As organization studies face today’s global challenges, many scholars are searching for theories and methodologies that could provide solid foundations for interventionist and activist research. Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) and its methodology of formative interventions offer such an alternative in constructive dialogue and debate with related approaches such as critical realism (Allen et al., 2013), actor-network theory and other practice-based approaches in organization studies (Miettinen et al., 2012).

Activity theory is widely applied in studies of organizational change, organizational learning and knowledge creation, agency and organizational authorship, and information systems in organizations (Allen et al., 2011). Activity theory is increasingly used as a framework in intervention studies such as Change Laboratories, aimed at supporting and understanding complex emancipatory transformations in heterogeneous coalitions of formal organizations, communities and social movements (Sannino & Engeström, 2017).

In activity theory, materiality is understood through the lens of productive actions to create objects of use value. This comes close to the idea of material agency suggested by Malafouris (2013). However, material engagement is more than an encounter between a subject and a material object. Such encounters are embedded in historically evolving activity systems, mediated by instruments, rules, communities and divisions of labor (Vetoshkina et al., 2017).

Being a dialectical approach in search of movement and development, activity theory looks for inner contradictions in activity systems as the source of movement and change. Developmentally significant contradictions cannot be effectively dealt with merely by combining and balancing competing priorities. Seeing contradiction as an inconsistency or competition between separate forces or priorities corresponds to the general mechanistic tendency to replace inner systemic contradiction with outer, external oppositions. Inner contradictions need to be creatively and often painfully resolved by working out a new “thirdness,” something qualitatively different from a mere combination or compromise between two competing forces. Contradictions are historical and need to be traced in their real historical development (Engeström & Sannino, 2011; Foot & Groleau, 2011).

Activity theory sees agency as action, not as a trait. Transformative agency may be understood as breaking away from the given frame of action and taking the initiative to transform it. The generative mechanism behind transformative agency is called double stimulation (Sannino, 2015). Human beings may break out of a paralyzing conflict of motives by employing material artifacts as second stimuli. Studies of double stimulation in formative organizational interventions are an important focus on current studies based on activity theory.

Formative interventions based on activity theory are increasingly involved in creating alternatives to capitalism in attempts to deal with the grand challenges of poverty and ecological crisis. Such interventions often encompass heterogeneous organizational coalitions, thus expanding the unit of analysis and taking steps toward 4th generation activity theory.

This sub-theme invites contributions focused on analyses of materiality, contradictions and transformative agency in different organizational settings and cultural contexts. We especially encourage the submission of papers that;

- use CHAT as a methodological tool in the study of organizations,
- establishing a dialogue between CHAT and other practice-based theories,
- report on formative interventions in heterogeneous organizational coalitions involved in creating alternatives to capitalism, and
• explore aspects of information behavior, information technology use or management in organizational settlings.

References


