Pursuing an Evolving Object

A Case Study in Object Formation and Identification

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Abstract: The notion of *object* is a central, but frequently misunderstood, element of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). From what, where and when does the object of an activity system come? How does an activity theorist identify an activity's multifaceted, evolving object? This article presents a rearticulation of object in CHAT perspective, illustrated by a case study of object formation in a network of conflict monitors in the post-Soviet sphere-- the Network for Ethnological Monitoring and Early Warning (EAWARN). Through participant-observation fieldnotes, transcripts of recorded discussions among EAWARN participants and interviews with Network members and directors, and postings to the EAWARN listserv, the author demonstrates how an activity system's object can be identified through the varying perspectives of multiple participants in an activity system.

<u>Introduction</u>

The notion of *object* is a central, but frequently misunderstood, element of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). From what, when, and where does the object of an activity system come? How does an activity theorist identify an activity's multifaceted, evolving object? What is the relationship between a collectively constructed object and individuals'goals? Leont'ev (1978) argues that every activity is motivated by its object. By this he means that human activity is prompted by and oriented toward a particular object. According to Engeström, (1999, p. 381), the object-- as it grows in motivating force-- shapes and directs the activity, and "determines the horizon of possible actions." These theorists point to the critical role of objects in organizing and even defining activities. Their arguments imply that understanding of an activity system hinges upon understanding its object. However, just as a horizon is forever unreachable, an object is in principle uncatchable. Thus this paper concerns the analytical pursuit of an ever-evolving object that is simultaneously material and ideal, by "catching" facets of the object as it is conceived of and engaged by the participants in an activity system through empirical research. Given the dual nature of object as both material and socially constructed, any activity-theoretic discussion runs the dual risk of either reifying object through emphasis on its materiality to the neglect of its socially-mediated nature, or conversely, turning it into just a social construction by neglecting its materiality. Although I have sought to avoid both extremes, the linguistic shifts in this paper between the material and constructed aspects of the EAWARN's object reflect modalities within the activity-theoretic notion of object itself.

The activity theory notion of object is richly complex, but English-language elucidations of this essential concept are scanty (see Miettinen, 1998, Seppanen, 2000, and Tuunainen (2001) as recent examples). Furthermore, many English-language activity theory studies simplify overly

or ignore outrightly the developmental process of object formation in an activity system. In this article I present a rearticulation of object in CHAT perspective, illustrated by a case study of object formation in a network of conflict monitors in the post-Soviet sphere-- the Network for Ethnological Monitoring and Early Warning (EAWARN). Recently registered in the Russian Federation[1] as a nongovernmental, non-profit organization, the EAWARN was created in the early 1990s through a consortium of four organizations. These were the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology (IEA) in Moscow, part of the Rossian Academy of Sciences; the Conflict Management Group in Cambridge, Massachusatts; the VEGA International Laboratory in Moscow; and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, which provided funding to the EAWARN between 1990-1999.

From its inception in 1990, the Network grew to approximately 30 participants by the mid-1990s, from roughly twenty different regions of the former Soviet Union (FSU). These figures are approximate due to varying indicators of membership, and a significant turnover rate. Most of the participants in the Network had doctoral degrees from Soviet institutions. Many were trained in anthropology and ethnology, others in sociology, political science, and mathematics. A few had journalistic backgrounds. Some knew one another before joining the Network, but most did not. Most members of the Network were recruited to participate by the Rossian directors of the EAWARN, who also held executive positions at the IEA. The primary requirement for membership in the Network was the sending of regular reports on the sociopolitical and economic conditions affecting ethnic relations in each participant's region to the EAWARN's Moscow office. These reports were archived in a database at the Moscow office, and selections of them were edited and published quarterly in the Russian and English language versions of the Network's journal, called *The Bulletin.*

The structure of this paper is as follows. After synthesizing extant literature on object and object-formation, I discuss the relationship between object and motive in the framework of activity theory. Through participant-observation fieldnotes, excerpts from transcripts of recorded discussions among EAWARN participants and of interviews with Network members and directors, and postings to the EAWARN listserv, I demonstrate how an activity system's object can be identified through the varying perspectives of multiple participants in the system. I then analyze the multivoiced construction of two object-conceptions around which the EAWARN's conflict monitoring activity was oriented between 1995-1999. When I quote the EAWARN participants I present their discourse exactly (although translated in most cases from the original Russian) regarding goals, motives, etc. However, I alter terms when necessary in my analysis-- with accompanying explanation-- in order to remain consistent in my use of activity theory terminology. While I pay careful attention to the terms in which the participants' speak, I reserve the right to conceptualize their actions, discursive and otherwise, in my own analytical categories.

Object Formation

The activity theory concept of object can be difficult to grasp, in part because the German and Russian terms in which it developed are not easily translatable into English. As Engeström explains:

In classical German philosophy, the object's embeddedness-in-activity was captured by the concept of *Gegenstand,* as distinct from the notion of mere *Objekt...*

Objects do not exist for us in themselves, directly and without mediation. We relate to objects *by means* of other objects...This means that objects appear in

two fundamentally different roles: as objects (*Gegenstand*) and as mediating

artifacts or tools. There is nothing in the material makeup of an object as such that

would determine which one it is: object or tool. The constellation of the activity

determines the place and meaning of the object. (Engeström & Escalante, 1996, p.

361-362, Italics in the original)

Even aside from the obfuscating effect of translation, the dialogical process through which

objects are formed, (see Bakhtin, 1982), creates challenges for analysts who seek to identify

them. Stated briefly, an object (*Gegenstand)* may be understood in the framework of activity

theory as a collectively constructed entity, in material and/or ideal form, through which the

meeting of a particular human need is pursued. To elaborate, activity theorists (Leont'ev, 1978;

Lektorsky, 1984; Engeström, 1990; Engeström, 1999; and Engeström & Escalante, 1996) argue

that the process of object formation arises from a state of need on the part of one or more actors.

The need state, which is usually unconscious and thus not clearly definable, precipitates a set of

"search actions" (Engeström, 1999, p. 381), during which any number of potential objects

(*Objekts)* may be encountered. These may be in ideal or material form, or simultaneously both.

In most cases, it is only when search actions result in an encounter between the need and an

object that the need begins to be experienced consciously.

This stage is illustrated in the data on the EAWARN, in instances when some participants

reported that they learned about the Network through casual conversations with colleagues about

new developments in the realm of sociocultural studies. Such conversations are common

practices among academic colleagues in many contexts, and may be seen in activity theory terms

as an example of search actions, because they are precipitated by one or more needs experienced

at varying levels of consciousness. The need(s) that prompts academics to engage in such

conversations may include the need for information on a particular research stream in which one has vested interests or the need to stay abreast of current events in the general field. Both of these needs are linked to deeper-rooted need states such as an intrinsic love of learning, the need to develop one's academic career, or the need to obtain income in order to provide for the material necessities of life.

Academics participating in collegial conversations about developments in their field may be only vaguely conscious at any given moment of the needs that prompt such conversations. The EAWARN participants who were introduced to Network in this way were not necessarily consciously pursuing the satisfaction of one or more of these need states, but the concept of the Network caught their attention, prompting them to contact the EAWARN office in Moscow. Encountering the Network as a conceptual *Objekt* catalyzed their conscious recognition of one or more needs, thus prompting them to pursue membership in it. They then began to participate in the construction of the embedded-in-activity object *(Gegenstand)* of the Network, as described in theoretical terms below.

The subject(s) orients toward one of these objects (*Objekts)* through actions mediated by both personal experiences of the subject(s) and reifications of cultural-historical experience, and a "motive" arises out of the encounter of the need state and the object. This motive engenders tool-mediated actions through which the embedded-in-activity object, the *Gegenstand,* is "enacted and reconstructed in specific forms and contents-- but being a horizon, the object is never fully reached or conquered." (Engeström, 1999, p. 381) To illustrate, within the EAWARN, actions directed toward the object-concept of ethnological monitoring included writing monthly reports on ethnic relations in the participants' respective regions. The writing of these reports was directed toward ethnological monitoring, but did not fully accomplish it. Going

further, since the relationship between object and motive is dialectical, in that motive energizes object-oriented activity, and the conjoining of object and need state evokes motive, it is essential to maintain a clear analytical distinction between the two concepts.

The construction of any object[2] thus entails a dialogical interaction between aspects of the subject's personal experience and his/her relationship to the community of significant others with whom the object is pursued, and cultural-historical properties of the object. In other words, an individual's construction of an object is both facilitated and constrained by historically accumulated constructions of the object. This process is elaborated by Lektorsky (1984):

> In the objects cognized, man singles out those properties that prove to be essential
>
> for developing social practice, and that becomes possible precisely with the aid of
>
> mediating objects carrying in themselves reified socio-historical experiences of
>
> practical and cognitive activity. (...) In other words, the instrumental man-made
>
> objects function as objective forms of expression of cognitive norms, standards,
>
> and object-hypothesis existing outside the given individual. (p. 137)

Thus an individual subject (or even a collective subject) does not arbitrarily construct the object of an activity. Rather, as Engeström (1990) observes, "[objects] are constructed with the help and under the influence of historically accumulated collective experience, fixated and embodied in mediating artifacts." (p. 107) Furthermore, at any point in time, participants in an activity may be at different stages in the contingent processes of need-consciousness and object-formation, thus shaping their ability to perceive and articulate the object of the activity in which they are engaged. The EAWARN participants manifested a range of stages during the period of this study. In interviews conducted with Network directors and members between 1995-1999, many

reported a transformation in their understanding of the Network's object during the course of their participation in it.

In the EAWARN project, the personal experiences and agendas of the participants interacted with deeper-rooted and more durable constructions of the ethnological monitoring object-concept. These constructions were reified in the analytical concepts, tools, and practices appropriated and/or developed and employed by the IEA and the CMG in their pre-existing activities of conflict analysis and management. These tools and practices included notions of ethnicity, conflict and objectivity specific to the cultural-historical contexts in which they evolved; discursive practices of reporting and analyzing socio-political events; and methods of negotiation. These can be viewed as mediating artifacts which in turn have been developed through interplay between individual and institutional experiences and agendas, and the discourse of a large, international community of analysts and activists concerned with conflict monitoring and management.

Two brief examples of artifacts that mediated object-formation in the EAWARN are the concepts of ethnicity and ethnic conflict developed during the Soviet era. Tishkov (1997) and others, (see for example Dragadze, 1980), have traced the historical development of a primordial understanding of ethnicity that was formulated first by Sergei Shirokogorov (1922; 1924), and elaborated through the work of Yulian Bromley (1973; 1977), a former director of the IEA, and Lev Gumilev (1989; 1990). According to Tishkov:

> The Russian social science tradition, especially with respect to interpreting
> ethnicity, is heavily dominated by the primordial approach. Its adherents see
> ethnicity as an objective 'given', a sort of primordial characteristic of humanity.
> For primordialists there exist objective entities with inherent features such as

territory, language, recognizable membership, and even a common mentality.

(1997, p. 1)

After pointing out the deep critique that primordialism has received in the West, Tishkov argues that the concept of ethnicity as primordial continues to be the dominant understanding among social scientists in the post-Soviet sphere, significantly shaping research on ethnic relations.

Contingent upon any notion of ethnicity is the formulation of conflict between ethnic groups. Tishkov (1997, p. xiii) explains that due to the hegemony of the "'Marxist-Leninist theory of nation and the national question'...The concept of 'ethnic conflict' was not allowed in official discourse; it was euphemized into 'contradictions', 'difficulties', or the like." This discursive taboo proscribed, among other things, the development of analytical tools for studying ethnic conflicts. Tishkov goes on to report that "Little has changed in the methodological horizons of academics and in the minds of policy practitioners in Russia." (p. xiii) In contrast, members of the American partner organization in the EAWARN, the Conflict Management Group (CMG), drew upon the theory and methodology of the field of conflict management as it had been developing since the 1980s in the U.S. and Western Europe, in its work on conflicts of any kind, including ones involving different ethnic groups.

William Ury, a CMG affiliate, explained at a 1993 conference in Moscow on reporting ethnic conflict-- sponsored by the Network's "parent" project, the Joint Project of Ethnic Conflict Management in the former Soviet Union, and attended by eight EAWARN participants among others-- some of the tenets of the conflict management field as it has developed in the West. His list included: viewing conflicts (ethnic or otherwise) as not completely resolvable; constructing the goal of intervention not as ending the conflicts, but rather as transforming them from a condition of negative conflict to a condition of positive conflict; and using "democratic,

non-violent means, through negotiations, to deal with the issues underlying the conflict." (Joint Project on Ethnic Conflict Management in the former Soviet Union, 1994, pp. 60-61) Furthermore, Ury expounded a definitively non-primordialist view of ethnic conflict management which the Rossian and American co-directors of the EAWARN shared with him. In this view, ethnic conflict consists of three concentric rings: power, interests, and, at the core, issues of identity, and interventions need to deal with all three "rings".

These differing cultural-historical approaches to ethnicity and ethnic conflict were both present as mediating artifacts in the Network participants' constructions of the Network's object. Their attempts to analyze and intervene in conflictual ethnic relations were shaped and constrained by these conceptual artifacts.

In Christiansen's (1996) analysis of object formation in a detective unit, she elaborates some of the personal components that shape an individual detective's perception of the detective work activity-- differentiating his perspective from those of his teammates. In her analysis, the individual subject's past professional experience, position in the power structure, role within the team and idiosyncratic characteristics of each particular case interplay in each detective's perception of the activity. Likewise, the perspectives of participants in the EAWARN project-- both directors and members-- were shaped by many personal factors. These included their professional experience as researchers and/or activists; their relationships to others in the Network, to the IEA, and to their local academic and political power structures; and the particular conditions of ethnic relations in their regions. Comments made by many Network members regarding the relative level of conflict in their respective regions, illustrated how that factor shaped in particular their perspective on the Network's effectiveness in providing early warning of violent conflict.

Identifying Objects

As Engeström and Escalante (1996) observe, the objects of some kinds of activities, such as manual labor, are relatively easy to discern and articulate, because of their observable materiality. In contrast, the objects of intellectual labor, such as that of the EAWARN, are harder to identify.

> It is much more difficult to envision and define the objects of such activities as trade, administration, play, recreation, or scientific research. A closer look at any such activity reveals the slippery and multifaceted character of its objects. Yet it is clear that those activities are oriented toward something and driven by something. This something-- the object-- is constantly in transition and under construction, and it manifests itself in different forms for different participants of the activity. (Engeström & Escalante, 1996, p. 360)

An object may have, at any time, multiple manifestations for the various participants of its activity, both individually and collectively. This phenomenon is demonstrated empirically by Holland and Reeves (1996) who formulated the notion of "perspective" as a conceptual tool for identifying how teams, as collective subjects, construct differing conceptions of their object in relation to a given set of expectations. The possibility of differing object conceptions held by co-participants in an activity is also elaborated by philosopher of social science, Theodore Schatzki (1995), who uses the term "practice" in approximately the same sense as activity theorists use "activity":

> By a 'practice' I mean an interrelated, open-ended manifold of actions linked by actors' shared understandings... The actors involved will share understandings about what they are doing and about the relations among their activities, for

example, that and why particular actions are appropriate responses to others.

Their agreement, however, need only be partial. Participants in a practice can

have conflicting interpretations of it. Such conflict, however, occurs within a

wider (although revisable) background of agreement concerning what the practice

is and which actions generally belong to it.[3] (p. 148, italics added)

Schatzki's observations point to a key consideration for activity theory analysts-- that

actors'/subjects' perceptions of the object need to be viewed as dialogical, both with one another

and with the historically accumulated meanings of the activity.

The identification of objects often requires a complex process of analysis over time, since

participants in an activity are not always conscious of the need state that underlies their activity.

Engeström and Escalante (1996) caution:

The object should not be confused with a conscious goal or aim. In activity

theory, conscious goals are related to discrete, finite, and individual actions;

objects are related to continuous, collective activity systems and their motives...

The slippery and transitional nature of objects sometimes evokes a denial of their

very existence. (p. 360)

The identification of an activity system's object is further complicated by the possible presence

of multiple objects. However, the presence of multiple objects indicates either that: 1.) an

activity is just beginning to coalesce; 2.) that one activity is about to decompose into multiple

activities; or 3.) two or more objects are "temporarily merged" according to Kaptelinin (1996, p.

58). Schatzki (1995, p. 150) muses that one consideration in the analysis of activity is "the

problem of identifying how many and which ends a given practice subserves." This problem is

revealed as even more complex through the multivoiced structure of an activity system.

Engeström (1999) explains the multiple viewpoints an analyst must take in order to approach an understanding of the activity under consideration:

> Activity system as a unit of analysis calls for complementarity of the system view and the subject's view. The analyst constructs the activity system as if looking at it from above. At the same time, the analyst must select a subject, a member (or better yet, multiple different members) of the local activity, through whose eyes and interpretations the activity is constructed. This dialectic between the systemic and subjective-partisan views brings the researcher into a dialogical relationship with the local activity under investigation. The study of an activity system becomes a collective, multivoiced construction of its past, present, and future zones of proximal development. (p. 10)

A particulary cogent example of an analyst's construction of an activity through multiple viewpoints is found in Christiansen's (1996) study on a department of detectives within the Danish police force:

> Taken as paperwork, the object of police investigation could be seen as the report material piling up until the final summary is presented in court. From society's point of view, however, represented, say, by Parliament and government, the outcome of police investigation may be justice, preservation of private property, or crime prevention. For the person on the street, it may be apprehending criminals, thereby creating a feeling of security. Since neither the minister of justice nor the person on the street participates in detective work, such conceptualization has only the quality of contributing to building the activity as a cultural frame, offering itself to the police officers entering the profession.

The police detectives working in the field take-- depending on personal

history and capacity-- something from this cultural frame and something from the

local culture within the team they are working with [sic]. They merge this with

their personal experience, and from all this their activity/objectified motive

emerges. They may not be very explicit about it, but it is reflected in their

professional attitude, their priorities, and their choice of tools. (p. 180-181)

Although I take issue with Christiansen's term "objectified motive," since it can cause a

misleading conflation of the two necessarily distinct concepts of object and motive, her analysis

of individual perspectives on an object is quite useful. She considers conceptions of the object of

detective work from the perspectives of a person on the street and a minister of justice, and

explains how these conceptions contribute to, but do not dictate the perception of the activity by

the detectives themselves. Rather, the detectives, as subjects in the activity, incorporate elements

of this "frame," along with the perspective of their local working team and aspects of their

individual experiences, in their conceptualization of what it is they are doing together and why.

Similarly, the participants of the EAWARN construct varying conceptions of the Network's

object through the mediational influence of the institutionally transmitted, reified forms of the

object.

To summarize this discussion of objects within the framework of activity theory, the

German term *Objekt* refers to a conceptual or material entity, while *Gegenstand* adds the

meaning of embedded-in-activity to *Objekt*. In English, the term object has the dual meaning of

entity and aim-- sense is determined by context. An object that is embedded-in-activity can be

understood as a complex, multifaceted, organizing principle of an activity that evolves over time.

An object is conceptualized, engaged and enacted by participants in the activity in diverse ways,

resulting in differing object-concepts within the same activity system. Thus the identification of an activity's object requires careful observation from multiple viewpoints within the activity system, ideally over time. To illustrate this process, I present and analyze data in the following section pertaining to the object-concepts perceived by participants in the EAWARN.

Conceptions of the EAWARN's Object

It became clear to me early on in this study of the EAWARN that several different agendas were driving the development of the Network. At times I wondered whether a common object even existed among participants in the Network, or whether the EAWARN was simply a vacuous shell that provided a convenient cover for the pursuit of individual goals. The data on the EAWARN's activity evidence that the Network, during the period of this study, was indeed a functioning activity system. Its participants were oriented around a single but complex and multifaceted object, and, in activity theory terms, relations between them as subjects and significant others to one another were mediated by a particular division of labor and set of norms. However, as with any complex, multifaceted object, the Network participants constructed their own conceptions of it differently depending on their organizational and personal perspectives, and they engaged with it through varying actions that reflected their individual goals.

The discourse of the EAWARN participants revealed two primary conceptions of its object, both of which had several distinct manifestations. These object-concepts were engaged from multiple perspectives by the members of the Network, through a range of conceptual and material mediating artifacts. In this section I draw from the oral and textual discourses of the Network, observations of interactions within it during the period of this study, and interviews with EAWARN participants, to identify the Network's object-conceptions. While analyzing the

interview transcripts, I paid particular attention to the interviewees' articulations of their hopes for the EAWARN project, their accounts of their respective motives for joining it, and their perceptions of the Network's aim(s)[4].

Holland and Reeves' (1996) concept of varying "perspectives" is critical to understanding the intertwined object-conceptions that were discernible within the EAWARN. In interviews, many of the Network participants gave substantively different responses to questions regarding their perception of the purpose of the Network, and their reasons for choosing to participate in it. Their discourse evidenced a range of object-concepts, and multiple goals that they pursued within the horizon of the Network's object. I argue that these variations in conceptions of the object reflect differences in perspectives contingent upon the participants' varying constructions of themselves in relation to the subject of the activity. The participants' conceptions of the Network's object varied in part based on whether they perceived themselves as actors or observers in the activity.

To illustrate, when asked about their motive for joining the Network, each EAWARN member tended to respond in ways that revealed his/her construction of him/herself *individually* as a subject. In contrast, when asked about the primary objective of the Network, EAWARN participants' responses indicate the construction of a collective, but not necessarily all-inclusive subject. More specifically, their discursive representations of the actors in the Network's activity system either included *all* of the Network participants, just the directors of the Network, or just the Network members. In instances of the latter two types, both Network members and directors differentiated between themselves as subjects with differing perspectives on the object of the Network.

When distinguishing themselves from EAWARN members, the directors were more likely to represent themselves as a subgroup within the Network community acting as co-subjects with the Network members. One exception to this was an occasion in October, 1995, when the Rossian director Valery Tishkov suggested that I ask the Network members how they understood and described their participation in the Network-- indicating his recognition that the Network members might construct the Network in varying ways. The data I present below indicates that this, in fact, was the case.

In contrast, when EAWARN members referred to the directors as the acting collective subject of the Network, they consistently represented themselves as outside of, or in opposition to, the subject. Most members who constructed the Network as a totalized collective subject included themselves within that subject *vis a vis* the object of the Network. However, a few members, all of whom had participated in the Network for a year or more, positioned themselves apart from and/or outside of the totalized collective subject they constructed, through indications that they personally did not share what they perceived to be the object of the EAWARN project.

Another collective actor within the EAWARN was its primary funding agency, the Carnegie Corporation. In the perspective of a Carnegie representative, the foundation's purpose in funding the EAWARN was two-fold. During a discussion at the Network's annual meeting in 1996, she explained the foundation's considerable investment in the EAWARN in the following way:

> The first goal was to give an opportunity to scientists in the former Soviet Union
> to use the Internet. And the second goal was exactly to create a network on the
> warning of conflicts. At the same time we [Carnegie] should do both. (10/12/96)

Although the Carnegie representative uses the term "goal" in the this statement, in activity-theoretical terms, these "goals" were actually motives—the driving forces that drew the foundation to invest millions of dollars into the EAWARN over several years. In this comment the Carnegie representative constructed the foundation as an actor/subject. The comment is best interpreted not only in the immediate context of the EAWARN discussion, but also in light of the foundation's concurrent program on "Preventing Deadly Conflicts". The foundation as a collective subject, through its actions of financial sponsorship, was pursuing the simultaneously material and ideal object of shaping civil society by providing for the expansion of Internet access to researchers in the FSU, and by building a network that could provide early warning of conflicts. Viewed from this perspective, the EAWARN itself was first an outcome of the foundation's activity, and then a tool in its more extensive activity of preventing violent conflict.

Through the examples above, it becomes apparent that conceptions of the Network and its object (or lack thereof) varied, in part by the interlocutors' constructions of themselves in relation to the subject of the activity. At times a participant spoke as an individual subject, implying that other Network participants were members of his/her community of significant others who were also negotiating, enacting and engaging an object with him/her. In other instances, a participant's representation of the Network constructed the subject as inclusive of everyone in the Network, or some sub-group of participants. And, viewed from the perspective of the Carnegie Corporation, the Network was first an object-outcome, and then a tool for shaping civil society.

The data suggest that a shared, multipartite, object existed for the EAWARN and motivated the Network's activity. Two primary conceptions of this object were apparent across all the types of data: (1) the monitoring of ethnic relations/early warning of conflict and (2) the

building of an epistemic community. The participants discursively constructed both conceptions in multifaceted ways. As detailed below, ethnological monitoring/early warning was manifested in three distinct ways in the data, and epistemic community building had four different manifestations. Each of these seven manifestations of the object was identifiable in more than one type of data. Furthermore, each of these manifestations was perceived as the main focus of the Network's activity, at various times by various participants and in more than one kind of data. Taken together, the object of the Network is multiform construct with numerous kinds of interactions between the parts. In the following sections I analyze each of the primary object-conceptions and its related manifestations.

Ethnological Monitoring and Early Warning

The first object-conception of the EAWARN project I discuss is the most obvious and predictable one: the monitoring of ethnic relations, and related to it, the early warning of conflict. However, the complexity of this object-conception combined with the varying perspectives of the Network participants toward it precipitated at least three distinct manifestations of it in the data on the EAWARN project.

In the first manifestation of the ethnological monitoring/early warning object-conception, the interventionist aspects of early warning, conflict prevention and conflict management were accorded greater significance. This manifestation was most apparent in the earliest discourse of the Network. However, by the mid-1990s, only the American director, Bruce Allyn, and a few Network members, continued to articulate this conception of the Network's object. For example, in an interview in October, 1995, Allyn expressed his vision for the Network, emphasizing the potential of the Network to provide early warning and expertise in conflict management:

I think that we can already begin to alert policy-makers to go to areas where

things might be emerging and then, because, with it being well-connected to the

UNHCR and to uh, OCSCE, uh what is it, OC, OSCE yeah, then get it um, you

know to Vanderstool and others and so that it will, you know, already can play

that role and in a year of two will be much more uh, I guess, subtle in its

reporting, every you know cumulative process will be more and more refined and

settled in reporting and at the same time I see another very important dimension is

that, you know, we are anticipating the education, training, development of the

professional, uh, group of professionals in the former Soviet Union, and their

ability to influence the development of civil society in their regions. (Interview,

10/95)

Similarly, several Network members articulated a vision of the Network which foregrounded its

interventionist potential. For example, one Network member stated, "In the future perspective

there will be versatile people needed in Russia because as far as all the countries of the world,

except Iceland, are multinational, the problems will exist. And there are specialists needed, who

will resolve [these conflicts]." (Interview, 10/96)

Others represented the interventionist manifestation of the ethnological monitoring/early

warning object-conception in relation to the training on conflict management they hoped to

receive through participating in the Network. For example, one Network member's response to a

question on how her motivation to contribute to the work of the EAWARN project could be

increased included the following:

Some training for two to three months. Because the [annual] seminars, there is

still little time, just a week. I would want to penetrate into the situation, in

conflictology, deeper. And on the professional level. That is why some kind of

training would stimulate me a lot." (Interview, 10/96)

This perspective reflected clearly some of the individual participants' sociocultural and/or

institutional contexts. For instance, participants from areas where tensions were strong or

conflicts had erupted violently were more likely to express hope that the Network's activity

would help shape policies in their regions. The Network members who articulated this

conception of the Network's object tended either to have been personally involved in resolving

conflicts in their respective regions, or desired to be.

In the second manifestation, ethnological monitoring and early warning appeared to be

two equally significant and contingent facets of the same object. This was the conception of the

object that was foregrounded in the CMG's reports on the Network to Carnegie from mid-1993

through September, 1995. For example, a CMG description of the "Project on Ethnic Conflict

Management in the Former Soviet Union" in May, 1993, stated that "The Project is creating an

Information-Sharing Network to enable representatives to communicate with each other, with the

offices in Moscow and Cambridge and with the international community... The Project seeks to

develop the Network to serve the function of early warning and prevention of conflict."

This manifestation appeared as well in Tishkov's initial "circular letter" to Network

participants in October, 1993, as evidenced in his explanation of the Network's name at the time,

the "Network on Ethnological Monitoring and Conflict Management in the Former Soviet

Union":

Regarding Ethnological Monitoring and Conflict Prevention. The name for the

Network which I propose is to give a wider context for monitoring by specialists

of the situation in the sphere of ethnic relations in the FSU and for elaborating

evaluations and recommendations to prevent or manage potential conflicts in this

region of the world... Among [the Network's] tasks we include the rendering of

assistance to the organs at the federal, republican, and local levels in realizing a

well founded policy in the sphere of ethnic relations, and the resolution of the

conflict situations. (Network correspondence, 9/28/93)

The prefaces to both the Russian and English versions of the *Bulletin,* the Network's published

compilation of reports on ethnic relations in the FSU, contained similarly worded statements of

the Network's purpose, in which this egalitarian manifestation of the ethnological

monitoring/early warning object was apparent.

The data excerpts presented above, along with many other data from this period in the

Network's history, indicate a series of contingent relationships between the elements of

ethnological monitoring and early warning. The processes of monitoring ethnic relations, of

providing early warning of potential conflicts to various governmental and nongovernmental

entities, and of preventing some conflicts and managing those that were not prevented were

construed in interdependent relation to one another.

In the third manifestation of the ethnological monitoring/early warning object-

conception, emphasis was placed on the academic or informational aspect of monitoring, and

early warning was relegated to a distinctly lower level of priority. By the fall of 1995, Tishkov's

concept of the Network's object had shifted from interlinking and balancing the facets of

monitoring and early warning to foregrounding monitoring and weighting it more heavily. Early

warning had come to seem less attainable to him than ethnological monitoring, thus he

represented it as having secondary status as an organizing force in the Network's activity:

The network will stay basically the network of scholarly expertise. The kind of

applied, um, policy-oriented because in the field of urgent anthropology efforts

known in the West or in the field of ethnic and conflict studies and so from that

point of view I do not perceive that we will transform the network in[to] a kind of

operational network doing active interventions. But I do not exclude the

possibility of undertaking some steps like for example mission, like that kind of

mission or kind of group urgent discussion with the coming out of a certain

warning report or statement, even statement. And probably sometime [in the

future?] with a kind of peace-building activities because we train participants

often in conflict management as a discipline, as a theory, as a practice. Not going

to make them full-time professionals but at least we know this field probably to

assist the local peace-builders in this operation, being experts not only in ethnic

issues but also in conflict resolution. But an effort to stay a monitoring network of

ethnological monitoring. That's why the title of the network is first "ethnological

monitoring" in spite sometimes it's perceived as sometimes and the title is used in

abbreviated form "the early warning network" but for me from the very beginning

I put it into the title ah, ethnological monitoring, understanding that it's a little bit

ambitious to write of early warning and how many networks just failed.

(Interview with Tishkov, 10/95)

Tishkov's comments here made clear his vision of the Network's object as being currently and

remaining primarily "ethnological monitoring." In this representation, the development of

analytical expertise was foregrounded, and skill-building in conflict management receded, thus

seeming to hold diminished priority.

Returning to the intertwined issues of perspective and subjectivity in the construction of the Network's object, in the interview excerpt above Tishkov spoke from his own position as director and as part of the collective subject of the network as a whole. He also referenced two subgroups within the collective subject: "we," by which he presumably meant himself and the other directors of the Network; and the Network "participants/experts." Despite Tishkov's conception of the Network's object by this time as primarily ethnological monitoring, in his perspective individual members of the Network community could conceivably be participants in the concurrent activity of assisting peace-building in their respective regions. As such, those members as distinct subjects would be engaging the object-conception of peace-building, drawing upon resources provided by the Network such as information and skills training as mediating artifacts, in cooperation with local peace-builders.

In addition to Tishkov's articulation of the object-conception as primarily ethnological monitoring, this conception was manifested in many other places in the data as well. Many other members of the EAWARN project also communicated that ethnological monitoring was both the Network's organizing principle or object and the motive underlying their personal participation in the Network as individual subjects. Activity theory illuminates this phenomenon through its premise that motive always entails an individual subject's personal relationship with the object of a collective activity, whereby meaning is derived from the encounter between motive and object. To illustrate, in response to a question regarding the primary aim of the EAWARN a Network member replied:

> I think, first of all, considering that it is dedicated to ethnic monitoring, that is,
>
> following the ethnopolitical situation, first of all, in the regions. And, moreover,
>
> in the regions which are a zone of conflict, pre-conflict. (Interview, 10/96)

Thus this member represented the Network's object-concept as the monitoring of ethnic relations in regions where conflict was brewing. When asked why she herself joined the Network she answered:

> The motives are, that I for the duration of the last years was involved in studying
>
> of interethnic situation, relations in our republic. And when I found out about the
>
> existence of this Network, in which they do the following of ethnic monitoring,
>
> then I understood, that this is very close to me and very closely connected with
>
> the work, which I did. (Interview, 10/96)

In these comments this Network member indicated both her desire to become part of what she perceived as a collective subject of the Network, and that she was motivated by the object-conception toward which she perceived the Network to be collectively oriented: the monitoring of ethnic relations.

Figure 1 helps summarize this discussion of manifestations of the object-conception of ethnological monitoring (EM) and early warning (EW) in the EAWARN.

Priority of EM & EW in object-conception	Approximate period
em⇔ EW	early 1990s
EM ⇔ EW	mid 1990s
EM ⇔ ew	mid-late 1990s

Figure 1: Evolving priority of ethnological monitoring & early warning in the EAWARN

The use of capital letters in the acronyms signifies the relative priority placed upon each facet in relation to the other during a particular period, and demonstrates the evolution of this object-conception.

<u>Epistemic Community Building</u>

The second of the two object-conceptions around which the Network's activities were oriented was that of epistemic community-building. The data suggest that a range of EAWARN participants perceived the object of the Network's activity as the development of a community of expertise on the analysis of post-Soviet era ethnic relations. According to the accounts of the EAWARN participants, this conception functioned as the primary one for several Network members, and as a closely ranked second for most of the participants. However, a careful examination of the accounts of many Network members, Tishkov and Allyn, reveals that their perspectives on the constitution of the epistemic community, and thus of this object-conception, differed along two dimensions.

The first dimension was the perception of the geographical domain of the epistemic community being developed by the Network. As I demonstrate below, some participants perceived the epistemic community as developing solely or primarily within the boundaries of the former Soviet Union. Others perceived the epistemic community around which the Network was oriented as including others from outside the FSU. The second dimension in which constructions of the epistemic-community object-conception varied was that of the vocational orientation of the constituting members. Some EAWARN participants envisioned the epistemic community which was being pursued and enacted by the Network's activity as consisting of primarily academic analysts. Others envisioned the emergent epistemic community as consisting of (and developing) activist-analysts. Still others articulated the object-conception of the

EAWARN as epistemic community-building in a way that included both academic analysts and activist analysts.

The directors of the EAWARN project all acknowledged epistemic community-building as an activating force in the Network's functioning. Not surprisingly, both Tishkov's and Allyn's perspectives on the epistemic community conception of the Network's object corresponded to their respective constructions of the ethnological monitoring/early warning object. Just as Tishkov came to emphasize the academic and informational aspects of monitoring, he also constructed the epistemic community object in strongly academic terms. In his view, the Network provided opportunities for intellectual exchange, both face to face and mediated electronically or through publications for reunited academic colleagues whose previous epistemic community dissolved with the Soviet Union. Alternately with ethnological monitoring, the aim of the Network was, in his words:

> ... an effort to keep the best experts in the field of ethnic studies and conflict
>
> studies in the post-Soviet space as one community. I mean community as um, as
>
> people who cooperate, exchange material, educate each other, and who keep
>
> human contacts which had very drastically failed and which failed quite
>
> drastically after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and many intellectuals, and
>
> especially in the field of academia, feel unhappy about this situation. They do not
>
> have proper access to other academic, academia like Western, Anglo-American,
>
> academia, because of the language barrier and lack of context and many other
>
> [unintelligible], so they, they still feel [bloc?] of attachment, interest, and
>
> sometimes [unintelligible] those interests to keep relations with the leading

research institution centers of Russia. Ah, [unintelligible] of Russian Federation, I

mean they publish [in] ah New Independent States. (Interview, 10/95)

Thus in this perspective, the EAWARN as a collective subject employed the mediating artifacts

of the Network, a common language, and shared academic and political histories, to pursue the

object-conception of re-constituting an epistemic community of analysts within the FSU.

Another EAWARN participant shared Tishkov's construction of the object-conception of

epistemic community-building. In his articulation of the aim of the Network:

The goal-- the creation of common communicational space. I think that is the

most important. The second, this is the exchange of information and

intensification. Intensification, let's call, of scientific and human communication.

But scientific is the most important. Because the exchange of ideas, this makes us

richer. (Interview, 10/96)

This participant did not include any interventionist element in his construction of the epistemic

community as the object of the Network. Rather, the community was envisioned as a virtual

place, a "common communicational space," in which research-related ideas and information

could be shared among participants.

Two participants went one step further in their construction of the epistemic community

object-concept. Going beyond a vision of the Network as re-constituting an epistemic

community within the sphere of the former Soviet Union, they perceived the Network as a

microcosmic re-constitution of the Soviet Union itself. One participant articulated this

construction as:

The Network-- we, somehow, are the representatives of our national ethnic

groups. Forming a certain unity. This is also serving for the resolving of conflicts.

(Interview, 10/96)

He seemed to evaluate this reconstitution of the Soviet Union positively. The second member

who articulated this view of the Network was not so sanguine:

I think that this Network now is a small model of the USSR. And in this sense it

suffers from the diseases that were in the Soviet Union, but also has the same

merits. Exactly from us depends how we will decide our fortune." (Interview,

10/96)

In the perspective of these participants, the members of the Network were primarily and

immutably representatives of their respective ethnic groups, modelling through their

collaborative activity the constructive ends that cooperation between "nationalities" can

accomplish.

In contrast, Allyn's concept of the building of an epistemic community emphasized the

international contacts (meaning outside the former Soviet Union) to which members of the

EAWARN project were exposed, and its composition of activist-analysts. The geographic

dimension was apparent in comments by Allyn such as the following:

I consider already to be a very significant fact that, you know, that [the network

members] are part now of a larger international community of specialists and

scholars who are, you know, supporting objectivity and uh, and uh truth in um, in

uh information. (Interview, 10/95)

Consistently with his foregrounding of the prevention and management of conflicts in his

construction of the monitoring/early warning object, Allyn also emphasized the interventionist

potential of the epistemic community emerging through the activity of the Network. Referring to the community as a "group of professionals" he said:

> I see another very important dimension is that, you know, we are anticipating the education, training, development of the professional, uh, group of professionals in the former Soviet Union, and their ability to influence the development of civil society in their regions. (Interview, 10/95)

The perception of the epistemic community being developed through the Network's activity as consisting of activist-analysts was articulated by several other Network members in addition to Allyn. One responded to a question on the aim of the Network with the comment that "I think that somehow-- I hope that this will be so, that this is the formation of a high quality group of experts who in the end will be able to give to our authority bodies good advice in the sphere of nationality relations, politics, solving of conflicts." (Interview, 10/96) However, in contrast to Allyn, this member perceived the epistemic community which the Network was engaged in building as activist-analysts solely within the FSU.

The manifestations of the epistemic community object-conception can be visualized in the form of a matrix where the horizontal dimension represents the geographical constitution, and the vertical dimension represents the vocational constitution of the EAWARN (see Figure 2).

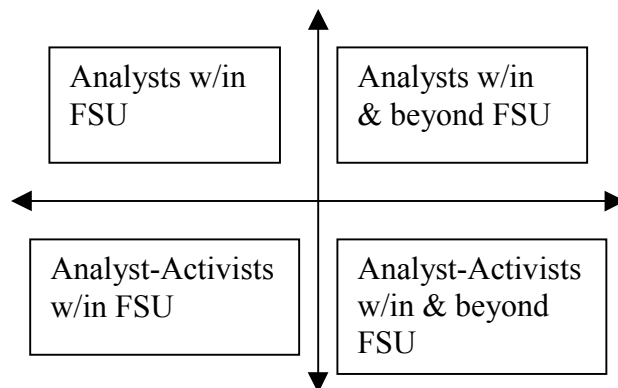| Analysts w/in FSU	Analysts w/in & beyond FSU
Analyst-Activists w/in FSU	Analyst-Activists w/in & beyond FSU

Figure 2: Manifestations of the epistemic community object-conception

The manifestations of this object-conception in the EAWARN data occurred in and across all four quadrants.

To summarize the findings I have presented, I argue that the EAWARN's activity is oriented around the construction, engagement and enactment of a complex multifaceted object, which is manifested in the Network's discourses in a variety of forms. The primary conceptions of the object as articulated and enacted by the Network's participants are the interlinked processes of ethnological monitoring and early warning, and the building of an epistemic community. This community is discursively constructed as developing *at least* within the former Soviet Union, and consisting *at least* of analysts of ethnic relations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have presented an analysis of how the EAWARN participants perceived their complex object, as a case study of how multifaceted, evolving objects can be identified and examined within the framework of cultural-historical activity theory. I traced the dialogical process of object formation in the EAWARN between the individual members, their cultural-historical context and their community. I identified two primary object-conceptions around which the Network's activity was oriented during this study-- the monitoring of ethnic relations for the purpose of providing early warning of conflict, and the building of an epistemic

community-- and analyzed the various manifestations of these object-concepts in the discourse of the Network.

The data I presented in this paper on the development of the EAWARN's object indicate that there was some chronological sequencing within and between the formation of the object-concepts. The object-concept facet of early warning preceded that of ethnological monitoring, and the object-concept facet of an epistemic community within the FSU preceded the facet of one that would extend beyond the FSU. Furthermore, the object-concept of epistemic community- building through the Network may have been a later layer to the ethnological monitoring/early warning object-concept, as it was not referenced specifically in the earliest conceptualizations of the Network. On the other hand, it is possible that this object-concept may have been manifested in the earliest stages of the Network, at least within the Rossian side of the Network, but simply not reflected in the data I collected on the EAWARN.

I suggest that individual career development goals have a ubiquitous presence in any collaborative and/or professional enterprise, and therefore cannot be taken as nullifying the existence of a larger, collective object. The evidence I presented in this paper demonstrates that participants in the Network during the period of this study by and large agreed that there was some central aim to their collective activity. Furthermore, they articulated surprisingly consistent conceptions of what that aim/object was.

Some might argue that in spite of the participants' articulations, there was in actuality no common object within the Network during the period of this study-- that the Network was just a shell covering the individual goals of its participants. Some might also argue that career development was itself an object of the Network, alongside the object conceptualized as ethnological monitoring/early warning and epistemic community-building. However, neither of

these formulations fully account for the motivating force of the EAWARN among these participants during this period.

For an activity theory researcher, striving to understand an evolving object in all its complexity requires careful study of an activity system over time, from several perspectives and ideally through several kinds of data. Although object-conceptions can be observed and identified empirically, the object—engaged and enacted yet always unfinished, simultaneously material and ideal-- is in its essence "uncatchable". Perhaps the most illuminating questions a researcher in pursuit of object-understanding can ask are toward what is the collective activity oriented, and what is energizing it? The "catches" in the form of manifested object-concepts, though partial and transitory, are worth the pursuit.

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[1] "Rossia" and "Rossian" are more accurate renderings of the Cyrillic words commonly spelled in English as "Russia" and "Russian." Moreover, as Tishkov (1997b) notes, Rossia/Rossian has a civic connotation, whereas in the Russian language, the word *ruskii*, on which the English "Russian" is based, connotes ethnicity. In this study I use Rossia/Rossian to refer to the multinational political state and its citizens, and Russian when referring to language or ethnicity. When quoting from other sources, I retain the spelling of the source.

[2] From this point on I use the term object in its activity theory sense, as Gegenstand.

[3] While Schatzki has not written on activity theory, some of his observations of social processes and some of the analytical concepts he employs share commonalities with those of activity theorists.

[4] In the interview conversations referred to here the terms aim, objective, goal and motive were used atheoretically and sometimes interchangeably.

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