Cultural-Historical Activity Theory and Cultural Community Psychology: The Potential for Greater Commonality

Roland G. Tharp & Clifford R. O'Donnell

To cite this article: Roland G. Tharp & Clifford R. O'Donnell (2016) Cultural-Historical Activity Theory and Cultural Community Psychology: The Potential for Greater Commonality, Mind, Culture, and Activity, 23:1, 5-14, DOI: 10.1080/10749039.2015.1107742

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2015.1107742

Published online: 15 Dec 2015.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 63

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Cultural-Historical Activity Theory and Cultural Community Psychology: The Potential for Greater Commonality

Roland G. Tharp and Clifford R. O’Donnell

University of Hawai‘i, Manoa

ABSTRACT

Greater commonality for Cultural-Community Psychology (CC) and cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) is advocated. The potential for greater commonality is exemplified by a series of examples of the many researchers who now use concepts from both CC and CHAT, including our own career work in culture studies, community development, delinquency, and education. A centering whorl of science is observable in the density of intersections across fields, and research on common propositions, such as the current intersections of intersubjectivity and joint activity, as studied by CC, CHAT, cognitive science, psychoneurology, and intervention theories. Therein exists the promise of a new center of commonality in psychology.

The purpose of this article is to explore the potential benefits of greater commonality of Cultural-Community Psychology (CC) and cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). We begin by briefly tracing the development of community psychology and its ongoing evolution into CC. Next we discuss the similarities of key CC and CHAT concepts, and follow with examples from our own work, a discussion of the contribution of activity settings to our understanding of culture, and a presentation of recent cognitive and psycho-neurological research supporting key CC and CHAT concepts. We conclude with a discussion of the benefits of greater commonality of CC and CHAT for theory and research in both fields and for psychology.

Development of community psychology

The modern history of community psychology begins with a 1965 conference devoted to a discussion of the implications of the then recent Community Mental Health Centers. The conference was held in Swampscott, Massachusetts, and ever since community psychologists have traced their field to the Swampscott Conference. Many characteristic values and principles of community psychology were articulated at the conference: a commitment to prevention, the social context of behavior, the links of individual behavior and social systems, recognition that minority groups are disproportionately disadvantaged in society, and that education and training in the field should be interdisciplinary to create and apply knowledge (Bennett et al., 1966). No longer limited to mental health issues, community psychology was born.

Formal organization of the field soon followed. Community psychology became Division 27 of the American Psychological Association in 1967; two journals, the American Journal of Community Psychology and the Journal of Community Psychology, were established in 1973; the first textbook was published in 1973 and three more were published in 1977. By 1981 more than 40 graduate programs were developed and the Council of Program Directors in Community Psychology was organized to coordinate graduate education in the field.

CONTACT Clifford R. O’Donnell cliffo@hawaii.edu University of Hawai‘i, Department of Psychology, 2530 Dole Street, Honolulu, HI 96822-2216.

© 2016 Regents of the University of California on behalf of the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition
The community psychology focus on social context was a major theme of many theoretical formulations. Three that were especially influential are Behavior Settings (Barker, 1968), Sense of Community (Sarason, 1974), and Ecology (Kelly, 1986). Social context research led to a greater emphasis on qualitative methods (Banyard & Miller, 1998) and participatory collaboration between researchers and citizens (e.g., Jason, Keys, Suarez-Balcazar, Taylor, & Davis, 2004).

Concern with the disadvantages of ethnic minority groups was apparent in the 11% of articles on the topic in community journals through 1985 (Loo, Fong, & Iwamasa, 1988). Inevitably interest in ethnic minority groups evolved into a greater emphasis on cultural diversity. By 1993 the need for community research to be anchored in cultural methods was recognized, and a special journal issue was devoted to the topic (Seidman, Hughes, & Williams, 1993). Next, an ecological model was used to emphasize the importance of cultural context and the diversity within and among cultural contexts (Trickett, 1996). Cultural context became increasingly important as community psychology developed globally (Marsella, 1998) and more than half of the members of community psychology organizations lived outside of the United States (Toro, 2005).

Unity of CC and CHAT

In his presidential address to the Society of Community Research and Action in 2006, O’Donnell reviewed these developments, noted the increasing use of culture as the context for diversity, and advocated that community psychology move beyond diversity toward CC through greater collaboration with cultural psychologists. The evolution toward CC continued with a special issue on the topic in the American Journal of Community Psychology in 2011. Recently we addressed cultural community psychologists, advocating a greater unification of those two fields, recognizing their inherent similarities in values and methods (O’Donnell & Tharp, 2012).

We urged that CC psychologists strengthen this unity by adopting related concepts from CHAT. In CHAT, activity theory informs the analysis of context as activity (e.g., Chaiklin & Lave, 1993). In CC, our focus is on the setting of the activity: “Activity settings arise from the pressures and resources of the larger social system of which the participants are a part” (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988, p. 73) and incorporate “cognitive and motoric action itself (activity), as well as the external, environmental, and objective features of the occasion (settings)” (Tharp & Gallimore, p. 72). In CHAT, activity is often analyzed as a system and sometimes as a setting (e.g., Brown & Cole, 2002; Lave, 1988).

Vygotsky (1978, 1987) placed an emphasis on semiotic processes, as does CHAT and CC. The concept emphasizing semiotic processes that is important in our work is intersubjectivity. In our analyses “intersubjectivity develops in activity settings during joint productive activity, facilitates the activity, and becomes the shared meanings of culture through semiotic processes (largely linguistic) that accompany the members’ shared activity” (O’Donnell & Tharp, 2012, p. 23). Similar to action theory in CHAT, in our analysis “intersubjectivity results from the shared experiences among people engaged in collaborative interaction: their history, values, thoughts, emotions, and interpretations of their world. Intersubjectivity is the psychological commonality that provides meaning in their lives” (O’Donnell & Tharp, 2012, pp. 23–24).

There are many other identified similarities between the fields of CC and CHAT. CHAT theoretical principles (Brown & Cole, 2002; Cole & Engeström, 2007) are in general highly compatible with CC. Both CHAT and CC use their theoretical principles to develop interventions. Like CHAT, CC also has a rich literature on such issues as collaborative relationships between researchers and other participants, the necessity of community support for sustainability, and the importance of adequate time necessary for interventions (hence the need for field, rather than laboratory, studies). Moreover, CC interventions often focus primarily on prevention, social behaviors, and social interactions, and they adopt culture-based interventions, sometimes in their entirety (such as Navajo sings or Native Hawaiian ho’oponopono; Poonwassie & Charter, 2005).
CC program examples

This article continues our suggestions for more self-conscious steps toward increased commonality of CC and CHAT, in the interest of contributing toward a greater commonality of psychology itself. As further exemplification of the practice of these cross-theory combinations, we now discuss our own adventures toward greater commonality of CC and CHAT. Examples of CC programs for and with specific cultural context are a common feature of our work. We present three examples: the Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP) (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Vogt, Jordan, & Tharp, 1987); community development (O’Donnell & Tharp, 1990; O’Donnell, Tharp, & Wilson, 1993; O’Donnell, Wilson, & Tharp, 2002), and delinquency research (O’Donnell, 1992, 2003, 2005; O’Donnell & Williams, 2013). Each of these programs also used crucial explanatory concepts and analytic guidelines that are similar to those used in CHAT.

KEEP. In the case of the KEEP research, conducted in a new private research and demonstration school in Honolulu, our design strategies included classroom social organization and pedagogy based on Native Hawaiian culturally compatible modes of social organization and teaching–learning, together with some compensatory activity settings to better equip the children for further education. But our knowledge of contemporary Native Hawaiian culture had begun with experimental and ethnographic work in contemporary largely Native Hawaiian communities of rural Hawaii, especially Nanakuli, a small rural community on the Waianae coast of Oahu (see, e.g., Gallimore, Boggs, & Jordan, 1974).

In Nanakuli and Hawaii generally, non-Hawaiians, especially those in schools and statewide institutions, operated in standard U.S. modes. Few Hawaiians were teachers. Hawaiian students did not prosper.

This initial research program studied Native Hawaiians in the context of the Waianae coast community including its institutions of public schools, a preschool, a small health center, and a few nascent intervention programs for support of needful youth. Psychologists and anthropologists (Gallimore & Howard, 1968) used culture-study and psychological methods, including participant observation, ethnography, structured interviews, a few small quasiexperiments, and comparative ethno-analyses of other Polynesian cultures. The research team and their associates also experimented with some intervention studies in the schools and community (MacDonald & Gallimore, 1971).

In contemporary terms, the Nanakuli study was a CC program. But conducted just as the first Community Psychology graduate programs were founded, that term was not common. Cultural psychology existed but was generally practiced as “cross-cultural,” largely as comparison studies across cultures. The Nanakuli studies constituted a cultural-community psychology research program, and an early example of the CC cultural-community unification that we advocate.

Patterns of child/adult and child/child relationships, particularly those involved in child enculturation, were foci of the Nanakuli studies, and as KEEP proper began, these patterns were available as paradigms for emulation in classroom organization and practices, notably age-grading and group responsibilities.

We of the interdisciplinary KEEP team (Tharp et al., 2007) collected convincing efficacy data for our students’ academic growth some years before the appearance of the book-length report (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988), which we delayed writing because it was only when we came upon Vygotskian concepts available in English translation (Vygotsky, 1978, 1981, 1987) that we understood our results in terms of basic developmental sociopsychological processes.

Concepts such as the zone of proximal development and the developmental primacy of social processes prior to their emergence as psychological capacities—these were central to our expositions of the KEEP work, and those same concepts, of course, are foundational to CHAT. But in our research, intervention, and evaluation of the KEEP years, in the absence of the cultural-community psychological evidence, which preceded and enabled it, there would have been nothing to explain.

These explanations have been durable. The next phase of our own work was under the aegis of the national Center for Research on Education, Excellence & Diversity, including a decade of research/
practice programs with all major ethnic and linguistic groups in the United States. Out of that variety, organizing theory did emerge (Tharp, Estrada, Dalton, & Yamauchi, 2000), based firmly on Vygotskian principles and CC studies. In this present article, we advocate greater commonality of CC and CHAT, having experienced for decades its benefits.

**Community development.** CHAT concepts also informed the theoretical guide we proposed for community intervention (O’Donnell & Tharp, 1990). In that chapter we combined CHAT concepts of activity settings, joint activity, and intersubjectivity with behavioral means of influence: (a) physical resources, (b) funds, (c) time, (d) symbols, (e) people, and (f) positions. One or more of these means could then be used to influence the activity of a setting and guide community intervention.

Following on this framework, CHAT concepts were central in our community development project in Micronesia (O’Donnell et al., 1993) and in our analysis of community-based child protection projects (O’Donnell et al., 2002). In Micronesia, the Peace Corps invited us to assess what village elders described as a “youth problem” based on perceived disrespect, not fulfilling expectations, and substance abuse. After completing our assessment, we concluded that there was a dearth of participation in common activities between youth and village elders, resulting in a relative lack of intersubjectivity between the groups. The task then became to create common activities. For example, Peace Corps volunteers, serving as teachers of English, assigned their students to interview the elders about village history and translate the stories into English. As a result, intersubjectivity increased, the elders felt respected, and the students learned about the history of their villages.

Family social isolation is a common characteristic in neighborhoods with higher rates of child abuse and neglect. In our plan for child protection we presented how the creation of neighborhood activity settings could reduce the social isolation of families, expand their social networks, and develop their coping skills. Contact with other families in joint activities can increase the intersubjectivity of the participants and help to promote social norms to reduce child abuse and neglect (O’Donnell et al., 2002). Our plan was supported when the Strong Communities for Children program created new Family Activity Centers within existing community facilities; there was a large reduction in reports of child maltreatment as thousands of families participated and new norms of mutual assistance developed (Melton, 2013).

**Delinquency research.** Our guide for community intervention (O’Donnell & Tharp, 1990) was also used to reassess a behavioral delinquency prevention program (O’Donnell, 1992). CHAT concepts helped to interpret the results of this youth mentoring program, the Buddy System, by detailing the theoretical change from behavior modification to activity settings. These theoretical changes formed the basis for a community–peer model of delinquency where families, schools, and neighborhoods influence peer networks to facilitate or inhibit delinquency (O’Donnell, 2003, 2005). These peer networks are formed from the activity settings created by families, schools, and neighborhoods, and intersubjectivity develops among peers as they participate. Delinquency is facilitated when high-risk youths participate in peer activity settings without the supervision of responsible adults (for analysis of these results across many cultural groups, see Tharp, 2012, Chapter 11).

This delinquency research came full circle with a 35-year follow-up study of the Buddy System (O’Donnell & Williams, 2013). When the results showed program effects continuing into the adult years, CHAT concepts of activity settings and intersubjectivity were used to interpret the results. It was suggested that peer relationships developed during the program changed the activities of some of the participants, for better or worse depending on whether their new friends had an arrest record. The intersubjectivity developed in these relationships may have altered the trajectory of their early adult life. The results indicated that drug-related activities were especially important in the higher adult arrest rates of female participants.
Summary. In summary, our own experiences with a combined CC/CHAT approach to theory and research has resulted in greater depth of understanding and analysis, and enrichment of methodology. Just as the importance of developing new measures for CHAT has been recognized (Engeström, 1993), different methods are being developed to measure activity settings. One approach used ethnography, where an activity settings model was used as a template for interview, focus group, archival, and field note data collection (Davison & Hawe, 2012). The results showed new opportunities for school engagement among Aboriginal primary and secondary students. Others developed quantitative measures of recreation and leisure activity settings of children and youth with disabilities (King, Rigby, & Batorowicz, 2013) and a structured rating scale of direct observations (Rivera et al., 1999). These measures allow the assessment of participation experiences to benefit these children and youth and have implications for research, theory building, and clinical practice.

Activity settings and culture
The concept of activity settings also has been used to construe interventions as an event within a system:

leading to the evolution of new structures of interaction and new shared meanings. Interventions impact on evolving networks of person–time–place interaction, changing relationships, displacing existing activities and redistributing and transforming resources. This alternative view has significant implications for how interventions should be evaluated and how they could be made more effective. (Hawe, Shieh, & Riley, 2009, p. 267)

Examining changes in activity settings, networks, relationships, and resources assesses the context of interventions, rather than the programs, and could be the basis for a new science and practice of context evaluation (Hawe et al., 2009).

Construing interventions as an event within a system places activity settings at the nexus of the ecoculture in which the intervention occurs. Activity settings lead to the shared meanings of culture, and these shared meanings facilitate the creation and maintenance of some settings and the inhibition of others. Culture and activity settings create each other. Therefore, interventions may need to adapt to cultural differences within similar socioeconomic families (e.g., Bernheimer, Gallimore, & Weisner, 1990) and communities (cf. Trickett, 2009). The assessment of activity settings could be helpful in seeing if cultural differences exist among the participants and if variations in intervention are necessary. Similar to the role of discoordination and internal contradictions of activity systems in CHAT (Brown & Cole, 2002; Engeström, 1993) any context evaluation should also include an assessment of any new shared meanings and corresponding activity settings developed during intervention.

New shared meanings that developed from changes in activity settings and social interactions were assessed following a tsunami in American Samoa (Binder, Baker, Mayer, & O’Donnell, 2014). The tsunami disrupted daily activities and created new activities to cope with the disaster. Some of these new activities represented cultural change. An example is the formation of a counseling program, a process new to American Samoa, wherein individuals discussed personal problems and emotions outside of their families and thereby created new shared meanings.

Much of the work admired by both CC and CHAT is by psychologists who use concepts and practices from each, sometimes in combination, as they are most appropriate to a given enterprise (as in the work of A. E. Maynard, personal communication, June 19, 2013). These concepts proved helpful in understanding the evolution of cultural communities over time, as impressively demonstrated by Maynard in her extensive studies with Greenfield of the changes among the Zinacantec Maya of southern Mexico. With increased commerce and urban living over a 10-year period, activity settings analysis documented the changes in everyday life, such as more formal education and increased economic opportunities for women, and greater individual choice, for example, young women were now permitted to spend time with young men without a chaperone (Greenfield, Maynard, & Marti, 2009).
Urban living and economic changes also increased contact with strangers and different ethnic groups. As more activity settings include people with different experiences and perspectives, changes in intersubjectivity and the corresponding changes in cognitive development, skills, emotions, and eventually even values would be expected. Already verbal activities learned in school have altered sibling activities at home. Older siblings now provide more verbal explanations in their interactions with younger siblings (Maynard, 2005).

Taken together, these studies suggest that some commonality is in fact already a subject of interest to both our fields and has contributed to our understanding of how interventions can be more effective and how cultures change. We advocate increased unity not to erase our differences, but rather to experience them as broadening a shared vision. Activity theory “is not a fixed and finished body of strictly defined statements—it is itself an internationally evolving, multivoiced activity system” (Engeström, 1993, p. 64). Advances in research and intervention would develop from greater commonality. Best design, in our view, is based on purpose and context, guided by best theory. We do suggest that best theory would grow from a greater commonality of CC and CHAT. So we endorse, and testify: A greater commonality of CC and CHAT is practical. And necessary.

The value of commonality: Contributing toward a new center of commonality in psychology

In what sense and with what justification might greater CC/CHAT commonality contribute toward a new center of commonality in psychology? We suggest that the center of a science is marked by the density of intersections across topic fields, and the incidence of research that combines, clarifies, or verifies common or competing propositions. We now consider research in cognitive science and psycho-neurology that supports activity theory, and in which the early signs of a centering may be discerned.

Attempts to understand the processes of human psychology by studying people outside of their context has been criticized as leading to limited and, sometimes, inaccurate knowledge in both community and cultural psychology (e.g., O’Donnell, 2006; Shweder, 1995). Recently, however, an important shift is taking place in social cognition research, away from a focus on the individual mind and toward embodied and participatory aspects of social understanding. Empirical results already imply that social cognition is not reducible to the workings of individual cognitive mechanisms.” (De Jaegher, Di Paolo, & Gallagher, 2010, p. 441)

In this research, the focus is on social interaction, “putting social cognition back where it belongs: between individuals and not only in their heads” (De Jaegher et al., 2010, p. 446).

This focus on social interaction and joint action in particular is showing progress in understanding the cognitive and neural processes by investigating perception and action. There are many signs that research in these fields heretofore considered far removed from CC or CHAT (in cognitive science and psycho-neurology) are helping to clarify, verify, and provide specific mechanisms for both intersubjectivity and joint activity (though they do not use those terms). Two excellent overviews of this vigorous enterprise are Sebanz, Bekkering, and Knoblich (2006) and Knoblich, Butterfill, and Sebanz (2011).

Much of this research directly affects our understanding of intersubjectivity and its relationship to joint activity. Intersubjectivity involves co-actors feeling the same emotions and values in the same situations. CHAT and CC emphasize the role of semiotic mediation in transmitting the value reactions that are such a large part of intersubjectivities, and in general these cognitive studies find that conversation-during-the-activity is a necessary condition for the felt feelings to emerge. As Vygotsky placed an emphasis on semiotic processes, now Galantucci (2009) has proposed experimental semiotics as a new approach for studying communication as a form of joint action, and psycho-neurological studies have added additional direct mechanisms: “a single mechanism (shared circuits) applies to actions, sensations and emotions: witnessing the actions, sensations and emotions
of other individuals activates brain areas normally involved in performing the same actions and feeling the same sensations and emotions” (Keysers & Gazzola, 2006, p. 379).

Readers from CC and CHAT will be pleased to find that cultural psychological variables have also been considered by cognitive science. Sebanz et al. (2006) reviewed recent studies on joint attention, action observation, task sharing, and action coordination. The paradigmatic experimental setting for work on joint action is: pairs of participants working together on mental tasks, such as solving puzzles, in sight of each other, and able to converse. These participants typically nonconsciously mimic each other’s actions, and unintentionally synchronize rhythmical movements. One finding has been in noting strong tendencies for nonconscious mimicry, which turns out to increase felt affinity during joint action. Participants from a collectivist culture were found more likely to perform nonconscious mimicry than those from an individualist culture.

Mimicry generally increases with motivations to get along well with others. It has been suggested that mimicry is a tool that bonds people together, a social glue (van Baaren, Maddux, Chartrand, de Bouter, & van Knippenberg, 2003). Many studies have since confirmed and extended this finding (for a review, see van Baaren, Janssen, Chartrand, & Dijksterhuis, 2009).

Lakin and Chartrand (2003) gave research participants an affiliation goal, which increased non-conscious mimicry. They propose that behavioral mimicry is a part of individual’s natural repertoire, to be employed in a desire to create rapport. Even nonconscious mimicry of gestures, postures, and mannerisms does enhance smoothness of interactions and fosters liking between participants (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999).

The findings just mentioned so briefly are uniform and so robust that they may be treated at least provisionally, as settled science. Commenting on Luria’s work in neurology, Lamdan and Yasnitsky (2013) agreed: “The numerous successes of contemporary neuroscience and neuropsychology are obvious and undeniable. Brain research is clearly on the rise these days, and brain-related studies are rapidly growing in numbers and expanding in newer cross-disciplinary fields” (p. 509). Lamdan and Yasnitsky went on to discuss Luria’s “dynamic system of thought,” “pregnant” with exciting possibilities of further theoretical, practical, and applied development such as, for instance, the unfinished Vygotsky-Luria theory of “meaning, sense-making, and consciousness” (p. 509). (The research in cognitive science and psycho-neurology just discussed is an “exciting possibility” that is contributing to “the unfinished Vygotsky-Luria theory of meaning, sense-making, and consciousness.”)

The deep relationship, by which joint activity increases intersubjectivity, which in turn increases affinities, also is the central theoretical dynamic in Delta theory (Tharp, 2012). Delta theory asserts that this dynamic accounts for intentional influence for change as practiced by all professions, in all social sciences and education, as well as in all organizations, from the mafia to the military, and by all those in the natural roles of caretakers and developers of the young.

Theory itself is seldom “settled”; its viability depends on emerging data and, where necessary, appropriate modifications. Delta theory, positing universal relationships, is thus also subject to the dynamics and responsibilities of the method of universals, which requires a continuing diligent search for exceptions.

The data from cognitive science as to cultural differences are still slight but are uniform in verifying the relationships proposed by cultural psychology, using cognitive science research methods. When we write that greater commonality of CC and CHAT can contribute toward a new center of commonality in psychology itself, it is with this background of already-existing overlaps among culture studies, education, psychological counseling and therapies, cognitive science and psycho-neurological research fields, all investigating aspects of two central concepts: intersubjectivity and joint activity.

These explorations of exciting overlaps among various fields do not threaten any of them in any way, but rather strengthen us all. Cognitive researchers have made similar points:

Psychological research on joint action may also lead to a fruitful exchange between experimental psychology and different disciplines in the humanities specialized in the use of discursive, observational, and phenomenological methods (De Jaegher et al., 2010), especially musicology, anthropology, and philosophy. (Knoblich et al., 2011, p. 93)
But no matter how satisfying these overlapped findings may be, it is also true that the larger enterprise of a new center of commonality has hardly begun. Just how that might be managed should now be the subject of many conversations, both across and within both sides of the border that so many of us now hopscotch.

CHAT and CC have a head start. Let us lead on.

ORCID
Clifford R. O’Donnell http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8147-3640

References


