



Perspective

Taking safety promotion and injury prevention “beyond interventionism”: Aligning activity theory with community based participatory research

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INTRODUCTION

In the year 2000 about five million people around the world died as a result of injuries due to violence or unintentional causes, while the numbers for those hospitalized or treated and discharged were, respectively, 30 times and 300 times as high (Suffla, van Niekerk, Bowman & Matzopolous, 2008). South Africa, is one of a number of countries for which very high rates on injury and violence have been recorded. The impact of these have been far reaching, e.g. the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV, 2001) reported that the medical costs for violent injuries alone was estimated at R4,7 billion at the time. Despite the high incidence of violence and injuries in South Africa, and the negative effects they have on social and economic development “there remains a scarcity of effective, replicable and contextually congruent injury interventions” in this and other lower income contexts (Eksteen, Bulbulia, van Niekerk, Ismail & Lekoba, 2012, p. 499). It is no wonder that the South African Department of Health and its partners have called for ‘an integrated strategic framework for the prevention of injury and violence’ as well as the ‘prioritisation of evidence-based intervention, investment in surveillance systems, and improved human resources and management capacity’ (Mayosi et al., 2012, p. 12).

While an evidence-based response to violence and injury prevention is certainly desirable, there is still the danger that initiatives in countries such as South Africa may be compromised by inappropriate Eurocentric models that are not fully cognisant of the significance of cultural, financial and infrastructural factors (Seedat, 2002). The development of a ‘safe communities approach’ in an African context, may offer an instructive model for constructing contextually relevant research-based interventions for safety, peace and health promotion. Seedat, McClure, Suffla and van Niekerk (2012) explain the safe communities approach as

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one which “recognises the psychological, social, economic and criminological dimensions of violence and injuries and involves the promotion of ecological actions to address risk and protective factors at multiple levels (individual, school, peers, family, community and society) using interventions aimed at universal, selected and indicated groups’ (2012, p. 4). Such an inclusive and socioeconomically grounded approach is echoed by others in the safety promotion sector, e.g. Eksteen, et al.(2012) report that ‘injury prevention and safety must be studied in a social context’ (2012, p. 499) so as to ensure that communities’ participation, knowledge, interests and ownership is maximized. Lazarus, Bulbulia, Taliep, and Naidoo (2015) add that, for marginalised communities, especially, these issues of agency, knowledge and power should be historicised and engaged in a decolonizing agenda. In light of this need for a socio-historical contextualization of violence and injury, and so too for the research and interventions in this area, the above South African researchers have advocated for a community based participatory approach that is transformational and ‘reflects two-way processes, characterized by joint-learning, co-management, and shared control of projects’ (Lazarus et al., 2015, p.88). This is consistent with the relational approach to participatory research interventions that Seedat and colleagues insist should entail “the fostering and supporting of strong, protected, socially cohesive communities, which prioritise social connections and community life” (Seedat et al., 2012, p. 9).

Through the use of the language of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), in anticipation of the discussion below, one could say that the above researchers employ community based participatory research (CBPR) as a worldview through which the community forms the basis for the nature and outcomes of the research process (Lazarus, Duran, Caldwell, & Bulbulia, 2012).The implication is that theoretical, symbolic and material tools for the research or intervention are collaboratively developed through co-learning activities that are cognisant of the rules, participants and roles of the activity, and the power relations that these entail. Practitioners of CBPR point out that poorly resourced communities are usually characterized by an abundance of urgent health and safety issues coupled with a shortage of researchers, infrastructure and resources. Furthermore, Lazarus, Taliep, Bulbulia, Phillips and Seedat (2012), add that it is a complex, time consuming and resource demanding matter to bring together a diverse group of actors and experiences within a CBPR engagement. Some of the challenges include those arising when researchers attempt to follow the ethical ideals of loosening control over the research design while simultaneously attending to the scientific demands of validity that are based upon that control. The unequal access to resources that structure power imbalances within and between the community and the researchers also give rise to fundamental contradictions around establishing empowering relationships, as well as around the appreciation and appropriation of the participants’ various forms of knowledge and resources.

In terms of a reflective engagement with these challenges, as well with developing



appropriately contextualised research interventions, as mentioned earlier, the Ukuphepha initiative is edifying. Developed from the work of the Centre for Peace Action (CPA), a Johannesburg-based NGO established in 1990 to focus on injury prevention programmes, Ukuphepha “aims to initiate, implement, evaluate and maintain safety promotion demonstration programmes in low-income communities in South Africa” (Eksteen et al., 2012, p. 501). The programme includes projects such as the Child Safety, Peace and Health Promotion study, the Elder Photo Documentary project, and the Spiritual Capacity and Religious Assets for Transforming Community Health by Mobilising Males for Peace and Safety (SCRATCHMAPS) project, all of which apply and innovate CBPR principles to maximize the transformative potential of community engagement.

This paper, therefore, confines itself to literature from the Ukuphepha researchers and projects to discuss the possibility that research interventions in the fields of violence and injury could benefit from an alignment with Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). Thus, having pointed to the necessity for effective research interventions in this field and indicated how progressive forms of CBPR are conceptualised in response to this need, the paper will now put forward CHAT as a useful framework for operationalising some of the key principles and practices of CBPR. It will briefly indicate some of CHAT’s principles which are congruent to those of CBPR and indicate how CHAT can contribute to CBPR with its analytical tools. The paper suggests that CHAT can, in turn, take its methodologies “beyond intervention” by learning from the innovative praxis of CBPR initiatives such as the Ukuphepha.

ACTIVITY THEORY, DEVELOPMENT WORK RESEARCH (DWR) AND THE CHANGE LABORATORY

The scope of CHAT is so vast that this discussion has sought only to reference some of its key contributors as clues for those wishing to follow up on it. However, like CPBR, CHAT is an approach which theorises learning and change within a particular community or activity system. Both of their concerns with transformative social relations have been historically developed from politically motivated, action-oriented research traditions. As Sannino explains: ‘Activity theory has an activist and interventionist history...Throughout this history, activity theory stands as an activist theory of development of practices, which may be traced back to Marx’s idea of revolutionary practice, emphasizing that theory is not only meant to analyse and explain the world but also to generate new practices and promote change’ (2011, p. 580). CHAT has developed from Lev Vygotsky’s attempts to account for social mediated learning, and offers an analytical framework that investigates human activity as a system of individual, communal and societal relationships which are historically developing and mediated by tools, rules and the division of labour (Daniels, Edwards, Engeström, Gallagher & Ludvigsen, 2013).

As can be seen from Figure 1, activity theory emphasizes 'interdependencies between the acting subject and different levels in the activity system' (Mørch, Nygård, & Ludvigsen, 2010, p.187). It is therefore, like CBPR, 'a framework for analysing a multitude of relations' (Mørch et al., 2010). However, it distinguishes itself from this, and other approaches by virtue of its focus on object oriented activity, where both the concepts of activity and object are deeply theorised as systemic and historical phenomena (Sannino, Daniels, & Gutiérrez, 2009). Activity is therefore more than actions, and the object, or objective of the activity is that focus which gives it direction.

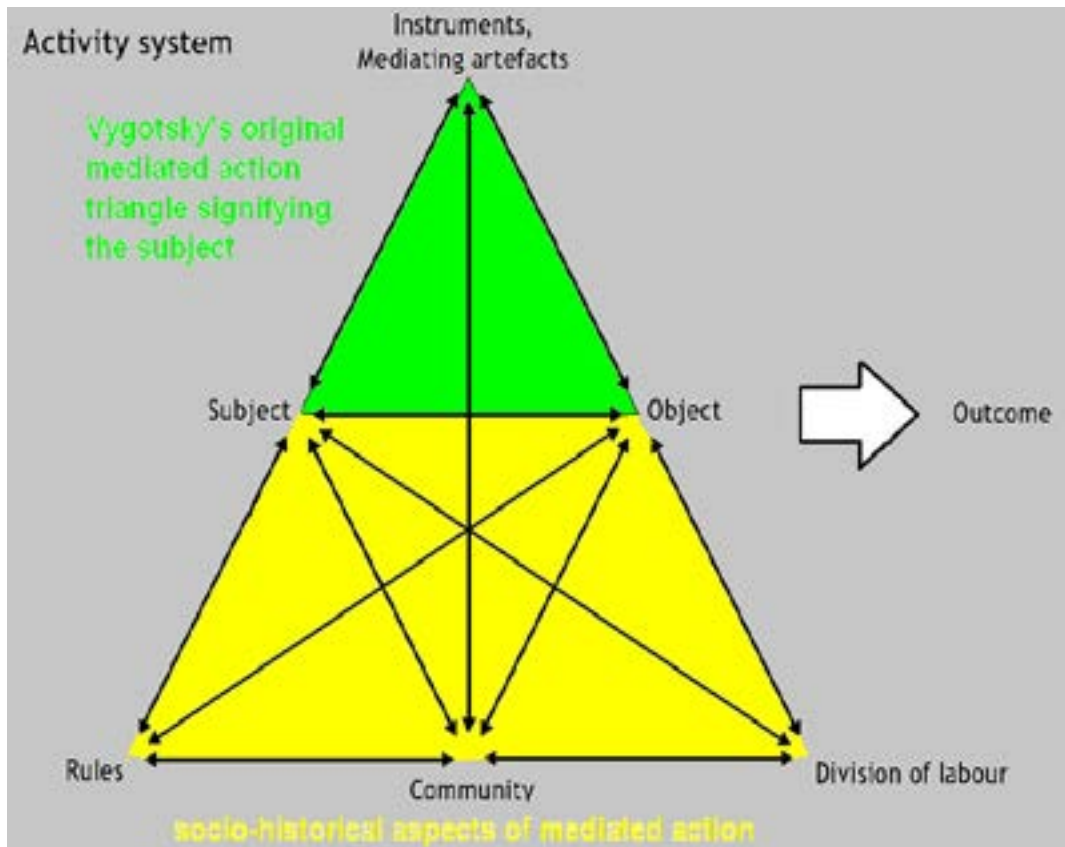


Figure 1: An activity system

Source: Derived from Engeström (1987, p.78)

The Ukuphepha programme, for example, may be analysed in terms of its historically developed object of implementing and studying safety, peace and health promotion initiatives across a number of low-income communities (Eksteen et al., 2012; Seedat, McClure, Suffla, & van Niekerk, 2012). For the SCRATCHMAPS project within this programme, the

main object is to mobilize community assets and spiritual capacities in particular, so as to promote safety and peace in the selected communities (Lazarus et al., 2012). Objects, though, are complex and dynamic, since they are subject to the various interpretations of the multiple subjects of the activity, and to the historically evolving construction by the activity itself (Kallio, 2010). This alludes to two other principles of CHAT, namely, multi-voicedness and historicity. According to the former, the effects of multiple points of view, traditions and interests of the activity of a project have to be considered, while the latter demands that activity systems be understood in terms of how they were produced over time (Engeström, 2001). CHAT therefore analyses the activity system in its entirety in much the same way as CBPR engages with the socio-historically contextualised community as the unit of analysis.

Yet, while CHAT aligns itself to the historical, relational and developmental aspects of CBPR, I believe its elaborate theorisation of human activity as a mediated, object-oriented process contributes a complex, systemic framework to the analyses of these aspects. Furthermore, the principles of contradictions as a source of change, and of expansive learning (Engeström, 2001) means that CHAT can offer deeply theorised concepts and models that analyse and harnesses the conflicts and disturbances arising from systemic tensions such as those mentioned earlier.

These analytical tools would be made available to CBPR through the Development Work Research (DWR) methodology as theorized and practiced by Yrjo Engeström and the Finish branch of cultural-historical activity theorists at the Center for Activity Theory and Developmental Work Research of the University of Helsinki (Engeström & Glăveanu, 2012). As Daniels and Edwards (2010) explain, DWR is based on the Vygotskian principle of dual stimulation and is used to resolve the kinds of tensions faced by participants seeking to expand beyond the constraints of their current situations, as is being suggested by the safe communities approach to violence and injury research and intervention development and implementation. This principle allows for the incorporation of an auxiliary means to resolve a problem situation so that both the person and the circumstances are transformed by such a use of external resources (Sannino, 2011). Intertwined with this is the principle of ascending from the abstract to the concrete which explains the dialectical manner in which theoretical generalizations are derived from change and experimentation (Sannino, 2011). Taken together these principles lead to research interventions which are “more than just innovative research methods which aim at achieving practical change in work and educational settings, they can be seen as instantiations of dialectical materialism and implementations of activity-theoretical interventionist epistemology” (Sannino, 2011, p. 594).

The Change Laboratory is exemplary as a research intervention that embodies this transformative methodology. Designed as a means of fast-tracking DWR, it essentially

comprises a specifically arranged space in which participants of an activity gather and set up “a rich set of instruments for analysing disturbances and for constructing new models for the work practice” (Engeström, Virkkunen, Helle, Pihlaja & Poikela, 1996, p. 10). This entails setting up three surfaces (blackboards or flipcharts) on which to elaborate (i) theoretical models for analysing information; (ii) new ideas and tools that the participants come up with; and (iii) ethnographic information about the activity system. Thus, the dual stimuli of empirically based problems and theoretically elaborated models are used simultaneously by the participants to trace past, present and future situations and ideas, and come up with more effective tools and practices for the activity in which they are engaged. Basically, then, the Change Laboratory offers CBPR a comprehensive tool for structuring a research intervention so that the participants can collaboratively collect, analyse, develop and represent data, theories and practical and theoretical resources with which to engage the project which they have identified.

That is not to say that the CPBR-CHAT exchange is a one-way process. For example, while Sutter (2011) suggests that the CHAT framework could go “beyond interventionism”, this is already being done by CPBR projects like SCRATCHMAPS. Sutter advocates for research activity that engages the diverse knowledges and resources of the participants in developing both the development activity as well as the research activity (Sannino & Sutter, 2011). Achieving this would entail that the joint activity of researching and developing be undertaken as a coalition in which notions of research, the role of researchers, and the tools for research, are redefined so that they are more receptive to utilising the resources held by all of the project’s participants (Sutter, 2011). While he admits that the details of how to go about this still need to be figured out, he proposes a two-step process, one of which would be to analyse the developmental project itself. The other step involves directing the resources of the participants in the project at the research activity.

Such an inclusive model for interventionist research in the area of safety, peace and health is evident in e.g. the Ukuphepha programme’s commitment to a proactive engagement which prioritises community participation and empowerment (Eksteen et al., 2012). At a practical level the SCRATCHMAPS project, in particular, encompasses an approach that goes “beyond interventionism”. The structures and processes it has put in place reflect Sutter’s (2011) call for radically restructured research relationships and tools. These range from advisory committees through which academics and community members negotiate the research process, to community asset mapping that identifies capacities which could enhance the effectiveness of the intervention as well as the research process, as well as openness to all forms of exchange that may positively capacitate individuals and the community, longer time-frames for the project (Lazarus et al., 2012), and mentoring engagements for building appropriate collaborative relationships (Lazarus et al., 2014).

Thus, while researchers and others using CBPR could develop their theoretical repertoire by drawing from the Change Laboratory methodology to model the analysis of projects,

CHAT can expand its praxis by examining how some of the above-mentioned projects draw from the community's resources to theoretically and practically develop their research activity.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The aim of this paper has been to encourage collaboration between CHAT and CBPR practitioners. Thus, while the complexity of CBPR and CHAT precludes even a superficial explanation of their principles, it should at least be evident that they demonstrate great potential for exchange through their community-oriented and relational approaches to investigating and instigating change.

In summary, then, I am suggesting that CBPR and CHAT analyses that are willing to push the boundaries of research interventions could benefit from a methodological alignment. This is because, while they have much in common, their respective primary foci or purpose differ somewhat. CBPR is essentially concerned with empowering, collaborative community based research, while CHAT's main focus is understanding human activity (including research) as a system of mediated social relations. Thus, complementing a CBPR engagement with a CHAT-based approach like the Change Laboratory affords it a systematically elaborated set of theoretical and practical tools which have been developed from similar principles but within the scope of differing purposes and applications. For example, CHAT offers CBPR conceptual tools such as the cycle of expansive learning, knotworking, runaway objects (Engeström, 2001) and so forth with which to enhance the analytical ability and capacity to embrace the challenges and contradictions that inevitably arise from ambitious community based initiatives. CBPR projects like SCRATCHMAPS, in turn, have painstakingly developed their praxis beyond the conventions of interventionist research. By practically adapting their various roles, mediating structures and notions of engagement within the project, researchers and community participants here have reconfigured the interventionist methodology. CBPR's priorities have therefore expanded research activity in ways which activity theorists may find instructive.

It is therefore not difficult to envisage a multitude of analytical and practical possibilities arising for a safety, peace and health promotion paradigm should researchers in this area choose to explore exchanges between the CHAT and CBPR frameworks.

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