

Presentation of the
International Society for Cultural and Activity Research
(ISCAR)

What is ISCAR?

The International Society for Cultural and Activity Research (ISCAR) is a scientific association that aims to promote and develop multidisciplinary theoretical and empirical research on societal, cultural and historical dimensions of human practices, and to promote mutual scientific communication and research cooperation among its members.

No singular description fully characterizes the intellectual focus of ISCAR, even if the primary frame of reference that has historically brought researchers together from different disciplines into ISCAR has been an interest in a related set of psychologically-oriented theoretical perspectives that were first formulated in the 1920s and 1930s in the Soviet Union by such researchers as L.S. Vygotsky, A.N. Leontiev, A.R. Luria, and S.L. Rubinshtein. International attention to these perspectives by researchers outside of the Soviet Union started in the 1960s, especially by psychologists, educational researchers, and linguists. Subsequently there has been interest from computer and information scientists and other researchers interested in collective practices. The diversity of disciplinary backgrounds and specific research interests led to the reception of these theoretical perspectives in differentiated ways, such that theoretical foci were formulated that emphasized a subset of ideas from these perspectives, and not necessarily from all of them. These foci have subsequently been elaborated further such that today there is no typical or predominant theoretical perspective within ISCAR. Thus it is likely that individual ISCAR members might describe their particular theoretical focus with such descriptive labels as sociocultural, activity-theoretical, cultural-historical, cultural historical activity theory, or critical psychology (to name some of the more common ones).

However, a common point of reference that appears in most, if not all, research conducted by ISCAR members is a focus on the study of specific cultural

practices and/or the genesis and development of mental processes, where practices and processes are conceptualized as historically and collectively developed, mediated through the use of tools and signs, and constructed through participation in these practices. Investigations are directed to both individual and/or collective aspects.

There has been a longstanding practice by researchers within ISCAR's theoretical foci to incorporate ideas from other research approaches and trends of thought that might be relevant for investigating problems and issues of interest that arise from theoretical, empirical, and historical developments. For example, some ISCAR members draw on ideas from such research traditions as pragmatism, symbolic interactionism, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, semiotics, the Bakhtinian discourse tradition, and social studies of science. There is also attention to social and cultural anthropology, history, a variety of sociological traditions, and several social constructivist philosophical traditions.

An important ongoing theme in the development of the theoretical tradition has been the relation between theory and practice. This interest arises in part from a concern within the general theoretical perspective to have a research approach that can contribute to the improvement of societal practice and in part from an epistemological view that psychologically-oriented theories must be developed in relation to the practices in which persons engage. These two aspects of this theme remain important for some, but not necessarily all, ISCAR members.

Another interest for some ISCAR members is to explore the main philosophical traditions toward which the original psychological traditions were oriented; particularly concepts, principles and methods from Marx and Hegel, such as dialectical logic and historical materialism, and in some cases the dialectical materialism as formulated initially by Engels. There is also a continuing interest to integrate ideas from these theoretical traditions and their subsequent further development into specific research approaches.

In short, there is a diversity of theoretical, practical and philosophical interests found among ISCAR members today. Members are interested in a variety of societal practices, primarily within education, work, health and the family. Some of the topics of particular interest include conditions of schooling and instruction for diverse groups (cultural minorities, atypical physical or psychological

development); the design and use of technological tools in relation to work and educational practices; teacher training; children's play and transition to schooling; subject-matter teaching (especially in mathematics, science, history, literacy, and second-language learning), the conditions and characteristics of work practices and/or their transformation and development. Within these diverse fields of practice, it is also possible to find researchers who focus on specific aspects such as identity formation in diverse cultural contexts; cultural diversity and processes of inclusion and exclusion in school and societal life; conditions and contexts for learning; the role of communication and dialogue in forming meaning in work, play, family, and school; the relationship between self and culture from a historical perspective; collective memory; and integrating microanalysis of specific practices with historical and comparative studies.

Historical Origins of ISCAR

ISCAR was formally constituted in June 2002, reflecting a decision to integrate two organizations that were each oriented to supporting scientific communication about different aspects of sociocultural, cultural-historical and activity theory approaches.

One organization was the International Society for Cultural Research and Activity Theory (ISCRAT), which held its first Congress in Berlin in 1986. This congress was initiated as a further development of three previous conferences held in the early 1980s in Northern Europe, with participants primarily from the Nordic countries, Germany, the Netherlands, and the Soviet Union. Subsequent congresses were held every 4 years in Lahti (Finland), Moscow, Aarhus (Denmark), and Amsterdam, with participants coming from all over the world.

The second organization centered on the quadrennial Conference for Sociocultural Research, first held in Madrid in 1992, with subsequent conferences in Geneva and Campinas, Brazil. Participants in these Conferences came from all over the world. Many were interested in developing sociocultural and historical research perspectives, drawing on cultural and cognitive psychology, the Bahktinian discourse tradition, and diverse studies with Vygotskian perspectives in related disciplines such as educational sciences, anthropology, sociology, sociolinguistics and history.

By the end of the 1990s, it became clear that the two organizations shared similar concerns and drew from some of the same theoretical sources. Many researchers were actively participating in both conferences, and recognized that their efforts were both overlapping and complementary. As the result of numerous contacts established by researchers from five continents, it was decided that unifying the two organizations would further emphasize the relevance and importance of the research trends that both embodied and enriched their diverse regional origins. Thus, at the Fifth ISCRAT Congress in Amsterdam 2002, the International Society for Cultural and Activity Research (ISCAR) was founded with the aim of continuing to further develop the interests represented in the two previous organizations, while preserving respect and recognition of the diverse interests of the participants.

Current Activities

- A main function of ISCAR is to support the organization of a triennial international Congress for the presentation of research within the sphere of the Society's interests. The first congress will be held in Seville, Spain, September 20-24, 2005. All researchers and professionals who are interested in the theoretical perspectives found within ISCAR are invited participate in this congress.
- An electronic newsletter is sent to members several times per year.
- In some regions of the world, ISCAR sections have been formed. These sections often have their own webpages, and in some cases organize conferences, ph.d. courses and related activities.

Hopes for the Future

Researchers who participate in ISCAR are oriented to the importance of analysing interconnections among sociocultural, political and historical perspectives for understanding and developing societal practices, cultural life and the mind. Dominant political and economical interests that reign internationally are often in tension with local, cultural traditions of practice. Scientific and societal changes, sometimes quite rapidly, have yielded new conditions and mediating instruments for communication and knowledge production, which in turn have resulted in the

elaboration of new social practices and the modification of existing practices. In recognition of advances being made in different fields of the social and human sciences as well as the practical professions, ISCAR seeks to establish a long-lasting structure and forum that will encourage research and discussions that will help to both better understand the development of individuals, communities, and societies in these contemporary conditions, and to participate constructively in their dynamics.

Who can be a member of ISCAR?

ISCAR welcomes all researchers who are interested in the Society's conceptual focus on theoretical and empirical research on societal, cultural and historical dimensions of human practices. At present ISCAR has members from a wide range of disciplines interested in the study of human development and societal practices including psychology, education, philosophy, history, sociology, linguistics, anthropology, work research, computer sciences, information systems, knowledge management, clinical neuropsychology and rehabilitation, occupational therapy, criminology, and social work.

For more information:

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