Some proposals for strengthening organizational activity theory

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Abstract

This paper seeks to highlight a perceived ‘drift’ of organizational activity theory: from an original concern with the social mediation of human consciousness, through intersubjective interaction, to a focus on networked relations between organizational communities, through intercollective interaction. It is argued that such a drift threatens the explanatory power of Vygotsky’s original formulation, which offers an explanation for the social conditioning of meaning, but which nonetheless acknowledges its location within individual human beings, not groups. In an attempt to address this perceived situation and to contribute to the further development of organizational activity theory, the paper draws upon two ideas from the Russian semiologist Bakhtin, incorporating these within a proposed framework for the application of activity theory within organizational settings which remains consistent with Vygotsky’s original ideas.

Introduction

At a time when concepts of 'organizational knowledge', 'core competencies', 'best practice', and other views of corporately shared (and shareholder-owned) assets abound, it can be tempting for organizations to overlook the ways in which much of the behaviour of employees may be explicable in non-organizational terms. Such an explanation accounts for the widespread organizational use of self-images such as the organization chart, business process map, information architecture, and knowledge repository, which portray balance and equilibrium - at the expense, perhaps, of a sufficient acknowledgement of the non-shared aspects of employee interaction that are not amenable to capture and ‘ownership’ by the organization.

Although various strands of the organizational literature have sought to address the idea that peoples’ behaviour within organizations may be linked to motivations which extend outside the organizational domain, this paper argues that this important insight is insufficiently reflected within current organizational activity theory, which appears to have drifted away from its original formulation in the work of Vygotsky (e.g. 1987a). It is argued that this original formulation, which emphasised the mediation of human consciousness by tools and signs - in opposition to Cartesian divisions between reified social representations and individual people - has been replaced by a concern with the interrelationships between social groupings, which, not being conscious, are incapable of mediated experience in the manner Vygotsky proposes.

In making this argument, the paper is structured as follows. The first section seeks to provide a brief overview of some of the ways in which the relationship between individual motivation and social context has been approached within various literatures, including cognitive psychology, organization studies, social anthropology, and sociology. The second section compares the models of three prominent writers within the activity theory tradition, Vygotsky, Engeström, and Blackler et al., to illustrate the way in which ‘organizational’ activity theory appears to have drifted away from its Vygotskyan moorings in human consciousness. The third section then attempts to propose a response to this perceived situation, based on two ideas drawn from Bakhtin, through which it is argued that organizational activity theory can be complemented and strengthened.

Approaching motivation, organizational context, and activity

Various theories of motivation have been proposed within cognitive and organizational psychology to explain peoples’ activity within organizational contexts, including different ‘lists’, or hierarchies for the satisfaction of universal human needs (e.g. Murray 1938, Maslow 1954, McClelland 1961); equity theory (Adams 1965), involving peoples’ sense of fairness
regarding their perceived benefits within an organization relative to their inputs; self-consistency theory (Korman 1970), which proposes that people act in a way that is consistent with their self-image; reinforcement theory (Skinner 1953), which proposes a psychological need for regular ‘rewards’ and feedback; attribution theory (Staw 1975), where people make judgements about the likely motivations of others related to observed patterns in their behaviour over time; expectancy theory (e.g. Lewin 1938), which juxtaposes the value of the potential reward with the likelihood of its achievement; and goal-setting theory (Locke 1968), which relates the setting of goals directly to improvements in performance. Although the validity of some of these theories has come under criticism (Snyder and Williams 1982), several of these, such as Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, continue to inform the literature on organizational culture.

A considerable literature exists concerning the extent to which organizational culture may be established in such a way as to influence employee behaviour. ‘Integrationist’ writers such as McDonald (1988) and Schein (1983) have provided case studies in which this appears to be the case; ‘differentiationists’ such as Collinson (1994), Leidner (1993) and Van Maanen (1991) emphasise the forms of employee ‘resistance through distance’ that underlies the apparent stability of surface representations; and ‘fragmentationists’ such as Weick (1990) and Meyerson (1991), and Hatch (1993) argue that organizational culture is a process which is co-constituted with the ongoing interpretive activity of people, whose motivations are shifting, ambiguous, and not amenable to organizational control. In a well-known study that mirrors much of the emphasis of activity theory, Kondo (1990) argues that individuals craft their selfhoods continually, mediated by the changing cultural factors of various groups to whom they belong. Consistent with the increased interest being shown in theories of practice within the organizational domain, it is perhaps fair to say that this latter view has gained increasing acceptance in recent years, a view which might be summarised as follows:

“The foremost paradox of the frantic search for communal grounds of consensus is that it results in more dissipation and fragmentation, more heterogeneity. The drive to synthesis is the major factor in producing endless bifurcations. Each attempt at convergence and synthesis leads to new splits and divisions…The search for community turns into a major obstacle to its formation. The only consensus likely to stand a chance is the acceptance of heterogeneity of dissensions” (Bauman 1992, in Parker 2000:227).

Within the social anthropological literature, writers have stressed various aspects of the relationship between peoples’ activity and their social context. Geertz’ ‘cultural’ brand of anthropology represents an early attempt within this new, practice-based genre to locate meaning relationally within and between the cultural symbols generated by intersubjective activity, of which his famous account (1973) of the Balinese cockfight is a good example (see also Geertz, 1984; Turner, 1967). However, more recent approaches, such as ‘cognitive’ anthropology, exemplified by Lave (1988), are careful to focus on “the whole person in action, acting within the settings of that activity” (1988:17): a shift from examining ‘representational’ texts, or ‘cultures’, to the study of pragmatic discourse, driven by socially mediated cognition (Holland et al., 1998):

“The notion that meaning inheres in culture and that people receive it passively…is rapidly being replaced by the idea that culture consists of ingredients, potentials, which people actively select, interpret, and use in various ways as opportunities, capabilities and experience allow. …And to understand what a life means to the person living it, we must be able to observe the processes through which the person conceives and creates the life” (Briggs, 1998:2).

This approach has been influenced by Mead (1934), whose distinction between the ‘Self’ (historical identity), the reflexive ‘I’ (the mediator between the Self and the wider social environment), and the various ‘Me’s’ (faces which the individual presents to the different
aspects of his or her world) allowed for the discussion of the way in which peoples’ long term identities may be affected by the different contexts in which they operate. Thus, amongst others, Goffman (e.g. 1974) was able to address the interrelationship between peoples’ social expectations and their enactment of these in everyday life; Cohen (1994) contends that self-motivation results from an interaction between socially-derived components and a longer-term sense of self; Holland et al., (1998) has argued that the ‘self’ is co-emergent with the ongoing enactment of cultural worlds; and Cain (1991) has documented the way in which peoples’ increasing familiarity with a particular community resulted in the incorporation of certain community metaphors into people’s self-understanding and sense of purpose. Like Kondo’s study, this last example closely resembles Vygotskyan activity theory, in that the metaphors appear to have mediated peoples’ consciousness.

Within sociology, theories of practice, which view social life as emergent and enacted, have come to challenge representationalist depictions of organizations and organizational knowledge (see Tsoukas, 1996, for a summary), offering a critique of the dualism of individual-society which characterized immediate post-war social science. Theories of mind deriving from in-depth psychoanalysis models, which looked to ‘deep’ layers of the unconscious for evidence of the innate self, have been increasingly complemented by approaches which emphasize cognitive and symbolic interaction as mediators of consciousness, and which thus substitute relationally activated components of experience, animated in the present by thought, for what had previously been viewed as essential, discrete, and bounded. Schank and Abelson’s (1977) ‘scripts’, which these authors found themselves forced to generate in order to create the necessary relationality before computer-generated ‘understanding’ could emerge, have demonstrated in another way the need for interaction between symbol and context within a process, if meaning is to result (D’Andrade, 1984).

In particular, situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991), sensemaking (Weick, 1995), actor-network theory (e.g. Callon, 1986a) and structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) share a phenomenological influence stemming particularly from Heidegger (1978), which views much social activity as pre-reflexive and grounded in physically situated routine, in which the Cartesian subject-object split is temporarily traduced in activity, only to reappear in reflexive awareness upon its disruption (Polanyi, 1967; Giddens, 1984; Winograd and Flores, 1986). At such times – those where sensemaking is most likely to occur - the twin ethnomethodological pillars of indexicality (the contextual definition of the world) and reflexivity (people’s continual adjustment to, and creation of, such contextual relations) detach both subject and object from stable definitions, so that social meaning comes to be seen as emerging from the ongoing, negotiated interrelation between the two – suspended in webs of its own significance, to paraphrase Geertz (1973). Finally, of course, Giddens’ trajectory of the self (1991), in which people reflexively reconstruct their self-narratives so as to form a coherent relationship with and between the various disjointed influences on their lives, has proved an influential image of the emergent person.

The majority of these theoretical approaches would contend that ‘people’ and ‘society’ are but two poles of an interactive, co-constitutive process, in which people need, on the one hand, “to find images and symbols to live with, and live by” (Fernandez 1982, in Cohen 1994:141), but also in which interpretive activity always transforms and assimilates such symbols, within a uniquely personal worldview (Boland and Tenkasi 1995). In this view, organizations, as subsets of ‘society’, offer employees just some of a number of possible ‘images and symbols to live with and live by’, and thus it follows that the continuing enactment of organizational life is a process which draws upon non-organizational, as well as organizational, components.

This insight results in two important implications for the application of such theories of emergence to organizations. First, organizations, and organizational symbols, should not be reified at group level, since this would be to deny the implications of these various literatures that organizations are emergent processes, animated through human interpretive activity.
Second, having recognized the importance of such human interpretive activity to organizational life, researchers should thus acknowledge the role of non-organizational, as well as organizational, influences in conditioning all such interpretive activity in the organizational arena. As a theory which sets itself a broad “agenda for interactive social science” (Blackler, et al., 2000:278), it is argued that current organizational activity theory is subject to such implications. The next section seeks to illustrate that it falls short on both counts.

The ‘drift’ of organizational activity theory
Activity theory is less a ‘theory’ in the sense of a well-defined approach and set of constructs, than an explicit focus on the interaction between actors and their surrounding environment which accepts that activity is socioculturally constructed, but maintains that much of the meaning available within any one particular context is determined in relation to the ‘activity systems’ in which it is embedded. The approach has its roots in the work of Leont’ev (e.g. 1978), who emphasised the socially mediated, contingent and situated nature of consciousness and meaning - and hence the socially defined nature of meaningful activity (1978) – a matter considered of some importance during the Soviet project. Leont’ev drew in turn on the developmental psychology of Vygotsky (e.g. 1987a), whose approach to learning showed how children come to internalise cultural forms as part of their development, which hence come to mediate their ‘natural’ emotions and behaviour. Thus, at the lowest level, and consistent with the emergent view of context developed thus far in this thesis, the theory proposes a central, mediated framework in which ‘a subject’ and ‘mediating artefact’ (Vygotsky’s cultural forms) interact with an ‘emerging object of activity’, to generate outcomes (Engeström 1999:30) as in Figure 1:

![Diagram](image-url)

**Figure 1: The ‘original’, Vygotskian formulation of activity theory**

As a theory of practice, activity theory posits a relationship between the three sides of the above triangle in an attempt to express a dynamic, and thus none of the three components may be isolated from the others, since they are all co-constituted. This dynamic has relevance to the study of human behaviour in organizations, since it has something specific to say about organizational culture, motivation, and action: that the actions of the ‘subject’ component of the triangle are influenced, or ‘motivated’, by whatever artefacts (organizational or non-organizational) come to mediate his or her consciousness – affecting, at the same time, the central, emerging object of activity. It is in this sense that the psychological term ‘motivation’ will be used in the discussion of activity theory that follows.

In an attempt to apply this localised formulation to organizations, recent ‘organizational’ activity theory, as popularised by Engeström (e.g. 1987, 1990, 1993, 1998, 1999, 2000) has
replaced the ‘mediating artefact’ at the bottom of this triangle with ‘community’, as set out in Figure 2. In this modified view, shared cultural (or organizational) forms are consciousness-mediating devices (Wertsch 1981), and ‘phenomenal’ activity is thus mediated by historical, ‘structural’ factors, or ‘activity systems’. In reflection of this, the interaction between the ‘individual’ and the ‘community’ is mediated by rules, the interaction between the individual and the emerging object of activity is mediated by tools (concepts and technologies), and the interaction between the community and the emerging object of activity is mediated by a division of labour, in a triangular relationship. This view differs from a ‘pure’ phenomenological approach to practice, which sees activity as its own context, but which has been criticized as self-contained and ahistorical (Lave 1993). Thus a simple ‘operation’, the closest activity theory comes to an unmediated, phenomenal act, remains meaningless until situated within meaningful activity (clusters of operations), whose meaning in turn is determined by its situation within wider activity networks.

![Figure 2: An ‘organizational’ adaptation of activity theory (summarised from Engeström 1993)](image)

However, it is arguable that there is a problem with this drift from the model shown in Figure 1. Engeström (1993:97-8) outlines three methodological principles of organizational activity theory: “(1) using a collective activity system as the unit of analysis; (2) searching for internal contradictions as the driving force behind disturbances, innovations, and change in the activity system; and (3) analyzing the activity and its constituent components and actions historically”. Consistent with organizational activity theory’s position on the more ‘structural’ side of the theories-of-practice continuum, two out of three of the above principles focus on the analysis of the ‘activity systems’ in which interaction is embedded, and even the third principle – analysis of the activity itself – adopts a historical, rather than emergent, position. It is therefore readily apparent that this, fairly structural, approach takes little account of the competing influences on participants, culturally ‘mediated’ or not - in determining the meaning and outcome of activities within activity networks, since it has moved from describing an emergent dynamic between ‘whole’ individuals (encompassing organizational and non-organizational aspects) and those objects mediating their consciousness (the original formulation in Figure 1), to descriptions of the emergent relationships between employees, their work groups, and the objects of their activities in Figure 2. This concern appears to be acknowledged by Engeström himself (2000), who concludes a recent article with three methodological worries with current activity theory approaches. Engeström argues that such approaches should better address the linkages between activity systems, the multiple perspectives of their participants, and the transformation over time of commonly shared components. In particular, he suggests that
“While the notion of perspective offers a useful heuristic, its theoretical characterization remains weak. Is a perspective a cognitive structure, a discursive achievement, or a cultural artifact? How should one go about distinguishing, delineating and naming different perspectives? How does this notion relate to such concepts as, for instance, ‘mental model’, ‘repertoire’, ‘social representation’, or plain old ‘attitude’?” (2000:308).

It is argued that the current difficulties encountered by ‘organizational’ activity theory with such distinctions are due, in part, to the theory having drifted away from the original Vygotskian concern with the development of situated people, towards the Leont’ev-inspired study of collectives. At this collective level - of activity ‘systems’, or ‘networks’ - it becomes progressively difficult to distinguish between what is shared and non-shared, what is historical and what is present outcome, what is physiologically rather than cognitively driven, and indeed how these various elements are co-constituted. Moreover, as will be seen, activity theory’s collective emphasis encourages generalizations about community which may not sufficiently reflect identity-driven conflict within the group being studied: in any practice-based ontology, motives are attributable to people, not groups.

Moreover, organizational activity theory’s focus on ‘communities’ demands a particular methodological approach from its proponents: that a particular organizational ‘community’, such as a ‘community of activity’ (Blackler et al. 2000), those using a clinical information system (Engeström 1987), or general practitioners (Engeström 1993) is first isolated as an analytical unit, whereupon the relationship between its constituent ‘individuals’ and the ‘community’ is then identified, so that its emerging objects of activity can be studied. The problem with this approach is that, in identifying emergent objects through isolating contradictions between individuals and wider activity systems (Engeström 1993), the analysis occurs within an exclusively organizational setting, and therefore incorporates just one of a participant’s several identities; even inter-organizational settings tend to invite people’s deployments of similar, ‘company man/woman’ personas. Thus, if contradictions are identified, it is therefore extremely difficult to say how this might be the case, since there is very little knowledge about the competing influences on the individual which have led to such ‘dis-coordination’ (Engeström 1993).

Moreover, organizational activity theory appears to have drifted even further from the Vygotskian model shown in Figure 1. As an example, Blackler et al.’s (2000) ‘Organising Processes in Complex Activity Networks’ will be discussed, selected because of its appearance in the special issue on knowing in practice of Organization 7(2), which is relatively well-known as a showcase for new directions in practice-based theory. In this paper, the authors studied ‘HighTech’, a small UK producer of electro-optic products, which had responded to the increasing instability and interactive complexity created by technological convergence and market globalisation by creating a series of Strategy Development Groups, tasked with reconsidering future strategic options and pioneering new, collaborative ways of working. Working in an observational capacity, the authors followed the deliberations of three of these groups over a period of four months, supplemented by a series of formal interviews of group members.

In summary, Blackler et al. present the experiences of the three Strategy Development Groups by attempting, at Figure 3, to superimpose Boland and Tenkasi’s (1995) concepts of perspective making, perspective taking, and perspective shaping, onto a modified ‘organizational’ activity theory model (such as that shown at Figure 2), thus moving a further step away from the original dynamic shown in Figure 1. The model is further modified in that, in seeking to explain the key finding presented in the paper - the emergence of different collective objects of activity within each group (i.e. different outcomes from the groups’ deliberations) - the level of analysis has been altered again, this time replacing the ‘subject’ on the left-hand side of the triangle in Figure 2 entirely with a ‘community of activity’, in which “expertise can be understood as a collective, heterogeneous phenomenon” (2000:283).
Thus the original triad of subject – mediating object – emerging object of activity of Figure 1, which describes an interpretive, emergent dynamic, has been replaced entirely by an ontology in which groups are actors:

**Figure 3: Blackler et al’s adapted activity systems model**

In Blackler et al’s model at Figure 3, interpretive experience appears to be generated from the relational interaction between ‘communities of activity’, which, if properly directed, can result in the development of a ‘collective mind’ (2000:285). In their words:

“Rather than analysing organizations as single activity systems it is more satisfactory, therefore, to analyse them as networks of overlapping activity systems or, for simplicity of expression, as activity networks. The units that make up such networks can be labelled ‘communities of activity’: such communities can be loosely defined in terms of the extent to which members recognise shared work priorities, work with a common cognitive and technological infrastructure, and support each other’s activity” (2000:282).

In addition to its differences from Figures 1 and 2, such an ontology also differs from Boland and Tenkasi’s original formulation, which sought to illuminate the sensemaking activities of situated individuals, highlighting the importance of narrative in this process (e.g. 1995:357). A comparison of the three triangles reveals that, in seeking to investigate the relevance of activity theory to current organizational concerns such as ‘communities’ and ‘networks’ – a valid and important task - Blackler et al. are attempting to ‘bend’ an ontology which is based firmly upon the relationship between the co-emergence of individuals’ behaviour, that of wider groups, and objects of activity (as in the activity triad at Figure 2 – itself already a ‘bending’ of the original formulation as shown at Figure 1 - to encompass instead the co-emergence of ‘community’ behaviour, ‘related communities’, and ‘emerging collective objects of activity’. Put simply, a generative dynamic, rooted in the interpretive activity and situated actions of ‘whole’ individuals, has been replaced with a higher level of (representational) abstraction, in which relationships are posited between the sum of such activity at group level, and the sum of the sum of such activity at ‘related community’ level, ignoring all non-organizational ingredients to organizational activity.
Ironically, it appears from Blackler et al’s accounts of the three groups that their deliberations were characterised nonetheless by individual differences of opinion, concerns and identity-related struggles – particularly in the case of the third group, where:

“…some members strongly disagreed with each other about the most appropriate way for the group to proceed and, in early meetings, a power struggle developed in the group. Subsequently, much of the group’s business was conducted in small subgroups…when he (the Group Chairman) was present he dominated the group, apparently raising members’ anxiety levels” (2000:289-90).

Although data (such as that above) concerning such interaction features throughout the empirical material – indeed, forms the material itself – peoples’ competing biographical influences remain unaddressed, in spite of their pivotal role in the organization of human experience. In short, Blackler et al’s exclusive analytical focus on the collective – an abstraction - is inconsistent with the clearly practice-based ontology of ‘original’ activity theory, which acknowledges that collective symbolic forms depend for their meaningful existence on their phenomenal animation via knowing people, within an emergent context comprising shared, as well as more personal, tacit contextual components.

This is not to suggest for a moment that Blackler et al. are unaware that knowing is performed by people (as evidenced, amongst other articles, by his influential (1995) article on knowing), but rather that it is important to resist any temptation to focus exclusively on the collective. If organizations under the lens of activity theory are to appear as more than cardboard cutouts, in which ambitious workers co-operate tirelessly to support each others’ efforts to increase shareholder wealth – a fairly unconvincing scenario – it is therefore arguable that the approach must develop a greater sensitivity to the competing influences on individuals – not social groups - drawn from (and conditioned by mediating artefacts within) the non-organizational domain – in addition to the important role played by mediating artefacts in the organizational domain (the focus of current ‘organizational’ activity theory). To do otherwise is to produce research which is potentially interesting, but which may not necessarily qualify as an application of activity theory.

**Strengthening the methodological application of activity theory**

Approaching contested social relations

In order to achieve a greater sensitivity to the competing influences on individuals’ interpretive activity, two ideas will be taken from the Russian semiologist Bakhtin (1895-1975), who linked the focus on emergence and mediated practice which has come to be associated with Vygotsky, with a more thorough consideration of the implications of the prior ‘answerability’ of the world for the way in which the interpretive process occurs. Bakhtin’s ‘dialogical’ thought thus represents a useful way to anchor organizational activity theory more closely to the ‘subject - mediating artefact – emerging object’ dynamic of the original ontology at Figure 1. It should be emphasised at this point that Bakhtin’s thought is complex and wide-ranging, and that the discussion of his ideas below thus will be restricted to those which have an ability directly to complement the use of activity theory within organizational studies.

Like Vygotsky, Bakhtin emphasised the pivotal role of the appropriation of cultural artefacts in the development of the self:

“The child receives all initial determinations of himself and of his body from his mother’s lips…[her words] are the first and most authoritative words the child hears about himself; they for the first time determine his personality from outside” (Bakhtin, 1979, in Holquist 1990:81, original italics).
Because, for Bakhtin, the phenomenology of the I (to continue our earlier terminology) is open-ended, it is invisible to itself; i.e. the ‘me’ that reflects upon its activity is different from the I that acts (Holland et al., 1998:173) – a position fundamental to most practice-based approaches. Therefore, peoples’ interpretations of, and actions within, particular scenarios are always framed using “the finalizing categories of the other” (Holquist, 1990:84). In the activity of interaction, therefore, the I is almost literally ‘authoring’ itself - to use Bakhtin’s term - using pre-existing symbols and routines, or mediating artifacts, which come, over the passage of time, to affect their historical sense of self (in Mead’s terms). This position is, of course, entirely consistent with the Vygotskian roots of activity theory, in which interaction and consciousness itself is mediated by cultural components. Since the I as bricoleur must make use of pre-existing symbols, the situations in which this occurs are always political and contested in the manner discussed earlier, because they always afford a social positioning to those who use them:

“There are no ‘neutral’ words and forms – words and forms that belong to ‘no-one’; language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents...All words have the ‘taste’ of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life: all words and forms are populated by intentions.” (Bakhtin, 1981, in Holland et al., 1998:172).

*Utterances and speech genres*

The unique configuration of participants’ convergent expectations which may be emergent within any one organizational encounter consists therefore of a complex, political interplay of shared and non-shared types of mediating artefact: organizational symbolic configurations, non-organizational symbolic configurations, and the emergent state of a person’s self-identity at a particular moment - relationally animated within each participating person. This configuration is therefore temporary, personal to each participant, and cannot be shared. Bakhtin is specific on this point, seeing every social encounter as a unique combination of contextual elements, in which new meanings are always generated in a temporary configuration called an *utterance*:

“an active understanding...establishes a series of complex interrelationships, consonances and dissonances with the word and enriches it with new elements....The speaker strives to get a reading on his own word, and on his conceptual system that determines this word, within the alien conceptual system of the understanding receiver; ...The speaker breaks through the alien conceptual horizon of the listener, constructs his own utterance on alien territory, against his, the listener’s, apperceptive background” (Bakhtin, 1981, in Holland et al., 1998:173).

The concept of utterance is the fundamental unit of dialogical analysis for Bakhtin, for it contains the concept of a temporarily performed and unique configuration of context (mediating artefacts), social positioning, and meaning between interacting, 'dialogical' people, which (differently) affects the experience of each. In the words of Holquist, one of the leading translators and authorities on Bakhtin:

“Consciousness is the medium and utterance the specific means by which two otherwise disparate elements – the quickness of experience and the materiality of language – are harnessed into volatile unity” (1990:63).

Although an utterance is shared between two people, its meaning remains personal. Although, also, people have relative freedom in their activities, Holquist emphasises that:
“an utterance is always an answer…an utterance expresses the general condition of each speaker’s addressivity…relations between utterances, the context that makes them meaningful in specific situations, are always conditioned by the potential response of an other. …An utterance, then, is a border phenomenon. It takes place between speakers, and is therefore drenched in social factors” (Holquist, 1990:60-1)

For Bakhtin, therefore, we can understand languages and the identities constructed in and through the words of others by looking at the way in which utterances are authored (Holland et al., 1998:279). Bakhtin situates such enactment within dialogue, which, as well as various non-spoken, and physical cues, always comprises words and phrases that come ready-charged with the pre-existing, convergent expectations of its participants, to whom it always affords relative positions. This insistence on dialogicality is different from ‘straight’ linguistics:

“Dialogue is real, monologue is not…The study of communication differs from the study of language as such (or at least as it is conceived in the practice of most professional linguists) in a number of ways, the most fundamental of which is that in communication there is no point at which the speaker may be thought of as an isolated individual. In the sphere of communication the individuality of the speaker is always and everywhere relative” (Holquist, 1990:59, original italics).

In the concept of the utterance we now, therefore, have a conceptual device for linking the interpretive, sensemaking experiences of two or more people within a dialogical, relational framework of interaction, and thus for understanding how each person brings a unique configuration of different types of shared and non-shared contextual input to a shared exchange. The utterance links the ‘meaningful activity’ of an activity network to the various organizational and non-organizational influences on individuals with which such activity is co-constituted, therefore supplying a theoretical and methodological device which addresses the central concern of this paper. Figure 4 shows how the concept of utterance provides a conceptual device for linking the interpretive activity of two or more people within a dialogical, relational framework of interaction, and thus for understanding how each person (the ‘subject’ of activity theory) brings a unique configuration of non-shared contextual input to a shared exchange (the ‘emerging object of activity’ in activity theory): two of the three sides of the original triangle at Figure 1:

**Figure 4: Proposed modification of ‘organizational’ activity theory**
But how is the subjective input of ‘pre-positioned’ subjects (reflecting Bakhtin’s emphasis) mediated, or constrained in interaction, by mediating objects – the third side of the activity theory ‘triangle’? In addressing this question, it will be helpful to draw upon a second of Bakhtin’s ideas: the ‘speech genre’. This term refers to the way in which the convergent expectations of participants in any dialogue act to restrict their available options in the construction of utterances: i.e. a view of ‘structure’ as residing in the heads of interactants.

There are three types of speech genre. The first is the extent of standardisation within which a particular theme, or ‘script’, under discussion is usually conducted: Holquist (1990:64) provides, as an example, the inappropriateness of any unnecessary elaboration of the simple order “Halt!” when trying to bring marching soldiers to a stop (a particular theme, or ‘script’) – although this is obviously an extreme example, since most themes allow more latitude to the speaker than a single, expected, barked order. The second type of speech genre involves the enculturated ability of the listener to ‘guess’ what the speaker has to say, usually before the utterance has been completed. Interestingly, this redundant effect of genre has also been commented upon by Sperber and Wilson (1986) in their concept of conversational ‘relevance’, as well as problematised by the social anthropologist Rapport (1993) who pointed out that people often make mistakes whilst ‘guessing’, and thus can end up by ‘talking past’ each other entirely. The third type of speech genre involves common, ‘socially acceptable’ ways of saying certain things in certain situations, which also come to constrain what is said in an utterance. The interaction between utterances and speech genres operates thus:

“To learn to speak means to learn to construct utterances...We learn to cast our speech in generic forms and, when we hear others’ speech, we deduce its genre from the first words; we anticipate in advance a certain volume [that is, the approximate length of the speech whole] as well as a certain compositional structure. We foresee the end; that is, from the very beginning we have a sense of the speech whole” (Bakhtin 1926, in Holquist 1990:65).

An utterance (which may incorporate one or more speech genres) is therefore a form of dialogue - i.e. it is always relationally constituted from the spoken and non-spoken relations between two or more interactants, regardless of who actually speaks. The concept is intended to draw attention to the non-separability of the various relational components of human interaction. First, there is the 'latent', pre-charged nature of the available and appropriate vocabulary, which provisionally pre-positions interactants within the utterance before either has spoken a word. Second, there is the nature of the actual words chosen by the speaker, and their mode of delivery, in response to this 'answerability' of the situation in which they find themselves. Third, there is the way in which the words are filtered by the enculturated expectations of the listener as they are received. As a concept, utterance is intended to express the way in which all three factors momentarily combine in a fleeting relationship that is deeply situated, or ‘drenched’ in social factors. Utterances thus become empirical examples of the way in which speech genres and other social forms act as consciousness-mediating devices.

As observable phenomena, utterances and mediating objects therefore represent units of empirical observation that are amenable to detailed analysis. What was said, how it was said, and the prior positionality, in terms of what was unsaid, which the interaction drew upon and reproduced – or perhaps challenged - provides a rich ethnomethodological framework which stresses that social life is only comprehensible through an examination of the political answerability of the individual-level exchanges through which it is enacted. They allow for a closer conceptualisation of the way in which conflicting contextual ingredients both structure/mediate, and are structured by, intersubjective interaction between people.

It is argued that the concept of utterance allows the researcher to apply the principles of activity theory to the organizational domain in a manner that remains more faithful to the
original dynamic than some more recent formulations, such as those in Figures 2 and 3. This is because it explicitly acknowledges the unique combination at any one shared moment of the interactants’ subjectivities (pre-positioned subjects), the role of mediating objects (speech genres) in conditioning these, and the emergent object of activity which is modified as a result, an achievement not possible within a group-based ontology. This is not to imprison the researcher at the level of ethnomethodological minutiae: the approach allows the study of the co-evolution of people, communities, and organizational forms (the focus of ‘organizational’ activity theory). However, it demands that, to remain true to the ontology of activity theory, the units of analysis must be the mechanism of intersubjective interpretive activity, mediated by speech genres and other shared and non-shared contextual forms, within an utterance.

In this way, Engeström’s three concerns with current activity theory, outlined at the beginning of the paper, are addressed directly. In the case of the first concern, addressing the linkages between activity systems, it has been argued that people’s participation in various systems, through their deployment of identities, actually provides the linkages between such systems, in which participants struggle to balance conflicting motivations which arise from their various biographical influences. In addressing how activity systems may come to affect one another, it is to the actual linkages between the various selves deployed in practice by each participant (many of which lie outside the organizational domain) to which the analyst should turn. To attempt to link activity systems structurally to one another is to analyse residues of activity, rather than the situated activity itself.

In addressing Engeström’s second concern, the need to address the multiple perspectives of participants in a way which allows for distinctions between types of shared and non-shared inputs to activity has formed the primary focus of this paper, which has borrowed, amongst others, from Bakhtin as Engeström also suggests. The paper has discussed the way in which such contextual inputs relationally combine in interpretive activity through the motor of interaction between the Self, the I, and identity, framed, always in dialogue, within an utterance. Although a different set of categories has been chosen in order to do this, the key questions posed by Engeström have all been addressed. Thus potential explanations can be developed to account for observed differences in people’s attitudes and behaviour within the same activity system; and explanations can be developed for linkages between activity systems, by looking at the way in which the identity deployed by a person within one activity system is influenced by other identities which that person may also be deploying in other contexts.

The proposed framework also addresses Engeström’s final concern, the transformation over time of shared components. This is because the above distinctions allow for a more precise delineation of what is shared as opposed to what is non-shareable, also describing the way in which these are shared (for example, speech genres are forms of shared organizational context), as opposed to what only appears to be shared (peoples’ expectations, or private, non-organizational concerns). When addressing the way in which people learn and how, in consequence, the object of activity comes to be redefined, it is now possible to examine the personal elements of the object of activity and to say something about how these work together, instead of taking the object unproblematically as given. A hypothetical example of the ability of the proposed model to address such matters is presented shortly, in relation to the paper by Blackler et al. (2000) which was discussed earlier. First, however, I address issues relating to the practical implementation of the model in the field.

**Practical implementation**

Considering the framework proposed at Figure 4 in practical terms, it is apparent that documenting the way in which individual subjects are pre-positioned (i.e. ‘where they are coming from’) within an interaction, or utterance, must be a considerably more difficult activity than recording speech genres and emerging objects of activity (the remaining two sides of the activity theory triangle), which are empirically available to the researcher in a
relatively unproblematic sense. As an indirectly available component to empirically observable activity, the first side of the triangle therefore requires further consideration. Since Bakhtin’s concept of the utterance has been proposed as the key frame of analysis for the proposed approach, the researcher seeking to make use of this idea in the field should address this issue by starting with the clear methodological guidance he provides for accounts of utterance, which should

“reproduce this event of the mutual [simultaneous] relationships between speakers, must, as it were, restructure it, with the person wishing to understand taking upon himself the role of listener. But in order to carry out that role, he must distinctly understand the position of the other as well” (1926, in Holquist 1990:62).

Bakhtin’s comment, as well as the earlier insights drawn from a wide literature regarding the non-shareability of phenomenological experience, would indicate that the practice-focused researcher should abandon altogether attempts to identify ‘shared’ understandings of activities within activity ‘communities’. If this is the case, however, how is admissible empirical material therefore to be generated? In addressing this fundamental dilemma of practice-based approaches, modern social anthropology has an answer:

“We take some responsibility for how we are viewed, or how we wish to be viewed; we try to impress ourselves (our selves) on others, subject, of course, to the same limitations of control over other people’s meanings…however indistinct may be the cultural line between anthropologist and anthropologised, its reality cannot be denied. …To understand the thinking selves who we observe we have to invoke our personal experience as thinking selves, in as controlled a manner as our discipline will allow…The individual makes sufficient sense out of this 'inchoateness' to be able to behave competently within it. By how? By thinking about and ordering it through the medium of self consciousness and experience, and then using that self consciousness as the premise for imagining the experience of others” (Cohen 1994:154).

The similarities between Bakhtin’s advice and the above comment, from a modern social anthropologist, are striking. Since an approach is being proposed which is based at the level of the individual (organizational and non-organizational), and it is clearly impossible to chart the detailed utterances within all of a person’s organizational and non-organizational interactions – over any period of time - both writers make an important, practical point for the purposes of the present discussion. They advise the researcher to try to understand what it is ‘like’ for the person under study to balance his or her competing roles by comparison with ones’ own experience – an endeavour which should thus form an important component of the approach proposed here. It is therefore suggested that detailed observation of sample utterances within a particular activity system should be accompanied by an interview-based mapping of a subject’s other perceived roles and concerns, in which some of the difficulties experienced by the subject in balancing all these aspects are discussed at length. However, as we have just heard from Bakhtin and Cohen, these methods can be no substitute for intuitive reflection, based on personal experience and detailed familiarity with the individual(s) under study gained through sustained ethnographic involvement. Finally, those shared contextual components within an activity system (written material, images, etc.) are available to the researcher for recording and analysis.

Together with speech genres and emerging objects of activity, the study of pre-positioned subjects’ interaction within an utterance thus confronts the empirically ‘difficult’ aspect of Vygotsky’s original dynamic, retaining its ontological emphasis on socially mediated, emergent subjectivity in a way which has been unachieved hitherto within organizational activity theory studies. It should perhaps be acknowledged that such a research method is unlikely to be suitable for all researchers; as emphasised by Van Maanen (1979), researchers differ in their aptitudes for various styles of research and presentation. The approach
proposed here calls for both the time resources and willingness, and the sensitivity and resilience required for such immersion. Finally, it should be mentioned that the proposed approach differs from, say, discourse analysis (e.g. Fairclough 1992), because it supplements the identification of speech genres - at the level of discourse - with a more three-dimensional investigation of the remaining sides of the activity triangle, shown in Figure 4: the pre-positioning of the subject (via interviews/sustained observation), and the emergent object of activity (empirical observation). Table 1 over the page summarises the proposed framework.
Table 1: Summary of proposed activity theory framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Phenomenon addressed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Utterance (ethnomethodological analysis)</td>
<td>Unit of analysis: confirmation of person’s behaviour in practice suggested by other instruments (see below)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-positioned subjects (interviews/sustained observation)</td>
<td>Addresses possible motivation: interrelationships between the various discourses sustained by the individual (thus linking activity systems); conflicts engendered by these</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech Genre</td>
<td>Empirical evidence of mediating objects: discourses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentation of emerging object(s) of activity</td>
<td>Allows study of alteration/subversion of shared forms by people over time, and hence offers a view of organizational change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A revisionist example

As an example of the way in which such a framework might be applied, I will turn once more to Blackler et al.’s (2000) ‘Organising Processes in Complex Activity Networks’. It will be remembered that the authors observed the deliberations of three strategy groups at ‘HighTech’, who had been tasked with reconsidering future strategic options and pioneering new, collaborative ways of working – and that they identified the emergence of different collective objects of activity within each group (i.e. different outcomes from each group’s deliberations). Although these were interesting findings, it will also be recalled that Blackler et al’s analysis was found to be problematic from an activity theory perspective, since it offered little explanation for the important intersubjective interactions which formed its subject matter – and thus it was argued that its exclusive analytical focus on the collective was incompatible with the Vygotskian root of activity theory as shown in Figure 1.

In contrast, local-level analysis of utterances within a framework which acknowledged that interactants approach an activity from different positions, such as that proposed at Figure 4 and Table 1, would remain more theoretically sensitive to the co-constitution of subjective consciousness and mediating (social) artifacts in emergent activity which appears in Figures 1 and 2 (although only Figure 1 addresses non-organizational influences on peoples’ organizational behaviour). Such an approach would remain sensitive to the emergent, political self-enactment which forms the motor of social life, as well as methodologically more targeted towards the locus wherein this occurs: the ‘answering’ activities of people. In the case of Blackler et al’s Strategy Development Groups, an explicit focus on other, non group-related aspects (such as other organizational alignments, non-organizational interests) in the interviews conducted with each participant, supplemented by insights gained from sustained ethnographic involvement, might more clearly have revealed the interrelationships between the various ‘community’ discourses which the authors were seeking in the study (but which are not evident from their results) – as well as the motivations of individual players.

To take a hypothetical example, we might have learned that the deliberations of one particular strategy group took a particular direction as the outcome not so much of rational group discussion, but perhaps due to a combination of the strong personality, discursive ability, preconceived ideas and personal motivations of - say, a senior engineering manager (a pre-positioned subject). This individual might successfully have deployed a ‘rational’-sounding, logistics-based discourse (speech genre), drawn from his own sphere of the organization, with which he felt familiar and confident, to argue in favour of a relocation to a site closer to his own home town: a personal, non-organizational motivation likely to result in a material organizational outcome.

The framework proposed in Table 1 would assist the researcher in structuring the identification and documentation of this sort of difficult, (but, in my view, common) scenario,
by looking at the motivations of the pre-positioned interactants, and the ways in which they pursue these within a shared activity – in this case, developing an area of corporate strategy. Having therefore gained some knowledge of ‘where different interactants were coming from’ in the way all employees gain knowledge of each other – through sustained daily interaction and interviews/meetings, the researchers in this case would then have been in a position to identify speech genres and documentation commonly appearing in the group discussions, which would have provided insights into the sorts of discourses which mediated and constrained peoples’ attempts to pursue their aims (such as our hypothetical engineer’s use of ‘rational’-sounding logistical arguments to pursue what was, in fact, a personal interest). As the base units of analysis, - short exchanges, or utterances, would have provided empirical examples of the interaction of such constraints with underlying individual motivations, perhaps providing isolated examples of the attempts of other, differently pre-positioned, hence differently motivated, interactants to counteract the way the discussion was going. An example might be the proposal of ‘rational’ counter-arguments within the constraints of this same ‘engineering’ speech genre – providing logistical justifications to propose a site relocation that was more equidistant to all employees.

Finally, of course, the alteration of shared organizational forms (such as revised organizational structures, a site relocation, mission statements, strategy documents) over time as a result of such activity would provide a longitudinal, ‘higher’ view of the development of the emerging object of activity itself (the right hand side of the triangle in Figures 1 to 4), thus ensuring that the analysis is not restricted to the micro-level of ethnomethodology. The analysis of speech genres (and of the group memberships of the person from whom they are introduced) also provides evidence of the interlinkages between groups sought by organizational activity theorists. The crucial difference between the framework proposed here and the approach adopted by Blackler et al. is that any group-level analysis and insights – such as our hypothetical example in which the strategy of the overall organization came to be affected by a discourse within the engineering community – are grounded in analysis of the co-emergence of the individual, the group, and the object of activity: the activity theory dynamic. In this way, any linkages between emerging objects of activity at the organizational level are identified at the dynamic level of practice, since this is where they are to be found.

Conclusion

This paper represents an attempt to highlight a perceived drift within organizational activity theory away from an original ontology which, through its focus on the social mediation of individual consciousness, demanded a methodological approach at the level of intersubjective interaction, towards a model with an altogether different focus: that of intercollective interaction. It has been argued that any drift away from a fundamental emphasis upon an equal co-emergence between the interpretive activity of the individual, mediating artefacts, and an emerging, situated object of activity as set out at Figure 1, runs the risk of objectifying an emergent dynamic by according ontological existence to groups, thus converting a process back into a representation: the very dualism that activity theory seeks to overcome.

In response to this, I have drawn upon Bakhtin’s ideas to propose a practical framework which would assist future studies using an activity-based ontology to ensure that they retain the focus on (inter)subjective emergence demanded by the original approach, whilst retaining a higher level of perspective about emerging organizational outcomes. The retention of such a high-level perspective is important, since there is a need to achieve a balance between the low-level analysis of social acts characteristic of ethnomethodology, which generate or replicate social frameworks, and the higher-level analysis of social frameworks themselves - without which such acts lack meaning (Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel 1981). It is hoped that the issues and proposals concerning activity theory raised in this paper may contribute to a growing debate concerning appropriate ways of applying practice-based theoretical approaches within the organizational context.
References


Van Maanen, John (1979) Tales of the Field. Chicago: Chicago University Press


