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Full length article

## Identities in motion – Boundary-crossing learning from an intrapersonal perspective

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how learning unfolds in poly-contextual settings. In work-related learning, boundaries between contexts have been viewed as learning resources. From the multilevel approach suggested by Akkerman and Bruining (2016), we focus on the intrapersonal level, on individuals as units of analysis. We propose an intrapersonal methodology and demonstrate it with an empirical study based on individual interviews. We combine cultural-historical activity theory understanding of an individual with Mariann Märtsin's ideas of identity construction and identity as subjective sense through multivoiced negotiations of meaning at the boundaries within the self. Our analysis demonstrates how the interviewees offered examples of identity construction that show how they rendered their being meaningful in the world in all its diversity without losing the unity of the self. Situationally dominant senses opened fields of meaning potentials with mediating semiotic devices at the boundary between the personal and the professional. The analysis points to some generalizability of sensemaking as a generic process that always operates in unique forms. Our findings suggest that exploring subjectivity from the perspective of sense-making may contribute to research on work-related learning by addressing an object of sense making which is dialogically comprised with hybridity, multiplicity, and complexity.

### 1. Introduction

In work-related educational research, boundaries have been viewed as learning resources that trigger reflection and efforts to (re) establish continuity in actions and interactions across different, increasingly specialized domains of work (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; see also Edwards, 2010; Engeström et al., 1995; Kerosuo, 2006). Against the basic and commonly held presupposition that professionals learn best in situations of sameness in the minds, Akkerman and Bakker, drawing on their review of several poly-contextual boundary crossing studies, propose that boundaries as in-between spaces of multiple perspectives and parties have brought a potentially new horizon in educational theory. To give theoretical grounding to their claims on learning, Akkerman and Bakker reference the concept of dialogicality (Marková, 2003) as the ontological characteristic of human mind to conceive, create, and communicate about social realities through mutual engagement of the ego (i.e., self or selves) and the alter (i.e., others) (see also Engeström, 2023). Likewise, Akkerman and Bruining (2016) have taken up a multilevel approach to explicate different units of analysis in boundary crossing research. They suggest that, at an *institutional level* of boundary crossing, actions and interactions are

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initiated between multiple organizations or organizational units; at an *interpersonal level*, boundary crossing relates to actions and interactions between specific groups from different practices; and at an *intrapersonal level*, people participate simultaneously in intersecting practices and literally come to *embody* the boundary. Our paper focuses on the intrapersonal level for investigating learning of individuals who participated in a multi-professional and multi-organizational project. The project followed the ideas of expansive learning theory (Engeström, 2015/1987) indicating a transformative learning mechanism in terms of boundary crossing research.<sup>1</sup>

The project concerned was conducted as a learning network setting,<sup>2</sup> in which practitioners and project researchers came together to examine family mediation activity (Bergman-Pyykkönen, 2017; Haavisto, 2018). The practitioners came from both different organizations as well as professional domains, including social work, family therapy and legal. While the framework of expansive learning is known for the move from individual to collective unit of learning, our research took a direction back to individual. Our interest derives from the position of cultural-historical activity theory in which the processes of tool-mediated practice, the social relations among people, and the individual mechanisms need to be viewed as a unified system of relations which are dialectically connected (Stetsenko, 2005, p. 85; Engeström, 2009). Within this unity, subjective mechanisms belong to the realm where individuals become construed as an agentive and inherently necessary moment within unfolding collective activity and learning processes. This position links our interest to research on agency in professional learning. Scholars in this field have suggested that more emphasis should be placed on the relation between learning and subjectivity as well as on issues of individual identity that imply “a need to consider subjects' sense of professional self” (Eteläpelto et al., 2014, p. 650; see also Billett, 2011; Edwards, 2010; Karvinen-Niinikoski et al., 2019). The aim of this research is to explore the intrapersonal perspective of boundary crossing and contribute to current literature on the relation between subjectivity and learning and how it unfolds in the context of work-related learning.

The main part of the paper contains the construction of an intrapersonal methodology and its demonstration with an empirical study based on individual interviews. We rely theoretically on the cultural-historical understanding of an individual, not individualistically separated, but instead related to a person's involvement in the world and a way of being in concrete situations (Stetsenko, 2017; Stetsenko & Arievidtch, 1997). In this regard, we find it useful to explore Märtsin's (2010a, 2010b, 2019) ideas of identity construction and identity as subjective sense through multivoiced negotiations of meaning at the boundaries within the self (Valsiner, 2007). She approaches identity development as a by-product of the individual's ongoing process of meaning-making – “a temporary stabilisation in the flow of interpretation and reinterpretation of signs” – in encounters with the world (Märtsin, 2019, p. 168). In our approach, multivoiced negotiations of meaning are seen to occur in both inner and outer dialogues as a means of resolving new in relation to what has been and striving for meaningfulness by reducing uncertainty and ambiguity in social practice (Bakhtin, 1981; Engeström, 2014; Marková, 2004).

The paper is organized as follows. To begin, we describe the project with information about data collection, including the data used in this study. This is followed by the methodological section which focuses on the construction of an intrapersonal approach to boundary crossing and introduces the multi-voiced method of this study. Our findings regarding subjects' sense of professional self and learning are presented with illustrative examples from data analyses. At the end, we discuss our findings in relation to professional agency defined from the perspective of socially and dialogically constituted subjectivity in the context of work-related learning.

## 2. Background and data

### 2.1. The family mediation project

The FASPER project (Finnish abbreviation of *facilitative family mediation*<sup>3</sup>) was launched in response to an identified societal need for the further development of family mediation practice. Family mediation legislation was introduced in Finland in the Marriage Law of 1987, but service provisions were ambiguous and ill-defined and remained largely unknown to both professionals and divorcing parents. In Finland the level of marital divorce is high<sup>4</sup> and every year, about thirty thousand children are affected by parental

<sup>1</sup> In their review of the literature on boundary crossing, Akkerman and Bakker (2011) identified four learning mechanisms that explicate in what way boundaries carry learning potential: identification, coordination, reflection, and transformation.

<sup>2</sup> Multi-professional and multi-organizational learning networks are usually designed to enhance learning through boundary crossing with a view to develop and create qualitatively different practices and innovations (Alasoini, 2011). In these networks, the object of learning and the object of collaboration are intertwined and inseparable; in other words, the knowledge gained is not abstract but relates to specific practices, products, technologies and how to collaborate (Toiviainen, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> In Europe, the term ‘family mediation’ is preferred to ‘divorce mediation’, which is more common in the United States. Although family mediation can be used in a wide range of disputes involving family members, it is most used to address issues that arise during divorce or separation. Family mediation is typically used to facilitate the process of transition from one family structure to another, including communication, cooperative decision-making, and relationship renegotiation (Parkinson, 2011, p. 6).

<sup>4</sup> In the twenty-first century, the number of marriages has declined (from about twenty-eight thousand in 2000 to about twenty thousand in 2021), but the number of divorces has not declined to the same extent (from about fourteen thousand to twelve thousand during the same period) (Statistics Finland, finstat.fi).

separation (Aaltonen, 2015). When parental quarrels escalate, the ensuing conflicts can have severe effects, both personal (see, for example, Kelly & Emery, 2003) and financial (Hämäläinen, 2011). These disputes can become complex and difficult for social work, child protection, counselling, and family therapy professionals,<sup>5</sup> especially for child welfare supervisors<sup>6</sup> and judges who must make and enforce court decisions regarding custody and maintenance agreements (Mattila-Aalto et al., 2012).

FASPER was a four-year multi-professional and multi-organizational project (2009–2014) that began with no preconceived model of family mediation (Haavisto, 2018; Haavisto et al., 2014). Instead, its bottom-up design drew on local knowledge and transformative learning. The project's developmental work involved three learning networks summoned explicitly to bring together knowledge and practices from several domains of work and to encourage collaboration across boundaries. Participants included social workers in child protection and municipal family counselling, child welfare supervisors, family workers, psychologists, family counsellors from the Lutheran church, family therapists and attorneys and judges who were responsible for child custody arrangements. Within these learning networks, participants and researcher-interventionists came together as learners, and external experts delivered lectures on topics that included experiences of family mediation in the UK.

During the project, network participants developed models for family mediation practice which they then piloted working as mediators in interprofessional pairs. These pilots were documented for subsequent use within the networks; with written informed consent from the parents, mediation sessions were audio-recorded. In addition, parents and mediators were interviewed after the session. Working together, FASPER participants and researchers developed a process model for family mediation, a toolkit for mediators, a service model for family mediation as a multi-organizational network and an elementary training programme for family mediators (Haavisto, 2018). From the beginning of the project to the end, the first author contributed as a researcher-interventionist, and the third author served as the project's scientific leader.

## 2.2. Study data

During the project, we gathered a range of data typically used in developmental intervention projects, including initial interviews, observations, memorandums, plans, proposed models, pilot interviews and individual interviews with some participants at the end of the project.

The present study draws on data from eight individual semi-structured interviews with members of one learning network. The interviews were conducted after all three learning networks had completed their work and the developed models had been implemented. The eight participants chosen as interviewees (Table 1) participated actively throughout the project, and four of them had participated in developing and piloting the elementary training programme for family mediators. At the time of the interviews, all the interviewees were working as family mediators; in every case, the interviewer and interviewee were already acquainted, as they had worked together during the project.

The e-mail invitation to participate in the final interviews posed some general questions about the topics of interest, including the following. *What happened during the journey (i.e., the project), and what was your experience? What helped you or made it difficult to learn to be a mediator? What do you think and feel about the family mediation system you helped to co-develop during the project? What do you think about working and learning with practitioners from diverse professional fields and organizations?*

In addition, the e-mail included a map of the 'project journey' (Fig. 1), which the interviewer created to facilitate the interview dialogue. This external 'in-between' artefact was intended to provide a shared point of reference when exploring different perspectives on project events and as a sign-creating anchor for sensemaking (Engeström, 2009).

All of those invited agreed to participate in the interview. The interviews were conducted at the respondent's place of work, either in their own workspace or in a room used for meetings with client families. The active interviewing process invited the interviewee to play the role of "a kind of researcher in his or her own right, consulting repertoires of experience and orientations, linking fragments into patterns, and offering 'theoretically' coherent descriptions, accounts, and explanations" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Each interview took about 90 min; all were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim by the interviewer, and shared with the other authors.

The next section outlines the theoretical basis for our methodology and analysis.

## 3. Intrapersonal analysis of boundary crossing

### 3.1. Methodology

The intrapersonal level of boundary crossing made us revisit the methodology of the developmental project FASPER, in which the project is seen as a collective learning activity around a *shared object* of different groups, organizations, or activity systems. To conceptualize the shift of our focus to individual participants of the project, we turned to the notion of *inter-object* which allows for

<sup>5</sup> We acknowledge the debate on defining 'profession' and 'professional' in the sociology of professions (e.g., Abbott, 1988; Brante, 2011; Evetts, 2003, 2013). However, we use the term 'professional' in line with Edwards (2010) to denote practitioners that are expected to "do more than simply follow routine procedures or tackle prescribed tasks" (Edwards, 2010, p. 3). The participants in project FASPER were all considered experts with a higher education and career in their respective occupational fields.

<sup>6</sup> Child welfare supervisors are social workers or lawyers by training who work in municipal family law services. They administer confirmation on paternity and maternity as well as prepare and register parental agreements on child custody, living arrangements, visitation rights, and maintenance after separation/divorce.

**Table 1**  
Information on the eight interviewed professionals.

Work orientation	Occupation	Organization
Therapeutic	Family therapist	Public social service
Therapeutic	Family counsellor	Counselling provided by Church organization
Therapeutic	Family counsellor	Counselling provided by Church organization
Judicial	Judge	District court
Judicial and social work	Child welfare supervisor	Public social service
Social work	Social worker	Public child protection
Social counselling	Family worker	Public child protection
Social counselling	Social counsellor	NGO

recognizing reflective activity actualized by the means of sense making (Engeström, 2014). These means are both cultural artifacts and individually constructed interpretations of subjects having linkages of past events to the present of biographically active persons. The means bring about the relevance of a notion of *personal sense* that refers to a distinction between (social) meaning and sense (Leontiev, 1978; see also Nissen, 2011). In the conceptual framework of activity theory, Bratus (2005) has argued that the sense is not so much object-related as inter-object having a synonym of ‘subjective connection’, i.e., subjectively established and personally experienced connection between the people, objects, and phenomena that surround a person in time and space. In the dynamics of a poly-contextual, boundary crossing setting, contexts are connected to shifting processes but supported by living, responsive, dialogic relations (Engeström, 2014).

To examine project participants at the boundary from the intrapersonal perspective of boundary crossing, we need to clarify what kind of boundary we expect to be crossed in our study. At the intrapersonal level, following Akkerman and Bruining (2016), boundary crossings can occur when people simultaneously participate in intersecting practices (p. 248). In our case, practitioners experienced processes where they were supposed to add and accommodate family mediation to their core disciplinary practices. In intersecting practices, the practitioners must engage in dialogue with themselves between different perspectives of work. The professional practitioner is often seen as a person with a social identity as a member of a particular professional community who uses professional resources from education and practice in their daily tasks and upholds ethical commitments (e.g., Wenger, 1998). Our focus on the intrapersonal level in these intersections and on subjectivity in learning led us to distance ourselves from the given professional identity (see Kramer, 2021) and instead use a concept of identity that strives for a perspective on *identity construction related to individual sensemaking*.

As mentioned (see Introduction), we found Märtsin's ideas useful for approaching subjectivity in our study. She (2010a; 2010b) draws upon Jaan Valsiner's insights of self and sensemaking in her proposal for a general model of identity construction, which deals with the double, and simultaneous, aspects of identity. On one hand, identity provides a sense of sameness and continuity; on the other hand, identity – as a process of being – is momentary, fluid, and multiple. The subjective sense of sameness and continuity connects diverse images of the self by placing these in senseful relation to each other, and thus renders one's being in the world in its diversity meaningful. On this view, identity as subjective sense “does not pre-exist its dialogical encounter with otherness, but instead becomes created within and through that encounter”; in other words, identity is constructed “in certain situations, in relation to meaning fields that are opened by these situations” (2010b, p. 110). Märtsin applies this view of identity to explore “those more or less conscious externalized dialogues where people are constructing meaning through dialogically engaging with different signs (voices, I-positions), and through which people become episodically aware of the meanings they hold about themselves and about their relation to the surrounding world” (2010b, p. 110). From this it follows that these dialogues are the arena where a person's unique, lived-through experience becomes ordered and rendered meaningful. Various signs – “a person's and others' utterances, gestures, properties of the setting, available collective meaning potentials and the myriad of signs from past and future evoked by the signs that are available here and now” (Märtsin, 2010b p. 110) – are gathered up and placed in meaningful relations to each other through dialogue. In this way, a subjective sense of the situation and one's position within it emerges temporally stabilizing the flow of experiences and the related flow of signs.

Märtsin builds upon Valsiner's ideas of self and sensemaking which include a fuzzy field of highly generalized meta-signs. The field is fuzzy because we cannot define its boundaries or specific content (Märtsin, 2019, 38). Märtsin (2010a) appropriated these ideas to explain the link between our subjective sense of continuity and sameness and the ongoing meaning-making process as we encounter the world. In her view (p. 439), the situationally created subjective sense is distanced from the situation in which it originally emerged, and becomes a generalized, trans-situational subjective sign that can be integrated into “a person's intra-psychological system” (Valsiner, 2001) or identity as “hyper-generalized personal sense” (Märtsin, 2010a). Likewise, Märtsin (2010a, 2019) suggests that we can reasonably deal with the “multiplicity and unity” paradox by conceiving of this process of being as resulting in the construction of a fuzzy field of hyper-generalized personal sense which functions ordinarily as an implicit and unspeakable background of our everyday existence while being constantly re-created through momentary instances of foregrounded and explicit identity-dialogues. To illustrate this idea, she offers the metaphor of carpet-weaving as an image for thinking about identity as multiple and fragmented but also unified and same (Märtsin, 2010a, 2019).

We applied these ideas of the inter-object and identity construction to the analysis of social encounters with otherness being accounted in the interviews. In the terminology concerning semiotic mediation the words ‘sense’ and ‘meaning’ are central and often used in literature and the present paper interchangeably. Instead of indicating that the words have the same meaning, in our use associated with dialogicality, they rather signify different sides of meaning making, i.e., making ‘the world’ meaningful for us and

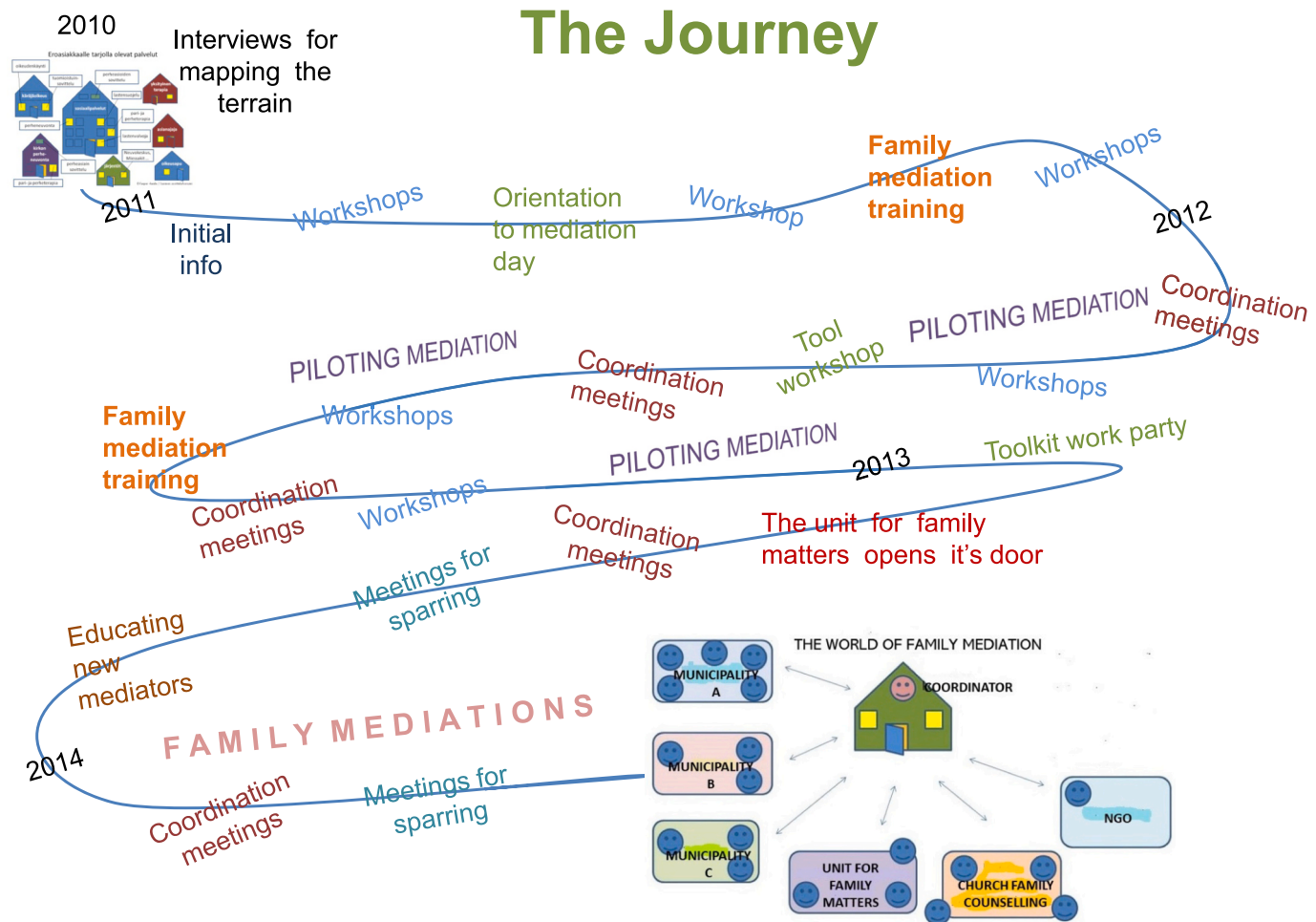


Fig. 1. The family mediation journey (text items translated for this article). The picture shows events during project FASPER, and it was created to facilitate interview dialogue.

positioning ourselves to the world with dialogue with ourselves and other people. In the background of Valsiner's theorizing (assumably influencing also Märtsin's work), the cultural heritage of the Vygotskian tradition is obvious including the distinction between sense and meaning. (Vygotsky, 1986). Valsiner (2007, 269–370) underlines, by citing Vygotsky, the dynamic relationship of these terms and their unity in the given context. In his description of the distinction, the dynamic, fluid personal sense makes use of potential meanings encoded in language and constructs ever-impresic semiotic devices which encounter the experiential uncertainty that the person faces in the given situation. The meaning instead is obtained by inserting the previous meaning into a novel context of communication realizing the potential of the meaning even if anchored on only one of the zones of the sense that the word acquires in the context of speech. Relating different meanings of these terms (sense and meaning) to different theoretical frameworks, Per Linell (2009, 28) regards Bakhtinian dialogism (dialogicality) as “a framework for explicating human sense-making” and when it is concerned with accounts of sense making “‘sense’ is of course taken to mean roughly ‘meaning’” for the reason that dialogism deals with the processes in human meaning-making in and through language, in thinking, communication and action, and the products of such processes. In his theory of ‘the dialogical self’ Hubert J. M. Hermans (2001, 243) locating himself at the intersection between the psychology of the self and the dialogical tradition of Bakhtin proposes a view which challenges the ideas of essential self and essential culture and conceives these in terms of “a multiplicity of positions among which dialogical relationships can develop”. This view, which also fits to synthesize our approach, allows for the study of the self as ‘culture-inclusive’ and of culture as ‘self-inclusive’.

To investigate sense making at the intrapersonal level of boundary crossing we formulated the following research question: *How do the interviewees construct their identity or subjective sense of being in their encounters with work-related change and how is learning manifested in their accounts of identity construction?*

### 3.2. Method of analysis

The analysis of interview data employed the method of multivoicedness, informed by the epistemology of dialogism (Aveling et al., 2015; Bakhtin, 1981; Marková, 2003; Engeström, 1995, 2023). In Bakhtin's writings a voice is “a speaking subject's perspective” through which agency construes (see Wertsch, 1991, 51). The voice and I-positioning are parallel concepts in our analysis being culturally mediated by words which connect individual speech to the social life of language (see on “social languages”, Bakhtin, 1981). Words do not exist inside or outside of individual consciousness; rather language lies “on the borderline between oneself and the other” where “the speaker populates it [word] with his own intentions, his own accent... adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention” (Bakhtin, 1981, 293) resulting in multivoicedness of communication. In addressing how the individual ascribes meaning to the world and determines what is cognitively, emotionally, or otherwise relevant for her, dialogism captures the heterogeneity of situations. In dealing with ‘the multi-layeredness’ of meanings carried by other places and temporalities and seeing a ‘here-and-now’ situation as crisscrossed by a ‘there-and-then’ (Engeström, 2014; Grossen, 2009; Marková, 2004), this approach differs from the interactional analysis of dialogues and conversations as well as discourse analytical orientations. Aveling et al. (2015, pp. 683–684) advanced four principles that are good to bear in mind when applying dialogism. 1) Analysis cannot be isolated from context because dialogism posits the interdependence of Self, Other and the social field. 2) There is a need to remain open to alternative interpretations. 3) Interpretative skills and contextual knowledge inform the wider social and symbolic contexts. 4) The researcher needs to deal with reflexivity to be sensitive to how the research encounter itself might foreground particular voices and dialogical dynamics.

We approached the data by reading the transcripts of the interviews as externalized dialogues that appropriated meaning fields opened by the interviewer with the help of the journey map (Fig. 1.). The interview situation served as an arena in which the project participant could construct meanings by engaging dialogically with different I-positions evoked by signs made available by utterances of the interviewee and others', including signs from the past and future, and properties of the setting. The analysis began with an open and data-driven reading of the interview text, mapping subjective connections that the interviewee made between people, objects, and phenomena (Engeström, 2014). The method demanded iterative readings of each transcript to clarify how the interviewee gathered and placed signs in meaningful relations to each other within the context of the interview as a whole (Aveling et al., 2015). This gathering up, as Märtsin (2010a, 2019) has argued from the point of view of identity construction, temporally stabilizes the flow of experiences and the related flow of signs allowing the person to become episodically aware of the meanings they ascribe to themselves and how those meanings related to the surrounding world –in our case, the project content.

Our process of interpretation followed the hermeneutic circle as “the dynamic relationship between each part and the whole, and between a text and its context” (Packer, 2018, p. 482). We strived for what Packer (p. 483) denotes a *hermeneutic of the subject* that acknowledges the dynamic relation between being and world, and between past and future, understanding a person's knowing as a manner of being that one can develop via actual interaction. The analysis was accomplished by all three authors and through their discussions about alternatives of interpretations. The discussion simultaneously supported self-reflection of the interviewer (the first author) as project researcher and facilitating project participant.

## 4. Findings

The analysis of subjects' sense of professional self, revealed a rich diversity of subjective connections that informed interviewees' sensemaking and self-positioning in relation to boundaries of work-related learning. Acknowledging this uniqueness of personal sense making, we sought to capture how each interviewee gathered the flow of signs and experiences to remake the meaning ascribed to themselves and the surrounding world, including their own disciplinary practice. While each of the eight interviewees told a unique story, those stories were not continuous or linear but were constructed in the moment as reactions to other(ness) and foregrounded certain aspects of the existing field of personal sense. The next section draws on three interviews to show the interplay between our

theoretical analysis of subjectivity and data reading. These three were selected to represent different organizations and work tasks or work orientations (see Table 1). We summarize the analyses by a section of relating the insights to learning.

#### 4.1. Situationally dominant subjective senses

Our first interviewee worked in family counselling and pair therapy and as a professional supervisor. In the interview, she<sup>7</sup> depicted herself as “*the kind of person who likes to seek and be on borderlines*”. In Excerpt 1, responding to the interviewer's question about whether she has different identities for different tasks at work including mediation, she crossed the work boundary to cite an example of mediation in her private life.

**Excerpt 1.** (Interviewee TW/6<sup>8</sup>): *I found, by the way, even in my private life, not at work, I encountered a problematic situation in my friend's family between mother and son, not between the parents, and it was serious [...] I went there and positioned myself not only as a friend but as a person applying this know-how [of mediation]. I was surprised that it worked out and solved the conflict and it seems to be lasting [...] As I usually play a very different role in relation to these people, I had to mentally put on the mediator's coat to be able to speak differently with these persons while mediating.*<sup>9</sup>

One sign that popped up repeatedly as she spoke was “*the coat*” and the expression “*to put on the mediator's coat*”, which she used as a metaphor for undertaking a certain task. The interviewee wanted to be seen as aware of professional boundaries and she emphasized that she is not someone who goes and gets involved in the lives of her friends or those closest to her. She liked the metaphor of the coat because it could be put on in a given situation and then taken off. She linked this to experiences in her childhood.

**Excerpt 2.** (Interviewee TW/6): *I consider it important that persons are subjects in their own lives and that I do not get involved. This stance probably comes from my own background; my mother was someone who had an excessive desire to take care of everything. She came in through doors and windows [tried to get involved in everything], and I learned to set boundaries.*

Responding to the interviewer's original question on several identities, she continued.

**Excerpt 3.** (Interviewee TW/6): *One thing that is clear, which I take for granted, is that when I am a professional supervisor, I am a professional supervisor. In fact, I have already learnt to put on the coat when practicing as a professional supervisor. When I am a supervisor, I am not a therapist. It can be therapy if you want to think of it that way; in the same way, you can also think about mediation as therapeutic if you like. It is ‘a line drawn in water’.*

In response to the above reflection on boundaries, the interviewer posed a question: ‘Is it a kind of role?’

**Excerpt 4.** (Interviewee TW/6): *Well, no, I do not feel that I am changing. I am a unity and remain the same. For instance, if I am working as a professional supervisor, and I notice that there is an issue that requires us to go beyond the task to take a slightly therapeutic look, I say this aloud [to the client] [...] I see that this is possible in mediation, too, and I have used some professional supervision tools in that context. It's as if I have these three soups to mix but as they have arrived one at a time, they have become ordered in relation to each other [...] and are not in conflict but, on the contrary, definitely support each other.*

The ‘coat’ metaphor might arise in other interviews as well, but beyond the available collective meanings, this interviewee's use of it offered her a way (or ‘*the method*’) of being aware of the boundaries while simultaneously being able to consciously go beyond or across them.

**Excerpt 5.** (Interviewee TW/6): *The mediator's coat is kind of an automatic pattern when parents come to mediation. I do not actively think about it because it seems to relate to my basic work. Actually, in a way, we mediate people all the time even when only one person comes in. We mediate this person, which means mediating between one's matters, one's whole life, between aspects of one's biographical history or something. This comes close to my normal work.*

The coat switching served as a semiotic device in a field of intersecting meaning potentials in different contexts and to provide unity by sustaining the same subjectivity on the borderline of different tasks.

To display another example, we follow an interviewee who had several task positions at her workplace related, in different ways, to intimate relationship consultation. During the project, she was also undertaking further education in the domain of psychotherapy. When asked how she managed to move between these tasks and family mediation, she opened a field of subjectively relevant meanings by introducing the issue of ‘*peace*’ and extending this sign beyond her working context.

**Excerpt 6.** (Interviewee CW/4): *Well, in a certain way they are different tasks in which I perform different roles. But on the other hand, they all concern the same issue because therapy meetings also include divorce or post-divorce issues. Indeed, this divorce theme is strongly related to*

<sup>7</sup> As a strategy to guarantee anonymity we have chosen by lot to call all the interviewees ‘she’ although both genders are represented in the excerpts.

<sup>8</sup> We use the following abbreviations to describe the interviewees' work context: TW = therapy work; CW = counselling; JW = judicial work. The eight interviews were originally randomly numbered from 1 to 8. The numbers connected to the excerpts do not follow the order in Table 1.

<sup>9</sup> We use brackets to help the reader in two ways: [...] means that part of the transcribed talk is left out, and [of mediation] indicates that the text in brackets is the authors' annotations.

my basic work, but therapy work involves other themes, too. But what's funny, is that ever since I was a young girl, I have essentially always been an advocate of peace. I never understood how people could kill each other, or why there are still wars in the world, or why people are unable to resolve their conflicts. I feel that this mediation task is, for me, a way to make a small contribution to peace making.

Continuing her response, she referred to another way in which she makes visible the inter-related facets of personal sense or multiple senses in processing her being.

**Excerpt 7.** (Interviewee CW/4): *On the other hand, I believe that change starts from the individual [...] in consciously coming to terms with themselves and understanding and acting differently in relation to conflicts [...] And the family is the basic unit from which everything starts, where children learn the patterns of thinking from the parents.*

Addressing the interviewee's interest in psychotherapy, the interviewer asked her whether her insights concerning the individual came from there or whether they were related in some other way to individuals. In her response, the interviewee extended her professional approach to a broader view of humanity.

**Excerpt 8.** (Interviewee CW/4): *Well, perhaps they are related to a particular view of man. I think and believe, you see, that we live to grow as persons. In a way, I am – or regard myself as – strongly oriented to personal growth, and I like the idea that this is the purpose of life. That's why I like to support other people in this kind of process of change.*

Combining her view of personal growth and project experiences, the interviewee referred to learning which she passed through while practicing family mediation in pairs during the project's pilot.

**Excerpt 9.** (Interviewee CW/4): *When engaging in mediation, I have to take the child's view. I have had to learn this because it doesn't come naturally to me as a person or from my work. I began to understand this mostly while working with another mediator and I have learnt to acknowledge the child and to ask questions of concern to the children.*

In constructing her subjective sense, the interviewee also looked beyond her professional life by recalling her memories of being a child.

**Excerpt 10.** (Interviewee CW/4): *It is interesting that, as in my work, I am myself a child of divorce. Now and then I felt that I was not seen by the adults in my own case, – that, in a way, I was dismissed – and that because I might carry these experiences inside me and follow a similar model, I may easily dismiss the child when I should see her.*

Associating the activity of family mediation with peace making enabled the interviewee to open several fields of meaning and to construct dialogical hybridities that captured identity as a process that is multiple and fragmented, yet also unified and same.

In both above interviews, although the respondents differed in terms of their professional tasks, the organizations they worked for both provided services in the field of social and family counselling. To compare those findings with the sensemaking of a practitioner whose work is not essentially about human counselling, the following excerpts come from an interview with a court practitioner. To begin, the interviewee was asked about her motive for participating in the project. In her response, she registered her discontent with her work situation before mediation became an option and described her own feelings and experiences.

**Excerpt 11.** (Interviewee JW/1): *Attending a court session that dealt with a child custody issue, where the parents were quarrelling, was very distressing for me [...] I assumed then that most judges did not like these sessions either and that it was a must-do task that must somehow be completed although very uncomfortable. This education [participating in a learning network] offered me a perspective how to educate oneself to look after people in crisis.*

The interviewee made it clear that she did not want to highlight her court background during the project because she did not consider this focal to family mediation. On the contrary, she viewed it as “a thing which you have to throw away when acting as a mediator”. The interviewer asked her how she switched from judicial thinking to mediation.

**Excerpt 12.** (Interviewee JW1): *I think this kind of attitude is innate and has always been a part of me, while judicial thinking is a kind of expertise acquired through education.*

The interviewer then invited her to elaborate on this comparison by asking whether mediation has fewer restrictions [than legal practice].

**Excerpt 13.** (Interviewee JW1): *Well, it's funny, I think that mediation does not have the same restrictions but, of course, in mediation, you must control your talk and think very carefully what to say in order to allow people their own texture. However, the substance is freer because it is, let's say, cross-disciplinary in that you can move between many domains [...] In particular, individuals who are trained in therapy have an excellent ability to ask questions. That's what I admire, and if I could be even half as good, that would advance my practice.*

In the iterative reading of the interview as a whole, it emerged that the interviewee repeatedly raised issues from her personal life while answering questions about her work. For example, in response to the question of what might be transferable between judicial work and family mediation, the interviewee started from her position as a member of a judicial community, but her view shifted from the professional to the personal.

**Excerpt 14.** (Interviewee JW1): *In our court group, we shared the view that this kind of reform [developing family mediation as a social service outside court] includes something that relates to our work's future and that there is good reason to get involved. Of course, many personal reasons that have been meaningful and rewarding for me, have also kept me involved. At a personal level, I was already quite interested*

*in psychology at school, but when our children were born, our life situation did not allow me to continue with higher education. Instead, I availed of any learning opportunities at work, especially regarding how to meet people in the court room. For me, this interest has influenced my willingness to stay [in the project] because it offers such good material and ideas to ponder and put into practice.*

This interview can be linked to the other two examples in terms of how the interviewees constructed an identity or subjective sense of being in their encounters with the world by introducing meaningful relations at the boundary between the personal and the professional without losing the unity of the self. Beyond the unique connections in their sensemaking, all three interviewees offered examples of identity construction that show how they rendered their being meaningful in the world in all its diversity. In all three interviews, situationally dominant sense opened fields of meaning potentials with mediating semiotic devices, such as going beyond, extending and crossing the semiotic fields, while setting boundaries for anticipated actions in the domain of mediation.

The analysis points to some generalizability of sensemaking as “a generic process that always operates in unique forms” (Valsiner, 2005, 204). According to Valsiner, generalizability is a sign's propensity to create an abstracted reflection upon and become generalized beyond the situation in which it originally emerged. In his view, this propensity becomes observable in semiotic devices including promoter signs that have transformed into a generalized and trans-situational form and can be integrated into the fuzzy field of personal sense, from where they can be taken up and be used in sensemaking in novel contexts. Our interviewees' stories show, as Valsiner (2005, 202) also proposes, that any sign can potentially be functioning as a promoter sign, a semiotic mediating device, that extends from the past to the possibilities of future. Following then Märtsin's (2010a) idea of identity as a by-product of meaning making and semiotic process, we contend that the results reveal the sense of self as an aspect of being that persists when backgrounded until it is foregrounded and re-created through momentary instances of identity-dialogues. On this interpretation, our findings show how the individual comes to literally embody the boundary at the intrapersonal level of boundary crossing.

#### 4.2. Negotiations between identity and learning

The strong ties and connections between identity and learning have been highlighted in sociocultural theories suggesting that “learning involves the construction of identities—a process whereby learning creates identity, and identity creates learning” (Stetsenko, 2017, 333). Our analysis, conducted by tracing and articulating connections that the interviewees made between different fields of meaning, shows how the practitioners gathered up different experiences and observations and placed them in meaningful relation to each other without losing the unity of the self. It is notable that the interviewees emphasized the sameness of themselves when they simultaneously recounted learning experiences in facing new challenges in work. Contributing to make sense of ‘who I am’ and ‘who I want to become’, learning involved in identity construction pertained to positioning in and enacting the world as a part of the whole subjective self (see also Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). The analysis captured boundaries such as work/personal, childhood/adult and family mediation/work in other disciplinary field by showing how the interviewees adopted alternating I-positions to enter these contexts and constructed dialogical hybridities needed for being in the field of intersecting meaning systems (Engeström, 2023). These findings can be seen to confirm the dialectical interdependence of personal sensemaking and collective meaning fields. As such, we consider the intrapersonal perspective as a valuable analytic lens for giving a rich and more nuanced description of how learning unfolds in professional contexts.

In the next session, we discuss how to relate our findings and the used methodology to the research on subjectivity as an intrinsic part of professional agency.

### 5. Discussion

The aim of this research was to explore the intrapersonal level of boundary crossing to contribute to current literature on the relation between subjectivity and learning in work-related context. The focus was put on agency which we defined from the perspective of socially and dialogically constituted subjectivity in learning. The existing research on work-related learning includes proposals to incorporate the personal issues of self and subjectivity in explanations of learning. For example, the well-known scholar in the field of adult education (Billett, 2006, 2011; see also Billett & Choy, 2013), advances a theoretical model underlining the importance of subjectivity in professional learning. The model conceptualises learning through and for work in terms of a duality involving a relational interdependence between personal and social contributions. Billett's use of ‘relational’ refers to an interdependence based on needs of both the social worlds and the persons. Working life, i.e., the social world, requires agentic individuals to remake and transform practices, whereas individuals need the knowledge embedded in the history and cultural practices of given work settings. Because the social world does not express its message unequivocally and unambiguously, the individuals must actively interpret what is being suggested. Therefore, a way of how individuals engage with new experiences is connected to personally agentic epistemological processes. Beyond the social, individuals necessarily construct their own views about work, workplace participation and performance requirements – being premised upon what they know: their cognitive experience. Although the social may ultimately enforce conformity, it is always the individual who elects to engage (or not) in transforming practices at work that also leads to transforming the individual, to learning, as Billett (2011) highlights.

Eteläpelto et al. (2014) developed an understanding of professional agency based on “a subject-centred socio-cultural perspective” or “agency-centred approach”. Influenced by Billett's duality model, their approach relies on “an acknowledgment of the roles of both the agentic actor and of structures” (Vähäsantanen, 2015, p. 3). From this subject-centred socio-cultural perspective, agency is relationally embedded across social circumstances, tools, and people. In addition, what individuals believe, and how they think and act, are seen to be shaped by historical and socio-cultural practices. To balance and integrate how the individual and the social contribute

to professional agency, they elaborate a theoretical model of professional agency (Eteläpelto et al., 2014; Vähäsantanen, 2015) defining agency as “a practice-based process of action and behavior which individuals or collectives enact through influencing, making choices, and taking stances in their work and/or their professional identities” (Eteläpelto, 2017, p. 186). Professional identity in turn refers to the subject's professional sense of the self, as a personal and social entity that “encompasses the subject's personal interests, goals, and ethical commitments at work” (p. 186).

Although Eteläpelto et al. and Billett address the role of subjectivity in work-related learning, the duality between ‘person’ and ‘social’ as a starting point in both theoretical frameworks seems problematic. The duality may place ‘the personal’ into a space of meanings associated with the social world of work, such as commitments, ideals, motivations, interests, and goals, thus narrowing the range of meaning potentials into fields of given by the researchers. However, as our analyses indicate, people are also constructing their identities by making subjective connections between different fields and meaning potentials in a social situation. They negotiate and intertwine experiences and meanings from all aspects of life in constructing and re-making their being in the world in its diversity. Akkerman and Meijer (2011) also identified processes of this kind in their study of teachers' professional agency. Criticizing the commonly used distinction between ‘personal identity’ and ‘professional identity’, they characterized the boundaries between the personal and the professional as ‘indistinct’ in the sense of overcoming their dichotomy and emphasizing the self as unitary in terms of personal and cultural continuity (p. 316). The interviewees of our study did not confine themselves to the work context but moved between the personal and social contexts in their sense-making. Exploring subjectivity from the perspective of identity construction and as a sense of self (Märtsin, 2010a) can be seen to contribute to research on work-related learning by addressing an object of sense making which is dialogically comprised with hybridity, multiplicity, and complexity. The dialogic approach, then, enriches also understanding of a joint mediated activity of transformative learning by shedding light on collaboration, not as ‘collective’ in a generalized holistic sense, but in the sense of participation where heterogenous participants position themselves (in their own ways) as learners in developmental processes (Engeström, 2009).

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper we explored the intrapersonal level of boundary crossing learning (Akkerman & Bruining, 2016) by conceptualizing the individual's perspective in terms of the ‘inter-object’ and ‘identity construction’ both of which are linked theoretically to sense-making. These concepts informed our focus on the subjectivity enabling us to trace and identify connections made in the social situation of being interviewed as participant in a project that implied a rupture in the interviewees' everyday work and traditional ways of learning. The multilevel perspective on boundary crossing enabled us to integrate new work challenges (found in the institutional level of the project) and network learnings (interpersonal level) with the intrapersonal approach adopted here. This intrapersonal analysis foregrounded the individual as related to the world rather than as an isolated organism situated in some environment (Kramer, 2021) and highlighted the semiotic mediating devices that extended individual sensemaking from the past to the possibilities of future.

In everyday practice, family mediators are confronted with a way to work that is structured and time limited and emphasizes parents' authority and knowledge concerning matters of their children and everyday practices (Haavisto et al., 2014; Parkinson, 2011; Roberts, 2008). In their broader work setting, practitioners of different disciplinary domains are supposed to follow professional, legal and ethical rules to decide, validate, and even reinforce (in a judicial context). As the project FASPER has shown, the mediator's expertise relies on enabling and leading a dialogue that guides the parents to resolve their mutual conflicts and form together new well informed parental practices. In addition to new skills, family mediation requires a different mind-set for enacting in situations of intersecting dynamics of work processes that put more emphasis on personal performances of professional judgement and discretion. Our study points to recognition of professional ethics intertwined with the personal, encouraging the practitioners also to transgress professional and personal boundaries and exercise professional agency when needed, even outside a professional setting.

However, concerns have been raised that interprofessional work and boundary crossing might blur professional and non-professional identities (Edwards, 2009; McLaughlin, 2013) causing tensions in practice which are experienced to circumscribe professional autonomy and professional agency and endorse managerialism and strict accountability processes (Karvinen-Niinikoski et al., 2019). To both keep professional boundaries and cross them in an ethically sustainable manner require awareness and perception of one's professional agency. The interview situation could also be interpreted as a reflective space (Ruch, 2014), a moment for building trust and leaving room for critical reflection together with a peer, as both interviewer and interviewee were participants in the same developmental project. Our findings suggest that professional identities in motion drawing on both professional and personal life keep professional agency self-contained but open to expansion by contributing to co-authoring the further development of their profession and professional identity in changing contexts of their work. The critical professional challenge is to influence change by contributing to collective and interprofessional efforts for improving and developing sustainable practices.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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