Toward a transformative-activist co-exploration of the world? Emancipatory co-research in Psychology from the standpoint of the subject

Niklas A. Chimirri and Sofie Pedersen

Abstract
With a fundamental interest in further developing and specifying the theoretical and ethical framework of *Psychology from the Standpoint of the Subject* (PSS), the article at hand asks: What is the PSS researcher's position in and responsibility toward society? What does the theoretical concept of the *co-researcher*, which is so pivotal in this tradition, entail for conceptualizing the relationship between the academic researcher and all those others who participate from different societal positions? Is there a specific, emancipatory contribution the PSS researcher is to make to the production of societal conditions, including the production of knowledge? What is the contribution of the other co-researchers then, and how do they gain from the PSS researcher's labor, in particular her scientific explorations of the world?
The article's analyses delve into various versions of understanding and implementing emancipation through psychological co-research, i.e. of how PSS research differently aims at bettering one another's living conditions. First, the original methodology developed in the Berlin context is presented, which can be roughly described as a theoretically informed dialogical exchange between academically trained people. This is secondly followed by a critique of this model, articulated by the Scandinavian Practice Research tradition and mounding in substantial conceptual and methodological developments – in particular of the understanding of the (co-)researcher relationship. Thirdly, it is illustrated that Practice Research instantiated some new ambiguities, by analyzing its methodology of fellow knowledge gaining through the lens of cultural-historical psychology and foremost Stetsenko's texts on the researcher as a transformative activist. Finally, it proposes *mutual knowledge-sharing* as the primary

task of PSS co-research projects, in order to specify and nuance the co-researcher concept in relation to the conceptualization of the nominal researcher. Thereby, we intend to resurrect lively debates of PSS' emancipatory potentials and contribute to dialogically nuancing its self-understanding.

Keywords
psychology from the standpoint of the subject, practice research, co-researcher principle, emancipation, mutual knowledge-sharing, cultural-historical psychology, transformative activist stance

The aim of bettering societal conditions via our psychological investigations is deeply embedded in the emancipatory agenda of German-Scandinavian Critical Psychology, a.k.a. *Psychology from the Standpoint of the Subject* (PSS). But in assuming this aim, does our theoretical framework sufficiently allow for transparently and critically reflecting on our own self-understanding and our own 'emancipatory' contributions to societal production and reproduction? With a fundamental interest in further developing and specifying this theoretical framework, the article at hand wonders: What is the PSS researcher's position in and responsibility toward society? What does in particular the theoretical concept of the *co-researcher*, which is so pivotal in this tradition, entail for conceptualizing the relationship between the academically employed researcher and all those others who participate from different societal positions? After all, the nominal, professionalized academic researcher is mostly acting on the grounds of the very same societal conditions that her non-academically employed co-researchers are also acting on. However, some conditions are different or at least differently accentuated given the specific, labor-related position the nominal researcher enacts, for instance given the right to academic freedom secured via national and international legal documents, or the profane fact that the researcher is partly paid precisely for exploring the world in scientific ways. So, is there a specific contribution the nominal PSS researcher is to make to the production of societal conditions, including the production of knowledge, that others cannot make? What is the contribution of other co-researchers then, and how do they gain from the professionalized PSS researcher's labor, in particular her scientific explorations of the world?

The analyses presented here first delve into various versions of understanding and implementing emancipation through psychological co-research, i.e. of how PSS research differently aims at bettering one another's living conditions. First, the original methodology developed in the Berlin context is presented, which can be roughly described as a theoretically informed dialogical exchange between academically trained people. This is secondly

followed by the critique of this model, articulated by the Scandinavian Practice Research tradition and mounding in substantial conceptual and methodological developments – in particular of the understanding of the (co-)researcher relationship, given that all participants are engaged in conducting their respective everyday life. Thirdly, it is illustrated that Practice Research instantiated some new ambiguities, by analyzing its methodology of fellow knowledge gaining through the lens of cultural-historical psychology and foremost Stetsenko's texts on the researcher as transformative activist. Finally, it proposes *mutual knowledge-sharing* as the primary task of PSS co-research projects, in order to specify and nuance the co-researcher concept in relation to the conceptualization of the nominal researcher. By proposing this concept, we intend to resurrect lively debates of PSS' emancipatory potentials and contribute to dialogically nuancing its self-understanding.

Problematizing emancipation as conceptually mediated social self-understanding primarily aimed at academics

Without any doubt, Psychology from the Standpoint of the Subject (PSS) has always already been promoting an emancipatory research agenda – a wish for bettering one another's societal living conditions. But just as much as the approach has undergone a number of historical-cultural changes and developments since it was first introduced in the late 1960s and 1970s at the Freie Universität (FU) of Berlin by a group of psychologists that gathered around Klaus Holzkamp's professorship, so has its understanding of what emancipation is, and of how it should be promoted through its research engagements, changed and developed, as an inevitable consequence of historical time.

So where do we stand today, or rather: How does current PSS understand emancipation and emancipatory research? Is emancipation still on PSS' agenda, or how explicitly is it on PSS' agenda? Given recent calls for further democratizing the research processes within PSS' *Practice Research* (see Munck, 2017; Kousholt, 2016; Højholt, 2016) and for further specifying its emancipatory sustainability (Chimirri, 2015), it appears that the emancipatory agenda of PSS stepped into the shadows of other conceptual debates and developments, among others of the concept *conduct of everyday life* (e.g., Holzkamp, 2013b; Dreier, 2011; Schraube & Højholt, 2016; Bader & Weber, 2016; Chimirri, 2014; Røn Larsen & Stanek, 2015; Mørck & Celotte-Andersen, 2016). But can the latter be sufficiently conceptualized without considering its emancipatory potential? After all, the theoretical concepts of PSS carry an immanently emancipatory heritage: They were developed to assist co-researchers

in unraveling and making conscious the intricate contradictoriness of everyday existence and of one's own self-understanding as part of contemporary societal conditions.

Accordingly, while the Marxist impetus of PSS as early German Critical Psychology was clearly shaped by the political activism of the student movement, and by its criticism of psychology as an exploitative and manipulative "control science" (see Holzkamp, 2013a, p. 45; Holzkamp, 2013b, p. 328), PSS' project was not to smash psychology, but rather to revolutionize it by reconstructing its conceptual foundations:

> "FU delegates maintained that the problem was not with psychology as science in principle, but with the powers that, as a discipline, it blindly served. They granted that the prevailing psychology was shaped by and in thrall to an oppressive and exploitive ideology, but just as a psychology had been formed to serve oppressive interests, a genuinely critical psychology could be developed to serve more broadly human, emancipatory interests. At the very least it should be possible for such a psychology to clarify just what constitutes a liberated existence and to identify the psychological processes that mediate domination." (Tolman, 2009, p. 152; see also Tolman, 2008; Schraube, 2015)

Psychology is, in the PSS understanding, thus to be reformulated in ways that serve the respective emancipation of human subjects (see also Maiers, 1991; Tolman, 1994; Markard, 2009; Chimirri, 2015). This is primarily attained via the concepts that this tradition of Critical Psychology has developed, most prominently that of *subjectivity* as both constituted by societal conditions and at the same time actively co-constituting these very same societal conditions that human beings are dependent on.

In contrast to, for instance, subjectivity as conceptualized in psychoanalysis, hence, Holzkamp's concept of subjectivity was to foreground *"the human possibility of ending … suffering by participating oneself in changing the conditions causing it"* (Holzkamp, 2013a, p. 33). This reconceptualization would render it possible "to extend and complement a critique of [psychological] science with a critique of society" (Papadopoulos, 2009, p. 163), though without adhering to an emancipatory research practice that favors practical intervention over theorizing. Instead, Holzkamp and colleagues engaged in theoretical debates for over a decade, working on grounding the concept of human subjectivity in meticulous transdisciplinary phylogenetic and ontogenetic analyses, before Holzkamp came to summarize his insights in his first opus magnum *Grundlegung der Psychologie* ('Foundation of psychology'), issued in 1983. In essence, the book proposes a range of conceptual developments that nuance and

specify human subjectivity, so as to assist the nominal researcher and her fellow research participants, programmatically called *co-researchers*, to engage in dialogue and thereby to generalize agency via processes of promoting *social self-understanding* (Holzkamp, 2013b). This mutual exchange of knowledge was the sort of critical-emancipatory research practice that PSS envisioned and promoted – in line with Karl Marx' dictum that the free development of each one is the precondition for the free development of all, meaning that the aim of emancipation must (also) be the creation of societal conditions under which the different abilities of each person can thrive (Haug, 2016; see also Markard, 2013; Chimirri, 2015).

With Tolman (2003), it can be argued that PSS wanted to reconstruct psychology as *moral science*, which strived towards mutually educating theoretically knowledgeable, critical and highly self-reflexive moral co-researchers of human practice that would be deeply aware of and committed to their collective interdependence and to overcoming human suffering:

> "[Morality] emerges only on reflection of the necessary interdependence of the individual and humanity-at-large. Our personal interests are essentially and ineluctably linked to the common interest; they are … the *particular* expressions of the universal human interest. To act morally, however, the person must also *know* of his or her interdependence with others, must understand something of his or her own humanity, must be cognizant of the possibilities for action on any given occasion, and must be able to anticipate the practical consequences of his or her action on the basis of which its morality is judged. In order to act morally, and thus ultimately in one's own interests, one must have true knowledge, and since what is needed will not always be given in sensations, this knowledge will have to be theoretical knowledge." (Tolman, 2003, pp. 46-47)

This understanding of emancipation as exchange of theoretical knowledge, a sort of collective enlightenment project that creates moral human subjects, was among others strongly criticized by the Scandinavian offshoot of Psychology from the Standpoint of the Subject (PSS) as introduced by Ole Dreier in Denmark: *Practice Research* (see Nissen, 2000; Mørck & Huniche, 2006, and Kousholt & Thomsen, 2013, for overviews). The critique suggests that empirical PSS research conducted by Holzkamp and colleagues was founded upon an academic ideal of promoting free symmetrical exchange among theoretically trained individuals within a 'utopic' space that itself mystifies asymmetrical power relations and conflicts of interest. As Nissen (2000) describes it, the "community of research, the project, is initiated and gathered by professional researchers", where "[p]ractitioners, or co-researchers, individually decide to

participate. They are often students, or former students, of Critical Psychology, and either they have read, or begin by reading together, central books from the tradition" (p. 161). The discussion of everyday problems, the research cooperation, thus requires academic training, and accordingly tends to take place in university settings. This methodology inadvertently comes to define a community whose theorizing and self-understanding are artificially decoupled from other ideologically laden contexts of everyday life:

> "The otherwise carefully eliminated cartesian dualism creeps in simply because the action context that realizes the 'generalized subject standpoint' is one of theorizing. It is in the unnoticed practical constitution of the 'we' of critical psychology that a purification of an abstract general humanity becomes a precondition for constituting the subject of everyday life as 'a subject'. Emancipated from ideology, purified by transcendental categories, subjects enter a virgin level of description. This entails a utopianism, a misrecognition of partial interest and ideology … Even the most frustratingly disempowered academic dispute is a concrete utopia if it claims to 'be' Critical Psychology." (Nissen, 2000, pp. 161-162)

In consequence, one of the central aims of PSS' Practice Research is to overcome the artificial, arguably utopic separation of doing theory and of doing practice, i.e. to bridge between the production and the use of knowledge from within everyday life (e.g., Dreier, 2007).

PSS Practice Research: Transgressing social inequalities through democratic participation across different conducts of everyday life

As an alternative to the above described 'utopic' academic exchange, which was largely decontextualized and isolated from the other everyday life contexts of the participants, and which furthermore reproduced a binary understanding of the acting subject and societal conditions, Dreier, Nissen, Højholt, Mørck, and many other Danish critical-psychological Practice Researchers argued for engaging in institutionally mediated collaborations with those affected by problematic societal conditions:

> "The key idea was that of a necessity of *de-centering*, that is, viewing and pursuing, say, psycho-therapy, not, as in traditional clinical psychology, from the exclusive angle of the (therapist in the) therapy session itself, but rather as one among the many socio-culturally interconnected action contexts in the lives of the people involved. This meant taking seriously

the users' perspectives, not as isolated attitudes or the like, but as perspectives relevant to the development of practice, and grounded in the users' daily lives. It also meant broadening the picture of practice to see the structures of conflictful [*sic*] cooperation, delegation etc. between professionals, families etc." (Nissen, 2000, p. 163)

Most importantly, it became central to the Scandinavian developments of Critical Psychology as Practice Research from the Standpoint of the Subject to decenter their analytical focus from single institutionalized arrangements to seeing them as interrelated or connected to *where* and *how* human subjects were acting otherwise in their life. Thereby, the problems that the affected people who the researcher comes to meet could be decentered, seen in the light of problems elsewhere in their life, and consequently in relation to more generally present societal conditions.

Within the last decade, Dreier (2009, 2011, 2016) and other Practice Researchers have increasingly picked up on Holzkamp's unfinished reflections on the concept *conduct of everyday life* (Holzkamp, 2013b; originally published in German in 1995[1]). Holzkamp argued for the conduct of everyday life being the most elementary concept in order to investigate human subjectivity and existence, as it is able to grasp and include the cyclicity and routinization of everyday life as aspects of agency, and thus as inherently relational processes produced and reproduced across the many contexts a subject partakes in. Everyday life is thus actively done by the subject, in her effort of meaningfully interrelating and contributing to a vast number of contexts and herewith contradictory life conditions:

> "The concept of conduct of everyday life sets us on track of investigating connections between structural life conditions and personal ways of experiencing and dealing with such life conditions. If we are to analyze connections between life conditions and personal reasons and meanings, we need to intensify our attention – and questions – to the complex and contradictory *life conditions* and (unequal) possibilities for *influencing* and *changing* them." (Kousholt, 2016, p. 255)

The attempt of influencing and changing contradictory life conditions, however, is co-dependent of all those other human beings who contribute to practice, and of their respectively different conducts of everyday life. Meanwhile, each human

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[1] See also the anthology edited by Schraube & Højholt (2016), the special issues edited by Højholt & Røn Larsen (2015) and by Chimirri, Klitmøller & Hviid (2015), as well as ongoing discussions in the Danish language journal *Nordiske Udkast* and the English language correspondent *Outlines. Critical Practice Studies*.

being contributes from an ontogenetically unique position and perspective, and we all engage in a necessarily *conflictual collaboration* (Busch-Jensen, 2013; Chimirri, 2014; both building on Axel, 2011) on at least temporarily bridging differences and working towards a common interest. For instance, Højholt & Kousholt (2011) exemplify, based on an interdisciplinary research project conducted with various researchers (from psychology, educational studies, and social work) and professionals working with the inclusion of children in difficulties (inclusion teachers, pedagogues, psychologists, and management), how the latter iteratively informed and actively co-shaped the project's common research agenda: The professionals co-formulated some of the project's research questions and thus main foci; the researchers' insights were presented to the professionals, which triggered reflections of their respective professional practice; in turn, this inspired the researchers to analyze how certain understandings of 'professionalism' play into the social problems identified in the inclusion practice. It is this back and forth movement in the exchange of knowledge, an exchange which is always-also conflictual due to differing and at times contradictory positionings and perspectives across the many co-researchers partaking in the project, that Højholt & Kousholt (2011; see also their contribution in this ARCP volume) term *mutual learning processes*.

Methodologically, the conduct of everyday life concept similarly invites the nominal researcher to engage in such conflictual collaborations with other practice contributors, so as to investigate *from within practice* how everyday life is done differently by different human beings – given their heterogeneous understandings of what the common interest may be on the grounds of their unique conducts of everyday life, as well as on the grounds of what problems they encounter in these processes of daily negotiation, in which the different perspectives must be meaningfully connected in order to develop the fellow practice:

> "Studying practices from different positions and perspectives – for example, talking to adults, children and various professionals – provides opportunities to learn about how problems and conflicts look very different from different perspectives, and thereby to analyze what is at stake in a given situation by *relating* the different perspectives to different positions and possibilities for influencing what is going on – and how these *differences are connected in a shared (contradictory) practice*, related to a common problem … The concepts of conduct of everyday life in conflictual social practice direct our analytical attention to such *connections* between personal dilemmas in reciprocal relations to social problems and common contradictions in social practices." (Kousholt, 2016, p. 255)

Differences among practice participants are actively being connected across the respective conducts of everyday life in the process of identifying and potentially changing what is of more common or general interest. Differences that emerge from within meeting one another in everyday life's (institutionalized) practice arrangements point to more general ontogenetic differences, for instance a specific constellation of intersubjective relationships across contexts, cultural inspirations including cosmological, ontological and epistemological frameworks of understanding the world.

Nevertheless, the general is always situated anew: Whatever connectivity there is across perspectives, whatever common interests and problems we can identify in practice, they are always already renegotiated according to an individual's unique conduct of everyday life. They are connected to other contexts, to other conducts of everyday life, differently by each one of us human beings, and cast a uniquely insightful light on the ambivalences and contradictions of the social conditions we are upholding in practice. In such an understanding, differences are constitutive of the general, of the practice we share, which each one of us contributes differently to in situated ways – and this conflictual social practice with all its different constituting conducts of everyday life immanently carries a potentially transformative potentiality. With reference to Højholt (2016), Kousholt (2016) writes:

> "Obtaining situated knowledge about possibilities for participation, personal concerns and struggles – as well as insight into social *conflicts*, how they affect us differently, and how we deal with them based on *unequal* possibilities for influencing them – can produce knowledge about common challenges and thereby also critiques of constrained life conditions and unequally structured social possibilities." (Kousholt, 2016, p. 254)

Transformation through diversification of knowledge?

The transformative potentiality of PSS' Practice Research emerges in the coming together of participants' different perspectives on social conflicts, and in the conflictual exchange of articulating unequal possibilities for influencing them. Hence, if it was not for the maintenance of unequally structured social possibilities for influencing common life conditions, conflictual social practice would indeed immanently carry a democratizing, transformative potentiality.

However, differences or non-equalities tend to be individualized and thereby rendered immovable and unnegotiable in practice, which can deadlock conflicts' transformative potentiality and in consequence future collaboration (Chimirri, 2014). Potential collaborators are henceforth *othered*, positioned as

less valuable for a productive conflictual collaboration, be it because of their (supposed) religious commitments (see Khawaja & Mørck, 2009), their earlier engagements with the gang milieu (see Mørck & Hansen, 2015), diagnoses received and treatments prescribed (see Kristensen & Mørck, 2016), apparent age, race and gender positionings (see Burman, 2017), their family's socioeconomic background (see Juhl, 2014; Højholt, 2016), or even the media characters and narratives they prefer (see Chimirri, 2013, 2014), etc.

Such deadlocking, individualizing preemptive categorizations of human subjects perpetuate the social inequalities that Højholt (2016) problematizes exemplarily with regard to the idea that poverty is considered generationally transmittable or socially inheritable. Even studies that do not hide their societally critical agenda, for instance of children's unequal possibilities for participating in school, tend to reify structural problems such as poverty *in* the respective children: The latter are victims of the former, and their agency as well as the different ways such problems become manifest in the children's everyday lives are lost from sight. Conflicts that emerge from within everyday life at the school, for instance, are therefore to be explored in a situated manner:

> "In research, we may explore the *content* of these conflicts and analyze the contradictory conditions in relation to these conflicts, as well as the possibilities for cooperation that these conflicts reveal. In relation to doing so, we need, among other things, theoretical developments to conceptualize the inner connection between societal and political conflicts and contradictions in everyday life, to analyze how social conflicts also become conflictual *for* persons when they conduct their everyday life." (Højholt, 2016, p. 159)

Instead of seeking universally valid, inequality-perpetuating knowledge about how certain children attract or even propel certain conflicts, or about how children's possibilities have been determined by previous conflicts, it is the actually experienced conflicts, and how the various practice participants contribute to these concrete conflicts, that need to be analyzed. The participants contribute differently based on heterogeneous conducts of everyday life, diverging interests, knowledge, experiences, etc. Nevertheless, do conflicts in school also reveal more general aspects of societal organization, and of how contradictions are engrained in this organization, thus propelling new conflicts – e.g., due to the reification of psychological categories that preemptively oversimplify the complexity of a school conflict. Methodologically, then, *the nominal PSS researcher seeks to diversify one-sided knowledge by gaining knowledge across different perspectives on a common issue.*

But irrespective of such conceptual and methodological developments made in the pursuit of overcoming PSS' utopic empirical research (sensu Nissen; see above), for instance by emphasizing how social conflicts become conflictual in different ways for different persons including the nominal researcher, an explicit call for further democratizing PSS research processes has recently been issued:

> "[W]e need to arrange cooperation between research and practice in ways that inspire open and mutual exploration of contradictions in practice and support joint exploration of how to change problematic conditions. In relation to this, it is significant to democratize the research process and make room for the contribution of the people involved. A part of the research process is to work on how to arrange conditions for the participation of co-researchers, and thereby the conditions for collaboration." (Kousholt, 2016, p. 255; see also Højholt, 2016)

Inter alia, it remains an open question in PSS' Practice Research tradition *how* the researcher can best arrange the research process in ways where the researcher's position in society, knowledge and most generally her conduct of everyday life can be rendered meaningful for the other co-researchers – in order to ground the joint exploration on a (at least temporarily stabilized) common understanding of what is at stake in the research project, and of who is contributing from what societal position in relation to what interests. Arguably, the focus needs to be directed more clearly towards the question of how to *share* what knowledge with whom and why, instead of how the researcher can – in the most ethical ways possible – *gain* knowledge about practice together with practice participants from within practice.

This relates back to one of the most fundamental questions of every human and social science: Who do we, as professionalized academic researchers, do our research for and why? And how do we contribute to reproducing arrangements that co-maintain at least some of the oppressive societal conditions that we seek to overcome? And to what extent can we actually claim to share or collaborate on an issue of common interest, when we are indeed often positioned differently in terms of our everyday life conditions? How are our research questions, analytical foci, choices of who to collaborate with, etc. connected to our respective conducts of everyday life, of how we live our lives across academic and non-academic practices? Ute Osterkamp has become a prominent advocate for considering such questions much more explicitly in PSS research, also because ongoing self-reflection and modesty separates PSS' emancipatory project from other critical-emancipatory, academic projects:

"Not the stupidity, unreasonableness, mental laziness, irresponsibility, conformity, etc. of the respective others, but one's tendency to thereby de-qualify these others, is subject science's problem. This in no way implies to self-censor one's thinking and feeling, to suppress personalized interpretations due to political correctness, but to understand this tendency in its subjective and objective function as continuously reciprocated, self-suggestive expression of dominant interests, which always includes the exclusion of others from one's realm of responsibility, justified by assigning certain individual characteristics to these others. A critical engagement with society that does not also result from recognizing one's own problematic behavior disentitles itself." (Osterkamp, 1995, pp. 851-852; authors' translation; see also Osterkamp, 2009)

It is in this critical engagement with one's own position as researcher that PSS' Practice Research has as of late sought inspiration in cultural-historical psychologist Anna Stetsenko's work on the Transformative Activist Stance (TAS; see, e.g., Munck, 2017; Pedersen, 2015; Chimirri, 2014). Højholt (2011) firstly drew on Stetsenko's work to nuance and clarify the subject-scientific concept of *participation*. The concept of participation was – in the PSS framework – always intended to point beyond a passive understanding of it (or 'minimalist' in Carpentier's (2011) terminology), in the sense of the Danish *deltagelse* / par*taking* (for a more elaborate discussion of the concept's history, see Chimirri, 2014, p. 117ff). But Stetsenko's focus, on how participants (or co-researchers) contribute to the research process, also renders it possible to more poignantly ask how the nominal researcher's conduct of everyday life actually contributes and ought to contribute to the other co-researchers' conducts of everyday life – including how the researcher himself reproduces certain dominant structures and understandings and herewith social inequality.

Stetsenko's work grew out of a line of cultural-historical activity theorists who at the same time carried forward and worked on revitalizing the central tenets of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), based on the philosophical writings of Marx and Hegel. Hegel (1979) suggested the term *Aufhebung*, to refer to the superseding transformation of dialectical relations into new higher-level forms, e.g., in relation to the developing self as an ongoing synthesis (see Pedersen & Bang, 2016a). But how has this been brought forward in current cultural-historical activity theory, and what implications might it have for the emancipatory agenda of critical-psychological co-research?

Inspirations from Cultural-Historical Psychology: From *participation* to *activist contribution* and *transformation*

In the earlier writings of Vygotsky, in particular, a political message that promoted solidarity and communion as part of an emancipatory approach was stressed (according to Stetsenko, 2013). This implied and put to the fore the significant role of individuals in creating their world. *Participation* has thus always been a central part of the conceptualization of the human lifeworld within the framework of Cultural-Historical Psychology (including *cultural-historical activity theory* or CHAT), as emerges from the following passage:

> "[H]umans come to be and come to know – each other, themselves and the world – while jointly enacting collective practices mediated by cultural tools (starting with the tools of labor, all the way to complex symbolic systems such as language), building on efforts of each other and on achievements of previous generations, while cumulatively expanding on and amplifying these achievements. Therefore, human activity – material, practical and always by necessity social, collective processes reliant on and mediated by cultural tools – is seen as the basic form of human social life that is formative of everything that is human in humans, including their subjectivity and its forms such as the mind, knowledge, concepts, and personhood. These subjective (psychological) phenomena are understood as related to human collaborative practices/activities and evolving in their midst." (Stetsenko, 2013, p. 3)

Drawing on Hegel's notion of *Aufhebung*, Stetsenko (2013) employs the term *superseding* when arguing for the necessity to, theoretically, fully incorporate the interconnectedness of humans and their historically developed societal conditions in relation to our way of conceptualizing human development and societal change. She writes:

> "The term 'superseding' used in a dialectical sense, denotes a conceptual move that does not eliminate a given phenomenon or its properties but instead, lifts them up and includes them, albeit in a subordinate role, into a new systemic whole comprised, in this case, by human collaborative practices. That is, these practices are fully dialogical and relational, yet what makes them what they are, their formative feature and character cannot be reduced to dialogicality only. Instead their formative feature has to do with people collectively and materially producing the conditions of their existence, while along the way necessarily interacting, dialoging, relating, as well as and coming to develop specifically human

psychological processes, agency, and subjectivity." (Stetsenko, 2013, pp. 12-13)

Here the term 'superseding' is used in relation to the engaged movement towards the co-creation of future conditions: a concurrent and ongoing future-directed movement that builds on existing conditions but at the same time constitutes new conditions. This implies a politically engaged psychology that surpasses the perspectives found in related ontologies, such as, e.g., a dialogical ontology. Stetsenko has argued extensively and repeatedly for the grounding of human being and becoming in *collective transformative processes* (see, e.g., Stensenko, 2009, 2013), which mounded in proposing a *Transformative Activist Stance* (TAS). This proposition is not only a theoretical venture, but just as much the result of engagements with practice, given that it is related to practice in an imperative manner.

Transformative activism

TAS emphasizes a "collaborative practice aimed at changing the world" (Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011, p. 313). It was developed on groundwork laid by Vygotsky and his followers and thus builds on fundamental insights from dialectical materialism, emphasizing that humans are created qua the *historical, cultural* and *material practice* in which they participate, and that they through their participation co-create and develop themselves. Such a dialectical view of the subject co-constituting the world that the very same subject is constituted by clearly underlines the Marxian roots that both Cultural-Historical Psychology and PSS share.

   In addition to these approaches, the TAS approach draws inspiration from *Social Practice Theory* (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), as well as the work of *Liberation Pedagogy* sensu Freire (Freire, 2000). It aims at further expanding these theoretical traditions in the line of an activist approach (Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011), which implies that in relation to enforcing the view of learning as embedded in participation in community practices, it enlarges the emphasis on the way in which individuals contribute to collaborative transformative processes. This contribution is emphasized as the "constitutive ontological grounding for human development" (Vianna & Stetsenko 2011:317). TAS can thus be regarded as a simultaneous prolongation and expansion of the notion of participation in that it stresses the unique contributions to co-creative processes. In the words of Stetsenko:

   "TAS highlights the notion that individuals contribute to collaborative transformative practices (in contradistinction with and a dialectical

expansion of the notion of participation) through their own unique deeds and their co-authoring of historically unfolding social practices. In this vein, collaborative practices are posited as ontologically primary, yet they are understood to be continuously and cumulatively evolving through unique activist contributions by individual participants, who always act as social subjects, and always matter in one way or another because they are directly implicated in creating their realities of existence and their development, and thus, in social transformations of the world." (Stetsenko, 2013, p. 9)

The transformative motion and activist potential embedded in the TAS approach relates to the creation of future societal conditions, and arguably implies a *moral subject* (sensu Tolman; see above) committed to and participating in co-creative collective processes. The commitment is to not only participate, but to participate and *take a stance* in relation to creating a desirable future for oneself and others:

"[It is important to] consider not only the present communal practices and their history, but, in addition, the relevance of the *forward-looking* activist positioning by the learners via-à-vis the future of these practices and of a commitment to social change in order to bring this future into reality." (Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011, p. 320; cf. also Stetsenko, 2008)

The historically grounded forward-looking or *forward-directedness* is also found in the very core tenets of activity theory, in relation to its conceptualizations of psychogenesis (see Leontjev, 2002). In a Danish elaboration of the works of Leontjev and colleagues, Engelsted (1989) highlights the forward-directedness as central to not only the human psyche, but also to psychology itself: Psychology begins with the phenomenon of reference to the future. He proposes the term *auto-kinesis* to account for this reference to the future, and suggests that the basic and primary kind of activity must be a behavioral relating-to the world. This is to describe the particular human ability to take a productive stance in relation to the world, and not only, as proposed by many other branches of psychology, to act in responsive and reproductive manners (in Engelsted's terminology, *servo-kinesis*). Simply put, autokinesis implies the ability of simple organisms to self-initiate action in relation to seeking food, however it also implies the ability of humans to engage in activist transformative collective processes in relation to co-creating future societal structure – and in that very same process changing themselves (cf. Engelsted, 1989; see also Bang, 2009a, 2009b; Pedersen & Bang, 2016b). Stetsenko integrates this perspective in her proposition that identity – and thus processes of becoming – comprises of meaningful life-projects and forward-looking stances:

> "Given that identity, within the TAS, is understood as having to do with a meaningful life project, it is this forward-looking stance in which cultural tools are revealed in their potential application within one's activist pursuits that can render knowledge relevant, turning learning into a personally and socially meaningful endeavour." (Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011, p. 320)

Stetsenko henceforth presents "an activist project of historical becoming through collaborative pursuits of social transformation" (Stetsenko, 2012, p. 144). She continues by proposing that at the very core of human development lies an "activist stance via-à-vis the world" (ibid.); this idea is based on the premise that collaborative transformative practice is the grounding for not only human *Being*, but also human *Becoming* – thereby stressing the active nature of human beings (as being constantly involved in processes of transformation). Accordingly, she critically addresses the models of personhood that are in circulation today, arguing that they have a tendency to portray individuals as not only subjected to the influence and power of outside forces in relation to which they are themselves powerless, but also that they are profoundly disconnected from other individuals and thereby to be understood as unrelated and unattached to others, if not even in dire need to protect oneself from them. She builds on the groundwork already laid in earlier publications (though this time also referring to philosophers Merleau-Ponty and Levinas) in order to establish the inherently relational character of personhood and human development. From here she suggests the logical – and necessary – step to be the dialectical expansion of relationality:

> "The next step in theorizing personhood and human development after establishing their relational character is, in my view, to dialectically expand relationality through the notion that human development is an *activist project* that is not only imbued with dialogism, ethics, and interrelatedness but also, and more originary, is grounded in collaborative, purposeful, and answerable deeds ineluctably colored by visions of and commitments to a particular project of social transformation." (Stetsenko, 2012, p. 147)

This dialectical expansion of relationality is thus an elaboration of the Vygotskyan project for and with psychology: Vygotsky proposed the superseding of a foundational understanding of connectivity through adaptation into an understanding of active adaption, or what Stetsenko terms "*active collaborative transformation of nature*" (Stetsenko, 2012, p. 148). Development can thus be

regarded as continuous transformations in relation to persons' value-laden engagements within an individual-environment reciprocity that also, through the very same engagements, undergo changes over time. In this view, subjectivity is a (momentary) result of ongoing engagements in collective activities, and a forward-directed relatedness to the world one opts to create for oneself – and others (see also Pedersen, 2015; Pedersen & Bang, 2016a).

The emancipatory methodology of TAS

In their recount of an empirical project, Vianna & Stetsenko (2011) present how newness and transformative processes emerge among marginalized adolescents with immigrant backgrounds at a New York orphanage through Vianna's intense and long-lasting engagements in and with practice; or in other words: how a transformative agenda became the product of collective developmental processes. Vianna's approach to working with the boys in the orphanage transgressed the traditional clinical approach of administering individualized therapy sessions, and of focusing on the mastering of symptoms of mental illness. Instead, Vianna – taking on a TAS approach – aimed at establishing fruitful collaborative projects with the boys and thereby collective learning processes: from initial museum visits and watching movies to the establishment of a book club. After some time, as mutual trust deepened, and a sense of solidarity grew among the participants, this joint engagement was expanded into more formal collaborative learning processes as shared activity, alongside which the boys developed their own motives for actively taking part in the learning processes (more formally connected to the educational system). This meant that "collaborative learning activities became the leading activity in the group home and institutional practices geared towards control and punishment dramatically receded" (Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011, p. 327).

Given the marginalized position of the boys at the orphanage, one may here question whether the transformative activist agenda fully demonstrates its potential, in that the zone of proximal development for the boys appears almost too obvious, as an alternative to traditional treatment plans and interventions building on medical ontologies of the human being. Also, the positions of the researcher and the co-researchers are not fully unfolded as such in relation to a joint project that is equally changing for all participants, which could imply a tendency to reproducing the standard privileged positions for the nominal academic researcher or psychologist. However, it still demonstrates how psychologists with an explicitly activist research agenda may engage from within practice according to the interests articulated by the other co-researchers, and through this contribute to the co-creation of mutually explorative practices with

the potential and power to transform not only ways of participating, but also ways of *being and becoming in* the world and *relating to* the world.

The challenge – or criticism – to German Critical Psychology, as it was articulated by the Scandinavian Practice Research development of PSS, with regard to who can rightfully be qualified as co-researchers that may contribute to formulating the common research interest, is, one can argue, overcome in TAS, where collective projects are intended to be more open-ended and to a larger degree determined by the motivation of all co-researchers, rather than foremost by the academically working, nominal researchers. Irrespectively, it also here remains unclear to what extent the presence of a professionalized researcher, or otherwise engaged outsider to the practice of concern, needs to assume the central role in initiating, facilitating, or maintaining a potentially transformative project. Moreover, it posits the question – a moral and ethical one – of the nature of the societal structure and practice that we are co-creating: The future-oriented nature of the TAS proposes an open-ended ongoing process, while at the same time pre-emphasizing a moral responsibility in relation to an unknown future society. So, towards what kind of future society – and for whom – are we contributing as nominal researchers, and in what way? Is it similar to the (also largely undefined) democratically organized society that Practice Research envisions? What would a purposefully transformed, or an emancipated society look like? Or may TAS and PSS Practice Research agree that these are questions that can only emerge from within the concrete co-research processes, and need to be renegotiated across all practices one contributes to together with all co-explorers – and that thus *democratizing the research process, its conceptual frame and its methodology, must be the primary aim?*

Discussion: Taking a transformative activist perspective on PSS' emancipatory engagements

We now take Kousholt's (2016) above cited call for further democratizing the research process as point of departure for arguing that adopting a more explicit Transformative Activist Stance (TAS) sensu Stetsenko and colleagues may be helpful in pursuing this democratizing engagement. In fact, some PSS Practice Research has adopted a similar transformative agenda throughout its projects, precisely in order to render the nominal academic researcher's relationship to other co-researchers as democratic as possible. However, we find this democratization process as envisioned in PSS Practice Research to be discursively somewhat void of some of the philosophical aspects further explicated in the TAS, which rather point in the direction of developing one

another as – with Tolman (2003; see above) – *moral human subjects*. The latter understanding of emancipation as developing morality by theorizing one another's societal conditions together not only resonates well with Stetsenko's view that human development is an activist project "grounded in collaborative, purposeful, and answerable deeds ineluctably colored by visions of and commitments to a particular project of social transformation" (Stetsenko, 2012, p. 147), as what is considered collaboratively purposeful to transform is ineluctably (also) a theoretical question and requires dialogue and conflictual negotiation. In this sense, it furthermore resonates well with the *mutual learning process* demanded by Højholt & Kousholt (2011; also Højholt & Kousholt, this ARCP volume; and Kousholt, 2016; see above), but, and this is where we see the primary theoretical discrepancy, only if this critical learning process explicitly acknowledges and takes as analytical starting point the researcher's own reproduction of problematic conditions (cf. Osterkamp, 1995; see above).

Crucially, this would entail understanding the nominal academic researcher beyond her professionalized positioning as fellow human and potentially moral subject, who acts across a multiplicity of contexts far beyond the professional ones – just as much as it entails understanding the research participants precisely as subjects co-researching joint (problematic) conditions in the world, not only in their respective professionalized or otherwise institutionalized practice. Human existence, a conduct of everyday life, always already interrelates contexts and societal conditions, and merely focusing on the problems emerging from within professional-institutional contexts reduces possibilities for mutual social self-understanding. Arguably, this is what the TAS fundamentally aims at superseding: By terming the researcher (and potentially everyone else) a transformative activist, it fundamentally democratizes our point of departure – not by doing away with individual ontogenetic differences, but by critically questioning the positions and categories the current societal arrangement keeps in stock for us. These positions and categories potentially fixate and deadlock the knowledge we aim at gaining from a dialogue, instead of actively exploring one another's curiosities and knowledge interests first, so as to potentially also question our own knowledge interest and ensuing actions in the conducts of our everyday life.

Processes of emancipatory democratization of research processes, then, require an explicitly symmetrical ontological and epistemological grounding of fellow co-researcher relations, which acknowledges one another's interdependency not only in epistemic terms, i.e. gaining knowledge of the respective other's perspective and conduct of everyday life, but also of actively needing to collaborate on creating optimal (democratizing) conditions for purposefully and transparently sharing knowledge with one another – for our co-

exploration here and now, as well as for the future orientations we already are negotiating and still are to negotiate. In these fellow being-becoming processes of co-exploratory negotiation of conducts of everyday life, processes that can never be fully anticipated but that we are nevertheless always already directed towards, manifold models of what a democratic co-exploration and negotiation entail are themselves up for negotiation. As can for instance be seen in a dialogic exchange between critical social theorist Axel Honneth and political philosopher Jacques Rancière (Genel & Deranty, 2016),[2] democratic ideals are at stake in all human relationships, and according to PSS, it is also at stake in one's self-understanding (and thus, following Engelsted, in one's autokinetic directedness). Arguably, the nominal academic researcher, at least on the grounds of a transformative activist self-understanding, who may of course enact a different set of democratic ideas than other co-researchers (including other nominal PSS researchers, as can be seen in the below case examples of recent, prototypical PSS projects) given a differently conducted everyday life, should work towards explicating this philosophical-political dimension in the fellow co-exploration of everyday life. Otherwise the democratic ideals at stake cannot be co-explored and democratically negotiated amongst the co-researchers, thus reproducing an impoverished version of the conduct of everyday life, of the societal arrangements produced and reproduced, and consequently of the problematic conditions shared – for instance social inequality.

Institutionalized spaces and knowledge interests, including a professionalized academic researcher's research questions, can certainly assist in providing optimal conditions for purposefully and transparently sharing knowledge with one another about one's ambiguous and at times contradictory self-understanding in the conduct of everyday life, at least at the outset of fellow explorative and transformative processes: The 'utopic' academic exchange criticized by Nissen (2000; see above) may indeed provide inspiration for creating similar spaces of fellow dialogue as can be found in research groups etc., as for instance the 'reflection spaces' with Early Childhood workers instantiated by Munck (2017, pp. 63ff) as part of her PhD project at a crèche. The main problem with these 'utopic' contexts, on the other hand, is that they can easily become isolated from other contexts through which everyday life is conducted, and that other potential co-researchers of everyday life are shunned from emancipatory processes.

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[2] We would like to thank Jacob Klitmøller for suggesting this reference, which could have certainly been worthwhile analyzing in depth in the context of this paper, given that it introduces into and contrasts two similarly emancipatory-critical, and yet fundamentally different approaches to doing social science – due to different underlying democratic ideals. However, that would have taken the article in yet another, more political-philosophical direction, which must be saved for another publication.

Meanwhile, the danger of isolating research processes from other contexts of everyday life is just as much looming when engaging in research processes from within institutional practice outside the alma mater. Here, the utopic exchange between theoretically trained critical psychologists is transferred to an utopic exchange between (welfare) professionals, based on their respective, societally prearranged tasks, duties and responsibilities including diverging, position-mediated knowledge interests: The nominal academic researcher gains knowledge from the other working professionals in order to pursue the academic interest of dialoging with other academics on academically relevant issues and publishing on them; in return the professionals may gain academically mediated knowledge for improving their respective professional practice. But is this emancipatory in the sense of sharing knowledge in order to improve shared life conditions for the conduct of everyday life? *How is the knowledge gained relevant to other contexts one partakes in, how can this knowledge be translated into a committed, transcontextually transformative activist and thus moral conduct of everyday life?* Is it necessary and possible to also put the democratic ideal, materialized in the institutional practice under scrutiny, up for a broader, potentially diversifying discussion and negotiation that supersedes the given arrangements for conducting everyday life here and now and in the future? And does that presuppose that the transformative activist PSS researcher explicitly opens up for a negotiation of one's own democratic ideals, or is PSS' conceptual frame and methodology bound to a specific set of ideals that just need to be rendered transparent to the other co-researchers?

A second danger consists in preemptively labeling potential co-researchers as institutionalized children, marginalized youth, psychiatric patients, technology-sceptic elderly, welfare professionals, or what not, and thereby assuming to already have gained a universally valid knowledge about the respective participants one comes to collaborate with. These categorizations and positionings may preemptively shun unthought-of possibilities for initiating emancipatory-transformative processes relevant to one another's conduct of everyday life beyond our preassigned societal roles and labels, by collaborating with one another as fellow human beings (or transformative activists). Of course, this is not a corollary: Plenty of highly creative, collaborative and thus potentially transformative projects start out by working with pre-labelled, marginalized groups and gradually transcend related knowledge presumptions, be it in therapeutic contexts (e.g., Minken, 2002; Borup & Pedersen, 2010a, 2010b), social work contexts (e.g., Mørck, 2006; Nissen, 2012), or in educational contexts as in Vianna & Stetsenko's (2011) case.

However, as soon as we start operating with 'marginalized' persons, we start thinking ourselves as 'privileged' researchers, and such labels can certainly

be important in order to pose critical questions to one's own conduct of everyday life as Osterkamp (1995; see above) points out. But it should not alone guide one's knowledge interest and ontological presumptions when engaging in collaborative practice with whomever. Otherwise, a third danger looms: That of initiating one-sided and potentially instrumentalizing interventions, which solely focus on helping the Other and thus disregard the fact that every collaboration is also intended to help oneself in transcending one's self-understanding for conducting a more purposeful, collective conduct of everyday life. PSS Practice Research, just as much as TAS research, needs to be careful not to engage in therapeutic interventions, whose purpose "is to help clients address and overcome problems troubling them in their everyday lives" (Dreier, 2015, p. 114). The purpose of emancipatory (co-)research cannot be to help (institutionalized, professionalized) *welfare users* address and overcome problems troubling them in their everyday lives, as both 'them' and 'we' are always already more than *users*, irrespective of what societal arrangement we are constituting and constituted by. We should never underestimate the potential to supersede the 'user' label together with others, as we actively contribute to creating the (institutionalized, professionalized, welfare, neoliberal) societal arrangement we are part of. Quintessentially, this is what we understand the Transformative Activist Stance to want to boldly underline: *We delve into every collaboration with all our existence, our conduct of everyday life, as moral subjects* – and never only as 'researchers' or 'professionals' or 'marginalized' or 'clients', but as transformative activists.

An interesting example of how initial labels were superseded as part of a PSS practice co-research project can be found in Line Lerche Mørck's recent work. Together with a former gang member, called Peter Hansen, she co-authored a piece in which they describe and theorize their collaboration over the stretch of over a year: It is entitled *From rocker to academic* (Mørck & Hansen, 2015; translated from Danish; see also the follow-up work: Mørck & Celotte-Andersen, 2016). Peter initially contacted Line after reading about her research on exit-programs on popular media, in which she recommended that gang members should be invited into tertiary educational institutions. Via a long process of approximating one another's self-understanding, Line assisted Peter in partly superseding his societally marginalized position as criminal gang member towards heading to university and initiating an academic career. Without further elaboration of the details, it clearly emerges from the article that the nominal academic researcher, Line Lerche Mørck, as well as the nominal research participant, Peter Hansen, went into this collaboration on more symmetrical footing in terms of uncertainty of what to expect from one another, of what it means to be a gang member and what it means to be an academic with much

more at stake than these positionings: In our reading, they went into the collaboration together as transformative activists. Certainly, this is but one prototype for thinking TAS more explicitly (it has always already been there, we would argue) into PSS Practice Research and its emancipatory agenda, and it also remains to be seen whether and how this one-to-one collaboration may supersede the two co-researchers' conducts of everyday life including enacted democratic ideals. However, it constitutes a noteworthy example of how a nominal PSS researcher, as a moral human being, renders her own positioning and self-understanding transparent and up for renegotiation (also amongst colleagues who may disagree with such a personal approach) in order to engage in a potentially transformative collaborative project.

Concluding remarks

Critical psychological *Psychology from the Standpoint of the Subject* (PSS) and cultural-historical *Transformative Activist Stance* (TAS) fundamentally share a common point of departure in Marxian thought and its emancipatory ideal that the free development of each one is the precondition for the free development of all. How this ideal is implemented, meanwhile, varies not only across these two approaches, but also within PSS and its Practice Research tradition. Generally, the understanding of emancipation as well as the methodology enacted depends on who the nominal academic researcher primarily intends to collaborate with, categorizable as: academically trained peers, non-academically working welfare professionals, marginalized youth, therapeutic clients, etc. As emerges from the discussion of PSS via a TAS lens, we argue that both approaches in essence seek to supersede such categorizations (and perhaps also the implied division of labor), in order to promote social self-understanding of the conditions we are together dependent of, and thereby to initiate, in Højholt & Kousholt's (2011) words, *mutual learning processes*. TAS can help in rendering the point of departure for such collaborations more symmetrical, by clarifying that all collaborators are – ontologically speaking – transformative activists. Such a nuanced social self-understanding of the common point of departure would help promote psychology as a moral science sensu Tolman (2003; see above).

This would furthermore require developing better methodologies for promoting the transparent mutual *sharing* of knowledge, of one's self-understanding, one's democratic ideals, etc., rather than the more instrumental *gaining* of knowledge from one another primarily for one's own (research or professional) interests' sake. It would require establishing a different set of standards for academic knowledge production in the Social Sciences and

Humanities, via which *the human being is regarded as a transformative activist subject, who constantly co-explores the world with others, thus co-shaping the knowledge base of one another, while morally committed to bettering one another's life conditions – for the sake of one's own interdependency with each other's conducts of everyday life*. One solution could be to couple collaborative methodologies more explicitly to all co-researchers' conducts of everyday life, so as to be able to transparently share knowledge in situ in relation to engagements one anyway is already engaged in. By exploring how to best resonate with one another's everyday life methodologies (or one another's ways of approaching the world and one another), one comes to explore one another's ways of sharing knowledge and engage with what one wants to transform in specific democratic ways.

However, this does not imply that the supposedly 'utopic', conceptually mediated academic exchange is entirely worthless: It may be important to uphold institutionally arranged spaces where the immediacy of experiencing everyday life is – to some degree – artificially suspended; for the sake of creating a common space for focused dialogic reflection and democratic renegotiation. After all, social self-understanding and intervention should ideally go hand in hand, and the development of practice (both 'non-academic' and 'academic'!) is dependent on the development of each and everyone's conduct of everyday life. Therefore, creating such spaces must not be limited to academia, as for instance Munck's (2017) above mentioned 'reflection spaces' with daycare staff illustrate. Academic exchange may precisely be taken as example for how necessary such spaces for fellow and potentially emancipatory reflection of research questions, analytical foci, ethical reverberations, and communication of insights across other contexts are.

Emancipation entails *forward-looking fellow development* through individual development and vice versa, and it is fundamentally conflictual as all affected need to have a say in it. What is needed, then, is to further develop concepts for how the communicative exchange of explorative interests and ensuing interventions can be rendered more *invitational, mutual,* and *caring,* via an inherently relational and processual methodology of interrelating ontogenetically unique, but nevertheless entirely interdependent, conducts of everyday life in more generally relevant ways. Critically combining the emancipatory projects of PSS and TAS, we suggest, may offer the conceptual, ontological, epistemological and ethical-moral grounds for such a methodological development, which remain to be further elaborated.

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Niklas A. Chimirri is Associate Professor of Social Psychology of Everyday Life at the Department of People & Technology, Roskilde University, Denmark. Both his teaching and research explore the relevance of communication technology for children's and adults' conduct of everyday life, with a focus on technology's ethical implications for designing collaborative research across generational and other othering thresholds. The aim is to develop a democratizing socio-material psychology of everyday life, which draws on and interrelates audience research, participatory design studies and intergenerational childhood research. He currently investigates young children's and adults' relational care practices in digitalized times. E-mail: chimirri@ruc.dk

Sofie Pedersen is Assistant Professor of Social Psychology of Everyday Life at the Department of People & Technology, Roskilde University, Denmark. Her research mainly revolves around youth development in relation to specific institutional settings, and she is specifically interested in the developmental possibilities and constraints that are offered and/or created in the environment, e.g. in high schools or social-psychiatric institutions. Her work is grounded in the intersection of ecological psychology, cultural-historical activity theory, and critical psychology. E-mail: sofieped@ruc.dk