

Activity theory and its contributions in strategy research

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Activity Theory and its contributions in strategy research Written by:
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Southampton University Activity theory is a name that commonly accepted
for a line of theorizing and research initiated by L. S. Vygotsky, A. N. Leont'ev,
and A. R. Luria, in the 1920s and 1930s, the founders of the cultural-
historical school of Russian psychology (Ed, Engerstrom, Miettinen,
Punamaki, 1999; Engerstrom, 2000). Chaiklin, Hedegaard, Jensen (1999)
explain that the roots of activity theory and the cultural historical approach
to psychology are in the theory and research of Lev S, Vygotsky and Alexei N
Leontiev. Similarly, Bedney and Meister (1997: XV) present that activity
theory has a broad history dating back to Vigotsky's work and his followers.
The scholars around the world have elaborated and developed further this
activity theory with conducting research in antropology, pedagogy, computer
science, philosophy, and psychology (Chaikin et al, 1999; Engerstrom et al,
1999). This paper will seek to outline activity theory and its application in
strategy research. Activity theory is a psychological paradigm as a basis for
work behaviour study in the former Soviet Union and it assumes ' a
distinctive human psychology defined by goal directed behaviour' (Bedny,
Seglin, Meister, 2000: 168). Activity theory defines ' activity' as ' a goal
directed system in which cognition, behaviour and motivation are integrated
and organized by goals and the mechanisms of self regulation' (Bedney et
al, 2000: 168). Kuutti as quoted by Hasan (2002) defines acivity theory ' as
a philosophy and cross - diciplinary framework for studying different forms of
human practices and offers a set of concepts, structures, and terms that are
eminently suited to research undertaken within the communities of practice.'

Further, Kuutti describes activity as 'a form of doing directed to an an object'; and the object transformed into an outcome by involving it through mediating artifacts drives , the existence of an activity (Food, 2001). In activity theory the pragmatic concept of " activity" is simply what people do, so that activity theory provides a framework suitable to analyse everyday and mundane human work where information and knowledge enable a strategic contribution (Hasan, 2002). According to Bedney et. al (2000) in activity theory, goal-orientation drives the elements of cognitive, behavioural and motivational into an integrated system that includes goal-oriented feed-forward and feed back elements (Bedney et al, 2000). Further, Bedney et al explain that the most essential unit of analysis in activity theory is a concept of action, which influenced the development of action theory in Western Europe. Under the rubrics of activity theory, motives, plans, performance methods and goal directed behaviour as a whole can be formulated either consciously or unconsciously, but ' the goal of an activity is always conscious' (Bedney et al, 2000: 168). Philosophically, activity theory is rooted in Karl Marx's reality concept as sensuous human activity, practice (Foot, 2001). Engerstrom et al (2009) quoting Marx explain that concept of activity results in a new way to understand change and it does not rise from above and nor it depends on merely individual self change of subjects. The key is " revolutionary practice" which is not to be seen in narrowly political context but as joint " practical- critical-activity" potentially reflected in any mundane everyday practice (Engerstrom et al, 2009). Foundational to activity theory is Marx's points, that is, ' real materialism has to take into account how social relationships are manifest in the felt experience of embodied persons,'

meanwhile the critical-cultural studies tradition has failed to connect ' the patterns of practice in economic relationships or media texts with the lived experience of embodied persons' (Foot, 2001: 59). Similarly, Avis (2007) quoting Engerstrom presents that activity theory ' derives from Marxian and is mediated through the work of Vygotsky.' Further, Engerstrom and Miettinen as quoted by Avis (2007, 162) write: Marx's analysis of capitalism includes invaluable analytical instruments, above all the concept of commodity as contradictory unity of use and exchange value. This dialectical concept is crucial for any serious analysis of the contradictory motives of human activities and human psyche in capitalist society. Still about Karl Mark, the Mark's concept of labour was the paradigmatic model of human object—oriented activity for Vygotsky when he built the concept of activity that stressed on the two mutually dependent things of mediation in labor activity (Engerstrom, 2009). The first is the making and use of tools that is started by making of tools, and the second is the labour process that is performed in the form of joint collective activity. Consequently, in this process, the man functions in a certain relationship with nature and to other people as well. Vigotsky's study of the human development was also influenced by the colleague of Mark, Friederich Engels, who emphasized the critical role of labor and tools in transforming connection between human beings and their environment (Vygotsky, 1978). Engels described the function of tools in human development as follows: ' The tool specifically symbolizes human activity, man's transformation of nature: production,' and such an approach needs an understanding of the active role of history in the development of human psychological (Vygotsky, 1978: 132). As Edward E.

Berg pointed out: Just as the tools of labor change historically, so the tools of thinking change historically. And just as new tools of labor give rise to new social structures, new tools of thinking give rise to new mental structures.

Traditionally, it was thought that such things as the family and the state always existed in more or less their present form. Likewise, one also tends to view the structure of the mind as something universal and eternal. To

Vygotsky, however, both social structures and mental structures turn out to have very definite historical roots, and are quite specific products of certain levels of tool development. (Steiner and Soubberman, in Vygotsky, 1978: 132

) Engel as quoted by Steiner and Soubberman (1978) presented essential concepts and elaborated by Vygotsky are that in the history, man, too, ‘

affects nature, changes it, creates for himself new natural conditions of existence’ and they both criticized the view of psychologists and philosophers

that ‘ only nature affects man and only natural conditions determine man’s historic development’ (Steiner and Soubberman in Vygotsky, 1978: 132).

Further, Vygotsky pointed out that the tool use has fundamental effect on humans both because the tool use has helped them connect more effectively

to their external environment and it has influenced significantly on functional and internal relationships within the human brain. Moreover, it looks that the

most distinguishing theme of Vygotsky’s work is his stressing on how as human being we realize actively and change ourselves in the different

settings of culture and history (Steiner and Soubberman in Vygotsky, 1978).

Activity Systems In his paper on activity theory, Engerstrom (2000 : 960)

explains an approach that differs between short term goal directed actions and long term, object oriented activity systems, and argues that this

approach called as cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) is ‘ a new framework aimed at transcending the dichotomies of micro and macro, mental and material, observation and intervention in analysis and redesign of work.’ Further, Engerstrom says that ‘ activity systems are driven by communal motives that are often difficult to articulate for individual participants’ and they are internally contradictory and in constant movement which the contradictions are manifested in mundane innovations and disturbances that drive broad developmental transformations. Such transformations result from expansive learning starting with questioning the existing standart practice, then ‘ analyzing its contradictions and modelling a vision for its zone of proximal development, then to actions of examining and implementing the new model in practice’ (Engerstrom, 2000: 960). Further, Engerstrom argues that activity theory is unique in three ways : First, activity theory is deeply contextual and oriented at understanding historically specific local practices, their objects, mediating artifacts, and social organization (Cole and Engerstrom, 1993). Second, activity theory is based on dialectical theory of knowledge and thinking, focused on the creative potential in human cognition (Davidov, 1988; and Ilyenkov, 1977). Third, activity theory is a developmental theory that seeks to explain and influence qualitative changes in human practices over time. (Engerstrom, 1999 : 378). The activity system can be drawn upon triangular representations; first, the upper part of triangle are representation of individual and group actions reflexted in an activity system. Second, community who share the activity general object. The last, the rules that regulate action (Avis, 2009). This activity systems as described by Frans Prektert (2006) have several

main features, they are : 1. An explicit object orientation 2. A recognition of the collective character of human activity 3. A notion of cultural mediation 4. An incorporation of contradiction and paradox as the sources of change

Moreover, Engeström as quoted Avis (2009) argues that five principles underpin activity theory : 1. A collective, artefact mediated and object oriented activity system as the prime unit of analysis. 2. The multi-voicedness of activity systems. 3. Historicity 4. The main role of contradiction as sources of change and development. 5. The possibility of expansive transformation in activity systems. Following Engeström, Prenkert (2006) human activity is modeled in triangle shaped model consisting of a large triangle with three apices and its connecting sides (Figure 1). The larger activity triangle consists of four sub triangle; production, distribution, exchange, and consumption is also an apex of the larger activity triangle, while the other two are shared among the sub triangles. The six constituent elements of human activity are located around the larger activity triangle. These elements comprise a subject performing the activity, instruments aiding in the activity, an object of the activity, a division of labor to distribute rewards and responsibilities of the activity, a community in which the activity takes place, and finally, rules governing the activity performed in the community. This model of human activity depicts the constituent elements and their relations in terms of an activity system, and it is what we have referred to as an ASM. These elements are of two types: core elements such as subject, object/outcome, and community; and mediatory elements such as instruments, rules and division of labor.' Moreover, In their article, Waycott, Jones, Scanlon (2005) quoting Leont'ev point out that activities

comprise specific goal directed actions, which ' in turn constitute operations, the routine, automatic processes that enable the goal of the action to be reached. The use of available tools which represent the ' conditions' will enable actions achieved, and the conditions of the activity result in operations, or mundane / routine process used. The following example on the activity of reading course materials can explain the difference between activities, actions and operations. Several actions like reading documents, texts books, sharing idea with other students, etc might contribute to this activity. Turning pages in the text books or documents, flicking through the documents to move forth and back among chapters and sections, and so on are the parts of the operations. The operations would be dependent on the activity conditions, such as if the students would read documents on PDA instead of paper, then the operations of flicking through the documents would not apply anymore. Instead, the operation would be to scroll up and down along the screen displays of the text. Contributions of activity theory in Strategy research As discussed in the previous section that concept of activity results in a new way to understand change and provides a framework suitable to analyse everyday human work. To start this section the author would like to quote Paula Jarzabkowsky's view, a main proponent of activity theory, that argues that ' activity theory provides a framework of four interactive components from which strategy emerges; the collective structures of the organization, the primary actors, in this research conceptualized as the top management team (TMT), the practical activities in which they interact and the strategic practices through which interaction is conducted' and it can be used to analyse an empirical study of the micro

practices of strategy (Jarzabskowsky, 2003 : 23). A study of micro strategy can be found within the growing body of research on practice, focusing on how people engage in the doing of real work (Jarzabskowsky, 2003). Moreover, according to Johnson, Melin, Whittington (2003), An activity-based view of strategy focuses on the detailed processes and practices which constitute the day to day activities of organizational life and which relate to strategic outcomes as well as allows managerial agency. In the micro processes of strategizing managers and other members of organization are involved day to day and such processes determine the organizational ability to formulate and implement strategy (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2003). The reason for contextualizing strategy within a theory of practice is specifically to focus attention on its routine and routinizing elements (Hendry and Seidl, 2003). Following Jarzabskowsky (2003: 24) a conceptual framework of activity theory is modeled in triangle shaped model consisting of a large triangle with three apices and its connecting sides (Figure 2). It is used to explain the three key contributions of activity theory to a study of strategy as practice. They are, first, contribution on practical activity. Practical activity is the site of interaction in which actors engage with their context s overtime. Practical activity is comprised of a series action but it is more historically situated and collective idea than any single action. Second, contribution of the concept of activity theory of practices as mediators between constituents. Interpretation of activity theory on practice through which actors and collective structures interact in practical activity. Third, examining the way that activity theory can be used to explain continuity and change at activity system level. References : Bedney and

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