Zucchermaglio Cristina, Alby Francesca

Gruppi e tecnologie al lavoro

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The book of Zucchermaglio and Alby "*Groups and technologies at work*", published in 2005 and not yet translated in English, represents the outcome of several years of empirical research and theoretical elaboration on socio-psychological dynamics and complex organisational phenomena in highly technological work contexts. The work focuses on the problematic issues in the relationship between technological and social aspects determining the uses and, in some cases, the misuses of technology.

The first part of the book shapes a theoretical framework, highlighting the main approaches of cultural psychology (Cole, 1996), that have focused on the relationship between "social" and "technological": activity theory, situated action and community of practice model.

According to such framework Zucchermaglio and Alby state that a better understanding of social and organisational aspects of technology in work contexts is the way to improve the design of digital artefacts. The analysis is based on the two basic assumptions shared by the main contemporary psychological theories. First of all, cognition is considered a social, situated and distributed activity within a given activity system on the job. Second, cognition is rooted in culture, con-

sidered a repertoire of identities, knowledge, artefacts, norms, attitudes and relationships between them, shared and negotiated by the community members.

They have an original and sensitive ethno-methodological look at the complex processes of construction of a shared work identity and at the relationship between individuals and artefacts. They present a point of view that psychological research has neglected for a long time and which the two authors are carrying out in collaboration since 1999, through their works on the narrative and discursive practices in organizational contexts that still ongoing. They give particular consistency to that "invisible work" (Star & Strauss, 1999) and design practices that represent the most part of the technology development process and which is not reported in official documents.

The second part of the book of Zucchermaglio and Alby illustrates such dynamics at work in a particular context of ICT: one of the so called "*dotcoms*" which had a rapid growth in business from the early '90s. They give an actual demonstration of organisational culture embedded in work practices starting from the distinction between professional design and design in use (Suchmann, 1997). Professional design is the process directed to the planning and design of systems-to-be, while design in use concerns the implementation and maintenance of actual systems. The authors describe, by means of a complex and fine grained ethnographical apparatus, the interaction between the teams of content producers and technicians during the different setting of design. According to several research findings (Engeström & Middleton, 1996), each work team is characterized by specific representations of the self and the task, traditions, routines and norms which bring to the construction of different views of the same technological object. Zucchermaglio and Alby clearly show how producers and technicians facing the same technological object, namely a web portal, they represent it in different ways. When the two groups cooperate in the development of the web portal they negotiate and co-construct a shared vision of technology through the externalisation and socialisation of their own points, not only by verbalising them, but also by using all the affordance and channels of the work environment like whiteboards, pen and paper, pointing objects on the screen, the spatial positioning of people.

In the fifth chapter the authors focus on the construction of the professional identity and its relationships with the practices and the organisational culture. Like it happens with the object, also roles, identities and borders are the result of a continuous negotiation process between the members of the two work teams. According to the authors, the organisational culture is characterized by shared repertoires of norms, practices and distribution of work which are basically implicit and allow actors to give sense to their actions because they are really integrated in a common framework.

This book represents an excellent example of psychological research on micro-organisational contexts and maybe the authors should had provided more details on methodological aspects and observation practices, useful for further developments. Nevertheless, it remains an excellent work in which the reader could also catch sight of the relationship between the instability of professional and personal identity and the precarious and flexible evolution of the organisational and job contexts.

References

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