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## **STORYTELLING AND ACTIVITY THEORY AS REFLECTIVE TOOLS IN ACTION RESEARCH**

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# STORYTELLING AND ACTIVITY THEORY AS REFLECTIVE TOOLS IN ACTION RESEARCH

Storytelling and Activity theory are useful as socially constructed data collection tools that allow a researcher access to the social, cultural and historical meanings that research participants place on events in their lives. This case study shows how these hermeneutic tools were used to promote reflection within a cultural, historical activity theoretically shaped research project on multi professional collaborative practice. The tools are shown to individually and jointly aid insight, understanding and action. The participants generated data through narratives and analysed the data with an activity theoretical framework. These were then interpreted as cultural historical artefacts by the researcher. The socially constructed paradigm within which they are situated, their participative use, and their creation of insight, understanding and action make them ideal as action research tools.

Keywords: reflection; action research; storytelling; activity theory; collaboration; multi professional

## Context

The UK legislative framework directed professionals in the UK to work together for the benefit of children, young people and families. It mandated that a range of services integrated and ‘worked together’ across professional boundaries. This created complexity as professionals endeavoured to work together in new ways and there were practical and personal difficulties with the arrangements. Currently there are 11 million children in the UK who are helped to achieve the five Every Child Matters outcomes by two million workers in the children’s workforce (DCSF 2008: 3). They are trained in 60 separate professions that constitute the eight sectors of the ‘children’s workforce’ in the UK. They are organised into numerous integrated settings involving the public, private and third sectors. The aim of the integrated working was to ensure that no children fell through the gaps between services, and to reduce duplication of work by multiple services in a culture of increasingly high stakes accountability. A number of tools were mandated that facilitated integrated working such as the ‘common assessment framework’, the role of the ‘lead professional’, a data base of information available to all services called ‘contact point’ and ‘information sharing’ protocols. The professionals that had to work together for the common good had their own professional backgrounds and discourses. They had their own terms and conditions and day to day practice based in their construct of ‘childhood’ and ‘youth’. For some this created difficulties in deciding on priorities, taking collaborative actions and working together. Whilst there is some evidence of success (Brown and White 2006, Audit Commission 2008, Ofsted 2010) there were many professionals that found the process of integration fraught with difficulties organisationally, professionally and personally. This action research project was based in a multi professional team in this fraught context who were striving to achieve collaborative advantage (Huxham 2005). This case study establishes whether storytelling and activity theory can promote reflection and collaborative learning in this complex context.

This paper will introduce the project as participative action research in a cultural historical activity theoretical framework. It goes on to frame stories and narratives as rich reflective tools that can generate shared understanding and are data in their own right. The findings present the narratives as reflective data sets. Activity theory is argued to promote interprofessional reflection and collaboration through shared analysis of the narratives, creating a second data artefact – activity system diagrams. These two artefacts are then interpreted by the researcher in a meta analysis. This three step process is argued to be highly reflective and appropriate for mediating collaborative practice in complex settings.

### **Theoretical Roots.**

#### ***Participative Action Research***

The project was participative action research (PAR) in that it sought to give the participants an equal power base in the project, valued their expertise and experience base (Grant et al 2008:589; Reason and Bradbury 2001:2) and accepted that there are many truths rather than a single universal truth (Ledwith 2007:599). The cyclical action oriented process of PAR (O’Leary 2009:139) was well suited to the change process that the research project undertook. The research project aimed to develop collaboration within a new community of practice. This involved changing how professionals conceptualised themselves and how they practiced, PAR offered this possibility as it changes praxis (Kemmis 2009:463). The PAR discourse added a new dimension to the project in that the diversity of experience and capacities within the local group were seen as an opportunity for the enrichment of the research-action process leading to social action or the construction of new meanings (Burns 2007:12). The research took a cultural historic activity theory (CHAT) perspective and this was congruent with PAR as a transformative socially constructed methodology (Somekh 2006:61). CHAT places individuals within a cultural setting (the work place), the work that they engage in is viewed as mediating behaviour, the activity creates the world in which it is situated. As such, the agency of the individuals in joint activity leads to a socially constructed workplace. The problematic aspects of PAR, its unpredictability and organic nature, were construed as advantages in the CHAT framework, as they would create tensions and dilemmas for the group to address together – a source of collaboration itself.

#### ***Stories and Narratives.***

A story or narrative represents an experience that is encoded into words and relayed verbally or in textual form. Developing a story or narrative from an experience therefore requires reflection and sense making activity (Simpson 2008). As artefacts, stories can be seen as repositories of situational experience (Denning 2005:178). From this perspective, stories offer potent tools for professionals making sense of new ways of working. Story in this context “does not replace analytical thinking, it supplements it by enabling us to imagine new perspectives and is ideally suited to communicating change and stimulating innovation” (Denning 2005:xx). Stories we listen to, create and tell can create change and so are ideal for promoting new shared understandings of collaboration. Stories allow us to surface unconscious thoughts into consciousness (Gabriel 2000:92, Broussine 2008:25) as we creatively engage in the retelling of events. The act of constructing a story forces reflection on the original event. This arguably creates deeper reflection than many other data collection tools such as interviews and surveys, as the individuals involved have time to reflect on and construct their own interpretations (Gauntlett 2007:73). This has

been described as a double construction of events – the first when the event is first experienced, and the second as it is recounted (Moon 2004:175). Relational agency is a feature of activity theory, and narratives develop this agency through; mutual ascription to longer term open goals, revealing and negotiating categories, and identifying values and motives in the language of the situation (Edwards and Kinti 2010:136). An act of storytelling can give voice to practitioners who are not usually heard – from this perspective it is inclusive and can redress power imbalances, linking it to PAR (McIntosh 2010), and the creative hermeneutic approach leads to emancipation and transformation (Cronin and McLeod 2010) – again congruent with PAR. As data collection tools, stories and narratives are rich, offering expressive forms of experience (e.g. metaphor) and collaborative approaches to enquiry (Broussine 2008:19).

There are challenges however to the ‘validity’ of a story: in the influence that the researcher may have in requesting a story (Gabriel 2000:137), in the social influence of a listener or group of listeners, in the accuracy of the story in representing reality, and in the interpretation that the reader or listener brings to the story not necessarily matching the authors meaning. In the methodological approach I adopted, the stories and narratives are data sets that are analysed by the participants. As socially constructed artefacts, the issue of validity is not important – my meta-analysis is more concerned with the added layer of meaning that these mediations add, rather than eliminating them. The stories do not represent reality, certain parts of the story may be exaggerated or embellished, others omitted entirely, and characteristics exaggerated in the metaphors chosen (Denning 2005:181). An appropriate measure of validity of story is not their objective ‘truth’, but their empathetic validity. Dadds (2009:280) describes this as the potential of research to transform the emotional dispositions of the readers. If research does promote empathy and interpersonal understanding then it is ‘worthy of recognition’ or valid, and in fact some of the greatest debates in this research came from when individuals felt that other’s stories were not ‘true’ for them.

### ***Activity systems.***

Cultural-historical activity theory emerged in the 1930’s as a way to make sense of human activity. Over the last eight decades it has evolved into third generation activity theory. Activity theory offers a comprehensive framework to analyse and develop organisational practices as it opens up new situated ways of understanding change. Activity theory developed from; Vygotsky’s (1978) work on the importance of discourse and mediating artefacts in processes of learning; Leont’ev’s (1978) work on the objects and motives of activity, Latours’ (2005) emphasis on the role of humans as ‘actors’ in social contexts, and Werth’s (1995) theorising on the role of interaction and socio-cultural psychology in learning. Activity theory is a collective, artefact mediated and object orientated system. It allows multivoicedness, and takes account of history. Contradictions are seen as the levers for change and create opportunities for transformation (Engeström 2001:137). I used Engeström’s (2001) third generation socio-cultural activity theory in this case study as has proved effective in multi-agency settings (Leadbetter et al 2007, McKimm 2009, Gallagher et al 2008, Anning et al 2005) and Daniels 2010) as; “it is not a specific theory of a particular domain, offering ready-made techniques and procedures. It is a general, cross disciplinary approach, offering conceptual tools and methodological principles, which have to be concretised according to the specific nature of the object under scrutiny.” (Engeström 1996:97). An activity system

comprises collective activities using mediating tools in a community of practice governed by rules and divisions of labour. The system is understood historically and may contain contradictions. These are hermeneutic units of analysis and the source of disruption, innovation, change, and development of that system, including its individual participants. The ‘conflict’ or ‘disharmony’ that professionals in integrated settings are currently experiencing was reframed as purposeful parts of an activity system that will both yield meaning and lever change. It is this process that leads to learning (Engeström 2001:137). Multiple activity systems interact in multi-professional work. These are shown in the third generation activity theory diagram shown in figure 1.

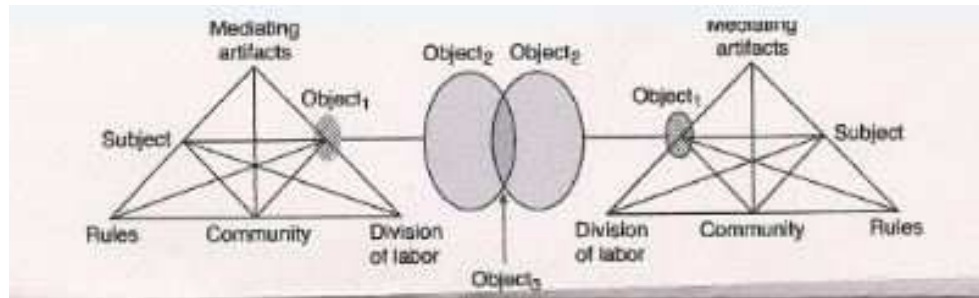


Figure 1: Two Interlocking Activity System's for Third Generation Activity Theory (Engeström 2001:136)

This framework offered me some tangible ways of unpacking the ‘architecture of practice’ advocated by Kemmis (2009:466) as the purpose of action research, and was congruent with his description of the transformative nature of action research. Reflecting on practice with the CHAT analytical framework would allow the practitioners to gain “greater observational powers and sense of authority over their work, and more of a grasp of its inherently complex political, social and cultural impact” (Bolton (2006:203). Engeström (2001) describes expansive learning as a developmental cycle where internalisation precedes externalisation. The internalisation involves critical self-reflection and leads to externalised solutions. I believe that these phases resonate with the role of reflection in the action research cycle. Anne Edwards has repeatedly found success in using activity theory in interprofessional settings. In 2006 Edwards used activity theory in the National Evaluation of the Children’s Fund and Edwards et al in 2009 used it again in the Learning in and for Interagency Work project. In both settings Edwards used activity theory developmental workshops (DWR) to map collaboration in multi professional settings. They found that activity theory not only revealed the ‘new social practice of the figured world’ (2009b:93), it also allowed those involved to challenge one another. It proved effective in focussing professionals on the activity involved when working on ‘mobile and changing objects’ (2009a:200), and created new ways of working as practitioners engaged in ‘decentered knotworking’ (2009a:201) with enhanced relational agency. Although Edwards and Kinti (2010:130) expected the DWR to be ‘third spaces’ where professional could discuss and debate neutrally, they found that they were places of struggle and learning. My contribution to the DWR technique was to use the participants narrative artefacts as the starting point.

A concern over using the activity system arises from the complexity of the model supposed to elucidate the situation. Careful design was needed to provide ample scaffolds to access the framework without overloading the participants. The

complexity of the model gives rise to further criticisms that it is too difficult to test out as society is too complex and multifaceted. As a data collection tool, its validity was not an issue as it was generating shared analysis rather than showing an objective 'reality', however in this case study, the participants would determine the validity of the human agency and their actions as a result of the session would determine how potent they viewed themselves.. Lima (1997) claims that activity theorists exaggerate the role of human consciousness, and goes on to say that activity is a nebulous concept - a pseudo concept. Josephs (1996: 441) says that activity theory can never comprehend the cultural aspects of psychological phenomena because the social scientist is inevitably bound by his culture which forces him to misrecognize social psychological reality. Ratnor (2010) counters this by stating that; "this charge invalidates all scientific effort to comprehend reality beyond the individual researcher". A further challenge could be the assumption that difficulties alone lever change – the appreciative inquiry movement would posit that change can come from successful situations, but when jobs are overfilled, and people are working in 'hot' environments (Schoen?) it is difficulties and problems, tensions and discontinuities that gain attention and energy, not areas of success for right or wrong.

I argue that stories and activity theory are tools that are socially constructed. They promote reflection and critical thinking through dialogue on practice that can be emancipatory and transformational as they link reflection to concrete actions for change. I will now present the methodology and findings of the case study before presenting the argument in the discussion.

### **Methodology.**

Situated as it is in a CHAT paradigm, this research is post positivist as it takes account of multiple ambiguous interpretations of the world and sees knowledge as subjective. From this interpretive stance, the methodology was inductive and exploratory using qualitative data. The participants and I (as researcher) shared subjective experiences to shape understanding of practice. In this respect the findings were; "*ideographic* – (unique) and may not be able to be generalisable, yet have their own intrinsic worth – or are *transferable* – the lessons learned from one context are applicable to other contexts" (O'Leary 2009:7). As an applied piece of organisational action learning I was concerned with the depth and richness of the data. As the participants would develop interpretations and hypotheses themselves, the approach had to be inductive. The subject matter (collaboration in the children's workforce) was 'ill defined and deeply rooted, complex, specialist and intangible' (Ritchie and Lewis 2003:32-33 and 'emergent' (Gray 2009:173). As the participants were leading the changes, action research was the appropriate methodological choice, and I decided that the quality of the actions would be the mark of the quality of the research. The sample for the study was a group of 20 multi professional managers from a range of children's services. The group had responsibility for children and young people in a single locality.

In the action research workshop, I established ground rules and clarified any ethical issues. After some warm up activities unpacking nuances of the term 'collaboration' we progressed to data collection. I asked individuals think of and share a story of collaboration. These were scribed by a partner roles reversed. The stories were then read out to the whole group. There was rich debate about some of the stories, some clearly evoked emotional responses (empathy, anger, sadness) and participants

questioned, clarified and challenged one another's accounts in a valuing way. As such issues, patterns and trends were developed inductively through reflective dialogue. At this point I gave a very brief introduction to activity theory. In a previous pilot I discovered that the longer I spent explaining the theory, the less the participants got out of the exercise. So with a short preamble, the participants returned to pairs and used the storyboards as an artefact and form of 'evidence' to analyse with activity theory. I had developed a set of questions to lead the participants through an individual analysis of their own story that they shared and enhanced by working with their partners. Early pilot research also showed me that it was important to use real stories or cases as the basis for the activity theory analyses as hypothetical cases only elicit espoused rather than real practice. Once the stories were mapped onto the activity theoretical framework diagram, contradictions, discontinuities and development were identified. This system map became a second artefact and piece of evidence. Pairs then presented their stories and analyses back to the group allowing group discussion and comparison of multiple perspectives. This was a lengthy process. As the discussion progressed, I recorded group insights (Labonte, Feather and Hills 1999:42) on a flip chart. These become the basis for action planning and change in the final stage of the day. This whole process comprised one action research cycle, and I hoped would stimulate further cycles. Reflecting on the day that I facilitated there were ten significant stages of work: defining, reflecting, encoding, sharing, reflecting, analysing, interpreting, sharing, insights and actions.

The purpose of the research methodology was to empower, change, engage and appreciate work and workers within the children's workforce engaged in collaborative practice. To this end, the research served an ethical purpose (Creswell 2009:90). Reciprocity revolved around the team gaining developmental work, and the researcher deepening understanding of the data collection tools. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured and the research was compliant with the data protection act. Informed consent had to be negotiated on an on-going basis as the outcomes of the research were not clear (being participatory). This also posed problems around the protection from risk as I could only attempt but not guarantee that the sessions were positive and safe. Ground rules and group agreements to work within those parameters were tools to ensure psychological safety.

The stories were analysed by the participants using first a grounded theoretical approach and then activity theory to generate insights. I then conducted an inductive analysis of the process of collaboration and of the quality of change as a meta-analysis of the process. Like Feldman and Weiss (2010:41), I found that this process led to deeper insights into the community of practice in question than the grounded theoretical analysis alone. Validity of the data and interpretation was three fold. First was participant validation that it was representative of their lived-realities. Secondly I asked them to what extent it enhanced interpersonal compassion and understanding, establishing its 'empathetic validity' (Dadds 2008:280) and finally the validity of the action research demonstrated by the changes that it had effected in the local community it served.

### **Findings.**

The findings about collaborative practice from members of the group were very similar suggesting some limited reliability. They consisted of a range of tensions and contradictions in practice. Where there was success it was seen to be contingent



on individuals who were willing to work across boundaries in sometimes unconventional ways. There was role blurring due to the size of the community of practice in the 'children's workforce' and because people were unsure of who to involve in which types of work or strategic decision making. Professionals were finding the pace of change impossible given that there was no scope to stop doing the day to day job, and they were operating a culture of fear promulgated by a high profile media cases and anecdotal tales of blame. The tools and rules mandated by the Government were not always fit for purpose, and multiple systems overlapped creating confusion as to what to use when, and a backlog of training. The interaction of different institutional activity systems was fraught with contradictions. Whilst all professionals were viewed as equals, some discourses prevailed over others in meetings and moving resources from the level of intervention to the level of prevention was impossible if services were to continue to be provided to those in acute need. Whilst these are significant findings, they are not the focus of this methodological paper. I will now go on to illustrate the methodology with one example. As it is illustrative, the full voice of the participants will not be as evident as they are in the full findings of the study.

#### Case One.

I have chosen one participants story and analysis for brevity and the whole group's insights from all the stories and analyses. This participant described a serious case review. The characters included a multi professional team and the narrative took place in a meeting room owned by children's services. The narrative events included a discussion of the case by multi professionals, professional disagreements, numerous options being identified and debated, a lack of agreement over who should lead the case and what to do, and blame was attributed for not working out what should have been done sooner. An intervention was finally agreed on but with bad feelings. The narrative tools included meetings, common assessment paperwork and case review paperwork.

*"Well everyone just sat around and said I can do this, well I can do this...that's not what we should do, this is more important..it was all tit for tat, I know best and round and round in circles...I was so frustrated!"*

*" We just went through the motions like of doing all the paperwork and all the hoops, some really focussed on what was best for the kid and were dead passionate, others just what was best for them to get the case done, trying to avoid any problems or blame."*

A grounded theoretical approach to interpreting the story surfaced themes of blame and confusion and professional rivalry. When this narrative was analysed using activity theory, the participants decided that:

**SUBJECT:** There were multiple subjects identified with no consensus on the prime subject

**OBJECT / MOTIVE:** There was a clear objective with a range of strategies identified to make that happen, some objectives were the child's wellbeing, other were self protection

**TOOLS / ARTEFACTS:** Numerous tools identified including unhelpful bureaucracy

**RULES:** Range of rules that are not commonly understood

COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE: Massive range of professionals potentially involved – unwieldy community

DIVISION OF LABOUR: Blame was mentioned in the division of labour, and passing the buck fuelled by contradictions between each professionals activity system that were brought into the meeting to interact.

The participants identified a range of contradictions from the whole range of activity analyses (of which the example above is one of twenty). These included: mixed subjects as the focus (are we looking at the child or the mother?), an overly bureaucratic system that did not aid flexible working, rules that are open to interpretation, the division of labour was cumbersome with such a huge community, labour was sometimes divided by sabotage, passing on or avoiding cases to avoid blame / workload, there was a lack of clarity for cases that were at a threshold level where clarity is most important, a lack of a common language was hindering understanding, splits between adult and child services hindered the intervention, different agency timelines caused difficulties and competing priorities and personalities played out in meetings hindering agreement. This was rich and overwhelming information.

The plenary (after a substantial break!) reviewed the activity frameworks (of which this is one). This discussion led to four insight cards. They were: that there were too many people all trying to do the same things, they needed clarity so that they all knew what they were doing, they needed to move to a supportive culture – all the time that there was blame there would be defensive behaviour, as they were not doing what they said they would do (in terms of espoused and real practice), they needed to either change what they said and challenge policy, or do what they said and follow policy. In the final and easiest stage the insights above were developed into an action plan including four prime actions:

- (1.) A review of safeguarding system, roles and rules, both espoused and in practice
- (2.) Development of a new system in a multi levelled, multi professional forum
- (3.) Individual behavioural change – no longer use blaming behaviours personally and challenge blaming behaviours when seen.

The sessions also had some unintentional individual consequences, for example one participant said, “Your workshop helped me to come to a life decision that I have struggled with for years – I have just rung my husband and told him I am retiring!”.

My met- analysis included; observations of the workshop session and the evidence generated by the participants in that workshop (narratives, activity analyses, insight cards and action plans). This showed that the people who had volunteered to be research participants were the people that were effective at boundary spanning, and those that had not volunteered were often characterised as barriers in the narratives and stories. A clear difference between the theory and practice of collaboration emerged as the managers mediated the top level policy into workable practice. This then created contradictions between the rules and the activity of the individuals in the system. Viewing the collection of activity systems together also allowed me to see the differences between various agencies that arose from the discrete professional discourses at play. One service would only be triggered by a family experiencing difficulties, whilst another worked to prevent children having difficulties, this showed

tensions between family focussed and individual focussed and preventative and interventions – a single example of multiple contradictions between the systems.

Process review.

I offered the group the choice of telling narrative accounts or metaphorical stories. 60% told narratives and 40% made metaphorical stories. The following comments were elicited in a feedback session at the end of the story telling:

“I had some unresolved feelings about several things when I walked into your session. In truth I probably needed to stop have a brew and get my act together – I was feeling pretty empty and unsure about lots of stuff all at once. When you asked us to tell a story to a partner that was relevant it was natural to discuss where I was at. So I jumped at it and through the fairy tale, without giving away too much to my partner, I told a story which described my complete sense of hopelessness and fear. For me the emotion attached to the things I was reflecting on were big and through the storytelling experience I had with you I was able to quickly talk about them safely (manage them without losing it).”

Feedback after the activity theory session included the statements from the groups that it: provided opportunities for professional dialogue and networking, it enabled them to acknowledge developments and plan next steps as it had stimulated new insights and revealed assumptions. The process had facilitated information sharing, increased knowledge and revealed issues that were tacit in a stark explicit way allowing them to see the ‘big picture’. For two people however it was too difficult to understand semantically.

### **Discussion.**

The use of stories and activity theory fostered inter-professional learning that built collaboration and helped to establish a community of practice (Wenger 1998) as professionals reflected on their practice together. Story telling proved an effective way to share the lived realities of professional lives. The storytelling was validating and opened up a rich space for reflection and professional dialogue. The third space created an opportunity for many to stop, reflect and talk openly about issues – using metaphorical cloaking if they felt they wanted it. There is limited evidence to support the notion of the depth of learning evoked by reflective storytelling, and future research may wish to compare a storied intervention with a standard strategic intervention to control for depth of meaning added by creativity and metaphor. When professionals reflect on their experiences in storytelling, I propose that there are four ways in which change occurs; through validation, reframing, unconscious connections, and by presenting ‘new’ in a palatable way.

Having someone listen to, and play back a story (‘I heard that ...’) can validate the listeners’ experience. This alone can create therapeutic change. This validation can be transformational, and “Through transforming our negative, painful or chaotic experiences into stories, we take responsibility for them, and we bring them to bear more constructively on our lives” (Maguire 1998:17). A story can often reframe the experience that an individual or group has had. It may be reframed by the ‘moral’ of the story, by the events of the story, or through listening and comparing to others stories. A huge obstacle may seem less significant in the light of others stories or other perspectives. Once reframed, a change can then occur. Metaphor allows us to conceptualise something in a new way, adding shades of meaning – a well told

metaphorical story about teamwork can help a corporate team identify with how they function, leading to development, and a story with subtle meaning is more palatable than being told you are 'dysfunctional'. Metaphor may reframe experience, and in using metaphor to encode our stories, we can be offered the safety and distance to share events that would otherwise remain private. This has been my experience of using stories in multi professional settings – it may be easier to talk about the difficulties of the prince trying to get to snow white than of the endless hurdles of collaboration. As Broussine (2008:26) says, “This is particularly valuable when researching organisational experience, because metaphors can act as a container for emotional and unconscious forces at work”. McIntosh (2010) argues that metaphors can become generative as they aid new, constructed meanings for groups. By 'new' I mean that we often learn or realize new things through listening to and telling stories. This is perhaps the most straightforward use of them. A nurse might tell a story about how an injection went horribly wrong to an apprentice, introducing new knowledge to them about how to and not to do it, a young person might tell a friend what happened last Friday night in town, passing on learning through experience (Denning 2005:xii).

Activity theory was an appropriate tool to develop understanding of the complex, multileveled and inter-organisational systems in each locality. Triple reflection was achieved by (1) reflecting on experience and encoding it into a story, then (2) reflecting on that in the activity analysis and (3) action plans. Narratives proved to be an effective data set for the developmental activity theory workshops as they were real and grounded in the individuals' experiences – this is a development of the current activity theory methodology. The analyses allowed greater insight into the whole system operating in each locality and prevented focus on a single aspect at the expense of others. Across the four localities the research revealed numerous shortcomings, difficulties and contradictions in the ways that they collaborated, multiple options and multiple interpretations lay at the heart of all the difficulties, high caseloads and the potential for 'blame' led to defended behaviour, and difference espoused and real practice. The activity system created a clear (if complex) system diagram that promoted reflection and facilitated dialogue that led to action planning. The process of working through stories and activity theory also facilitated collaborative work in the team as they worked through the ten stages of the day.

The PAR cycle also supported inter-professional dialogue. It created 'third' spaces (Hulme, Cracknell and Owens 2010:547) for reflection and by doing so offers opportunities for double loop learning – questioning the variables, strategies and consequences of actions. Reflecting on practice can be a passive activity of observation, but when allied with critical thinking and dialogue it can lead to change through the creation of new shared meanings – this was certainly evident in this case study. Reflecting on the stories and activity analyses generated dialogue about the contradictions and discontinuities. In such dialogue, the teams were 'knotworking' to use Engeström's (2008:217) terminology, working on tricky issues together, and became the motive force of change and development (Engeström 2001). The use of individual and group reflection in a single action research cycle mediated a socially constructed understanding by the new community of practice. Like Daniels (2010:111) I found that the use of the tools “encourages recognition of areas in which there was a need for change in practices and suggested the possibilities for change through reconceptualising the objects that the professionals are working on, the tools that the professionals use in their multi agency work and the rules in which

professional practices are embedded”, and allowed multiple truths to be recognised. It also facilitated ‘knowing how to know who’ (Edwards 2009a:206) as professionals came to understand and trust one another’s expertise.

The actions that were identified were of a high level and good quality, involving system and practice improvements. I am unsure of whether these have been carried out or not as a further restructure of the team has meant that developmental work was probably untenable and the membership of the team altered. The work certainly carried empathetic validity as the participants experienced empathy in the workshop, and other outside practitioners have said that the narratives and findings resonate with their experiences.

### **Conclusion.**

This paper has argued that high quality reflection is critical to achieve change in action research. Such reflection is prompted by data collection tools such as narratives and stories and activity theory. Participatory action research can lead to transformative change in organisations, and the use of a socially constructed cultural historical activity perspective allowed multiple truths to emerge for the multi professional managers involved in this project. The research has found that participants are able to collect and interpret data themselves within this participative paradigm. The developmental workshops that I designed used narratives generated by the participants as an artefact for analysis by the participants using activity theory. These have proved to be a rich and deep data source and equally valid as the video material that was originally used by Engestrom (2001). The activity theoretical analyses facilitated deep and collaborative learning for the professionals involved and led to the plans for significant organisational development. Non-traditional approaches to team development using action research are advocated and creativity is presented as offering deeper and more meaningful reflection than more traditional data collection tools such as surveys and questionnaires as the participants have time and tools to access deeper levels of understanding.

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