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Activity Theory Between Historical Engagement and Future-Making Practice

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Activity theory seeks to analyze development within practical social activities. Activities organize our lives. In activities, humans develop their skills, personalities, and consciousness. Through activities, we also transform our social conditions, resolve contradictions, generate new cultural artifacts, and create new forms of life and the self.

The legitimacy of activity theory as a unified theory has been the subject of various discussions. Holzman (2006), for example, argues that there is no unified perspective on activity theory. Holzman uses the term “activity theory” to cover a wide variety of approaches inspired by Vygotsky: among others, cultural-historical activity theory and sociocultural psychology. Such a broad view of activity theory contributes to a misrepresentation of the theory as fragmented and scattered across multiple perspectives. Further, this view brings with it the risk of losing focus on the actual nature of activity, which is the core of activity theory. An emphasis on psychological approaches without consideration of anthropological, sociological, historical, and linguistic characteristics of activity is risky and narrows the focus to the study of specific and limited aspects of activity. As a unified theory, activity theory has shown consistent viability throughout its history, beginning in the 1930s when Leont’ev formulated its basic principles and proposed the structure of activity. In addition, activity theory today attracts more interest globally than ever before. The term “unified” does not refer to a closed and fixed theory. However, it rules out an interpretation of activity theory as an eclectic grouping of multiple theories.

Conceiving of activity theory as a psychological theory ignores its multidisciplinary nature. As Davydov (1999a) writes, “The problem of activity and the concept of activity are interdisciplinary by nature. . . . The issue of activity is not necessarily connected with psychology as a profession. It is connected at present because in the course of our history activity turned

out to be the thing on which our prominent psychologists focused their attention as early as in the Soviet Union days. Things just turned out to be this way” (p. 50). This historical circumstance has given rise to the prominence of activity theory in psychology. Today, however, activity theory is redefining itself and proving its generative potential across a wide range of disciplines and fields of social practice.

Davydov (1999a, 1999b) argues that the generative potential of activity theory is based on its nature as a monistic theory. Activity theory is a theory of the activity structure and of the content of the activity germ cell. The content of the activity germ cell stems from the interaction between individual and collective activities within an ontogenetic and historical perspective. As Scribner (1997), Engeström, and others (Engeström, 1987; Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamäki, 1999) have pointed out, activity theory addresses the foundational theoretical issue of activity as the primary unit of analysis and, thus, provides both a theory of human activity and a productive method for its study.

In *Perspectives on Activity Theory*, Engeström (1999a) acknowledges the risk of activity theory’s becoming “an eclectic combination of ideas before it has a chance to redefine its own core” (p. 20). However, Engeström envisions a different future for the field, proposing that “the current expansive reconstruction of activity theory will actually lead to a new type of theory. Essential to this emerging theory is multivoicedness coexisting with monism” (Engeström, 1999a, p. 20). One distinctive theoretical feature of activity theory, for example, concerns the issue of change. As Minnis and John-Steiner (2001) argue, “The delineating factor [between activity theory and the theories dominant in Western psychology and sociology] is that activity theory requires a systematic examination of change. This can be done by provoking, facilitating, and documenting change” (p. 308).

This chapter contributes to these discussions on activity theory as a legitimate theory, unified by scientific contributions to its object of study, that is, activity. Activity theory is grounded in the lineage of Leont’ev’s works and recognizes a unifying thread between the works of Leont’ev and other Russian scholars, such as Vygotsky, Luria, Meshcheryakov, and Davydov. This thread may be articulated as follows: Not only is activity an abstract principle of explanation or a general theoretical notion; it is a concept that denotes the basic unit of concrete human life.

THE CONCEPT OF ACTIVITY AS THE CORE

From an activity-theoretical perspective, human life is fundamentally rooted in participation in human activities that are oriented

toward objects. Thus, human beings are seen as situated in a collective life perspective, in which they are driven by purposes that lie beyond a particular goal. Object-oriented activities, then, are the core of activity theory and distinguish it from other approaches. Sociocultural theories, for instance, focus on action rather than on activity (Wertsch, 1991). Here we wish to highlight an important difference between sociocultural approaches and activity theory. As a unit of analysis, a focus on action does not account for the historical continuity and longevity of human life. Activity theory conceptualizes actions in the broader perspective of their systemic and motivational context and, thus, aims at going beyond a given situation. The emphasis on action alone does not fulfill the research agenda in activity theory, according to which actions are studied in historically evolving collective activities.

Further, the boundaries of the field of activity theory are defined by two distinctive features. First, activity theory is a practice-based theory. Second, it is a historical and future-oriented theory. We argue that there are methodological issues that distinguish an activity-theoretical approach from traditional approaches to research. Activity theory involves the researcher throughout the course of the development, stagnation, or regression of the activities under scrutiny, as well as in the activities of the research subjects. This deep involvement in everyday human life is a crucial resource of activity theory.

We elaborate these issues in the following sections of the chapter. We first take up the issue of dialogue between theory and practice. Then we focus on dialogue between the past, the present, and the future. Finally, we trace the work of Yrjö Engeström, one of the most representative contemporary activity theorists, whose work has promoted dialogues between theory and practice, on the one hand, and between the past, the present, and the future, on the other.

ON THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

In recent years, scholars have declared a practice turn in social sciences (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, & von Savigny, 2000). This proclaimed practice turn can be traced back to Marx's idea of revolutionary practice, in which theory is not only meant to analyze and explain the world, but also to facilitate practices and promote changes. However, the social turn in activity theory is already found in the early work of Vygotsky, who drew on Marx's ideas 80 years ago. Since Vygotsky's work with children who were affected by the Russian Civil War, this practice-based approach has persisted. We see this approach in the work of many of the founders of

cultural-historical activity theory, including Luria, Leont'ev, Galperin, Zaporozhets, Meshcheryakov, and Davydov, who engaged in various kinds of interventions in multiple settings. This dialogue between theory and practice is an essential component of activity theory and warrants discussion and exemplification. We begin with a discussion of how the dialogue between theory and practice was originally conducted. We will provide examples of concrete research inquiries by these and other scholars – research that met specific practical needs of people and that led to material changes in the lives of the subjects.

According to Yaroshevsky (1989), there is a clear connection between the works of Vygotsky during the Gomel period in the early 1920s and his practice as a teacher of literature. In the same period, Vygotsky established a psychological laboratory at the Gomel Teacher Training School. During these years, the country was actively concerned with the challenge of providing infrastructures for homeless children and for children with special needs. Vygotsky's laboratory aimed at carrying out experiments with schoolchildren and children with multisensory impairment living in state-run children's homes. Luria (2005), reflecting on Vygotsky's work in this period, wrote, "Vygotsky's work at the teachers college brought him in contact with the problems of children who suffered from congenital defects – blindness, deafness, mental retardation – and with the need to discover ways to help such children fulfill their individual potentials" (p. 39). Vygotsky's intellectual work was driven by these practical concerns of his time.

The connection to practice was later explicitly presented as a central component within Vygotsky's (1997a) discussion of overcoming the crisis in psychology:

Confrontation [with a highly developed – industrial, educational, political, or military – practice] compels psychology to reform its principles so that they may withstand the highest test of practice. It forces us to accommodate and introduce into our science the supply of practical psychological experiences and skills which has been gathered over thousands of years. ... The importance of the new practical psychology for the *whole* science cannot be exaggerated. The psychologist might dedicate a hymn to it.

... Practice pervades the deepest foundations of the scientific operation and reforms it from beginning to end. Practice sets the tasks and serves as the supreme judge, as its truth criterion. It dictates how to construct the concepts and how to formulate the laws. (pp. 305–306, emphasis in original)

Even before meeting Vygotsky, Luria and Leont'ev shared an intensive period of research on emotions during which they “decided that one way to overcome . . . inadequacy in our own and others’ previous research was to work directly with people who were experiencing strong emotions in real life situations. The people we chose were actual or suspected criminals. . . . This work turned out to be of practical value to criminologists, providing them with an early model of a lie detector” (Luria, 2005, pp. 34–36). Luria’s subsequent academic work from the late 1920s on is indivisible from his practice as a medical doctor. He developed new methods of neuropsychological examination of patients with brain damage through his medical practice at the Burdenko Institute of Neurosurgery. In addition to diagnoses, Luria’s work resulted in the development of a number of treatments for restoring speech in patients who had experienced trauma or suffered from aphasia.

Leont'ev also worked actively with injured soldiers to rehabilitate their movement functions. Gal'perin, Zaporozhets, and Rubinshtein were among a group of prominent scientists who collaborated with him in this endeavor. As underscored by Levitin (1982), this work led to theoretical results and concrete innovations that were strongly practice based: “It was shown that the rehabilitation of lost movement essentially depends on the general character of the patient’s activity and the motives, goals, and means of this activity. The research data thus obtained was used to develop new effective methods of labor therapy and therapeutic exercises which were widely used at military hospitals” (p. 106). In a volume that reports the numerous results of this work, Leont'ev and Zaporozhets (1960) explicitly refer to the role of rehabilitation practice in understanding the symptoms connected to injured limbs: “It is difficult to over-estimate the importance of a correct understanding of these symptoms in the practice of rehabilitation. The most direct way to understand them is by careful observation of motor manifestations” (p. 194).

Similarly, Meshcheryakov devoted his life to the education of children with multisensory impairment. His book *Awakening to Life* (1979) is a thorough report of the development and implementation of Meshcheryakov’s method in the Zagorsk boarding school. This method consisted of progressively guiding the child with multisensory impairment to perform independent actions. First, the child carries out the action with the help of the teacher, who directs the child’s hand. Progressively the child recognizes a particular touch by the teacher as a sign to perform the learned action. Finally, the child learns to autonomously contribute to collective productive activities. At a time when children with multisensory impairment were relegated to the category of retarded subjects, Meshcheryakov’s work led

to generations of children with multisensory impairment who not only learned to move independently in their environment, but also became fully integrated in the society and obtained the highest academic degrees.

Within activity theory, even the most theoretically oriented representative – the philosopher Il’enkov – grounded his philosophy in the educational practices in the boarding school directed by Meshcheryakov in Zagorsk for children with multisensory impairment. Il’enkov (quoted by Levitin, 1982) publicly affirmed the following: “The enormous work being carried out by Meshcheryakov, while it is important for the study of the handicapped and for education, is above all important and necessary for those of us who study philosophy. The problems posed by the education of children with multisensory impairment are epistemological problems. The neurophysiologist deciphering mechanisms of the brain inaccessible to direct analysis, the astronomer describing remote galaxies, and the physicist studying invisible particles – all of them, in the final analysis, are exploring the world hidden from the sense organs at our disposal” (Levitin, 1982, p. 298).

Davydov’s (1990) book, *Types of Generalization in Instruction*, is a careful analysis and a harsh critique of contemporary school instructional practices in the Soviet Union. According to the author, teaching in Soviet schools was based on anachronistic concepts and methods that facilitated mainly empirical thinking and neglected more effective forms of rational cognition, that is, scientific and theoretical thinking. Davydov’s work comprises an impressive set of large-scale, long-term interventions of developmental teaching in schools. These inquiries were aimed at promoting scientific and theoretical forms of thinking through new methods of designing school subjects in line with the dialectical method of ascending from the abstract to the concrete.

For Davydov (1990), “study of the principles governing mental activity occurs *on the basis of and in the form of experimental instruction* (p. 373, emphasis in original). Moreover, Davydov (1988) connects the practice of experimental teaching with the nature itself of the method of formative experiments initiated by Vygotsky and developed further within his tradition:

The essence of that method consists in having psychologists draw up a project of a new type of activity for children that is in line with a meaningful social mandate to be analyzed in the more or less distant future. Then they join forces with educators to shape that type of activity in schoolchildren. ... The original elaboration and testing of this project (model) is done under experimental conditions. But when

the appropriate effect has been achieved in the sphere of children's consciousness, the shaping in them of a new type of activity can be transferred to a broader range of practice. (p. 73)

Transformation is a key theoretical notion for Davydov (1999b), who distinguishes the concept from the notion of change as used in everyday language. "Many changes of natural and social reality carried out by people affect the object externally without changing it internally. Such changes can hardly be called transformations. Transformation means changing an object internally, making evident its essence and altering it" (Davydov, 1999b, p. 42). For Davydov, the philosophical roots of activity theory found in the works of Hegel and Marx imply a particular type of activism. This activism does not coincide with technicist activism. Quoting Davydov (1999b): "Technicist activism ... has no humanistic origins. Instead of developing the essence of reality according to its own laws it disfigures it, mutilates it, and changes it without taking into account the historical interests of humans and realistic possibilities of the reality itself. Such activism does not coincide with the activity theory of Marx and Hegel, according to which people dealing with an object may only use the measure that belongs to that object" (p. 43). Thus, a humanist activism is grounded in historical realities.

Activity theory, as a practice-based theory, is grounded in practice both theoretically and concretely. On this basis, we argue that the very nature of activity theory relies on establishing a bridge between theory and practice. On the one hand, as previously addressed in the works by the founders, the study of higher mental functions was made possible by turning to the observation of concrete life situations. On the other hand, transformations of real practices are promoted while research within activity theory is performed. In this sense, we identify a dual role of practice in the works of the founders. From a theoretical point of view, practice is the epistemological source of knowledge, and it is their very concrete involvement in practice and activism that characterizes the lives and contributions of the founders.

ON THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE PAST, THE PRESENT, AND THE FUTURE

Activity theory is based on the collective heritage of the founders, in particular Vygotsky, Luria, and Leont'ev. With the collective foundational work of the troika, activity theory is unique in human and social sciences. This collective contribution stands in contrast to other approaches typically

based on a single individual's endeavors – for example, psychoanalysis on Freud's works and genetic epistemology on Piaget's works. Also, activity theory has the distinctive characteristic of developing as an integral part of the periods of historical turmoil in which activity theorists have lived. We recollect two such periods in the development of activity theory: first, the Russian Revolution, which triggered the engagement of the founders, and the European student movement of the 1960s, through which activity theory was rediscovered and further developed in Europe 50 years later.

The Russian Revolution was the consequence of extenuating and continuous conflicts during which the country experienced unsustainable conditions of inequality. The Bolsheviks, under the leadership of Lenin, were able to read the population's need for a radical political and social change. In November 1917, organized masses of workers and soldiers marched in the streets and took over Petrograd, where power had been in the hands of the Russian Provisional Government since the czar's abdication. John Reed's (1935) book, *Ten Days That Shook the World*, is a condensed diary that vividly captures the spreading fervor in the ten days when the actual insurrection happened. Far from bringing peace to the country, these events led to a civil war that lasted until 1922. Officers with monarchist ideals organized a loose army of counterrevolutionary forces aimed at opposing Lenin's power. The fact that Lenin was running a state during a civil war did not prevent new positive energy from spreading throughout the country.

Although Russia was taking only the first steps as a new type of society, the period immediately after the revolution was simultaneously a period of creative turmoil and one of great enthusiasm for the arts and sciences. And there was a lot of experimentation in cultural and political life. These years established the conditions for the growth of extraordinary creative efforts in all domains of cultural and social life. During the years when Vygotsky lived in Gomel after completing his legal studies, the whole society was displaced and considerable political attention was focused on homeless and pedagogically neglected children. A few years later, Luria and Leont'ev met Vygotsky, who represented a new psychology that they could collectively pursue.

What triggered this lifetime engagement under extremely difficult post-revolution conditions? Russia had been ruled for centuries by despots, and thus the revolution was a unique historical turn for the country. For a large number of artists, intellectuals, and academics, it meant a unique opportunity to build a new society. They became completely involved in this cause, exhilarated that they were sharing the vision of a better world for

all. A. A. Leont'ev (2005) writes that his father, A. N. Leont'ev, decided to study psychology because “as a witness of the events of the Revolution and the Civil War . . . Leont'ev developed a desire – as he recalled in old age – *to philosophically understand and make sense of what was happening*” (p. 13, emphasis in original). A. A. Leont'ev, sketching his father's autobiography, cites Leont'ev's shift from a desire to become an engineer to a commitment to studying psychology: “Then technical interests somehow disappeared on their own, and philosophical problems emerged. It was these problems that led me one fine day to the Institute of Psychology, where I asked: where does one study to be a psychologist?” (A. A. Leont'ev, 2005, p. 13). A need to make sense of historical turmoil was the driving force behind the formation of what was to become activity theory.

The revolution served as a catalyst for these scientists to come together and work collectively in the development of activity theory. Luria cites the influence of the fervor of the post-revolution years on him and his colleagues that lingered throughout their lives, including the period of the Second World War.

“The unity of purpose of the Soviet people so clearly felt during the great revolution and the subsequent years reemerged in new forms. A sense of common responsibility and common purpose gripped the country. Each of us knew we had an obligation to work together with our countrymen to meet the challenge” (Luria, 2005, p. 138).

When Stalin succeeded Lenin in 1924, the Soviet Union gradually transformed into a dictatorship. This led to a 30-year period of stagnation during which intellectuals and academics who deviated from the Stalinist ideology were politically attacked for their work and eventually physically threatened, marginalized, or killed. Vygotsky and his colleagues had to flee to the Ukraine for safety. A. A. Leont'ev (2005) refers to these years when Vygotsky and his colleagues were all in Moscow as a dangerous time: “The position of Vygotsky and his team at the Institute of psychology became less and less secure with each year” (p. 27). From this time on, it became increasingly difficult for these scholars to pursue their work. The pedologist movement in which Vygotsky was involved was condemned, and even after Vygotsky's death, his books were removed from his archives.

However, Stalinism was not immediately seen as a reactionary and inhumane regime. The communist ideals in the Soviet Union were largely humanistic, and millions of people believed that in the name of these ideals they were all building a better future. In those years with Stalin in power, few in the West could understand the extent of the internal terror in the Soviet Union. Great intellectuals like Jean-Paul Sartre and prominent

artists like Pablo Picasso were supporters of Soviet communism, which they considered to be a viable alternative to capitalism and U.S. imperialism. Only in the late 1950s did the horrors of Stalinism gradually begin to come to light. The realization of what actually happened in the Soviet Union during the regime of Stalin led numerous scholars from all over the world to turn their attention to banned or previously unknown works produced by Russian academics.

A few years after Stalin's death, Leont'ev received the Lenin Prize. This was an important sign that the new kind of psychology initiated by Vygotsky was finally acceptable. This event, however, was not a sign of a consistently positive atmosphere with regard to the work of these scholars. As late as the 1980s, scholars such as Davydov were prevented at times from traveling abroad. Until 1990, when the Soviet Union ceased to exist, the legacy of Stalinism continued and the state system Stalin built continued to be based on coercion and extreme control. Activity theory, then, must necessarily be understood in the context of this complex historical framework.

The student movement in Europe in the 1960s gave rise to a renewed interest in activity theory. Our decision to discuss the general history of activity theory and its connections to the events and the consequences of both the Russian Revolution and the student movement is not arbitrary. Authoritative historical analysis also refers contextually to both events. In the well-known book *Age of Extremes*, the historian Eric Hobsbawm (1995) writes, "If there was a single moment in the golden years after 1945 which corresponds to the world simultaneous upheaval of which the revolutionaries had dreamed after 1917, it was surely 1968, when students rebelled . . . , largely stimulated by the extraordinary outbreak of May 1968 in Paris, epicenter of a Continent-wide student uprising" (p. 298). The year 1968 is merely emblematic; it actually represents a period of about 10 years of social and political awakening of young generations until the mid-1970s.

In these years between the late 1960s and 1970s, activity theory was introduced in the West. Progressive academics like Urie Bronfenbrenner, Jerome Bruner, and Michael Cole brought the works of the founders to American academic circles. In the same years, a number of politically motivated activists from Italy, Germany, Holland, and Japan went to Russia to study with Luria, Leont'ev, and their colleagues. Because of its split society, Germany, in particular, became a crucial entry point for activity theory in the West. East Germany was an official part of Marxist ideology and published German translations of the work of Leont'ev, Luria, Davydov, and others. These translations made their way to the West, exposing a larger