Understanding a Dialectical Materialist CHAT Perspective on Social Movement Learning

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Abstract: This paper addresses adult social movement learning (SML) dynamics. Drawing on a specific dialectical materialist variation of a socio-cultural learning theory called Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) I explore findings from a large-scale research project in Toronto (Canada) called the Anti-Poverty Community Organizing and Learning (APCOL). I offer some preliminary evidence for the importance of something referred to as "object-work/skill" for discerning differences in anti-poverty activist learning lives.

Introduction

Adult education, community organizer/facilitators, and researchers working with various types of anti-poverty groups know that activist learning can develop on multiple trajectories. That is, amongst some learning can flourish and along with them organizing efforts, while amongst others learning leads to fragmentation and dissipation of collective effort.

In this context, the following paper reports on some results of the Anti-Poverty Community Organizing and Learning Project (APCOL) Project: a five year (2009-2014), multi-methodological approach focused on activist learning in the City of Toronto. The research was based on a participatory action approach through which 126 community residents were trained and supported in their involvement in instrument design, administration and interpretation of the results. The overall research design included a city-wide anti-poverty activist learning survey (n=600) integrated with a matrix of 10 issue-focused (health/nutrition; housing; educational completion; employment) neighbourhood-based campaign and program case studies (n=308) (for more detail see www.apcol.ca).

Below, I outline a dialectical materialist approach to the application of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) in an attempt to shed some light on different social movement learning dynamics illuminated by the APCOL research. I pay special attention to evidence of distinctive trajectories of learning rooted in the structuring of activist activity. Specifically, I look for indications of the presence (and absence) of indications of something called "object-work/skill".

CHAT and a Dialectical Materialist Approach to Methodology and Methods

Before proceeding, I offer some brief comments on the type of theory of adult learning that provides the foundation of the thinking presented in this paper. CHAT research has its foundations in the work of several turn-of-the-20th century Marxist psychologists including L.S. Vygotsky, A.N. Leontiev and others. This group set in train the development of what I have described elsewhere as a deeply historicized sociological psychology (or alternatively, a deeply historicized psychological sociology) of mind and change. It is an approach that has remained rooted in the notion that human learning and development could only be understood as (symbolically and materially) *mediated*, combining dynamics both *external and internal* to the *individual and/or collective subject*, and unfolding within the scope of a broader and unavoidably

contradictory minimal meaningful *unit of agency* (and analysis) called *activity*. And, it was within the scope of these claims that activity was defined as the interrelations of *operations* (typically un-self-conscious, mediated practices relating to specific conditions), *actions* (mediated practices related to self-conscious goals), and *object/motives* (typically un-self-conscious purposes inherent to activity as a whole). Infusing material reality, values, conventions, habits, emotion and embodied experience, politics, economics, culture and history as a dynamic, iterative process – it is an approach that collapses the arbitrary separations between people and context to account for our thinking, knowing, feeling and doing that define the way you and I go about the business of our (lifelong learning) lives.

Some CHAT research has been subject to critique for its mechanistic perspectives fore-fronting activity structure and social reproduction while back-grounding (and sometimes ignoring altogether) issues of contestation, power as well as individual and group choice-making and variation. Entirely valid in some instances, still this criticism simply fails to recognize either the contemporary body of research as a whole, or the dialectical, humanist Marxism that was so central to the founding of the tradition (e.g. Stetsenko, 2010). It is in this context, in epistemological and methodological terms, I summarize a dialectical materialist approach to CHAT with several key points (cf. Ollman 1993; Roberts 2014). Of course, we begin with the premise of *dialectical* (i.e. inherently contradictory, mutually constitutive/under-mining, based on a philosophy of internal relations) rather than *causal* relationships (i.e. effects of self-contained entities on one another, based on a philosophy of external relations). Likewise, the approach is premised on the notion that, for the analyst, all concepts are purposive abstractions selected to bring particular dynamics of change into focus according to a level of generality – simultaneous and equally real – most suitable to them in terms of (individual and/or collective) human agency. It is this type of epistemological and methodological perspective, I argue, that allows the vast and changing multiplicity of forms of learning and change that define power and responses to it from differing standpoints over time to be examined effectively (across individuals, groups, organizations, nations, systems of power, etc.).

In turn, it is worth noting that this perspective gives rise to certain methods of research and interpretation, well described in Marxist-Feminist standpoint theory of Dorothy Smith. These methods depend on a particular understanding the relationship between interview-talk on the one hand (an activity in its own right), and concrete other activities beyond it on the other.

> The methodological assumptions of the approach we are using are that the social organization and relations of the ongoing concerting of our daily activities are continually expressed in the ordinary ways in which we speak of them, at least when we speak of them concretely. How people speak of the forms of life in which they are implicated is determined by those forms of life. (Smith, 1987, pp. 188)

As we will see, practically speaking, the approach I offer depends a good deal on specific characteristics of people's stories and how these stories relate to people's broader activist activity. And, based upon this foundation, I go on to offer additional (necessarily more tenuous) claims about the possible relationship between this activity and survey results as well.

Findings from APCOL's Interview Research

The following illustrations from the APCOL data are meant to begin to address the fact that there are serious gaps in understanding variations in the adult learning (both organized and informal)

that form the foundation of emergent or stagnating anti-poverty activism. Challenging the evidence of variation is the fact that there are many profound similarities to be accounted for in terms of the objective conditions of poverty that these activists face. Against this backdrop, I argue we benefit from trying to appreciate a key difference in people's everyday lives – rooted in their neighbourhoods – vis-à-vis differences in the way activity is structured by and for them. And I add that a neighbourhood level analysis is particularly important here. Indeed, from a CHAT perspective, it is in the everyday learning life of the neighbourhood (frequently linked in a complex relationship with the household as we will see) that we find evidence of a *minimal meaningful unit* of collective agency and development capable of grappling both more and less successfully with the challenges of poverty.

Defying superficial observation, as Leontiev (1978) explained, CHAT requires analysis that "turns *not* from acquired habits, skills, and knowledge to activity characterized by them *but from* the content and connections of activities to which and what kind of processes realize them and make them possible" (p.113; emphasis added). In this approach, the object/motive and relations between aspects of activity that define an overall object-relatedness and trajectory of development are central. And, as Leontiev also indicates, "the object of activity is twofold: first, in its independent existence as subordinating to itself and transforming the activity of the subject; second, as an image of the object, as a product of its property of psychological reflection that is realized as an activity of the subject" (p.52). Thus, of particular concerned here, I claim that it is at a particular level of generality that we can ascertain the differences between the "general […] 'macrostructure'" of activity on the one hand, and on the other, "[w]hat is radically changed" in activity vis-à-vis people's reconfiguration of "the relationships that connect goals and [object/]motives of activity" (Leontiev, 1978, p.91).

Space limits for this paper are a barrier to fully illustrating the type of qualitative findings that bear on this type of approach. But, guided by Leontiev's comments above, I claim we benefit from paying particular attention to evidence of the subtle forms of distinctions between the relations of goal-directed action and object/motive of activist activity. Specifically, where there is evidence that activists are producing more coherent and more self-conscious relationships between these two elements of activity in the course of their everyday lives, we have some reason to believe that, with deeper assessment, we might begin to find an explanation for the more obvious differences seen in the trajectories of activist/non-activist learning that ultimately form the foundation of change-making beginning at the neighbourhood level.

We begin with a brief illustration from our interviews with activists (all names are pseudonyms) from neighbourhoods which over the course of the APCOL research would become hot-beds of anti-poverty activism. Hinted at here are some important indications of the type of evidence that was discovered and explored pertaining the internal structuring of their anti-poverty activity.

> I think actually I should say from the get-go that when I see anti-poverty I see it in a larger lens [but at the same time] I like to see the work that we're doing more in a narrow, issue-specific kind of way. We look at housing and tackle that issue, we look at employment and tackle that issue, and they all could fit under anti-poverty issues, right? […] In fact, my frustration was that there were people too committed to a particular ideology. ("Kelly", HT Neighbourhood)

Our interview with Kelly goes on to situate the origins of these statements in concrete experiences. But, even in this (all-too-brief) excerpt we find a potential starting point for understanding something important that has unfolded in one of the anti-poverty activism hot-spots in Toronto: a structuring of activity that has produced a vibrant, self-conscious problematization of the relation between goal-directed action and object/motives in anti-poverty activity. In the excerpt is also offered a short-hand (the constraints of an "ideology") that speaks to forms of activity in which there is a distinctive *failure* to self-consciously appreciate these relations. Thus, if we take it that "the social organization and relations of the ongoing concerting of our daily activities are continually expressed in the ordinary ways in which we speak of them", as the quote from Smith earlier recommends – then from an activity theoretical perspective, our interest can be turned effectively to instances of narrative as exhibiting "the content and connections of activities [that] realize them and make them possible" (Leontiev, 1978). I claim in this instance we find evidence of a subtle but profound activist learning accomplishment; something I refer to elsewhere as "object-work/skill" (Sawchuk, 2013, e.g. pp.59-60). I argue it is important as an accomplishment that stands at the heart of an individual/collective (re)construction of activity that, over time, unleashes enormous capacities by seeding a type of *critical praxis*; the foundation of what Vygotsky referred to as *scientific concept development*. Thus, where there is evidence that this type of self-conscious recognition of the relation between goal-directed action and object/motive is not limited to the interview encounter alone, I argue that empirically we find a distinctive trajectory of emancipatory (or truly expansive) activity (Sawchuk, 2006). This is a point that Leontiev (1978) sought to recognize as the accomplishment of "perceiving oneself in a system of social relations" through which, he added, one goes about "finding and disclosing in it the force of one's action" (p.139).

Indeed, it is crucial to recognize in carrying out research on activist development that the starting point of these subtle shifts in activity and insurgent forms of artefact production are typically rooted in mundane (and fragile) relationships between experience, thought, talk and practice; solidifying only later in the more dramatic practices of "collective externalization" by social movement groups the flourish and begin to succeed (Sawchuk 2010). Thus, traceable in emergent forms of language, thought and practice, we can note a powerful iterative process. Between 2009 and 2014 anti-poverty activism in Kelly's neighbourhood flourished led by the dynamics of "collective externalization" and insurgent artefact production whether it was in its founding of a vibrant new activist organization called WE-LED, its establishment of new partnerships between youth and local business, or its innovative Community Benefit Agreement campaigning based on blue-green economic development.

I think little of this can be appreciated without obtaining a glimpse of very different trajectories of activist learning however. Whereas the structure of activist activity in Kelly's neighbourhood was producing new expansive relationships of consciousness and action at a rapid pace, activists in other equally impoverished neighbourhoods in our study clearly experienced stagnation and a lack of community interest. A common problem, our focus groups and individual interviews amongst the latter explain an important element of the story. A key example in this regard was a neighbourhood in which preoccupations continued to revolve around the experience of Canadian culture-shock (despite levels of immigrant settlement comparable to Kelly's neighbourhood) and the loss of (inter-generational) family supports. When asked about the core issues facing their neighbourhood in terms of poverty issues, a leading activist there explains:

Really it is practical assistance. It's about helping families deal with the generation gap and Canadian culture [and] the need to recognize that families are overburdened, especially women. There is a need for a self-care component. […] Immigrant people sometimes just need to know where to go, and immigrant mothers and young parents who don't have family here with them need that practical knowledge. ("Kate")

Kate goes on to say how she desperately would like to know "how to break down the wall that stops people from feeling like they belong and are welcome to participate". Embedded in a series of concrete experiences, another activist in this neighbourhood describes her activism as gravitated toward a community support group for young mothers who, like her, wanted to "know how to educate my child [and] to make a change in the family and in the society". Indeed, still other activists in this neighbourhood also spoke to the centrality – in the structure of activist activity – of the household, family and the problems presented by the collapse of extended family supports. And yet interviewee from this neighbourhood describes the origins of her activism as having to "face the new reality and deal with it for her family".

It is important to note that none of the distinctions I am drawing here revolve around dis-crediting the basic shared interest many of these activists (in both neighbourhoods) have to successfully raise one's family. More broadly, nor do these distinctions I wish to draw revolve around any sort of Maslow-styled hierarchy of needs as such. "Needs", including the need to survive in a new culture or to raise one's family, are treated vis-à-vis the classic CHAT axiom: *need becomes a motive capable of directing actions only when it finds its object*. It is in this sense that I speak of alternative relations of learning at a nexus of need/motive/object. Specifically, key to my comments is the evidence provided by the unique intersecting narratives that constitute *activist activity* (narratives that might overlap, but which would likely include very different practices and intersect in a very different way if the research were focused on family life or immigrant settlement processes as such). In these terms there are few if any indications of the type of "object-work/skill" development stemming from the activist activity that was unfolding in Kate's neighbourhood. That is, in neighbourhoods like Kate's in which anti-poverty activism continued to sputter – we find evidence that while certain gains had been made the structure of anti-poverty activist activity had, as yet, failed to break the crucial barriers between action and object/motive. I argue here that this is a barrier of learning; a barrier that for these activists (and non-activists) limits the possibility of finding the force of one's action in relation to the system of social relations they confront.

By way of concluding this brief discussion I offer some even briefer closing observations gleaned from the APCOL survey as additional food for thought. The APCOL survey (n = 600) sought to generate a breadth of data on the activism learning process complete with attention to who, where and how forms of anti-poverty participation emerged (or failed to emerge) across a selection of the poorest neighbourhoods in Toronto who partnered with us. In fact, the neighbourhoods in which the activists quoted above lived were represented in this survey. It is in this context that we can note additional evidence of important variations in indicators of activist learning dynamics across neighbourhoods despite the fact that – in objective terms of income, unemployment, availability of services, housing stock – they remain virtually identical. We see in the survey findings, for example, neighbourhoods in which our estimates of the level of activism are *negatively* related to belief that one's household income is lies below the poverty line, while at the same time we find level of activism *positively* related the belief that there are major poverty-related problems in one's neighbourhood. Moreover, our estimates at the level of

activism in a neighbourhood does not relate very strongly at all to awareness of activist organization operating in one's neighbourhood (and hence the awareness of the opportunity to participate). And perhaps most vexing of all, at least to adult educators like us, we also find the level of anti-poverty activism *negatively* associated with participation in community organizing training in many neighbourhoods (including the two discussed above). To be explored further in coming publications, here I offer this preliminary summary of observations simply as further support for claiming the need to understand the socio-cultural learning dynamics that, more than likely, lie at the heart of explanations in ways that defy conventional understandings of motivation, availability of supports, objective need, false consciousness, structural injustice, and so on.

Conclusions

At best, this paper's contributions are simply to raise questions and offer some points of departure for further analysis. However, in my view the differences we see here remain provocative, and we can see that basic structural conditions certainly do not tell the story of differing trajectories of activist learning very well. Here, the level of poverty is shared, but responses to it vary widely. For this and other reasons, we need to understand everyday learning. To do this, I suggested how we might begin to systematically trace the emergence of different structures of activity, in terms of the specific inner relations of the minimal meaningful units of agency they support, and through this take on the analytic task of understanding how activist learning unfolds. Clearly, we need tools for understanding the different shapes, dynamics and trajectories of this social movement learning since it is the foundation of participation in more conspicuously transformative beliefs, groups, organizations, campaigns and so on.

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