Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

INTRODUCTION

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory and Action Research

Bridget Somekh
Manchester Metropolitan University

Morten Nissen
University of Copenhagen

The aim of this special issue is to provide a platform for comprehensive and critical discussion of the issues arising from methodology and practice in the experience of those working in the field of socio-cultural research with a cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) and/or action research (AR) orientation.

At the International Society for Cultural and Activity Research (ISCAR) conference in San Diego in September 2008, at an invited symposium on "The Social Construction of CHAT: An Intervention," a lively debate developed on the relationship between AR and CHAT. Yrjo Engeström expressed the view that AR is "not a (coherent) method" and "certainly not a viable substitute for a methodology genuinely built on CHAT," an opinion that was contested by several members of the audience. Anna Stetsenko, another contributor to the symposium, reminded us that Lev Vygotsky and Kurt Lewin, who is generally acknowledged as the founder of AR, were friends and influenced by each other's work. To continue the debate, the editors of *Mind, Culture, and Activity* (*MCA*) invited us to be guest editors of a special issue of *MCA* titled "Cultural-Historical Activity Theory and Action Research." At the time of attending the symposium at ISCAR in San Diego, Bridget was working on the proofs of the *Sage Handbook of Educational Action Research* (Noffke & Somekh, 2009). She has been a member of ISCAR, and previously ISCRAT, for more than a decade and uses both CHAT and AR in her own work. Morten has written and coedited a number of texts on action/practice research in the CHAT tradition and is a member of the ISCAR executive committee.

Arising directly from the debate at the San Diego symposium, the special issue set out to explore in what sense CHAT and AR can be said to be a method/methodology and to provide

Correspondence should be sent to Bridget Somekh, Education and Social Research Institute, Manchester Metropolitan University, 799 Wilmslow Road, Didsbury, Manchester, M20 2RR United Kingdom. E-mail: b.somekh@mmu.ac.uk

informed critique of both approaches. Although no individual article addresses these central pur-
poses comprehensively, the issue as a whole encompasses it incrementally, each article focusing
on particular aspects that build on one another. The editorial process of inviting, reviewing, and
editing articles has also provided us with insights relating to this overarching theme. For exam-
ple, it became clear that it is a near-impossible task to be widely read and knowledgeable in the
literatures of both CHAT and AR. Indeed, the AR literature is, itself, so diverse that it has devel-
oped subliteratures, making the task of comparing and critiquing both CHAT and AR even more
daunting. CHAT, too, displays a diversity not always recognised, even by many who write in this
tradition. We were assisted in our editorial work by a number of reviewers who were meticulous
in their task and often inspired in their advice to authors. It became clear from these review-
ers, however, that those with a CHAT background were less forgiving of authors (from an AR
background) who were not fully conversant with the CHAT literature than vice versa. This, in
itself, might be taken as a form of evidence that CHAT is governed by a more coherent "method,"
whereas AR engages with theory more flexibly and more eclectically. There was other evidence
that what is signified by the terms "method" and "methodology" is unclear because, during the
production of the Call for Papers, it emerged that the editors of *MCA* had a preference for using
the term "method," whereas AR authors would use the term "methodology."

As it happens, there has been an ongoing debate in the AR literature in the last five years about
whether AR is a methodology. This is a different debate, however, as those who claim it is *not*
a methodology, unlike Engeström, see this as one of its strengths. This is encapsulated in the
introduction to an article by Wilf Carr (2006) in the *Journal of Philosophy of Education*:

> "This book" writes Bridget Somekh on the opening page of *Action Research: a Methodology for
> Change and Development* "is about the many ways in which social science researchers can use action
> research methodology to overcome the limitations of traditional methodologies (Somekh 2006, p.1).
> After identifying "eight methodological principles for action research" (ibid p.6), Somekh lists "a
> range of methodological issues that are problematic for action researchers" (ibid p.11). Some of these
> issues—the nature of human action, the status and validity of the knowledge produced through action
> research – are indeed those that are at the forefront of action research's methodological debates. . . .
> But why do we assume that the need for an intellectual justification for action research can only be
> met by articulating its methodological rationale? Why is it felt necessary to import the methodolog-
> ical discourse of the social sciences into debates about the nature and conduct of action research?
> (pp. 421–422)

These two quite different claims that AR is "not a method/methodology" need to be considered
in relation to variations in the meanings of the terms. In the Conclusion to the *Handbook of
Educational Action Research*, Noffke and Somekh (2009, pp. 521–522) described their purpose
as "to push out the boundaries of definitions and categories of what is valuable in action research"
and noted that the "creative tension in the dissonance" of the six chapters on Methodology in Part
I "can be seen as illustrating how important Harding's (1987) conceptualization of the distinctions
between method, methodology and epistemology is to understanding the ways in which various
iterations of action research differ or concur." Carr seems to adopt very different assumptions,
assuming that a methodology is necessarily prescriptive.

These are issues that take us back into the philosophical prehistory of both CHAT and AR. Carr
traced the history of AR from the Aristotelian philosophical tradition of "practical philosophy" as
"rehabilitated" by Gadamer (p. 432). Following Gadamer, he claimed that a methodological form

of working "conceals the conditions that make human understanding possible and thereby distorts the character of human understanding itself" (pp. 428–429). He suggested that, in embracing the term, "action research itself became deeply implicated in depriving *praxis* of the tradition of inquiry through which it had hitherto been articulated and sustained" (Carr, 2006, p. 432).

Regardless of whether or not we should reserve the term "methodology" for such a reductive prescriptivism, however, Carr's critique resonates in a deep way with the attempts in the CHAT movement to develop an epistemology of practice. If nothing else, CHAT and AR share the fundamental assumption that knowledge emerges as aspects of practice—or "praxis," if that term is read in the wider meaning given to it when Hegel and Marx took up the Aristotelian legacy, as including labour (cf. Bernstein, 1971; Ilyenkov, 1977). Perhaps the endeavour to rethink research in this light not only unites CHAT with AR but also in both strands requires continuous internal debates and self-critiques to overcome the dichotomisations of theory from practice that keep reappearing with the institutionalisation of research. Yet precisely because that reappearance is anything but accidental, we cannot keep the tensions between theory and practice at bay just by invoking "praxis."

Carr is not alone in regarding a normative academic conventionalism as a real danger inherent to theorising (even when it is theorising about practice). In Isabelle Stengers's (1997) practice-based view of science, research is best when it takes the risk of mobilising the testimony of its data as objections to the theoretical consensus of a given community of scholars: "A proposition that has been accepted is not necessarily the object of a consensus of a community that preexisted it. It creates this consensus, as well as the community that corresponds to it" (p. 85). If research, at bottom, is thus innovative practice—which, incidentally, echoes Marx's (1999) reason for calling it "universal labour"—then it appears quite legitimate to turn praxis against the straightjacket of any normative theoretical methodology.

On the other hand, it may be argued, the identification of research with practice, against theory, flows too easily into the sea of pragmatic functionalism, which is one side of the current post-modern politics of knowledge (cf. e.g., Lyotard, 1984). Perhaps the obliging theoretical coherence of a "method" is required to counteract an uncritical hyperflexibility of diverse "methodological principles" taylored to just any given practice? For, rather than ivory tower elitism, the (post-)modern condition of research is to partake in social change in ways we only half understand. One should recall, from the critical theory, which is another legacy to AR, Günther Anders's (2002) reversal of Marx' famous 11th thesis on Feuerbach:

> It is not enough to change the world; we do this anyway, and it mostly happens without our efforts, regardless. What we have to do is interpret these changes so that we in turn can change the changes, so that the world doesn't go on changing without us —ultimately to become a world without us. (p. 5)

Thus, insofar as AR considers itself a democratic and critical movement, it might retain a place at least for a methodology that is reflexive, rather than prescriptive (cf. Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009).

But the epistemological wager of CHAT was always that critical theorizing can itself be groundbreaking, far beyond halting the glide toward practicism with a reflexive contemplation. Does Stengers, we might ask, in what we could call her neo-empiricist approach to research as practice, admit a fair place for the theorizing, which, after all, is what she herself (just as Carr) is doing? Any (guest) editor of a CHAT journal must hope that the reader encountering the perhaps excessive, but diverse and complex, emergent and contradictory superstructure of theoretical

speculation in the CHAT tradition sees more in it than mere conventionalism. Marx's injunction in the Feuerbach Theses, as it has been taken up in the CHAT tradition, was really about connecting revolutionary practice with critical theorising. In many ways, that program, sketched in 1845, is yet to be realized (Jensen, 1999), although, looking back on AR and CHAT in this light, it is striking how both Kurt Lewin and Lev Vygotsky combined their innovative theoretical work with political activism (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004).

It is, in fact, to the origins of AR and CHAT in the work of Vygotsky and Lewin, in the 1920s to 1940s, that this special issue turns in particular. The Call for Papers invited "historical accounts of the work of Vygotsky and Lewin during their lifetime and the extent to which each may have influenced the other." Once again, no individual article addresses this purpose comprehensively but, with the help of Anna Stetsenko, we have been able to draw upon the folk knowledge of their relationship that exists in the memories of contemporary Russians.

Anna writes,

> The link between Lewin and Vygotsky is a very well known fact in Moscow. It is general knowledge that they had corresponded on many occasions, read each other's works and were influenced by each others' ideas. I know that Luria and Lewin knew each other too. I remember that it was always mentioned that Lewin thought about immigrating to Russia when Hitler came to power but then decided in favour of going to the US. Lewin visited Moscow and I think they also met in Germany when Vygotsky was on a trip abroad. Much of this folk knowledge about Lewin and Vygotsky is reflected in various sources, such as the book on Vygotsky by his daughter Gita, by Luria's daughter in her book about her father; it was written about by Yaroshevsky in his book, plus in various published articles in Russian.

The special issue contains six articles. Four are grounded in accounts of research practice, whereas the other two focus specifically on the theoretical writings of Lewin and Vygotsky. We begin the issue with an article by Collins in which CHAT and Freire's Participatory Action Research are used to analyse and theorise about a heavily politicised research process involving a young researcher working with a local community. The theoretical tools are clearly set out in the opening pages of the article, and there is sufficient historical/political framing in a working-class community in Scotland, and illustrative detail from the research events, to generate very useful knowledge. The second article, by Orland-Barak and Ayelet, also engages with the political processes of working within historically formed structures, this time in a high-status teacher education college in Israel. This provides a good example of how a CHAT lens can be used to provide tools for meta-analysis of an AR project. The notion of "zooming in" to explore data when using AR and "zooming out" to engage in more systemic analysis of the same data with CHAT is a useful one.

The next two articles are of considerable methodological interest. They are presented in the middle of the special issue, rather than at the start or finish, much in the manner of the meat or cheese in a sandwich. Both are responses to the call for "comparisons between fundamental theoretical ideas in CHAT and Action Research, such as those developed by Vygotsky and Lewin and their followers." Chaiklin begins with the assumption, common to both approaches, that "social scientific research should be relevant to societal practice." His analysis of Vygotsky's writings focuses upon the "crisis in psychology" that required to be addressed and how this related to Vygotsky's developing understanding of the role of practice in psychology. His analysis of Lewin's writings engages with Lewin's concept of "laws" and the importance he attached

to "field experiments." Chaiklin shows how "Lewin's intellectual commitments do not reflect, and in some cases are diametrically opposed to contemporary statements and characterisations of action research." Nevertheless, his analysis clearly shows Lewin's radical engagement with research participants to bring them benefits.

Langemeyer's article explores and compares AR and activity theory as socio-critical approaches. Her reading of Lewin's work is enhanced by her ability to draw upon original German writings that have never been translated. Her discussions of Lewin's concepts of research as an "art" and a "revolutionary process," and Vygotsky's notion of methodology as "the backbone, the skeleton" in the research process, take us to a deeper level in understanding the development of their theoretical thinking.

The final two articles are both concerned with collaborative work between university-based teacher educators/researchers and teachers working with students in schools. Gordon Wells engages with both CHAT and AR traditions by means of an analytical narrative of his own development as a researcher. Data drawn from early research into children's language development is illustrative of Vygotsky's theories of language development. Wells shows that both AR and CHAT enabled him to work with children and teachers to better prepare them, as Dewey argued one should, "to play an informed and responsible role in the wider society in which they will be actors and decision-makers." The article by Ellis focuses on a research project aimed at working collaboratively with teachers in order to reenergise their professional practice. There is an interesting discussion of Vygotsky's ideas on creativity, which are applied to how teachers engage with the process of their teaching. This article makes some comparisons between AR and CHAT in relation to the production of knowledge, using the writings of John Elliott to suggest that AR is not concerned with the generation of knowledge but only the improvement of practice. This is an interesting critique of AR, which perhaps invites a response in a future issue of *MCA*.

REFERENCES

Alvesson, M., & Sköldberg, K. (2009). *Reflexive methodology. New vistas for qualitative research*. London, England: Sage.

Anders, G. (2002). *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen II* [The outdatedness of human beings]. Münschen, Germany: Beck'sche Reihe.

Bernstein, R. J. (1971). *Praxis and action. Contemporary philosophies of human activity*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Carr, W. (2006). Philosophy, methodology and action research. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, *40*, 421–435.

Harding, S. (1987). *Feminism and methodology: Social science issues*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Ilyenkov, E. V. (1977). *Dialectical logic. Essays on its history and theory*. Moscow, Russia: Progress.

Jensen, U. J. (1999). Categories in activity theory: Marx' philosophy just-in-time. In S. Chaiklin, M. Hedegaard, & U. J. Jensen (Eds.), *Activity theory and social practice: Cultural-historical approaches* (pp. 79–99). Aarhus, the Netherlands: Aarhus University Press.

Lyotard, J.-F. (1984). *The postmodern condition. A report on knowledge*. Manchester, England: Manchester University Press.

Marx, K. (1999). *Capital* (Vol. 3). London, England: Penguin Books.

Noffke, S., & Somekh, B. (Eds.). (2009). *Handbook of educational action research*. London, England, and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Somekh, B. (2006). *Action research: A methodology for change and development*. Maidenhead, England: Open University Press.

Stengers, I. (1997). *Power and invention. Situating science*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Stetsenko, A., & Arievitch, I. M. (2004). Vygotskian collaborative project of social transformation. *International Journal of Critical Psychology*, *12*(4), 58–80.