas tree. However, as a critical encounter is not a linear event, we expect various iterations and back-and-forth movements; thus the two-headed arrows in Fig. 1.

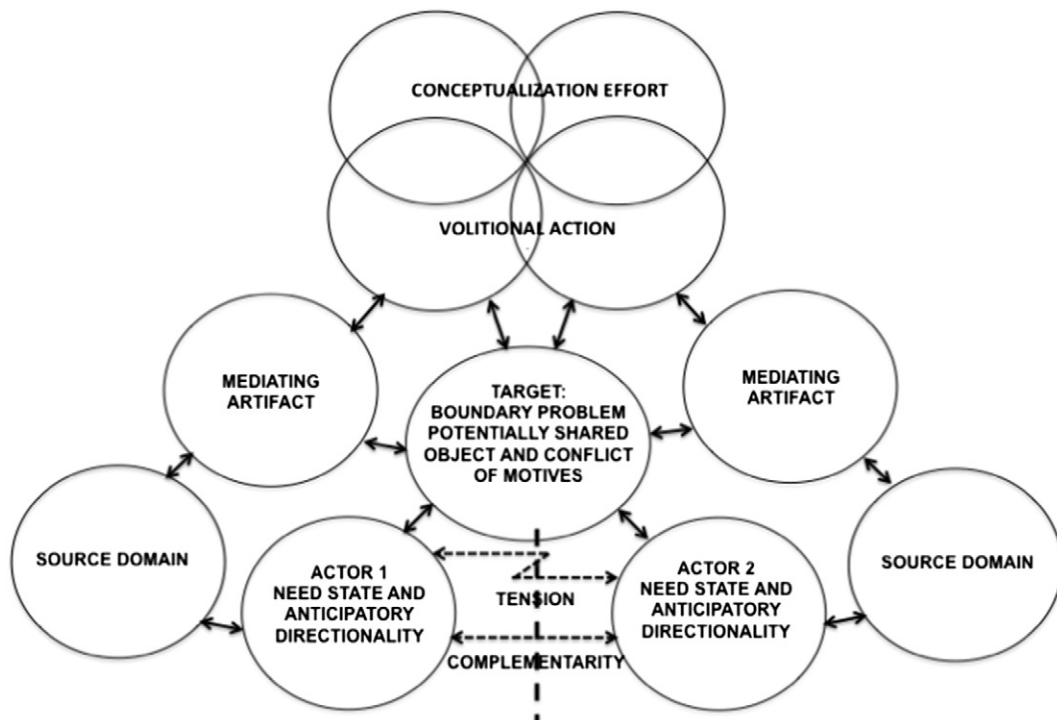


Fig. 1. The structure of a critical encounter.

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