

COMMENTARY

Toward a Dialogical Understanding of Objects in Subjective
Experience and Social Practices

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This article is a discussion of two articles, one by [Sánchez and Larrain \(2023\)](#) that examines the role of objects in the work of teachers, and the other by [Toval-Gajardo et al. \(2023\)](#) that studies the experience of artists in their world. Both articles share a dialogical understanding of the phenomena at hand. In this article, I first summarize the two articles, before considering them as complementing each other: Together, they may help sketch a psychology of the trajectory of objects, at the junction of the experience of designers, and users. As such, they can be seen as participating in the same analytical framework. To reflect back on this theoretical proposition, I then propose to apply it to a further empirical case.

Public Significance Statement

The article responds to two articles with important educational consequences. In addition, it documents a research project HomAge, supported by the Swiss National Foundation, which has as goal to understand better and support the development of older persons in their living environments.

Keywords: dialogism, case-study, design, learning, creativity

The two articles by [Sánchez and Larrain \(2023\)](#) and by [Toval-Gajardo et al. \(2023\)](#) address different situations—the role of the object in the work of teachers, and the experience of the artist in their world—yet concur in defining a dialogical understanding of the phenomenon at hand. Taken

together, these two articles may help sketch a psychology of the trajectory of objects, at the junction of the experience of designers, and of users. After summarizing these two articles, I suggest that they can be seen as participating in the same analytical framework. To reflect back on this theoretical proposition, I then propose to apply it to a further empirical case.¹

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**Objects of Learning and Musical Objects
From a Dialogical Perspective**

The two articles aim at capturing dynamics at the junction of social practices and individual experience, beyond individualizing theories of both learning and teaching, or of creating or receiving the arts. In any case, learning as well as

¹ Commentary on [Sánchez and Larrain \(2023\)](#), and [Toval-Gajardo et al. \(2023\)](#).

creating a music piece are seen as socially situated practices, embodied and engaging people's transactions with objects and others, in time and space.

Sánchez and Larrain (2023) propose to take seriously the role of objects in teachers' learning. The authors carefully examine the limits of two available theorizations of objects, actor-network theory that considers objects as actants, and sociocultural perspectives, which, inspired by the work of sociology of science, treat objects as boundary objects. To these, they prefer a dialogical approach, inspired by Vygotsky and Bakhtin's work, so as to conceptualize objects in the organization of social life. Their proposition entails five main points: First, objects engage dialogically with people; second, they organize social life, as result of past dynamics and as anticipation of the future; third, objects are internally dialogical; and fourth, objects have a discursive, material and esthetic existence. On this basis, fifth, "they become discursively intertwined with psychological processes" (Sánchez & Larrain, 2023, p. 9). Altogether, the authors conclude, "objects contribute to organizing social experience" (Sánchez & Larrain, 2023, p. 9) as inscribed and carrying past and futures practices and discourses. As consequence, then, they propose to consider the role of objects in teacher's learning, as these contain discourses and values, and enable and constrain further interactions.

In their article, Toval-Gajardo et al. (2023) examine the work of artists engaged in the creation of musical pieces, in a demanding and unrewarding world. Their article starts with a critical depiction of the music production system, currently a "third system," shaping difficult social, material and economic situations for artists. The authors also observe that the working experience of artists in these conditions has not been studied. They thus propose a framework that considers the subjective experience of creative work as social practice. Experience is defined as "is concrete and situated, and it is also a historical effect ...; subjective experience is also self-transformation, since it involves practices of subjectivity production." (Toval-Gajardo et al., 2023, p. 4). Reviewing different perspectives on artistic creation, including arts as capitalist practice, as means of social belonging and recognition, and as subjective experience, the authors eventually propose a dialogical understanding of art as experience and social practice.

Drawing on Vygotsky and Bakhtin, they see the work of creating art as a means "to establish a singular connection to the social"; it is indeed participating in the construction of artefacts that will then serve as social technique of the affects, artefacts that have an esthetic component, which are both means and results of affective transformation. Yet, such work is produced "on the brink of abyss," in context of great precarity, efforts and risk-taking for the artists. Hence, "the subjective experience of musical work has to do with the vertigo involved in the possibility of failing to generate the esthetic object and, therefore, failing to affectively transform the experience of a collective, to which the artist belongs" (Toval-Gajardo et al., 2023, p. 9).

A Dialogical Understanding of the Circulation of Objects

Hence, these two articles share a dialogical perspective on subjective experience as social practice, in which objects—created, used, found, interacted with, transmitted—play a key role, in the shaping of social interactions, self and the world, in response and anticipation of other practices. They are complementary for various reasons. First, they obviously consider different social domains, one very institutionalized, the other less so—education versus music. Second, they also consider different moments of the human-object dialog: The artist, in a world of existing artefacts, creates a new object, while the teacher meets an object already there, with which she or he learns and teaches. Third, they involve different temporalities: education is often meant to transmit the knowledge of the past, so as to guarantee continuity in the future, while art creation is usually meant to, still drawing on the past, create new possibilities for the future. Fourth, the articles also present us with different stages of research: The article on education is a theoretical elaboration that may precede an empirical exploration; the article on the arts presents us with the results of an empirical enquiry.

Taken together, these articles also give us the means to propose a dialogical theory of the circulation of objects, from their creation to their use, at the very specific articulation of the individual and the collective—the originality of the two articles being to consider subjective

experience *as* social practice. Hence, the articles invite us to consider both the dynamics of creation of objects, and of experiencing objects, both as subjective experiences and as social practices. Doing so, they emphasize the dialogical nature of objects, their material, aesthetic, and discursive or symbolic nature, and their role as vectors for continuity and transformation and as resources for imagining the past and the future, for shaping individualities and the collective.

Empirical Generalization

From a pragmatic perspective, theoretical propositions take their value from their power to enable us to see the world in a new way or to develop new forms of understanding (James, 1907/1075). One way to verify the strength of a theoretical proposition is thus to apply it to a new case study, a form of dialogical generalization (Cornish, 2020; Zittoun, 2017). Here, I propose to import the dialogical proposition to the field in which we are currently working, the changing housing conditions for older persons in a Swiss region, and to focus on the dialogical tensions taking place around one specific material object.

The study HomAge² was built as a regional case study in a Swiss Canton. In this region, we followed the slow transformation of the whole policy defining the landscape of care, which includes the project of reducing the numbers of beds in retirement home, of building new “houses with referee” affording independent living, and the creation of a network of counselors, home care, day centers for the older population, urban infrastructure, etc. (Gfeller et al., 2021). This in itself entails intense dialogs between the health, the housing and the finance offices and their representatives, private companies, associations, and a variety of care providers. We then documented one of these new housing projects, from its conception to the moving in of older residents, and the constitution of new social dynamics. Still as part of the regional case study, we observed everyday interactions entailing older persons—in institutions and informal neighborhood. And finally, we followed older persons for two and half years, so as to retrace the changing sociomaterial arrangements of their daily lives, as well as their development in older age. As so many social actors, persons and material configurations are involved, we are especially sensitive to the dialogical tensions

that take place around a diversity of situations. Here, I wish to take a paradigmatic example, that can be read through the approach developed by Sánchez, Toval-Gajardo, Soto Roy, and Larrain.

The case concerns the ovens of the flats in the new buildings for older persons. These buildings have been designed out of a double project: to respond to the wish of most older persons to age at home, and to reduce the costs of care. The buildings, usually beautiful modern houses, have been designed quite carefully: they should be implemented in each commune of the Canton, so that older persons can continue living in their usual neighborhood and maintain their social networks; they should be within walking distance from shops and public transports, and on not too steep slopes, to guarantee autonomy; they are made as independent flats, yet there is a communal room for people to meet, and a house referee to create and foster social dynamics in the house. Building one of these new housing projects is a challenge, requiring budget, following norms, requiring negotiations with state representatives to have them labeled “houses with referees” (“appartement avec encadrement”). The flats themselves have to follow architectural norms (from the Swiss Architects and Engineers Association 500), those for people with reduced mobility: door thresholds should be inexistant, the bathroom is equipped with Italian showers, corridors are marked with contrasting colors, etc. Hence, in the design, one can see basic tensions between, on one side, the call for autonomy and social life, and on the other side, the need to guarantee security and a form of surveillance. These tensions are particularly crystallized around certain objects, that were often mentioned throughout our fieldwork. One of them is the oven in the kitchen (Cabra et al., *in press*). Let me propose an analysis in the terms of Larrain, Sánchez, Soto Roy, and Toval-Gajardo.

The oven in a modern kitchen is designed according to sets of explicit and implicit norms and rules. An architect and technician designing a kitchen want the kitchen to respond to some aesthetical value, be accessible and usable, remain in a certain budget, and also, respond to the security rules dictated by the legislator—here,

² The study “HomAge” examines the changing of housing conditions for older persons and their development; it is done in collaboration with Fabienne Gfeller and Michèle Grossen and funded by the Swiss National Fund.

then, the oven needs to respect the principles of universal design, which postulates that it should be accessible to everyone—including people in wheelchair. So, on the side of the designers, producing an oven is a subjective work yet a social practice: ovens are sociomaterial objects that need to be produced responding to aesthetical and normative values; they are meant to be functional and to foster older people's autonomous lives. For older persons themselves, from their subjective perspective, however, these ovens are unpractical: They are so low that they require important bending, and their height also prevents carrying heavy plates when one has less arm and hand strength. Older persons therefore complain about these unusable ovens. The person in charge of the promotion and regulation of these new housing projects told the research team how many complaints came about these ovens:

The position of the oven, we get systematically shouted at. It is on the floor and everybody tells us we should put it higher for people who cannot bend. In fact, the standard norm is in the middle and the "disabled" norm is lower, for people on the wheelchair. For older persons it should not be straight on the floor, but at 40cm or so it should be fine. If you open an oven, the first thing [the level for a plate in the oven] is at 40 so that is fine. [Response of housing project, my translation].

Rather than "shouting," some inhabitants decided to change their habits as response to the oven. Hence, because she could not use the oven, an older woman who used to make her bread all her life decided that maybe it was time to stop, after all, as she was old. Hence, instead of fostering autonomy and aging at home, the oven had the opposite effect of closing down personal engagements and increasing the feeling of being old.

As part of our dialogical research project, we decided to put in dialog some results of our observations to an interested audience by creating a theater play that would be followed with an open dialog—a "theatrical forum." In the play "Staging age I",³ we represented the trajectory of an older woman moving in one of these flats, confronted with this oven that she cannot use, and mentioning it to a house referee. During the play, the audience laughed at this event—especially the older members of the audience who live in such new flats. During the discussion with the audience that followed the play, women in their 90s told us that indeed, they all had met the problem of these beautiful but unusable

oven. The fictional space, a third space, allowed people to put in dialog their subjective experiences, and a dialog took place between various stakeholders—promoters of these houses, house referees, etc.—present in the audience.

Hence, here we are in a case where we can follow ovens from the design in a complex set of negotiations to their uses, and the complex array of dialogical dynamics that surround them, both in subjective experiences and as social practices. When designed, these ovens resulted out of dialog between a plurality of stakeholders, with their perspective on finance, aesthetics, technique, security—negotiations which are semiotic and yet practical. Yet around them are also implicit representations of what it is to be "old". Here, to be "old" is to be disabled and be on a wheelchair, an implicit nobody questions: the relevance of the norms chosen to the constitution of these ovens for active older persons with less flexibility is not addressed. In their materiality, the ovens crystallize these aesthetical and functional tensions in brand new kitchens, and they afford certain usages, by certain users. The actual tenants, the users, apprehend these ovens in dialog with their past—their habit to cook, for instance bread, and their imagination of the future—to maintain their autonomy and their practices, and they are confronted to their material constitution: these are too low to be used, for the reality of their bodies. Hence, as subjective encounter and social practices, the ovens are turned from tools supporting life projects—making one's bread—to adverse, resisting objects, impeding and closing down routes for actions. Instead of creating new sociomaterial settings to support the expansion of one's spheres of experience, they oblige the persons to reconfigure their own spheres of experience.

Some of the older persons do respond to this material resistance: By complaining to the stakeholders, they maintain the dialog open. Yet in the words of the person in charge of promoting these new houses, the ovens become an object of complaints, and the older persons become anonymous those by which one gets shouted at;

³ "Staging age," a theatrical forum, written and directed by Nicolas Yazgi, in collaboration with the research team from *Homage*, thanks to an AGORA funding from the Swiss national fund, a scheme that "aims to foster dialogue between scientists and society", and the support of various cantonal institutions and the theater abc.

their voices are thus silenced. It is interesting that, thanks to the distanced, fictionalized representation of the situation in a theater play—a cultural experience and a social technique of emotions (Vygotsky, 1971; Zittoun & Stenner, 2021)—older persons manage to voice out the problem. The various stakeholders in the audience, this time, had to listen to, and respond to these complaints; a dialog was recreated, and people started to discuss about the possibility of constructing modulable kitchens.

Hence, the object I examined here is the oven in new flats; at the junction between design and use, entailing subjective experiences as social practices, it crystallizes, materially, aesthetically and symbolically, extremely complex dialogical tensions. The challenge, then, is whether these dialogs can be kept open: can people enter in dialog with these objects, and when called to respond to these many tensions, can they answer, and are they heard and responded to? In the example I presented, the risk is great that people's responses are silenced, and so the dialog seemingly stops with the design of the object, then having a trajectory of its own; but our reading invites us to see that these objects, with the tensions they contain, always trigger new dialogs. The double challenge is, first, to create spaces for these dialogs to unfold, and second, in cases like this, to bring back the dialogs of these who meet the objects, with those who designed it—to complete the dialogical cycle.

Opening: Toward a Dialogical Understanding of Objects

Objects are the poor parents of psychologists and educationalists, who tend to focus on discourses and practices. Objects are tools, for sure, as well as nonhuman actants; they are also boundary objects, affording the meeting of community of practices (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Gillespie & Zittoun, 2010; Latour, 2005; Star & Griesemer, 1989; Vygotsky & Luria, 1930/1994). The Vygotskian, Bakhtinian reading suggested by Larrain, Sánchez, Soto Roy, and Toval-Gajardo invites us to consider objects as taking part in complex aesthetical, embodied, semiotic dialogical dynamics, as social practices involving subjectivities. With an example from our current fieldwork, I suggested to articulate the focus of two distinct articles; the side of those who design objects, and those that use and transmit them further. Understanding

what relates these two groups of persons, and their subjective experiences as social practices, may perhaps help us to understand at what conditions an object, resulting from and crystallizing dialogs, can foster further dialogs, including these that participated to its production. Dialogical dynamics are potentially infinite.

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