

Review: A. Costall and O. Dreier (2006) *Doing Things with Things: The Design and Use of Everyday Objects*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing. 242 pp. ISBN 0 7546 4656 4 hardback. £55.

Those of us who teach and research about technology in everyday life will be interested in the core focus of this book: namely, how to understand the relationship between artefacts and human behaviour. Attention is paid to both the design and use of artefacts in different social contexts; from working to cooking and playing.

Unlike many such books the authors are not concerned with high-tech artefacts, but in the most part attention is focused on everyday goods we take for granted or which work in the background like spice racks, baking equipment, medical utilities and e-mail archives. In line with most sociology of science and technology books a broad conception of technology is deployed and thus the artefact includes not only the material good but also the skills needed to use it and the meanings it invokes in everyday activities.

For sociologists this collection is a chance to explore this topic from a range of theoretical perspectives. The book includes chapters by philosophers, psychologists, cognitive scientists, media scholars, artists and sociologists, and the latter are in the minority. Traditionally each of these disciplines has viewed artefacts quite differently - and the authors are to be commended for attempting to find common ground and language. What clearly unites the authors is their focus on the situatedness of use and the attention paid to both the human and the non-human. Theorists like L. Vygotsky, D. Haraway and B. Latour feature prominently.

This book emerged from two interdisciplinary cross-national workshops held in Copenhagen and includes contributions from the UK, Denmark and the Netherlands alongside the USA, Hungary, Germany and Sweden. The twelve chapters are divided into four sections - intentionality and the functionality of things, things in the world of the child, transformation and things, and finally, organisation and things. Apart from the first two, the chapters are based on qualitative empirical research in the field.

The first two chapters give contrasting perspectives on the importance of the concepts of 'functionality' and 'intentionality' to understanding use for philosophers. The 'standard view' is that designers intend users to use artefacts for certain functions and that users generally behave accordingly. A key problem with this view, however, is that boundaries between designers and users are breaking down and users often deploy artefacts creatively for non-intended functions or 'improper uses' in the terminology of the authors. Indeed functions can be both designed or develop from use. The first two chapters take opposing views on the use of these concepts and unusually for such collections they directly reference each other and refute each other's arguments.

The empirical chapters offer a rich set of studies with examples of the unintended, creative or 'improper' uses of objects by users. Examples include someone using their walking stick as a 'telephone' by thumping on the ceiling or Zapotec children from Mexico coming up with a greater variety of uses for baskets than Danish children. Designers may intend people to use objects in particular ways and design in certain 'affordances' but innovation does not stop when an artefact reaches the shop, but rather the artefact continues to change in function and meaning in the context of use and practice. They may take on additional functions, like fridges becoming display areas, or they may change their function entirely, like when books become door-stops. What emerges from these studies is the fluidity and flexibility of artefacts but also the built-in assumptions about users and contexts of use, which may serve to limit this flexibility or mean the artefacts are not used at all in the end.

While cognitive scientists and psychologists are increasingly looking to social structures for explanations (p. 113) they are also paying attention to the changing meanings of artefacts. Thus as Forchhammer, who is based in a neurological department, points out, a utility can be both a symbol of illness and a symbol of getting well. For some a wheelchair is welcome as a means of getting around, for others the same chair can be a very visible symbol or stigma of

disability. Something as simple as a calendar can take on a very different meaning when one is ill and cannot work. Similarly, the development of 'cognitive biographies' or life-histories of artefacts point to fruitful methodological and conceptual overlaps between disciplines.

Where the book is most useful and interesting is when perspectives are combined and the authors directly engage with each other. It provides a useful overview of key overlaps in terminology, methods and research issues between sociology and other disciplines, particularly psychology. The book also provides a range of empirical studies which could be used in teaching, but probably more as an illustrative additional reading, rather than a core text. The introductory chapters in particular are more for a postgraduate readership, I would suggest, and provide a good example of where two authors explicitly try to deconstruct and disagree with each other's arguments.

In most chapters the authors introduce a key theorist in a manner which is accessible for readers from other fields. However the book is still quite a challenge to read given the range of theorists and theories employed and there remain important disciplinary differences in language and assumptions. The chapters also range considerably in style and depth and thus one will probably end up picking and choosing the most relevant bits rather than assigning it entirely,

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