

# **Collaborative Case Studies for a European Cultural Psychology**

**European Science Foundation  
Exploratory Workshop**

**Scientific Report**

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## Executive summary

### ***The Motivation***

Cultural Psychologists in Europe have contributed to our understanding of many important social relations. They have studied students learning through social interaction, the organization of contemporary families, social interactions in health service provision, interactions within multicultural society and interactions between different nations in Europe.

Despite this expertise, Cultural Psychologists have neglected to reflect upon their own social interactions in the production of knowledge. Collaborations between researchers and research users, or across disciplines and national boundaries are increasingly common, but their value and appropriate design have received little explication. The motivation for the Exploratory Workshop was to advance the methodological awareness and sophistication of collaborative European research, by inviting Cultural Psychologists to use their conceptual tools to reflect upon the social psychological process of collaboration within their own research practice.

### ***The Objectives***

The objectives of the Exploratory Workshop were: to develop theoretical and methodological tools for designing collaborative social science research so that it is more intellectually productive and amenable to knowledge transfer; to provide a context for participants to reflect on their working practices of collaboration, to become more 'reflective practitioners'; to contribute to the integration of Cultural Psychology in Europe through networking and publications; and to build research capacity and facilitate the formation and functioning of future collaborative research projects.

### ***The Strategy***

The Exploratory Workshop was organised around five exemplary European research projects. These projects entailed collaboration between countries, with practitioners and between disciplines. As well as being instances of collaborative research, each of these projects studied a form of collaboration or social interaction. Thus, these five projects provided ideal opportunities to meet our objectives. The five projects were:

- 1) The SLOAN project on family interactions
- 2) The Change Laboratory, which facilitates organisational change
- 3) The DUNES project, which has developed educational software
- 4) An international project on democracy in Eastern and Western Europe
- 5) A collaborative analysis of diaries from World War II

The workshop was designed as a space for collectively undertaking the work of reflecting on our collaborative practices - not merely a space for the presentation

of previous research. Thus, much time was devoted to questions, discussion and commentary. Each of the five projects received half a day of discussion. The format was for two representatives from the project to present different views on the project (usually one dealing with the substantive research issues, and the other reflecting upon the collaborative research practices), followed by two commentators, external to the project, who were invited to raise critical issues.

### ***The Meeting***

The Exploratory Workshop took place over two and a half days in Chalet Royal, Veysonnaz, in Switzerland (8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> September 2006). The venue provided all the necessary facilities, facilitating an intensive workshop. Twenty-one Cultural Psychologists, from 12 countries, most of whom had not previously met, attended.

### ***The Outcomes***

Through commentary and discussion, comparisons were drawn between the projects and experience was pooled together, critically evaluated, conceptualised and integrated, to produce a framework for describing and designing a collaborative research project.

One of the exciting theoretical developments to emerge from the Workshop was a contribution to the methodological imperative for reflexivity in research. While best practice guidelines for research in the social sciences stresses the need for critical and self-reflective research, there has been little theorization of how to stimulate such reflection. On the basis of Cultural Psychological theory and the combined experience of the projects analyzed in the Workshop, we suggest that carefully constructed collaborations can facilitate critical self-reflection. Specifically, collaborators should be chosen to differ on the same dimensions as one wants to stimulate critical self-reflection. For instance, if one chooses to collaborate across disciplines, then it is likely that one will be led to reflect upon one's research assumptions. On the other hand, if one chooses to collaborate with practitioners, then one will be forced to question the practical utility of one's theory. International collaborations often focus upon comparison between countries, but the Workshop participants agreed that there is a deeper benefit to such collaborations if it leads one to question one's own implicit assumptions.

The outcome of our deliberations will be made accessible to the wider research community through a Conference Essay in the journal "*Forum: Qualitative Social Research*" (FQS), and a report in the ISCAR newsletter. The themes of the workshop are being developed further, with a proposal for a special issue of the journal '*Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*' under consideration by the journal editor. On the basis of the Workshop, a number of academic visits and future collaborative projects have been planned.

## Background and Aims

Social science research is increasingly based upon collaboration. Projects are designed to bring together researchers and practitioners, researchers from different countries and speaking different languages, researchers with different theoretical frames, researchers from different disciplines, and different generations of researchers. Our knowledge is being produced through social interaction along these dimensions of collaboration, yet the dynamics of knowledge construction sustained by these dimensions remain unarticulated by Cultural Psychologists. We are dealing with a peculiar form of knowledge transfer, namely getting researchers to use their own theories to advance their own research practice. While much emphasis has been given to refining individual methodological techniques, little attention has been paid to the social dynamics of the research process and how it mediates, and ideally facilitates, the process of knowledge construction. Cultural Psychology has many theoretical tools for analyzing collaborative practices amongst lay people. Hence, the organizers considered it valuable for Cultural Psychologists to turn their theories upon their own research practice, and to engage in critical reflection upon their collaborative practices for producing knowledge.

Secondly, the field of Cultural Psychology risks becoming fragmented. There are many researchers in the field across Europe, but there are few institutions for networking these researchers. Collaborative projects can provide a focus for the field, uniting different theoretical traditions. The organizers aimed to contribute to the integration of Cultural Psychology in Europe, including countries from Eastern Europe, Southeast Europe and the Baltic States, and to stimulate future European collaborative research projects.

The aims of the Workshop were thus:

- 1) to develop theoretical and methodological tools for designing collaborative social science research so that it is more intellectually productive and amenable to knowledge transfer
- 2) to provide a context for participants to reflect on their working practices of collaboration, to become more 'reflective practitioners'
- 3) to contribute to the integration of Cultural Psychology in Europe through networking and publications
- 4) to build research capacity and facilitate the formation and functioning of future collaborative research projects

In the terms of the European Science Foundation's mission, the Workshop sought to understand what the 'added value' is of European collaborations, and to identify research designs and practices that could maximise this added value. It also sought to conceptualise how collaborative practices can contribute to producing high quality scientific research.

## Workshop Design

This Exploratory Workshop provided a space for reflecting on existing collaborative research practice and exploring new ways of conducting collaborative research. The Workshop's novelty, unanimously recognized by the participants, was to apply Cultural Psychological models traditionally used to analyze and improve other people's collaborations – such as interactions at school, in the workplace or at home – to reflect on our own collaborative research practices.

Given its newness, the task of reflecting on our collaborative practices was a challenging one, something that few participants had explicitly done previously. Thus, the intention with this Workshop was to provide a setting to collectively undertake the work of reflection, not simply to report on our previous, polished research. The Workshop design was based on this aim, both in terms of setting and of organization.

The setting chosen for the Workshop was a relatively isolated mountain hotel in Switzerland, providing comfortable accommodation and good meals within beautiful scenery. This setting enabled the group to stay together and to remain engaged in the issues of the Workshop over the whole two and half days, not only during working sessions but also over meals and free time.

In terms of scientific organization, the Workshop was structured around five collaborative research projects:

- 1) The SLOAN project on family interactions, which entails international collaboration between the University of Rome La Sapienza and the University of Linköping in Sweden.
- 2) The Change Laboratory of the University of Helsinki, which for 20 years has been engaging practitioners to stimulate organisational change.
- 3) The DUNES project which produced educational software through collaboration between Cultural Psychologists and Software Designers.
- 4) An international project on European Transitions, examining representations of trust, responsibility and democracy in Eastern and Western Europe.
- 5) A project on diaries from World War II, based on collaborative data analysis between three researchers (the three convenors)

In preparation for the Workshop, all participants were asked to read a number of papers from each project and thus familiarise themselves with the projects. Additionally, participants were assigned specific tasks. Each project was represented by two **project presenters**. These were researchers internal to the project, and they were requested to present the project to the group. Usually this entailed one presentation on the substance of the research and a second

presentation on the dynamics of collaboration within the project. Each project was also assigned two **project commentators**. These commentators, who were external to the projects, received the project presentations a week before the Workshop and on this basis prepared comments, critiques and questions. To coordinate and facilitate the tasks of both project presenters and project commentators, the organisers provided guidelines.

Each project was allocated half a day, which provided time for the two project presentations (thirty minutes each), the two project commentaries (twenty minutes each), and four twenty minute slots for open discussion. The time allocated for the fifth project was less because it is a smaller project. Commentaries and discussions focused upon (1) critical reflections upon the given project and (2) advancing the group's understanding of collaboration in research.

Finally, to aid us to develop a statement of the main contributions of the Workshop, participants were asked to make a note of (1) what they had learnt from the Workshop and (2) how the Workshop would change the way they carried out their own collaborative research. These notes were collected at the end of the second day, and used as the basis for a concluding discussion which aimed to integrate and organize the themes that had arisen during the Workshop.

## Scientific Content

In what follows, we indicate the main points raised by the presentation of each project during the Workshop:

### **1) *The SLOAN Project***

This project, funded by the Sloan Foundation, is a large international and interdisciplinary collaboration between the University of Rome La Sapienza and the University of Linköping in Sweden. Video data on everyday family interaction and the socialization of children is collected in each country, and analysed, from a shared conversation-analytic theoretical perspective, by a research team in that country. First, Prof. Karin Aronsson presented the work done in collaboration with young researchers in Sweden. Secondly, Dr Francesco Arcidiacono, director of the Italian laboratory, presented the practices of collaboration which enable such international and inter-generational work. Then Prof. Clotilde Pontecorvo reflected upon these collaborations in the light of her previous experience of collaborative research, describing the involvement of junior as well as senior academics. Finally, Dr Charis Psaltis, in his commentary, situated the project within the funding context and analysed the relation between the aims of the project and the Sloan Foundation. This first session also raised the questions about the ownership of data produced in collaborative research.

### **2) *The Change Laboratory***

For 20 years a group of researchers at the University of Helsinki have been working with practitioners, in diverse organisational contexts, order to promote organisational change. The Change Laboratory has engaged in over 60 change interventions across the world. It has also a large database documenting these collaborations. Prof. Yrjö Engeström outlined the theory and method of the Change Laboratory using a case study, and Dr Annalisa Sannino proposed a complementary analysis of the same set of data from a different theoretical perspective, as a first step in a future collaboration. The papers were discussed by Dr Alex Gillespie, who proposed a third interpretation of the data, emphasising intersubjective dynamics in the production of knowledge. Finally, Prof. Pernille Hviid, in her commentary, raised critical questions about who remains silent in Change Laboratory collaborations, and the possibility of intervening to change researchers' practices. In the ensuing discussion two modes for stimulating reflection in research were identified: learning from failed projects and confronting diverse interpretations of a same dataset.

### **3) *The DUNES Project***

The DUNES project has developed software aimed at improving communication between students. This project entailed collaboration between psychologists and educators in 5 Universities and 4 private companies specialising in software development. This project was funded through the European Fifth Framework Programme. First, Dr Nathalie Muller Mirza and Dr Valérie Tartas presented a

joint analysis of the forms of collaboration taking place within the project. They highlighted difficulties met by the project, but emphasised that sometimes these conflicts were productive. The theory of socio-cognitive conflict provided a useful way to conceptualise these issues. They also emphasised the importance of making explicit the goals and division of responsibility. The discussants were Prof. Aleksandar Baucal, who used Cultural Psychological theory to explicate the importance of identity in research. Finally, Dr Gerard Duveen underlined the relationships between forms of collaboration and forms of the knowledge produced. The general discussion highlighted the importance of reflective thinking for researchers, both in terms of social and scientific responsibility, and in their relationships to funding agencies.

#### ***4) Transition in Eastern Europe***

This project on transition in Eastern Europe, funded by the ESRC, examined issues of trust, responsibility and democracy through a collaboration between researchers from Eastern Europe (Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia) and Western Europe (Scotland, England, and France). Prof. Ivana Marková drew attention to the collaborative nature of focus group data, and demonstrated the value of international data collection from a Cultural Psychology point of view. Then Prof. Jana Plichtová took a different theoretical approach to the same data, emphasising the importance of historical and political contexts in shaping the processes of knowledge production. Commenting on the papers, Dr Flora Cornish drew on the dialogical theoretical perspective of this project to highlight the value of collaborations for provoking reflexivity and for extending the generality of a project's findings. Finally, Prof. Uwe Flick presented used the concept of triangulation in order to understand the potential benefits, and problems of, collaborative research. The general discussion highlighted the importance of an "outsider" in collaboration as a means to stimulate relevant critical reflection.

#### ***5) World War II Diaries***

Funded by the Nuffield Foundation, the "War diaries" project is a collaboration of 3 researchers who agreed to collaborate in the interpretation of a single in-depth and public data set. Accordingly, they selected a World War II diary from the Mass Observation Archive, and have been debating different interpretations of the data. Dr Tania Zittoun presented on behalf of the project and emphasised the value of collaborative data analysis in producing richer and more creative interpretations. Finally, Prof. Aaro Toomela, the discussant, questioned the type of claims that can be made on the basis of a single qualitative case study, which in turn stimulated a productive discussion about the process of creativity in research.

#### ***Concluding Session***

Prof. Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont was asked to present a discussion on the Workshop as a whole. She identified the main components of collaborative research, distinguished four level of analysis for approaching them, and indicated

orientations for increasing the quality of collaboration in the five projects. She, for example, suggested that researchers engage in site visits to each others' projects. This practice, which is common in natural science, is overlooked in social science. One of the clear themes to emerge from the Workshop is that the confrontation of different research practices provides a simple and effective means to stimulate high-quality reflective qualitative research.

At the end, Dr Flora Cornish summed up the themes of the Workshop, using the convenors' detailed notes of the proceedings and the written feedback collected from participants at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> day. The highlights of this discussion were:

- a) Collaboration in research is a motivational and supportive practice fostering novelty and reflexivity. Collaboration can increase the richness of interpretation through a diversity of perspectives, and address issues which are too complex for isolated researchers.
- b) Qualitative researchers can enhance the quality of their research through collaborative analysis. During the Workshop there was demonstration of the benefits of collaborative analysis of the same data. Recently there has been a call for 'transparency' in qualitative research. We argue that engaging in collaborative data analysis is one way of enforcing transparency in the process of data interpretation. Furthermore, the potential for knowledge transfer is enhanced through collaboration with research users.
- c) We identified several different important dimensions of collaboration, including: centralised vs. distributed control, personal familiarity vs. lack of personal familiarity, division of labour vs. overlapping tasks, and similarity in basic assumptions vs. divergent assumptions. These dimensions provide a useful vocabulary for discussing collaboration.
- d) Using Cultural Psychological theory gives us conceptual purchase on the role of collaboration in stimulating reflexive research. Firstly, we suggest that variations on the dimensions mentioned in the previous point (point c) stimulate different forms of reflection. For example, when basic assumptions are shared, a certain number of ideas and practices might remain implicit in collaboration; when these are not shared, then the collaboration is likely to stimulate reflection on these assumptions. Alternatively, personal familiarity and issues of status and hierarchy may get in the way of certain forms of critical reflection. Secondly, we suggest that collaborations can be designed to stimulate reflection by choosing collaborators who differ on the dimensions that one wants to reflect upon. Thus, if one chooses to collaborate across disciplines, reflection upon one's research assumptions is likely to be stimulated. Or if one chooses to collaborate with practitioners, then one will be forced to question the practical utility of one's theory.

## Contribution and Outcomes

Given the intellectual energy and enthusiasm of the participants, we believe that the topic of the Workshop proved to be stimulating, timely and relevant. The discussions revealed the lack of a conceptual language for reflecting upon collaborative practices. Progress was made thanks to the openness of the presenters to discuss their projects in an honest and frank manner and the subtle and constructive questions and comments of participants.

### ***Advancing Conceptual Tools for Collaboration***

Bringing together the presentations of the projects and the discussions, we outlined a set of theoretical and methodological tools for conceptualising and designing effective collaborative practices. We developed a Cultural Psychological conceptualisation of collaboration and a set of dimensions for describing a collaborative project (as outlined above). We identified the value of collaboration in provoking reflexivity and novelty in a piece of research. In so doing, we demonstrated the value of a Cultural Psychology theorisation of research practice, as theories of interaction in a cultural context provided an understanding of how collaboration can lead to increased reflexivity and novelty in research. To formalise the conceptual contributions which the Workshop made, and to pursue these issues further, dissemination is being undertaken through several channels.

### ***Dissemination***

The knowledge produced in the Workshop provides a valuable starting point for researchers planning collaborative research projects. In order to make this knowledge widely available, beyond the participants, the convenors have written an Essay on the Workshop, which is currently under review at the open-access online journal *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* for publication in a 'Conference Reports' section. A summary report will be prepared for the newsletter of the International Society for Cultural and Activity Research, which will also alert readers to the longer journal report. Lessons will be shared with a set of researchers with an interest in collaboration in the field of health in Scotland, through a brief report to appear in the December 2006 issue of a local newsletter, *HealthQWest Connects*.

Finally, we have been invited to submit a special issue based on the Workshop for a new journal *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science* (previously *Integrative Physiological and Behavioral Science*) published by Transaction Publishers. The special issue will contain eight papers which will be selected for their ability to advance the issues addressed in the Workshop.

### ***Impact on Participants' Research Practices***

As a workshop for 'reflective practitioners', the meeting was intended as an opportunity for the development of methodological awareness among the

participants, to improve their current and future research practice. The feedback the organisers received from the participants indicates that the Workshop will affect future research in two domains. Firstly, the Workshop intervened in the five existing projects. Participants exchanged papers, recommended readings to each other, and offered constructive critique on each others' research. Those involved in these projects indicated that they had had few opportunities to reflect upon the practices within their collaborations, and that the Workshop had stimulated them to think differently and in more detail about their current work. Secondly, the Workshop stimulated reflection about collaboration which will lead participants to design and implement future collaborative research differently.

### ***Future Research & Collaboration***

Many of the Workshop participants agreed that there was significant value to be gained by further efforts to strengthen relationships among a set of European researchers who locate themselves within a shared theoretical tradition of Cultural Psychology. It was mentioned that despite European origins of Cultural Psychology, and significant research activity within Cultural Psychology in Europe, its visibility is lower than that of Cultural Psychology in the USA. Various means for developing a strengthened network of European Cultural Psychologists were suggested and are being pursued.

Firstly, a sub-group of researchers (including the convenors) with shared research interests are initiating a 'loose' collaborative research programme. A joint theoretical framework concerning the interaction of perspectives in institutional settings holds the research group together. Members will carry out research projects in their own countries, within health and education institutions. Their collaboration will initially centre on sharing and discussing readings and critiquing each others' papers and research proposals. These collaborations will be supported in the early years by research visits to each others' institutions and joint symposia at conferences. Once these national initiatives are firmly established, then a more 'tightly-knit' research programme will be initiated at a European level.

Secondly, several participants were excited by the originality of the Workshop theme, and made suggestions for follow-up workshops to further refine methodological practice and identify the most productive lines for collaborative research. On the basis of these discussions, a sub-group of participants has offered to organise a follow-up workshop in 2008, at the University of Cyprus. Relatedly, a sub-group of participants is exploring ways to finance and organize regular meetings of the network of Cultural Psychologists in Europe.

Finally, it was stressed by participants that the impact of the Workshop must not be reduced to the above projects. The Workshop intervened at the level of conceptualising collaborative research, and thus its impact will be evident in any future collaborations in which the participants take part.

## Final Program

<b>Friday 8 September</b>		
7:30-8:30	Breakfast	
8:30-8:35	Welcome	Tania Zittoun
8:35-8:50	ESF Presentation	Dalina Dumitrescu
8:50-9:00	Introduction	Alex Gillespie
<b>Project 1 – The Sloan Project – Chair, Tania Zittoun</b>		
9:00-9:30	SLOAN project 1	Karin Aronsson
9:30-9:50	Questions	
9:50-10:20	SLOAN project 2	Francesco Arcidiacono
10:20-10:40	Questions	
10:40-11:10	Break	
11:10-11:30	Discussant 1	Clotilde Pontecorvo
11:30-11:50	General discussion	
11:50-12:10	Discussant 2	Charis Psaltis
12:10-12:30	General discussion	
12:30-14:00	Lunch	
<b>Project 2 – The Change Laboratory – Chair, Flora Cornish</b>		
14:00-14:30	Change laboratory 1	Yrjö Engeström
14:30-14:50	Questions	
14:50-15:20	Change laboratory 2	Annalisa Sannino
15:20-15:40	Questions	
15:40-16:10	Break	
16:10-16:30	Discussant 1	Pernille Hviid
16:30-16:50	General discussion	
16:50-17:10	Discussant 2	Alex Gillespie
17:10-17:30	General discussion	
19:30--	Dinner - Magrappé	

<b>Saturday, 9 September</b>		
7:30-9:00	Breakfast	
<b>Project 3 – The DUNES Project – Chair, Tania Zittoun</b>		
9:00-9:30	DUNES project 1	Nathalie Muller Mirza
9:30-9:50	Questions	
9:50-10:20	DUNES project 2	Valérie Tartas
10:20-10:40	Questions	
10:40-11:10	Break	
11:10-11:30	Discussant 1	Aleksandar Baucal
11:30-11:50	General discussion	
11:50-12:10	Discussant 2	Gerard Duveen
12:10-12:30	General discussion	
12:30-14:00	Lunch - Magrappé	
<b>Project 4 – Transitions in Europe – Chair, Alex Gillespie</b>		
14:00-14:30	Transitions in Europe 1	Jana Plichtová
14:30-14:50	Questions	
14:50-15:20	Transitions in Europe 2	Ivana Marková
15:20-15:40	Questions	
15:40-16:10	Break	
16:10-16:30	Discussant 1	Uwe Flick
16:30-16:50	General discussion	
16:50-17:10	Discussant 2	Flora Cornish
17:10-17:30	General discussion	
19:30--	Dinner - Magrappé	

## Sunday, 10 September

7:30-9:00

Breakfast

### Project 5 – World War II Diaries – Chair, Alex Gillespie

9:00-9:30

Diary study

Tania Zittoun

9:30-9:50

Questions

9:50-10:10

Discussant

Aaro Toomela

10:10-10:30

General discussion

10:30-11:00

Break

11:00-11:30

Closing Discussion

Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont

11:30-12:30

Lessons Learned

Flora Cornish (facilitator)

12:30--

Lunch

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## Information on Participants

Countries	Cyprus (1), Denmark (1), England (1), Estonia (1), Finland (1), France (1), Germany (1), Italy (3), Scotland (3), Serbia (1), Slovakia (1), Sweden (1), Switzerland (5).
Gender	Women: 13 Men: 8
Career stage	Professors: 11 Mid career academic (>5 years post-PhD, not Prof.): 1 Early career academics (< 5 years post-PhD): 8 PhD student: 1

