

An application of CHAT analysis to a community-based action team

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Abstract: This study applies cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) to a community-based racial equity and social justice action group in the American South. The community action group is referred to as a 'team' by participants and by its host community. The CHAT framework applied incorporates Vygotsky's mediated action triangle and holds that learning can occur within any activity system. Using CHAT, it is possible to clarify points of tension that occurred within the action team during the community-based team's first year of development. Reflecting on points of tension within the CHAT framework supported appropriate modifications to the team's development. This application of the CHAT framework demonstrates ways CHAT could be applied to support leadership assessment and constructive follow-up on areas of tension in a community group, thereby contributing to group maintenance and ongoing well-being.

Keywords: community action group; racial equity; social justice; CHAT; cultural historical activity theory; groupwork; group work

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This study applies cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) to a community-based racial equity and social justice action group in the American South. The context was a community-based group project within the south-central section of a capital city historically home to African-American middle-class families. This article describes how a racial equity and social justice action group developed and maintained itself as an activity system within this larger environment. The authors functioned first as co-leaders and later as participants in the group, referred to as a 'team' by its participants, leaders and host community. Cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) was used reflexively to assess action team leadership and development during its first year.

Background

A well-established, three-year old community advocacy group in the south-central section of town provided a forum for ongoing community input on strategy development to address community needs and goals. The advocacy group met monthly, to identify and connect existing resources and potential partners across six domains: (a) health and wellness; (b) economic opportunity; (c) civic engagement; (d) education advancement; (e) community leadership opportunities; and (f) youth and senior citizens. This group, in collaboration with county human services, a land-grant university cooperative extension program, and the authors, convened a workshop to develop material for a grant application. (The manuscript of this article was read and approved by two key stakeholders from the workshop.) Although the grant itself was unfunded, the workshop led to the development of three smaller groups working under the advocacy group's aegis. These groups were referred to as 'action teams.' The three teams each targeted a priority challenge identified during the initial workshop. The initial workshop and community advocacy group approved a study exploring action team development. The study was also approved by the institutional review board (IRB) at the second author's university. This article describes the larger community environment in which the advocacy group and its action teams were situated, introduces cultural historical activity theory (CHAT; Engeström, 1999, 2001), and shows how CHAT can be applied to help maintain and sustain a developing group. One of the three action teams that sprang from the community advocacy group

workshop is used as an example. Recommendations for future work conclude the article.

The community environment

The community advocacy group's target area consisted of the 1½ mile radius around its meeting venue, a county-owned building. The building's historical significance for African-American education dated back to the early twentieth century, a time of segregation policies and Jim Crow laws. The area consisted of 22 blocks near the city's downtown center (NCWCHS, 2014). Based on 2008-2012 American Community Survey five-year estimates, 33% of residents lived at or below poverty, as compared to 11% of county residents overall. More conservatively, based on 2010 Census data, over 25% of residents lived in poverty and 8.5% of adults under age 65 were unemployed. In sum, many community residents experienced economic hardship.

The advocacy group's target area included three of the top five block-groups consuming Adult Medicaid in the state (NCWCHS, 2014). In America, Medicaid is a federal government-sponsored health insurance program for individuals meeting limited-income guidelines. The State government had chosen not to expand Medicaid coverage under the Affordable Care Act (Garfield, Orgera, & Damico, 2021), despite the State being home to 9% of American adults within the relevant income gap. For the target community, indicators of health and wellbeing were less positive overall than they were for the city or county as a whole.

Area strengths included active, participatory and committed community members and leaders that brought with them extensive professional and personal networks and experiences. Many community leaders and members participated in multiple community groups, and on a variety of civic engagement projects. Participants in the initial community advocacy group workshop expressed both pride in their community's history and recognition of local change, which included ongoing gentrification. Workshop participants discussed and identified specific community boundaries, assets and challenges, before identifying three priority challenges facing the community. The challenges identified were:

- racial equity and racism, which included systemic and institutionalized racism as well as the impact of the political climate

following President Trump's election;

- community leadership development, which included leadership skill-building and the need for opportunities to develop grassroots community leadership among younger generations; and
- workforce training for labor market value and upward mobility within the community.

As previously noted, each priority challenge became the focus of an action team. Action team formation began four months following the initial workshop. Approximately one year later, all action teams continued to meet monthly as open groups. This study focuses on the early development of the racial equity and social justice action team.

The racial equity and social justice action team

The racial equity and social justice action team was comprised primarily of women, with several men attending irregularly. The majority of participants came from social service-related backgrounds in which women predominate, at least in the U.S.A. (Law, 2020). Given this, it is understandable that the core working group of the action team was made-up of women. Participant ages ranged from mid-twenties to late sixties. Some, but not all, participants lived or worked within the larger community advocacy group's identified target area. Racial composition was primarily African American; several White women attended irregularly. The initial workshop convener asked the authors to serve as co-leaders when the group began. One author is African American and one is White; both are women.

Meeting time, frequency and location were negotiated and scheduled during the first action team meeting. The group met monthly over the lunch hour at the county-owned building that served as a meeting venue for the community advocacy group. Meeting notes/minutes were originally recorded by one co-leader using a logic model format. This format facilitated specific task identification and task assignment, for follow-up outside the group (e.g., Innovation Network, Inc., n.d.; W. F. Kellogg Foundation, 2004). After the third meeting, the use of the logic model was discontinued and meeting minutes were recorded using a standardized format by the county intern assigned to the team.

Logic model contributions to the team

The early use of a logic model format supported prompt identification of targets for change. Logic models can help a group to ‘plan, implement, evaluate, and communicate more effectively’ (Taylor-Powell & Henert, 2008, p. 1). A basic logic model framework includes inputs, outputs (including activities and participation), and impacts (short, medium, and long range). The group used the logic model to assist with both planning and implementation. The targets for change, once identified, led to desired *outputs* that included *activities*, specific tasks to be accomplished prior to the next meeting. In addition, *participation* was used to identify individuals that committed to complete assigned tasks. Desired short and long-term impacts were also identified.

The action team identified its targets for change as: (a) barriers to community re-entry for adults coming from the judicial system; and (b) racially disproportionate discipline within the county school system. These racially inequitable systemic challenges for community residents were not new, but participants felt they had increased recently due to changes in policy and political climate. These targets for change became the overarching group goals.

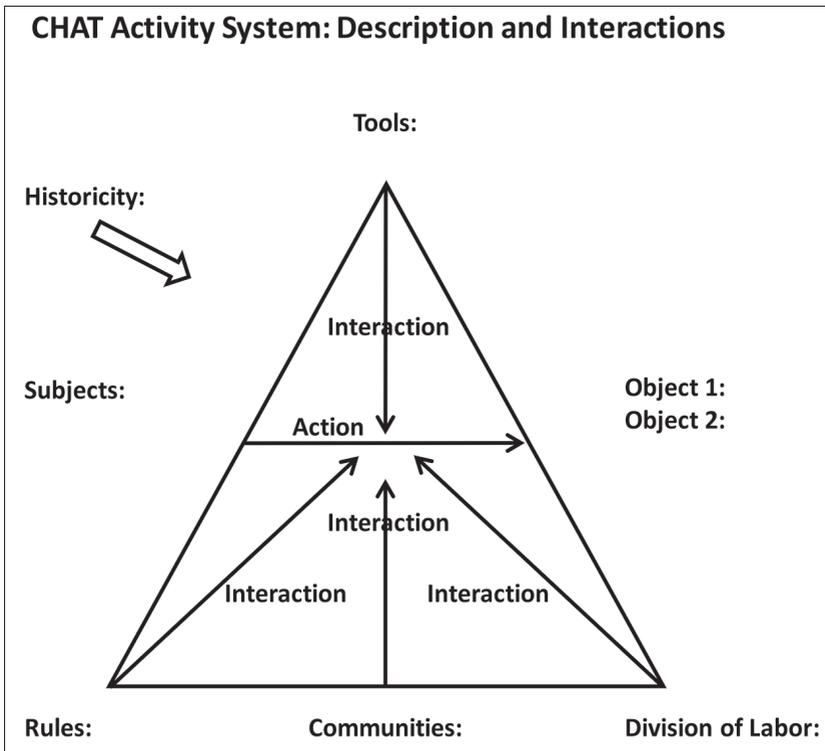
Participants also expressed distress and/or anger about gentrification pressures in their community. Group members shared their feelings of anger about wealthy/well-to-do Whites purchasing recently built homes constructed on lots from which older homes owned by people of color were cleared. This process displaced many long-time middle-class and low-income residents of color. One African American group member spoke passionately about ‘po’ Black’ residents, noting that gentrification was leaving them without alternative housing options in the city (N.B. the expression ‘po’ Black’ was repeatedly used by some action team participants to refer to African Americans with very low or no source of income). It is perhaps unsurprising that while some action team participants supported suggestions that long-time community members reach out to newcomers and welcome them to the area, other participants objected to any such outreach. Concerns regarding gentrification were presented to the community advocacy group for follow-up.

Introducing cultural historical activity theory

Cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) ‘is rooted in the philosophy that learning occurs from or during activity, rather than learning preceding activity’ (Fire & Casstevens, 2013, pp. 47-8). In CHAT ‘learning occurs within a dynamic context or ‘activity system’” (Fire & Casstevens, p. 48). Diagram 1, based on the description and interaction figure of a CHAT activity system used in Fire and Casstevens (2013), shows essential components of an activity system.

Diagram 1.

CHAT activity system: [Description and interactions].



Lev Vygotsky’s basic mediated action triangle, wherein individual subjects engage in activity through the use of mediating artifacts, or tools, to achieve an object, is central to the model (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010; Zittoun, Gillespie, Cornish, & Psaltis,

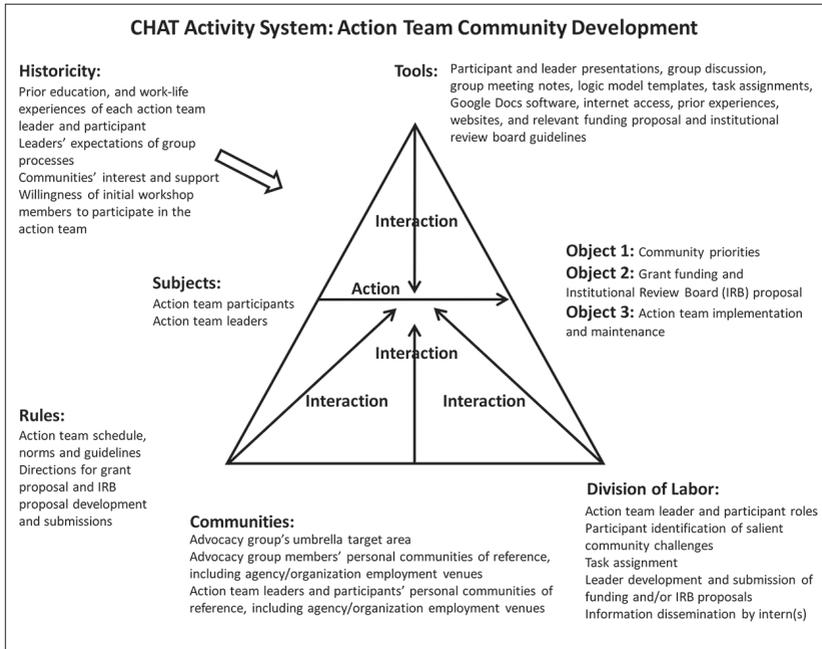
2007). Yamagata-Lynch (2010) noted that A. N. Leontiev distinguished between object-oriented activity and goal directed actions, the latter being the more temporary, viewed as steps towards larger, community-based object-oriented activity. Leontiev also took into account socio-historical context, i.e., historicity. Yrjö Engeström built on this in developing an activity systems model that incorporated Vygotsky's basic triangle and expanded it to include rules, community, and division of labor components (Engeström, 1999; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010).

The action team as a CHAT activity system

In considering the racial equity and social justice action team as a CHAT activity system, the model's *subjects* are the action team participants and leaders. Mediating artifacts (*tools*) include: participant and leader presentations, group discussion, group meeting notes, logic model templates, task assignments, Google Docs software, internet access, prior experiences, websites, and relevant funding proposal and institutional review board guidelines. Achievements, (*objects*) include the identified community priorities, completed grant-funding and institutional review board (IRB) proposals, and ongoing action team meetings/implementation and maintenance. Diagram 2 displays these components of this specific activity system. Additional activity system components include *rules*, *communities* and *division of labor*. Here, *rules* include the action team schedule, norms and guidelines. *Communities* include the advocacy group's umbrella target area, its members, and the action team leaders and participants' personal communities of reference, including agency/organization employment venues. *Division of labor* includes action team leader and participant roles, with participant identification of salient community challenges, task assignment, leader development and submission of funding and/or IRB proposals, information dissemination by intern(s). Finally, *historicity* involves the prior education and work-life experiences of each action team leader and participant; leaders' expectations of group processes; the target and larger communities' interest and support; and the willingness of initial workshop members to participate in the action team.

Diagram 2.

CHAT activity system: Action team community development



Tensions in the CHAT activity system

Yamagata-Lynch (2010) stated that in groups or communities, tensions caused by systemic contradictions:

arise when the conditions of an activity put the subject in contradictory situations that can preclude achieving the object or the nature of the subject's participation in the activity while trying to achieve the object. In some cases, the activity may collapse altogether and the subject may not be able to attain the object. In other cases, subjects may attain the object but be dissatisfied about how they attained the object. (p. 23)

The racial equity social justice action team's development during its first year saw points of tension that signaled opportunities for CHAT analysis, producing insights that could be used to support group

maintenance and stability. The authors address three points of tension below that appeared particularly relevant for the team during this period.

The first point of tension occurred during the first two action meetings. Co-leaders observed that participants' enthusiasm and passion led to a tendency towards monopolization. This led to tension among team members that was displayed through sidebar conversations and facial expressions, as well as negative comments made after the meetings. The behavior needed to be addressed to make it possible to obtain input from all participants. Co-leaders consulted with a collaborator, before deciding to use the first part of the third team meeting for a discussion of previously established norms and guidelines. This helped re-establish participant adherence to previously agreed-upon rules (see Diagram 2). Action team participants recommitted themselves to time-limited sharing.

The second point of tension arose during the third and fourth action team meetings. Co-leaders observed that some participants seemed to hear information offered by the White co-leader only if it was repeated by the African American co-leader, or another African American participant. Such repetition took time, making it difficult to complete processing and decision-making during the brief meetings. Co-leaders consulted and decided to ask an established action team participant to assume leadership of the team. The established participant had a life-long connection with the community, and was a well-known and respected African American community leader. The historicity involved supported this redistribution of labor, which happened with full support of all participants (see Diagram 2). The role transition occurred after the fourth monthly meeting and helped move the group process toward optimal functioning during subsequent meetings.

The third and final point of tension that surfaced during the first year centered around the study in progress previously approved by the community advocacy group. Although the community advocacy group and university IRB had both approved the study, the racial equity and social justice action team was an open group that encouraged new participants to join over time. Several incoming participants expressed negative views regarding research and research participation as early as the eighth action team meeting. At that time, an established participant concurred with their view. At the eleventh team meeting, discussion

arose regarding community needs assessment projects completed by previous researchers that had never resulted in positive impacts or deliverables for community residents, or the community overall. Even though the authors were instrumental in obtaining a small grant to support agency work with adults re-entering the community from the justice system, ethical implications of continuing the study could not be ignored (Minkler, 2004). The authors, then action team participants, consulted and chose to discontinue the study one-year following its IRB approval / inception. From a CHAT perspective, the decision to discontinue the study followed subjects' verbal input re: historicity, specifically local feelings of 'being used' or exploited by past researchers.

Discussion

The CHAT activity system approach can contribute to assessment and intervention during community development and associated groupwork, as described previously. Within this community-based racial equity and social justice action group, CHAT was able to provide a way to assess and evaluate group tensions. In addition, the use of a logic model in the first three groups assisted in the prompt formulation of group goals. Further, the logic model offered the group a structure that was then used to achieve targeted outcomes. The structure required specific task identification, as well as the assignment of each task to a specific group member. This led to a sense of accountability, which in turn contributed to individuals taking pride in group outcomes. Momentum developed as targeted tasks were accomplished and recognized by group members and leaders. Notably, the combined use of a logic model framework and CHAT helped the group to achieve and maintain stability in spite of the difficulties inherent in addressing racial inequity and social injustice with a diverse group and in the context of the larger community..

Tuckman (1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977) identified group development as having five stages, often referred to as: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. The racial equity and social justice action group did indeed progress through stages, however it might be argued that the use of a logic model allowed the group to reach the performing stage earlier than would otherwise have been possible. Further, CHAT supported the co-leaders in viewing the

storming stage and its tensions as a constructive, healthy part of the action group itself. The identified tensions, or dialectics, highlighted opportunities for change that could be used to strengthen the action team and its capacity for object production. For example, the co-leaders stepped down from a leadership role when a community member agreed to become group leader. This could be seen as contributing to the formation of group norms. It was at this point that the former co-leaders turned their energy to writing a small grant in support of one of the stakeholder organizations. This small grant was funded, providing two internships that assisted with program and service development that helped address one of the group's target goals, namely barriers to community re-entry for adults coming from the judicial system. The performing stage of the group continues four years later within the community.

Conclusion

A CHAT activity system can support leadership assessment, as well as constructive follow-up on areas of tension in group settings. A logic model can support goal development and task accomplishment in task group settings. The combined use of CHAT activity system and logic model can offer effective developmental support when working with community or group processes, and interactions between and among stakeholders.

Further exploration and application of the CHAT model to community-based projects and groupwork as a way to assess group process, interventions, and change, is suggested. The CHAT framework identifies subjects that can then become more reflexively aware of historicity, rules, tools, division of labor, roles and actions. This study chose to avoid the discussion of objects and focus instead on ways a specific activity system could be helped to develop and maintain itself. As Yamagata-Lynch (2010) noted, 'activity may collapse altogether and the subject may not be able to attain the object' (p. 23). With any group or community project, supporting its successful process is of first priority.

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