

Applying Activity Theory in Multiagency Settings

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In this paper I explore the extent to which two approaches to the social formation of mind are compatible and may be used to enrich and extend each other. These are: Activity Theory (AT) as derived from the work of the early Russian psychologists, Vygotsky and Leontiev, and the work of the sociologist Basil Bernstein. The purpose is to show how Bernstein provides a language of description which allows Vygotsky's account of social formation of mind to be extended and enhanced through an understanding of the sociological processes which form specific modalities of pedagogic practice and their specialized scientific concepts. The two approaches engage with a common theme namely the social shaping of consciousness, from different perspectives and yet as Bernstein acknowledges both develop many of their core assumptions from the work of Marx and the French school of early twentieth century sociology. The work of the Russian linguist is also be used to further nuance the argument applied in multiagency settings.

Keywords: Vygotsky, Activity Theory, mediation, artefact, Bakhtin, identity, discourse Bernstein, Hasan.

Introduction

This paper is concerned with the learning of professionals in new forms of practice which require joined up solutions in order to meet complex and diverse client needs. This form of work is neither that of a stable team or network. It demands changes in inter-professional practice and relationships with clients. Such demands confront all services which are engaged in joined-up responses to clients' complex needs. Current policy on social inclusion is running ahead of conceptualisations of inter-professional collaboration and the learning it requires in a number of fields. These include nursing [10]; mental health [29]; child protection [27]; abuse [31]; family based intervention [32] and local regeneration [35]. Responsive interagency work in these contexts requires a new way of conceptualising collaboration which recognises the construction of constantly changing combinations of people and resources across services, and their distribution over space and time. The creation of such professional contexts is central to current UK government policy (e.g. 8).

In the course of a multi professional development workshop a community paediatrician remarked that her biggest learning challenge was 'to learn to be and talk like a multi-agency person when I am not in multi-agency meetings'. The theoretical challenge implicit in this short statement is as to how we can understand the relations between the social organisation of work, discursive prac-

tice and social position. I will discuss the way in which the concept of social position can be used to promote theoretical development in Activity Theory. In so doing I will consider the way in which the cultural artefact, discourse, is deployed in relation to the social position of the subject. Thus the paper is primarily concerned with the analysis of subject positioning and discursive practice within activity systems. My key points of departure are to be found in three areas of academic endeavour:

- Post Vygotskian and Activity Theory based approaches to the study of artefact mediated, object oriented human activity as exemplified by the work of Yrjo Engestrom [7] and Michael Cole [4].
- Recent attempts by Dorothy Holland and colleagues [24] to synthesise the work of the Russian linguist, M.M. Bakhtin, Vygotsky and the French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu in an account of identity and agency in cultural worlds
- The theory of the social structuring of discourse in society developed by Basil Bernstein [1] and discussed in relation to the work of Halliday [12–14] and Vygotsky by the linguist Ruqaiya Hasan [16].

Activity Theory

The development and principles of Activity Theory have been discussed at length [e.g. 7]. I will not revisit such an account in this paper. I wish to direct attention

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to what Engeström terms the third generation of Activity Theory.

Engeström [7] sees joint activity or practice as the unit of analysis for activity theory, not individual activity. He is interested in the processes of social transformation and includes the structure of the social world in his analysis whilst taking into account the conflictual nature of social practice. He sees instability, (internal tensions) and contradiction as the ‘motive force of change and development’ [7] and the transitions and reorganisations within and between activity systems as part of development. It is not only the subject, but the environment, that is modified through mediated activity. He views the ‘reflective appropriation of advanced models and tools’ as ‘ways out of internal contradictions’ that result in new activity systems [5].

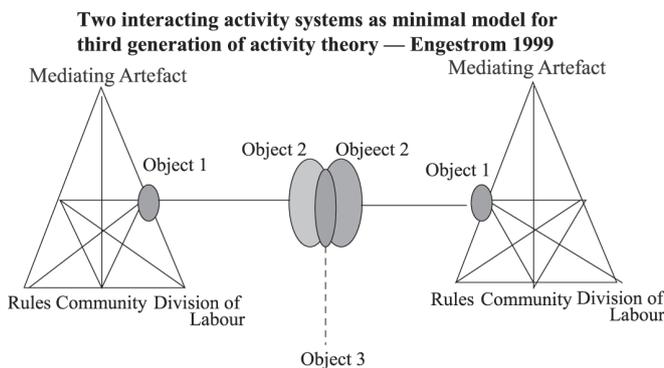


Fig. 1. Third generation activity theory model

The third generation of activity theory (see figure 1) as proposed by Engeström intends to develop conceptual tools to understand dialogues, multiple perspectives, and networks of interacting activity systems. The idea of networks of activity within which contradictions and struggles take place in the definition of the motives and object of the activity calls for an analysis of power and control within developing activity systems. The minimal representation which figure 1 provides shows but two of what may be a myriad of systems exhibiting patterns of contradiction and tension. In our study of learning for and in interagency working we are drawing on this third generation of activity theory as we model networks of interacting activity [6]. The project is concerned with the learning of professionals in the creation of new forms of practice which require joined up solutions to meet complex and diverse client needs. We are studying professional learning in services that aim to promote social inclusion through interagency working. Working with other professionals involves engaging with configurations of several, diverse social practices and the development of new forms of hybrid practice. The implications for notions of expertise have been explored by Hakkarainen, Lonka & Paavola [11]:

Expertise in a certain domain may also be represented in a hybrid expert who is able to translate one expert culture’s knowledge into form that participants of another expert culture can understand innovation emerges in networks of these kinds of communities. Creation of innovations supports gradually developing division of la-

bour and increased specialization as well as combination of existing dispersed resources for novel purposes [11].

Pirkkalainen, Kaatrakoski & Engeström [28] have argued that such hybrid practice is different from collaboration, cooperation or networking in which the constituent activities remain distinct. They suggest that hybridization involves change in positional relations between the agents of different activity systems and positional change of agents within some activity system. Such changes involve shifts in relations of power (in the division of labour) and control (within the categories established by the division of labour) within and between activity systems. The work of these shifts in the division of labour may will be discursive work. It is here that a present theoretical weakness is revealed by the introduction of the notion of hybridization and the focus on positional relations instead of object formation and historically generated forms of social relation instead of historical forms of work and organizations [28]. How do we develop a theoretical account of the discursive regulation of interpersonal relations which is compatible with the assumptions of activity theory?

Hasan [18] and Wertsch [33] note the irony that whilst Vygotsky developed a theory of semiotic mediation in which the mediational means of language was privileged, he provides very little if anything by way of a theory of language use. In an account of the social formation of mind there is a requirement for theory which relates meanings to interpersonal relations. The absence of an account of the ways language both serves to regulate interpersonal relations and its specificity is in turn produced through specific patterns of interpersonal relation and thus social regulation constitutes a serious weakness. This absence has carried through in the development of Activity theory. As Engeström and Miettinen [7] note it has yet to develop a sophisticated account of discursive practice which is fully commensurate with the assumptions of Activity Theory itself. At the same Engeström acknowledges the methodological difficulty of capturing evidence about community, rules and division of labour within the activity system [7]. The theoretically powerful move would be to understand the discursive regulation of interpersonal relations in terms of processes of social, cultural and historical regulation as witnessed in activity theory by the notions of rules and division of labour. I have used the term ‘witnessed’ because I argue that there is theoretical work to be done here. As Pirkkalainen, Kaatrakoski & Engeström [28] note at the end of their paper, the study of hybridization raise key questions such as “how do we understand division of labour – how do we understand rule in any given activity system”. They also suggest that there is a need to differentiate / unify concepts of agency, subject and actor. In the rest of this paper I will attempt to address some aspects of these questions.

Engeström [7] offers the suggestion that the division of labour in an activity creates different positions for the participants and that the participants carry their own diverse histories with them into the activity. This echoes the earlier assertion from Leont’ev:

Activity is the minimal meaningful context for understanding individual actions.... In all its varied forms, the activity of the human individual is a system set within a system of social relations... The activity of individual people thus depends on their social position, the conditions that fall to their lot, and an accumulation of idiosyncratic, individual factors. Human activity is not a relation between a person and a society that confronts him...in a society a person does not simply find external conditions to which he must adapt his activity, but, rather, these very social conditions bear within themselves the motives and goals of his activity, its means and modes Leont'ev [25].

In activity the possibilities for the use of artefacts depends on the social position occupied by an individual. Sociologists and sociolinguists have produced empirical verification of this suggestion (e.g. 2; 16; 17). The notion of 'subject' within activity theory requires expansion and clarification. In many studies the term 'subject perspective' is used which arguably infers subject position but does little to illuminate the roots or formative processes that gave rise to this perspective.

Identity and agency in cultural worlds

Holland et al [24] have studied the development of identities and agency specific to historically situated, socially enacted, culturally constructed worlds. They draw on Bakhtin and Vygotsky to develop a theory of identity as constantly forming and person as a composite of many often contradictory, self understandings and identities which are distributed across the material and social environment and rarely durable [24]. They draw on Leontiev in the development of the concept of socially organised and reproduced figured worlds which shape and are shaped by participants and in which social position establishes possibilities for engagement. They also argue that figured worlds:

"distribute 'us' not only by relating actors to landscapes of action (as personae) and spreading our senses of self across many different fields of activity, but also by giving the landscape human voice and tone. — Cultural worlds are populated by familiar social types and even identifiable persons, not simply differentiated by some abstract division of labour. The identities we gain within figured worlds are thus specifically historical developments, grown through continued participation in the positions defined by the social organisation of those world's activity" [24].

Thus this approach to a theory of identity in practice is grounded in the notion of a figured world in which positions are taken up constructed and resisted. The Bakhtinian concept of the 'space of authoring' is deployed to capture an understanding of the mutual shaping of figured worlds and identities in social practice. They refer to Bourdieu [3] in their attempt to show how social position becomes disposition. They argue for the development of social position into a positional identity into disposition and the formation of what Bourdieu refers to as 'habitus'. It is here that I feel that this argument

could be strengthened through reference to a theoretical account which provides greater descriptive and analytical purchase on the principles of regulation of the social figured world, the possibilities for social position and the voice of participants.

When faced with the empirical task of distinguishing between one habitus and another a researcher is left without any analytical or descriptive research tools.

"... if we take a popular concept habitus, whilst it may solve certain epistemological problems of agency and structure, it is only known or recognised by its apparent outcomes. Habitus is described in terms of what it gives rise to, and brings, or does not bring about..... But it is not described with reference with reference to the particular ordering principles or strategies, which give rise to the formation of a particular habitus. The formation of the internal structure of the particular habitus, the mode of its specific acquisition, which gives it its specificity, is not described. How it comes to be is not part of the description, only what it does. There is no description of its specific formation. ... Habitus is known by its output not its input [2, p. 133].

Thus the study of processes of hybridisation would be left without a means of distinguishing between key aspects of the activity systems in play. Hasan [18] also contends that the same problem is to be found with attempts which refer to Bakhtin's concept of speech genre:

though Bakhtin's views concerning speech genres are rhetorically attractive and impressive, the approach lacks — both a developed conceptual syntax and an adequate language of description. Terms and units at both these levels in Bakhtin's writings require clarification; further, the principles that underlie the calibration of the elements of context with the generic shape of the text are underdeveloped, as is the general schema for the description of contexts for interaction.

Linehan & McCarthy [26] develop a strong argument in favour of the deployment of a notion of positioning in communities of practice as an approach to studying participation in social settings. They outline a problem space which echoes some of the concerns raised by Holland et al. [24], but the problem of theorising social and cultural position in such a way that the analytical and empirical engagement with the figured world becomes visible remains elusive.

Basil Bernstein

Bernstein [1] used the concept of social positioning to refer to the establishing of a specific relation to other subjects and to the creating of specific relationships within subjects. This seems to me to concur with the analysis outlined by Holland et al. [24]. He relates social positioning to the formation mental dispositions in terms of the identity's relation to the distribution of labour in society. It is through the deployment of his concepts of voice and message that Bernstein forges the link between division of labour, social position and discourse and opens up the possibilities for a language of description that will serve empirical as well analytical purposes.

In what follows I will provide a very brief presentation of the essence of this argument. Full details may be found in Bernstein [2].

Bernstein's work is concerned with inter-relations between changes in organizational form, changes in modes of control and changes in principles of communication. His language of description is generated from an analysis of power (which creates and maintains boundaries in organisational form) and control that regulates communication within specific forms of interaction). Initially he focuses upon two levels: a structural level and an interactional level. The structural level is analyzed in terms of the social division of labour it creates (classification) and the interactional level with the form of social relation it creates (framing). The social division of labour is analyzed in terms of strength of the boundary of its divisions, that is, with respect to the degree of specialization. Thus within a school the social division of labour is complex where there is an array of specialized subjects, teachers and pupils, and it is relatively simple where there is a reduction in the specialization of teachers, pupils and subjects. Thus the key concept at the structural level is the concept of boundary, and structures are distinguished in terms of their boundary arrangements and their power supports and legitimations [1]. The interactional level emerges as the regulation of the transmission/acquisition relation between teacher and taught: that is, the interactional level comes to refer to the pedagogic context and the social relations of the classroom or its equivalent. The interactional level then gives the principle of the learning context through which the social division of labour, in Bernstein's terms, speaks.

He defines modalities of pedagogic practice in terms of principles for distinguishing between contexts (recognition rules) and for the creation and production of specialized communication within contexts (realization rules). Modalities of pedagogic practice and their discourses may then be described in terms directly referenced to the theory. Features of cultural artefacts may be described in terms of the cultural context of their production. Bernstein [1] argues that much of the work that has followed in the wake of Vygotsky 'does not include in its description how the discourse itself is constituted and recontextualised'.

Thus for Bernstein power relations regulate the degree of insulation between categories. Boundaries are established and challenged in relationships of power. For him power establishes 'voice' in that it demarcates that which is legitimate within categories and thus establishes the rules by which voice may be recognised. The distinction between what can be recognised as belonging to a voice and a particular message is formulated in terms of distinction between relations of power and relations of control. Bernstein [1] adapted the concept of voice from his reading of *The Material Word* by Silverman and Torode [30]. He grounds the concept in the material division of labour. Thus allowing for the move between the analysis and description of the social order and that of the practices of communication.

From this perspective classificatory relations establish 'voice'. 'Voice' is regarded somewhat like a cultural

larynx which sets the limits on what can be legitimately put together (communicated). Framing relations regulate the acquisition of this voice and create the 'message (what is made manifest, what can be realised) [36].

In last book he continues:

Voice refers to the limits on what could be realised if the identity was to be recognised as legitimate. The classificatory relation established the voice. In this way power relations, through the classificatory relation, regulated voice. However voice, although a necessary condition for establishing what could and could not be said and its context, could not determine what was said and the form of its contextual realisation; the message. The message was a function of framing. The stronger the framing the smaller the space accorded for potential variation in the message [2].

Thus social categories constitute voices and control over practices constitutes message. Identity becomes the outcome of the voice – message relation. Production and reproduction have their social basis in categories and practices; that categories are constituted by the social division of labour and that practices are constituted by social relations within production/ reproduction; that categories constitute 'voices' and that practices constitute their 'messages'; message is dependant upon 'voice', and the subject is a dialectical relation between 'voice' and message [36].

One may speak with the 'voice' of the psychology but the particular identity as a psychologist is revealed in the actual messages produced /spoken. Change occurs when 'new' messages are produced and give rise to changes in voice /classification /power relations. Identity may be studied in terms of utterance and the principles of social regulation through which it is generated and transformed. The rules of activity theory include what Bernstein refers to as framing and the division of labour (hierarchical and vertical) refers to classification. Hasan [22] argues that Bernstein paid very close attention to invisible semiotic mediation – how the unself-conscious everyday discourse mediates mental dispositions, tendencies to respond to situations in certain ways and how it puts in place beliefs about the world one lives in, including both about phenomena that are supposedly in nature and those which are said to be in our culture. She asserts that discourse is not treated as simply the regulator of cognitive functions; it is as Bernstein [36] states also central to the shaping of 'dispositions, identities and practices'

Hasan [16] suggests that Bernstein's analysis of how subjects are positioned and how they position themselves in relation to the social context of their discourse, offers an explanation of hybridity, in terms of the classification and framing practices of the speaking subjects. The invisible semiotic mediation is to be found in the relations of power and control which give rise to voice message relation in which identities are formed and social positions are bequeathed taken up and transformed. In Hasan's empirical work she has evidenced this effect: 'What the mothers speak, their selection and organization of meanings is a realisation of their social positioning' [22, p. 546].

Conclusion

Subject-subject and within subject relations are under theorised in activity theory. It requires a theoretical account of social relations and positioning. Holland et al. (1998) bring Bakhtin's notion of the 'space of authoring' into play as they outline the processes of mutual shaping of figured worlds and identities in social practice. They also argue that multiple identities are developed within figured worlds and that these are 'historical developments, grown through continued participation in the positions defined by the social organisation of those world's activity' [24, p. 41]. This body of work represents a significant development in our understanding of the concept of the 'subject' in activity theory. For my point of view there remains a need to develop the notion of 'figured world' in such a way that we can theorise, analyse and describe the processes by which that world is 'figured'. However the theoretical move which Bernstein makes in relating positioning to the distribution of power and principles of control opens up the possibility of grounding the analysis of social positioning and mental dispositions in relation to the distribution of labour in an activity. Through the notions of 'voice' and 'message' he brings the division of labour and principles of control (rules) into relation with social position in practice. This theoretical stance suggests that activity theory should also develop a language of description which allows for the parameters of

power and control to be considered at structural and interactional levels of analysis. A systematic approach to the analysis and description of the formation of categories through the maintenance and shifting of boundaries and principles of control as exercised within categories would bring a powerful tool to the undoubted strengths of activity theory. This would then allow the analysis to move from one level to another in the same terms rather than treat division of labour and discourse as analytically independent items. Given that, in Bernstein's terms, positioning is in a systematic relation to the distribution of power and principles of control, it is argued that this approach to our understanding the notion of social positioning as the underlying, invisible component which 'figures' practices of communication.

[A] specific text is but a transformation of the specialized transactional practice; the text is the form of the social relationship made visible, palpable, material... Further the selection, creation, production, and changing of texts are the means whereby the positioning of the subjects is revealed, reproduced and changed [36, p. 17].

My argument is that there is much to be gained through a sustained theoretical engagement with the notion of subject in activity theory and that Holland et al, Hasan and Bernstein provide rich sources of inspiration for such an endeavour. Such theoretical work would, hopefully, provide tools for engaging in the empirical study of the processes of hybridisation which abound in the cultures of our everyday worlds.

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