

Agency in cultural-historical activity theory: strengthening commitment to social transformation

Abstract

Theorising agency is crucial to intervening in social, economic, political and environmental crises. This paper examines three approaches to agency within cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT): transformative activist stance (Stetsenko), transformative agency by double stimulation (Sannino), and relational agency (Edwards). These reflect a surge of interest in agency, offering new concepts and expanding Vygotskian foundations. Examining these frameworks together enables us to address questions such as: Does it make sense to talk of a CHAT approach to agency? Are we moving towards a unified view? Do contemporary ideas resonate or compete with each other? Do similar vocabularies reflect shared conceptual meanings? Why might we work with one framework or another? How do they offer us different means to strengthen our committed, activist, work? All three uphold CHAT's rebellious gist, sharing notions of agency as a matter of what we do intentionally, not a quality we possess, where our actions are shaped by circumstances but where the possibility of transcending those circumstances always remains. However, paper finds important differences despite common foundations and apparent similarities in relation to dialectics, mediation, motives and practice. Bringing these distinctions into relief highlights what each framework offers and nuances that hold them helpfully apart.

Keywords

Agency, Vygotsky, activity theory, double stimulation, activism, relational agency

Introduction

Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT¹) is entangled with ideas of social change, seeking to understand the world not as it is, but as it is coming to be (Chaiklin, 2012). Much CHAT research seeks to promote such change, committed to a sociopolitical ethos connecting research, development and practice (Sannino, 2020, 2022; Stetsenko, 2020b,d, 2021). The concept of agency has an important but not yet fully realized contribution to make to this agenda (Engeström et al., 2022). Theorising agency in ways that enable concrete transformations is crucial in addressing the challenges of equity, social justice, enduring racism, global pandemics, and climate change (Bal et al., 2021; Sannino, 2022; Stetsenko, 2021).

Despite a surge of interest in agency within CHAT, there is a dearth of conversations cutting across sparsely connected research orientations within CHAT (Stetsenko, 2019, 2021). This is a problem because we lose out on valuable insights that can be gained by bringing different CHAT approaches to agency into view alongside one another. These insights include discerning common notions that underpin what gives CHAT a distinctive basis for theorising and researching agency, as well as bringing differences into sharper relief. Does it make sense to talk of a CHAT approach to agency? Are we moving towards a unified view? Do contemporary ideas resonate or compete with each other? Do similar vocabularies reflect shared conceptual meanings? Why might we work with one framework or another? How do they offer us different means to strengthen our committed, activist, work? An analysis of different approaches enables us to begin answering these questions.

This paper examines three prominent CHAT frameworks that address agency: transformative activist stance (TAS, eg. Stetsenko, 2017, 2020a-e), transformative agency through double stimulation (TADS, eg. Sannino, 2015a,b, 2020, 2022), and a trio of concepts associated with relational agency (eg. Edwards, 2017, 2020). Each has been extensively documented by their proponents and taken up by others, yet there are

limited cross-references between them. This makes them ripe for a generative reading alongside each other, seeking points of commonality and distinction. Subtle but important differences are explored in terms of dialectics, mediation, motive and practice. These underlie the unique value of each approach, and also hold them apart, in arguably helpful ways. The point is not to reach a grand synthesis but to bring these approaches into a closer dialogue and sharper relief, addressing the questions above, as part of an unfinished project to strengthen CHAT as a basis for committed activism and social change.

Agency in CHAT: activism and dialectics

Commenting on translations of Vygotsky's works, Edwards notes that 'I know of no reference to 'agency' in them' (2017a, p. 2). However, the absence of the word does not mean Vygotsky, Leont'ev and others did not care about agency. Sawchuk and Stetsenko (2008) argue that there was an activist, agentic core in the project Vygotsky and his collaborators were pursuing, seeking to transform society and concerned with social equality, liberation of oppressed workers and ethnic minorities, and equal access to education (Stetsenko, 2020d). Upholding the rebellious gist of Vygotsky's project requires activist scholarship, of which agency is an essential part (Stetsenko, 2019).

The dialectic foundations of CHAT enable contemporary theories to avoid problematic individualistic notions of agency on one side of a structure | agency divide. We can conceptualize human agency without falling into the traps of individualism (Stetsenko, 2020c). CHAT is concerned with human agency and transformation of the world, regarding agency as enabled and constrained by the same societal and material structures world that give rise to it (Roth et al., 2009). We may not choose the circumstances in which we act, but we need not be resigned to them either (Stetsenko, 2017). Important in CHAT is a view that agency cannot be considered simply as a property of individuals, but as emergent and situated in social and material interaction (Roth et al., 2004). In this way, CHAT theories are uniquely positioned to grapple with rising social and ecological injustice exacerbated by diverse contemporary crises:

Perhaps most important, the lenses offered by CHAT theories remain grounded in dialectical relations that include the consequences of human action, both individual and institutional, and the adaptive and innovative opportunities that humans create through agentic projects with each other and the natural world, rather than as against each other and the world. (Cole et al., 2019, p. 283)

The three frameworks examined in this paper all share a basis in dialectics that eschews problematic binaries. However, a close analysis pinpoints how they take up dialectics in distinctive ways that result in strikingly different approaches to agency.

Contemporary interest in agency from CHAT perspectives

This section gives a flavour of contemporary CHAT scholarship on agency, highlighting different strands in recent work. It foregrounds works that do not draw directly on TAS, TADS or relational agency in order to situate those focal frameworks within a wider field. Recurring themes are highlighted, rehearsing key ideas in the detailed exploration of TAS, TADS and relational agency that follows.

A double special issue of *Mind, Culture and Activity* (2019, vol. 26, issues 3 and 4) focused on young people, digital mediation and transformative agency. The contributing papers resisted a view of young people as passive and uncritical, instead understanding them as active, creative, agentic and critical users of digital technologies for personal and social change (Kajamaa & Kumpulainen, 2019). They approached transformative agency as a matter of young people's initiative and commitment to transform the contexts of their activity, emphasising mediation and conceptualising agency as temporal, where past, present and

future are connected. These ideas will now be illustrated with reference to three papers from these special issues.

Dias Fonseca (2019) explores Young Portuguese people's civic agency, when they act in concert with others, making a difference in life. Important here are notions of the individual acting with others, and that agency is not defined by winning the battle. Gutiérrez et al. (2019) similarly examine how groups of young people leverage digital tools to disrupt and reconstruct what it means to be a migrant in the U.S., finding subversive practices, challenging and resisting rules, and norms as crucial in bringing situations into young people's control. Alongside an echo of the joint nature of agency, here we detect a thrust around refusing to accept the status quo or to be confined by it, and the issue of *taking* control rather than operating within options that are given. The temporal unfolding of agency is also prominent in Cunha Júnior et al.'s (2019) account of Brazilian secondary school students' engagement with Facebook. They trace changes from observation to active contribution, and from individual to collaborative agency, highlighting the importance of teachers in these shifts, which were connected to the construction and envisioning of new possibilities. Notable here are ideas that agency does not boil down to acting alone or preclude being helped by others, and its connections with what becomes (imagined as) possible. Two years after the special issues, connections between agency and digital technology remain a key focus, as Karanasios et al. (2021) outline a challenge for CHAT to conceptualize the subject in augmented or virtual realities.

Other studies bring agency into view in quite a different way, linking agency to funds of identity. Hedges (2020) shows how students' agency – acting with initiative, commitment and effort – is mediated by imagination. They detect agency in instances where children act creatively, when they resist adult norms, and when they ascribe new meanings. Again, agency is not a sense, but a matter of active contribution. Seemingly personal aspects of interest, imagination and identity are framed in a way that foregrounds the role of others, in which the capacity to act is related to human interaction. Verhoeven et al. (2021) also take up funds of identity in relation to agency, arguing that CHAT brings a dynamic focus on how people interact with others and the mediational means available to them: 'we understand people to manifest agency when they *use* tools, norms, values and skills that they think are or can be made available *in order to* pursue their preferences' (p. 4 [emphasis in original]). Here we see mediation again, and a clear sense of intention, motive, and acting *towards* something. Verhoeven et al. advance an agenda to acknowledge adolescents' agency, defining what is important to their identities. The individual does not become a casualty of the social here.

Different again is the work of Zaretsky et al. (2021), rethinking how to organize school processes based on development, agency and collaboration. They argue that the child's position of agency is the 'most important condition for activating a mechanism in which one step in learning can give one hundred steps in development' (p. 127). Drawing on Elkonin, they characterize agency in terms of proactivity, independence and responsibility in building one's own behaviour. Independence does not imply solipsism; it is connected to the appropriation of historically developed cultural forms of activities in collaboration with adults. Here, agency in relation to developmental trajectories is highlighted, yet again we see notions of intent, mediation, self-with-others, and motion towards a not-given future.

Also focusing on radical change in the organisation of schools, Bal et al. (2021) address agency in a strikingly different way. An Indigenous Learning Lab (adaptation of a Change Laboratory) was used to foster collaborative agency and envision futures, developing locally meaningful solutions with the Anishinaabe tribal nation, one of many affected by colonialism and racism in the U.S. Concern here was for processes of designing more inclusive, equitable and culturally sustaining learning environments, reclaiming self-sovereignty, cultural regeneration, recovering spiritual harms and historical trauma. Bal et al. reveal agency to be temporally embedded, informed by the past, oriented towards an imagined future, and addressing the present. Connections can be discerned at a deeper political level between this work and what Hardman (2021) describes as Vygotsky's decolonial pedagogical legacy, which challenges hegemonic views of individuals as active yet stripped of culture and history, infused as such views are with

colonialism's denial of marginalized people's worldviews. Hardman sees the mechanism for such challenge in Vygotsky's notion of mediation, which, we have seen, is a central feature of CHAT accounts of agency.

With notions of collaboration without sacrificing the individual, mediation, intentionality, motive, temporality and active struggles over the future in mind, we now turn to the three focal frameworks of TAS, TADS and relational agency.

Three contemporary approaches to agency in CHAT

This section outlines key features of TAS, TADS and relational agency, highlighting their substantial take-up in research. This is a prelude to a reading that brings them into closer contact, highlighting commonalities and distinctions between them.

The transformative, activist stance

The transformative, activist stance (TAS) critically expands Vygotsky's project, aligned with a Marxist ethos of building a society in committed solidarity with others, for the benefit of everyone, particularly those marginalized and oppressed (Stetsenko, 2020b,c). In a theory that links mind, personhood, development and learning in non-dualist yet flagrantly partisan ways, TAS is explicitly distinguished from approaches that focus on *participation* in practices:

Most critically, what is suggested by the transformative approach is yet another shift – a transition from participation (as derived from the notion of dwelling in the present and adapting to it) to *contribution* – a more active and activist stance implying that all acts of being, knowing, and doing take place at the sites of ideological struggles and are part and parcel of such struggles. (Stetsenko, 2017, p. 11, emphasis added).

Stetsenko (2020a) outlines six key characteristics of TAS. First, an ontological view of the world as a shifting terrain of social practices, enacted by people as actors of collective projects and history, each contributing from a unique stance. Second, an epistemology that knowing is contingent on activist involvements in and contributions to collaborative practices. The third establishes change as ontologically primary, emphasizing the transformative nature of collaborative practices. Fourth, Stetsenko overcomes individual/social binaries without losing all sense of the individual, acknowledging individually unique contributions at the interface of social and individual levels of human life. Each person 'not only enters social practices, but agentively realizes them while making a difference in them' (2020a p. 10). Fifth, TAS renders future-oriented goals and endpoints integral to and constitutive of knowing, being and doing in the present, asserting the centrality of activist positioning as people strive towards what they deem important and in so doing commit to bringing that future into reality. The sixth point holds that these ethical-political dimensions belong in the our ways of knowing, being, doing and becoming. Through and in the process of constantly transforming and co-creating the social world, we create and constantly transform ourselves (Stetsenko, 2020a).

In TAS, imagined futures are neither treated as fuzzy aspirations, nor as taken for granted. The future is something people struggle over and struggle for in our actions. Future horizons are not received from authority, but figured out by individuals and communities (Stetsenko, 2020b). TAS emphasizes striving, 'people en-counter, con-fronting, and overcoming the circumstances and conditions that are not so much given as *taken up* by people (2020a, p. 12, emphasis in original). Such overcoming of the status quo is not just a response to how things are, but a matter of committing to the future. Stetsenko argues that research should join in, rejecting posthuman retreat into political quietism and accommodation of the status quo, instead taking sides in battles for the future (2020d).

TAS has been put to work in diverse contexts. These include studying protests in São Paulo (Brazil) where students resisted state plans to merge schools (Sales et al. 2020), and exploring how transgender people

co-create their own transformative agency as a historically marginalized population (Etengoff, 2019). TAS has also been used to foster student agency in higher education (Vianna & Stetsenko, 2017), and address disengagement from an oppressive curriculum among adolescent boys in foster care (Vianna & Stetsenko, 2019).

Stetsenko argues that through TAS, a 'banal, biscuit-box Vygotsky could be then made dangerous again, that is, useful in the struggle for a better world' (2020d, p. 7). Nardi (2017) agrees with the proposed redirection towards understanding that which enables us to transform our circumstances, acknowledging that doing so will require a readiness to deal with notions of individual agency without shrinking from communal forms of social life and human development.

Transformative agency by double stimulation

Sannino's (2015a,b, 2020, 2022) work on transformative agency by double stimulation (TADS) revisits Vygotsky's conception of intentionality and agency in order to realize the radical potential of double stimulation. The focus is on 'how people form wilful actions aimed at changing their circumstances and shaping their uncertain futures' (Sannino, 2015a, p. 1). Conflicts of motives are central to TADS, through which double stimulation is uplifted from an epistemological principle of formative intervention, to a core principle of agency:

Transformative agency built on double stimulation transpires in a problematic, polymotivated situation in which people evaluate and interpret the circumstances, make decisions according to the interpretations and act upon these decisions (Sannino, 2015a, p.2).

Double stimulation thus is not only an experimental method, but also a principle of volitional acts which constitute the path to transformative agency (Sannino, 2015b).

In the Vygotskian² model presented by Sannino (2015b) a conflict of stimuli activates a conflict motives, requiring volitional action. The solution to breaking away and changing the circumstances of action lies in forming auxiliary motives and implementing them. Agency is linked to ways learners turn to artefacts and decide to rely on them when faced by the problematic situations (Sannino, 2015b). TADS offers a non-individualistic notion of agency from inner psychological properties towards external artefacts that may become second stimuli and enable transformative actions.

In work on how homelessness has been tackled in Finland, Sannino (2018, 2022) has expanded TADS to incorporate the concept of warping, or forward-anchoring. Forward-anchoring involves throwing actions, searching for (metaphorical) firm ground in which new ideas can catch, which enables people to take over and regain control, rather than being at the mercy of the original situation. In actions of breaking-out, the anchor is pulled on, moving away from the problematic situation. Second stimuli that work as anchors pulled on in warping are instrumental in the elaboration of new meaning through experimentation embedded in the materiality of a problem. This is contrasted with backward anchoring, whereby background knowledge and stable representations are used to explain a problem and act (Sannino, 2022).

The value of this model has been elaborated through its take-up by others. Studies suggest TADS occurs outside of research interventions or experiments, for example when professionals support parents struggling with raising young children (Hopwood & Gottschalk, 2017, 2022), or when parents work with and against the health system to change the course of their children's lives (Hopwood et al., 2022). Conflicts of motives and volitional action were crucial in the agency that emerged in Donatelli et al.'s (2020) work developing a flow of care for children exposed to child labour. TADS was implemented as a principle underpinning formative intervention in Morselli's (2021) change laboratory promoting teacher agency in Italy, and in Grant's (2022) work on young people's leadership in schools in Southern Africa,

where students wanted to speak out, but lacked confidence doing something so counter to cultural norms. TADS has repeatedly been found to involve multiple auxiliary artefacts in temporally extended, non-linear, ratcheting and recursive processes (Hopwood & Gottschalk, 2022; Morselli & Sannino, 2021). This includes recent analyses focusing explicitly on forward-anchoring, where actions of throwing, taking over and breaking-out unfolded in complex rather than sequential ways (Hopwood et al., 2022). Studies have repeatedly found the fundamentals of the TADS model – agency as founded on double stimulation in response to conflicts of motives – to be upheld, helping to identify complexities and messiness in the dynamics of agency, rather than being undermined by divergence from the neatness of the abstract model.

Relational agency

This framework comprises three concepts: relational agency, relational expertise and common knowledge (Edwards, 2017b). Edwards presents these concepts as ‘gardening tools’ to cultivate relational practices (Edwards, 2011, p. 35), labelling how expertise is exercised by practitioners who accomplish effective interprofessional work (2017b). Edwards’ work resonates with that of Miettinen (2013) on collaborative agency, wherein two or more people work together to solve problems they could not do alone. This echoes aspects highlighted in the aforementioned study by Cunha Júnior et al. (2019), where collaboration between young people was essential to their shift in online participation, and construction of new, joint objects. Edwards explains:

I started to use the term *relational agency* to explain how two or more practitioners from different professional backgrounds were able to work with their different object motives when tackling the same complex object of activity, such as a child's trajectory. For a teacher the object motive might be oriented to increasing school attendance; while for a social worker it would be reflecting the need to strengthen the family. As a consequence they have the potential to jointly expand the object of activity, their interpretations of the trajectory, to reveal much of its complexity, in ways that a single practitioner would be unable to do (Edwards, 2020, p. 2).

Whether or not this expansion of interpretation and possibility for action actually happens depends on *relational expertise* (Edwards, 2010). This is a capacity to elicit and hear what matters to others, to be explicit about what matters to themselves as professionals, and draw on these understandings when needed (Edwards, 2020). The concept of common knowledge explains how links between people working relationally are built. Common knowledge, knowledge of each other's motive orientations, can become a resource that can mediate collaborations on complex problems – what Vygotskians would recognize as a second stimulus (Edwards, 2017b). Common knowledge is built over time through interactions which recognize similar long-term open goals as a value-laden glue that holds all ‘what matters’ together, legitimize asking for and giving reasons for interpretations and suggestions to reveal specific professional values and motives, and listening to, recognize and engage with the values and motive orientations of others (Edwards, 2017b). Edwards (2017b) uses the terms ‘what matters’ and ‘motive orientations’ in order to avoid connotations that ‘motive’ can (outside of CHAT) have with individual needs.

These ideas have been deployed in a wide range of contexts. A volume anchored in this framework (Edwards, 2017c) brought together studies from hospital, early childhood, school, service network, teacher education, and citizen science settings. Other studies have used these concepts in studies of services for families with young children (see Hopwood, 2019; Hopwood & Clerke, 2019), in research on the exclusion of young children in the UK (Edwards et al., 2009) and Chile (Edwards et al., 2017), a women's drop-in centre (Edwards, 2005), and around transitions to work for young people with autism (Edwards & Fay, 2019).

While the three scholars are clearly aware of one another's work, direct reference between them is limited. Having outlined each approach, I now bring them together in a generative reading that teases out point of connection and distinction between them, in order to revisit the questions posed at the outset.

The remainder of this paper expands on this, considering points of connection and distinction between the three approaches. In doing so we have these kinds of questions in mind – to which I will return explicitly in the conclusion: Does it make sense to talk of a CHAT approach to agency? Are we moving towards a unified view? Do contemporary ideas resonate or compete with each other? Why might we work with one framework or another? How do they offer us different means to strengthen our committed, activist, work?

Connection and points of distinction among the three approaches

This section revisits the three frameworks, pinpointing points of connection and distinction between them. It begins by considering their conceptual innovations within CHAT and theoretical frames of reference beyond it. Then common and particular ways they engage dialectic thinking are explored, before what might appear to be shared ground is shown to involve subtle significant difference concerning to ideas relating to mediation, double stimulation and practice.

All three approaches offer new concepts, expanding and enriching CHAT, building on and critically expanding Vygotsky's work. TADS is explicitly labelled a Vygotskian model (Sannino, 2016), and of the three is the framework that appears most generated *within* the CHAT tradition (a point I will return to later), drawing heavily on Vygotsky's texts, Vasilyuk on conflicts of motives, and the theory of expansive learning. It combines a specific understanding of a familiar concept (double stimulation, linked explicitly to conflicts of motives), as well as new concepts grounded in relevant metaphors, such as forward-anchoring (warping) (Sannino, 2022). The relational framework offers three novel concepts, which are specified and enriched through reference to Carlile (2004) on knowledge flows within systems, Tsoukas (2005) on institutional discourse, both of which reflect Edwards' concern for work at sites of intersecting practices. Taylor (1977) is also a clear influence in the development of these concepts, particularly around responsibility as key to agency. TAS has the broadest range of explicitly noted influences. It shares with the other two close reference to Vygotsky and Leont'ev, and is presented as a revived Marxist philosophy³, augmenting Vygotsky's project, infused with insights from Freire's critical pedagogy, Bakhtin's notion of becoming, developmental sciences and dynamic systems theory, critical race theory, ecological feminism, theories of resistance, and decolonising work (Stetsenko, 2017; 2020e). All offer CHAT something novel, yet it is clear that their frames of reference are not shared, being most focused on CHAT texts in TADS, and broadest in TAS. This is important in contextualising the further distinctions discussed below, and is one of the forces keeping these frameworks helpfully apart, setting them on trajectories that take us forward in different directions.

Dialectics were highlighted earlier in this paper as characteristic of how CHAT approaches agency, avoiding the traps of individualism. All three frameworks share a fundamental core that is in common with broader CHAT writing on this issue (eg. Cole et al., 2019; Roth et al., 2009). None regards agency as a property of individuals, but as something that emerges and manifests in social interaction. None suggests that prevailing circumstances are to be ignored, but none holds that they cannot be overcome either. In all three agency, while a matter of what people do (not what they sense), is also a matter of mind, connected to motives, what matters, envisioned futures. In all three, through agentic actions both the person and the world are transformed. This is grounded in dialectic thinking that binary dualisms between person and world, mind and body, external and internal. However, there are also differences in the ways dialectic thinking is deployed in the frameworks (which I now only point to rather than thoroughly excavate). Stetsenko (2017) discusses how TAS reclaims the unity of individual and social (through a concept of the collectividual), rematerializes concepts of mind, and resubjectivizes concepts of materiality (and the body), by dialectically linking mind with shared communal practices. This is described as a 'dialectically recursive and dynamically co-constitutive approach', in which people enact changes that bring the world, their own lives, their selves, and minds into reality (Stetsenko, 2017, p. 31). In TADS, dialectics affords thinking in terms of processes and relations rather than static and abstract categorisations (Sannino, 2022). Most

specifically and distinctively, dialectic processes are understood in regard to mastering historical contradictions and related conflicts of motives (Sannino, 2016). TADS needs to be understood in terms of its connections with the theory of expansive learning, and its links with Ilyenkov's (1960/1982) work on ascending from the abstract to the concrete in analysing the historical evolution of systems and their contradictions (Engeström, 2020).

Meanwhile, the relational agency framework has in common with the other two a basis in Leont'ev's dialectic view in which 'society produces the activity of the individuals forming it' (Leont'ev, 1978, p. 7; Edwards, 2017b, 2020). Edwards (2017b) explains the dialectic of person in activity in society gives rise to the object motive, which in turn directs the participation of the actors in activities. Edwards (2017a) argues that attending to learners' *needs* more than to the demands they meet makes little sense in a dialectical view of learning. 'Learning will occur only through a dialectic in which the child recognizes and engages intentionally with the demands inherent in the activity' (Edwards, 2017b, p. 7). Dialectics are thus at the heart of Edwards' project, wherein 'the Vygotskian account of mediation and externalisation points us to the part that human agency plays in the dialectic of person and practice – or agency and demand' (2020, p. 3). In the relational agency framework, then (and unlike the other two frameworks), dialectic thinking is tightly coupled to a notion of demands, and a particular notion of practice. Bases to dialectic thinking are insufficient to simply pull these frameworks together: nuances in dialectics create a distance and divergence between them.

We find something similar when the frameworks are read alongside each other in terms of motive, a key feature of the other contemporary approaches discussed earlier. TAS, TADS and relational agency foreground motive, particularly informed by Leont'ev (1978), regarding motive as something beyond the individual. However this apparent commonality disguises important differences. In TAS, the concept of motive underpins the move in TAS to (dialectically) reclaim the unity of social and individual dimensions of human development (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004). TAS explores how individuals undertake committed actions from unique standpoints, with goals and commitments to individually authentic agendas, charged with responsibility. Such standpoints are not *asocial*, but reflect each person's positioning in history, an amalgamation of the social and individual (Stetsenko, 2017). In TAS motives are part of an extended vocabulary including standpoints, goals and agendas, discussed through language denoting struggle and striving towards sought-after futures. TADS handles motives very differently, focusing centrally on conflicts of motives, dilemmas faced at a personal level, escaped by forming auxiliary motives and implementing them in processes which can be linked analytically and as a principle of intervention to changes in activities and beyond to heterogeneous coalitions (Sannino, 2020). In relational agency, it is not conflicts of motives that are central, but rather the fact that 'what matters' is not the same for people collaborating on complex problems: understanding of different professional emerges as an auxiliary stimulus (common knowledge), enabling people to work with rather than against each other (Edwards et al., 2017). TAS emphasizes acting in solidarity with others (often against hegemony and the status quo), TADS foregrounds conflicts of motives, and relational agency draws out attention to differing motives among people collaborating.

Considering the three frameworks in terms of *practice* further helps to understand distinctions between them. While Sannino (2020, 2022) is concerned with how utopias can be enacted in practice, in TADS practice is a general notion, not a concept connected to the notion of activity in a formal way. In contrast practices – variously described as shared, social, communal and collaborative – are at the heart of TAS: it is through contribution to and transformation of these historically evolving practices that people realize themselves and the world (Stetsenko, 2017) (Note, in TADS the focus is on transformation of *activities*). The concept of practice is different again, and plays a different role, in Edwards' relational agency framework. Following Hedegaard (2012), Edwards (2020) views practices as institutionally structured traditions of actions, in which activities are located. 'Practices are inhabited by those who act in them and are made up of activities in which people take intentional, motivated actions' (Edwards et al., 2019, p. 230), and are 'knowledge-laden, imbued with cultural values and emotionally freighted by the motives of those who act

in them.' (Edwards, 2010, p. 5). In this way practice is conceptualized in a way that is coherent with the cultural-historical connecting of motive and history (Edwards, 2020), placing 'practice, activity, motive and action in line with Leont'ev's view of the continuing dialectic between self and society' (Edwards et al., 2017, p. 244). The relational agency framework not only foregrounds a focus on sites of intersecting practices, but incorporates a formalized notion of practices that is not shared by the other two frameworks.

Distinctions can also be traced in relation to mediation and linked ideas of double stimulation. Mediation was highlighted as a recurring idea in the other approaches to agency outlined above, and is present in all three frameworks. The notion is perhaps broadest in TAS, where agency is held to be contingent on access to relevant cultural tools, and equitable access to and uptake of these mediational means becomes a central concern in addressing issues of social inequality (Stetsenko, 2017; Vianna & Stetsenko, 2019). Double stimulation itself receives little explicit attention in Stetsenko's writing. In Edwards' work, the concept of common knowledge is intimately linked to mediation – it emerges as a resource that mediates collaboration on complex problems. Here, it is linked to double stimulation, common knowledge as a second stimulus (the first stimulus being the problem, the second being the tool used to interpret and work on it) (Edwards, 2017b). Meanwhile, in TADS, double stimulation takes on more specific meaning in relation to conflicts of motives, where 'double stimulation cannot be subsumed to the general idea of mediation by symbolic tools' (Sannino 2015b, p. 2). These are not aesthetic differences. They are subtle yet significant differences suggesting that although the frameworks share common roots and are aligned with CHAT, they deploy concepts in ways that are non-identical, not directly transferable from one to the other (the same concept here does not mean the same thing there) and not necessarily compatible.

The frameworks can be further brought into relief by considering ways they strengthen a commitment to action and change. Stetsenko (2015) calls for a 'flagrantly partisan' approach to research and theory, advocating knowledge production that is embedded within activist pursuits of broad social relevance, with the researcher acting in solidarity with others, sharing political imagination and commitment to radical social transformation (Stetsenko, 2020d). Stetsenko (2017, 2019) criticizes relational ontology, with responsive and adaptive notions of agency that foreground standpoint at the expense of endpoint (eg. Biesta & Tedder, 2007). TAS augments questions of who is talking (drawing on critical scholarship, standpoint epistemology and feminist frameworks), with the question 'what for?' (Stetsenko, 2017). The relational target of Stetsenko's critique should not be confused with relational agency and what Edwards (2010) terms the relational turn in expertise. What someone is speaking or acting for is at the core of the relational agency framework. Relational agency is deeply ethical, concerned with what is important for each individual, while those individuals are connected dialogically to a common good (Edwards, 2017b). Edwards is explicit on this: hers is 'not a relativist argument that knowledge and knowing is merely situated; rather our knowing involves knowledge of the background from which we act and against which it is presented. We are engaged and, importantly, we have preferences and commitments as we make our way in the world, meeting, recognising and responding to demands' (2017a, p. 4). TADS is committed to change, too. Sannino (2022) calls for theorisations of agency that inform concretely lived change processes and lend themselves to fostering of agency and conditions under which transformative agency can be enacted. TADS is offered as one such theorisation, mobilized in a broad agenda to study and form heterogenous work coalitions tackling critical societal problems and forging practical alternatives to capitalism (Engeström & Sannino, 2020; Sannino, 2020). In these commitments, all three approaches decentre the research, less concerned with control over data or conditions in which a priori interventions are tested, and more ready to embrace the unruly processes that are part of disruptive change. This decentring does not mean a weakening of the researcher role, but rather augmenting it through its alignment alongside and with others. This reflects an ethical commitment to research that is not about others, but which stands with and for them. This is why research on agency, specifically through CHAT, is so important.

Conclusion

We are now in a position to address the questions posed at the outset of the paper, and reap the value of examining three contemporary frameworks together. Does it make sense to talk of a CHAT approach to agency? Are we moving towards a unified view? Do contemporary ideas resonate or compete with each other? Do similar vocabularies reflect shared conceptual meanings? Why might we work with one framework or another? How do they offer us different means to strengthen our committed, activist, work?

First, let us consider how these frameworks relate to the other approaches outlined at the start of the paper, where ideas of temporality and struggles over the future, and resistance/ winning the battle (or not), recurred. TAS conceptualises individual contributions from standpoints in history, as they strive towards futures that ought to be, where agency is not defined by winning, but can exploit fissures to resist and undermine the hegemonic status quo (Stetsenko, 2019). TADS engages temporality differently, connecting in-the-moment volitional acts that break away from conflicts of motives with agency that builds as auxiliary means are used repeatedly over time (Sannino, 2020). The struggle over the future, for example around ending homelessness and developing alternatives to capitalism, has resonates with the broad political agendas of equality and social justice that are foregrounded in TAS. TADS' connections with the theory of expansive learning give a specific reference point in such struggles in terms of overcoming historically accumulated contradictions in activities. In relational agency, although sites of intersecting practices can be fleeting (Edwards et al., 2017), people come to them as inhabitants of practices which are not ahistorical. The struggle over complex, immediate problems which have consequences for the future (for example young people's trajectories), and concern for those futures is part of what matters to those involved. Focusing on how people can negotiate (rather than navigate) differences to work with rather than against each other, relational agency may appear less about resistance and winning. However it is important to remember that the effective collaborations that relational agency makes possible may often challenge the status quo and herald changes that are very different from what was given, especially where the latter would have involved social exclusion.

Thus, the three frameworks do indeed engage – each in particular ways – with features that manifest in other recent CHAT work on agency. Can anything be said at all of a common core of CHAT approaches to agency? Yes. All three frameworks, and the wider approaches discussed earlier, reject agency as a property of individuals, but instead locate it in material action (see Roth et al., 2004). This action is consistently understood as intentional, acting towards something. And across all approaches we find the fundamental dialectic that historicises what we do without confining us to reproduce history: agency does not unfold in a vacuum independent of the circumstances in which we act, but we can transcend those circumstances. This is a shared occupation of the three frameworks explored in this paper, and something they share with wider CHAT approaches to agency.

However, the analysis demonstrates it does not make sense to talk of a CHAT approach to agency. Despite these shared features, there are CHAT approaches, plural. They do not fit together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, each covering parts of a single image that others do not. Furthermore, there is little to suggest TAS, TADS and relational agency are converging with each other or the other approaches to agency mentioned earlier in the paper. They have in common an ambition to develop and use CHAT to bring about positive change, but they diverge in their means to do so.

This divergence reflects in part the different theoretical frames of reference discussed above. Similar terminology, particularly around motives, mediation and dialectics, does not in fact reflect identity of concepts. Agency is an area where core principles and concepts of CHAT are not only contested, but brought to life, (re)fashioned, and invigorated. The analysis has shown how focusing on surface similarities overlooks significant distinctions in meaning. These differences cannot be brushed aside as aesthetic variations in emphasis. Are these frameworks in competition, then?

A non-competitive reading is warranted. This is not to suggest the frameworks can straightforwardly be combined or implemented together. But it is to suggest that one does not inherently displace the other. This is not gladiatorial theorising where there can only be one victor. Indeed, Stetsenko's (2021) response to Engeström and Sannino (2020) is an invitation to dialogue, concerned not with who is correct, but with CHAT and its prospects for (changing the) future. The spirit is clear: 'My point is not to diminish this work or to critique it for the sake of critique, but to make a passionate appeal to strengthen it' (Stetsenko, 2021, p. 35). Spinuzzi's (2021) response to the same paper can be read in a similar regard – arguing for the fourth generation of activity theory (of which TADS is an integral part) to be brought into dialogue with other frameworks in order to better engage public policy.

In this sense, the frameworks are *helpfully* apart. Are we not better served by having multiple ways of thinking about and promoting agency, all of them upholding the spirit of CHAT, while also expanding it? Does this not bring more to the table as we struggle to bring about the futures that ought to be? This multiplicity extends beyond the three frameworks examined in this paper, indeed beyond the others mentioned more briefly at the outset, too.

Even though these frameworks are non-competitive, the decisions we might make in working with one or other of them matter. The analysis presented here can aid such decisions by highlighting what the originators of these frameworks are presenting for us, what they are striving for. In TAS, Stetsenko (2017) is offering an ethico-ontoepistemology, a way of understanding reality itself that is inherently, flagrantly committed to alternative futures based on social justice and equality. This is at once a deep but hugely open framework, leaving much for researchers to determine in regards to how to intervene: examples from an adolescent boys' home and in an undergraduate psychology course followed very different processes (Vianna & Stetsenko, 2017, 2019). TADS, on the other hand, specifies in the detail the dynamics of transformative agency, and through links to the theory of expansive learning and Change Laboratory, provides a basis for intervention with a clear (evolving) structure and approaches to analysis (Sannino, 2020; Engeström & Sannino, 2020). The connection between double stimulation and conflicts of motives in TADS is precisely what Isaac et al. (2022) argue is valuable yet understudied, and TADS has informed interventions that do not resemble that do not resemble the Change Laboratory (Yang, 2021). It has also been used in analyses of agency not prompted by researchers where double stimulation played a key role (Hopwood et al., 2022), strengthening claims that TADS is not only a framework for intervention, but captures principles of agency that are in play in the wilds of everyday life.

The 'gardening tools' of relational agency (Edwards, 2011) are presented as a means to cultivate relational practices, and have been used in a diverse range of interventions and contexts (eg. Edwards, 2017c; Edwards & Fay, 2019). The concern with motive, what matters in a practice, is 'intended to encourage a focus on both professional agency and the conditions in which it may thrive' (Edwards et al., 2017, p. 245). While this may seem much more specific in anticipated application than TAS or TADS, the framework has proved of value beyond professional collaborations, for example in relation to how mothers understand and respond to what matters to their children (Hopwood & Clerke, 2019). Relevance of one framework or another is not determined by the context or problem. Instead, it is through these frameworks that we come to understand particular contexts as particular kinds of problems, and seek to transcend those circumstances in particular ways.

Agency forms part of a critique and corrective in research and theory, disrupting notions that assume neutrality while privileging dominant agendas (Cole et al., 2019). Nardi notes 'a good deal of theorizing in the last decades has undercut our ability to argue for and promote social justice and freedom. If we do not make commitments, we will not see results' (2017, p. 2). Analysing three contemporary CHAT approaches to agency, this paper has brought aspects of them into relief, highlighting implicit but previously unstated connections and distinctions between them. In so doing it reaches not a conclusion, or resolution but a three-fold invitation. First, a call for further work examining how CHAT addresses agency – work that is far from complete (see Engeström et al., 2020), but which is crucial to address the multiple crises we are

confronted with. Second, a continued reinvigoration and diversification of CHAT theories and methodologies of agency, and in particular, work to further the decolonising potential of Vygotskian ideas in general, and approaches to agency in particular (Bal et al., 2021; Hardman, 2021). Finally, a charge to make our theories of agency dangerous – useful in the struggle for a better world (Stetsenko, 2020c). This means acknowledging the standpoints our work emerges from and specifying in precise yet open ways the endpoints toward which it moves us, with others: towards something not just different but better.

[7,180 words]

Endnotes

¹ CHAT is used here to refer to a heterogeneous, geographically and historically dispersed, still-evolving body of work that has roots in the work of Vygotsky and Leont'ev. This includes but is not limited to the Finnish school associated with generations of theory based on the activity system (Engeström & Sannino, 2020).

² Sannino (2015b) clarifies the term 'Vygotskian' implies her own interpretation of Vygotsky's texts.

³ Stetsenko (2017) argues TAS is a departure from the canonical interpretations of Marxism that traditionally eschew the level of individual processes such as agency, mind, and consciousness.

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