

Sophina Choudry



Senior Lecturer and Presidential Fellow
Manchester Institute of Education
School of Education, Environment and Development
University of Manchester
Manchester, UK
Sophina.Choudry@manchester.ac.uk

Cultural Historical Activity Theory-related research

The aim of this commentary is to critically examine my previous and current work in terms of challenging and addressing inequality in society at large and how schooling serves a site of systematic and systemic process of differentiation and marginalisation in class reproduction. Currently, I am interested in organising activist research focusing on the conceptualisation and methodology that underpins a research-based sustainable movement bringing together local diverse community groups and resources including service providers/ stakeholders in England to evaluate what is meant by lived experiences education-related *and* health-related inequalities and how these are exacerbated by climate and pandemic crises (Choudry et al., 2024). I will be arguing that we need Bourdieu along with Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) in order to understand arbitrary power relations and their impact in transformative local activities.

Day to day, cultural experiences, e.g. experiences of children throughout schooling, need to be understood in relation to wider socio-economic and political relations within society in order to unravel the objective truth or their true purpose in/of the current school system (especially in the UK). For example, the UK National Curriculum (a syllabus within the UK that specifies what schools ought to be teaching and students ought to be learning) 'works' through emphasising the belief that it is (more or less equally or equitably) accessible to all learners. However, the curriculum itself is underpinned by a socio-political and economic hidden agenda leading to elitist knowledge that favours the middle class learners over learners from poorer backgrounds. Middle class learners are more naturally attuned to acquire that knowledge compared to their poorer counterparts (many of whom even rule themselves out) leading to social reproduction. From a Bourdieusian perspective, the engagement and identifications that lead the children from poor backgrounds to rule themselves out are instantiations of being dominated, which can be seen as structural relations of power at play - mediated by the local cultural school field. Hence, the local structure of schooling ensures class reproduction (Choudry and Williams, 2017).

In Williams and Choudry (2016), we called for the objectification of subjective perceptions to uncover hidden power relations and address misrecognition. In other work (see Choudry et al., 2017), we revealed how reproduction of capital is mediated by peer group relationships in the mathematics classroom, and how access to capital at the local level is mediated by policy. The work presented in Choudry et al. (2017) is the first paper to develop the use of social network analysis as a quantitative methodological tool to objectivise the subjectivities of classroom relationships and their role in the mobilisation of capital in the classroom and educational field, thereby proposing to break away from class reproduction by revealing the hidden structural power relations. Pace Bourdieu, I argue that wider objective socio-political and economic relations in society with local activity from a CHAT perspective for activities to be transformational.

In Choudry and Williams (2017), we push forward the agenda of a critical synthesis of Bourdieu with CHAT in order to address how power (or capital) in different cultural fields is structured around different manifestations of oppression (women-men; poor- wealthy; black-white and all the intersections thereof inter alia). Although 'Figured worlds' perspectives attempts to engage with this, it fall shorts (i) in understanding the impact of arbitrary power relations on e.g. world-making (Bakhtin, 1986; but also see 'play' in Vygotsky, 1967), transformation and agency; as well as (ii) in exploring how the habitus (embodied dispositions, understandings, etc.) are semiotically mediated through discourses especially in the field of opinion (the contested site of opinions), which may serve to re-instate the status quo of the doxa (hidden belief system), or provide alternatives (heterodoxy - see Choudry and Williams, 2017 for a detailed account).

In Choudry (2023), I present a methodology that underpins pedagogic interventions with the potential to be developmental for non-dominant learners through an analysis of diverse heterogenic mathematics classrooms in a high school within the UK. Specifically, I argue for institutions, such as schools, to be viewed as sites of differentiation through systematic and systemic processes of inclusions and exclusions (by drawing on Bourdieu). The inherent experiences of marginalised students in such a system leads to alienation from dominant forms of schooling and classroom activities (drawing on Leontiev; and Vygotsky). These instances of alienations present themselves, at times, as disruptions or disinterest in the dominant teaching-learning activity in the classroom. I argue, drawing on Engeström's third generation activity theory (see 1987, 1990, and 2001 as examples), disruptions and disengagement when understood as experiences of subjective alienation can reveal contradictions within and between activities. Negating these contradictions can be empowering for non-dominant learners leading to new transformative teaching and learning activities. Hence, for any such pedagogic intervention to be equitable and socially just, it has to be led by non-dominant learners (rather than teachers). And teachers recognising and valuing learners' voices can be seen as developing solidarity with and between non-dominant learner communities/groups.

The need for better conceptualizations of solidarity amongst and between diverse communities to tackle inequalities emerged from our 2021-2022 project: 'the Rochdale Pakistani community's call to action on COVID-19', led by me, a native Urdu speaker who conducted some of the interviews in the native language. This project aimed to identify marginalised 'voices' or perspectives from within these communities concerning COVID-19 related schooling issues. But, beyond this, what emerged were complex narratives whereby health concerns were intertwined with formal and informal education in historical and current experiences that were exacerbated by the pandemic and its associated intensifications of existing inequalities, e.g., racism (Choudry et al., 2021). So, we argue that in order to increase access, experience and improve education-related outcomes amongst the most vulnerable and marginalized members of society, interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral approaches to health, education and the environment are needed (Choudry et al., 2024).

The project has provoked us to think again about the concept of "we", in regards to (i) the communities whose voices we, as researchers, seek to document, (ii) our research teams and our positions and positionality regarding this research, (iii) the collective subject/voice of the "call to action" (Engeström, 1995) document we created as an output from our work with the Rochdale Pakistani communities (Choudry et al., 2023). We seek to understand the impact of arbitrary power relations on, i.e. positioning and being positioned (drawing on Bourdieu, 1990) on e.g. world-making (Bakhtin, 1981), transformation and agency (Stetsenko, 2019). In potentially progressive 'action', we engage with others in collective action to change the world in ways we assume/believe to be somehow consistent regarding intended outcomes (the object-motive), thereby, negating contradictions between individual subjects' actions, goals and consciousnesses (Engeström, 2015). In Choudry et al. (2024), we draw on Vygotsky's (1998) notion of human development through engagement in the social environment to develop our understanding of co-creation and co-production that has potential to lead to collective action. Building on this, Vienna and Stetsenko (2011) have argued that an ethos of solidarity and equitable power relations are key for human development. Thus, where my work now focusses on conceptualising dissonance and barriers to building solidarity with, within and between marginalised communities from an interdisciplinary perspective.

References

Choudry, S., Burman, E., & Williams, J. (2024). *From Freire to Vygotsky – barriers and dissonance to collective action to overcome racial, gendered and class-based inequalities in local communities in England*. Paper to be presented at American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Conference 2024.

Choudry, S. (2023). Power relations within division of labor—the key to empowering learners from marginalized backgrounds in mathematics classrooms. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 1-17.

Choudry, S., Howker, E. Burman, E., & Williams, J. (2023). *From individual to collective voice and progressive action: barriers and possible solutions to activism research*. Paper presented at American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Conference 2023.

Choudry, S., Burman, E., Williams, J., Ifitikhar, S. & Bharkhda, J.Y. (2021). *PaCCT Call to Action Document*. Manchester: University of Manchester. Available at: <https://shorturl.at/hmxGY>

Choudry, S., & Williams, J. (2017). Figured Worlds in the Field of Power. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 24(3), 247-257. DOI: [10.1080/10749039.2016.1183132](https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2016.1183132)

Choudry, S., Williams, J., & Black, L. (2017). Peer relations and access to capital in the mathematics classroom: a Bourdieusian social network analysis. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 38(7), 1037-1053. DOI: [10.1080/01425692.2016.1245129](https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2016.1245129)

Engeström, Y. (1987). Learning by expanding: an activity theoretical approach to developmental research [online].

<http://communication.ucsd.edu/LCHC/MCA/Paper/Engestrom/expanding/toc.htm>.

Engeström, Y. (1990): *Learning, working and imagining: Twelve studies in activity theory*. Helsinki: Orienta-Konsultit.

Engeström, R. (1995). Voice as communicative action. *Mind, culture, and activity*, 2(3), 192-215.

Engeström, Y. (2001). Expansive learning at work: Toward an activity theoretical reconceptualization. *Journal of education and work*, 14(1), 133-156. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080020028747>

Engeström, Y. (2015). *Learning by expanding*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Stetsenko, A. (2019). Radical-transformative agency: Continuities and contrasts with relational agency and implications for education. In *Frontiers in Education* (p. 148). Frontiers.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1967). Play and its role in the mental development of the child. *Soviet psychology*, 5(3), 6-18.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1998). Child psychology. In R. W. Rieber (Ed.), *The collected works of L. S. Vygotsky* (Vol. 5, English trans: M. J. Hall, R. W. Rieber). New York, NY: Kluwer Academic and Plenum Publishers.

Williams, J.(2015).Alienation in mathematics education: critique and development of neo- Vygotskian perspectives. *Educational Studies in Mathematics*, 92(1), 59-72. DOI: [10.1007/s10649-015-9659-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10649-015-9659-2)

Williams, J., Black, L., Choudry, S. and Howker, E. (2023). Funds of knowledge and identity in oppressed communities in England: an anti- capitalist analysis. In Esteban-Guitart, M. (Ed.), *Funds of knowledge pedagogies for social justice. International perspectives and praxis*. University of Girona, Spain.

Williams, J., & Choudry, S. (2016). Mathematics capital in the educational field: Bourdieu and beyond. *Research in Mathematics Education*, 18(1), 3-21.