Integrating Insights from Critical Race and Queer Theories with Cultural-Historical Learning Theory

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Abstract: Within cultural-historical learning theories, recent research has focused on the practice-linked (i.e., contextual) nature of identity. In this paper, we argue that while the concept of practice-linked identities represents a significant advance, this understanding of identity is limited because it cannot account for broad systemic issues of power and privilege. We integrate insights from Critical Race Theory and Queer Theory to develop a more nuanced understanding of identity development.

In recent years, learning scientists have begun to theorize the close connection between identity development and learning. Contemporary cultural-historical learning theories have replaced static conceptions of identity with a conception of identity as fluid, context-based, and linked to the practices in which people participate. (We use the term cultural-historical learning theories and the acronym, CHL, to refer to a broad set of theories, rooted in the work of Vygotsky (e.g., 1978), that consider learning in its social, cultural and historical context.)

One major challenge in understanding identity development is the influence of broad social identity categories like race, gender, nationality, and so on. While CHL has much to offer, these theories do not adequately deal with broader social categories (Nasir & Hand, 2006) nor do they fully appreciate the way communities of practice shape identities as a result of the power that is omnipresent in such communities. Critical race theory (CRT) and queer theories (QT) offer powerful insights into the construction of race and gender that can help CHL theorists better understand local, contextual practice-linked identities.

This poster presents a theoretical literature review. Key texts – both historical and contemporary – have been considered and distilled to find the major themes and set of assumptions underlying the three different theoretical frameworks. In future work, we will also include texts from other critical theories that consider the intersectionality of race, sexuality, gender and class (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002; Hill Collins, 2000).

Theoretical Framework: Cultural-Historical Learning Theories of Identification

CHL theories consider all learning to be cultural and social. These theories have several assumptions in common, including: learning and development are inextricably linked to the contexts in which people participate; learning and development are spread across the people, artifacts, and norms that make up the context; and learning and development happen at several interconnected levels. Drawing from these assumptions, CHL considers identity development to be an aspect of participation in practices. The benefit of considering identities as practice-linked is that identities are no longer confined to the person but also distributed across people, artifacts, and norms. A single person will participate in many different practices, and thus will develop many practice-linked identities that may be more or less aligned.

The central metaphor that we will use in this poster is drawn from Varenne and McDermott (1998) to describe culture: culture can be conceptualized as “the houses we inhabit” rather than as the habits we acquire (p.14). The metaphor captures how culture pre-exists any one person’s engagement with it, but is always modified, to some degree, by human intervention. One can rearrange furniture, paint walls, and invite people in. One can make small renovations oneself, and larger ones if one has enough people and resources, but some renovations might be impossible. There are boundaries to how much one can change the house itself, or how one uses it. For example, in most North American homes, it is quite difficult to cook a full meal in a room without a stove or microwave. We have to cope with the house as it is, or seek to change it.

Learning, from a cultural-historical viewpoint, can take many forms. Learning occurs when people enter new buildings and learn the ways to interact with others and with the space appropriately. It occurs when they innovate to create different ways of living or using the resources in the house, or when they build new structures, often by repurposing or replicating pieces of other structures (this is analogous to Gutiérrez and Rogoff’s (2003) ‘repertoires of practice’). As described above, this learning is distributed across people, and the artifacts and norms that are made available in the houses we inhabit. Identities cannot be disconnected from the houses or rooms in which we live.

Critical Race Theory in Education

The key assumptions of CRT, as they relate to the study of education, are: 1) racism is endemic to life in the U.S., 2) a contextual/historical analysis is necessary, 3) experiential knowledge of people of color is critical to understanding society, 4) ending racial oppression and broader forms of oppression is the ultimate goal of this
work (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006). CRT and CHL have important points of connection in that both insist on historical analyses; however, CRT is not a theory of learning. It is a theory of the influence of race on social structures (including the law and education). Therefore, CRT offers some tools for understanding power and privilege in studies of learning in context. Further, CRT insists that race is central and ever-present in contexts of learning. This contradicts CHL’s emphasis on understanding each activity system on its own terms. CRT suggests that CHL should consider race in the fabric of activity systems.

CRT can contribute to the house metaphor in several ways. First, CRT suggests the need to consider broader structural forces, such as legislation, and how these structures influence daily life. Second, these laws and norms are racialized. With respect to the house metaphor, we can consider the ways North American homes are constructed with a particular lifestyle in mind: one in which, for example, each member of a family has an individual bedroom, the sleeping spaces are separate from the living spaces, and so forth. People of various races, economic statuses, ethnicities, may live within the same structure quite differently. CRT suggests the need to focus attention on the way the houses we inhabit render non-normative living habits more difficult. Finally, CRT suggests the need to consider the ways different people within a building interact differently. In a home, each of the people who live there might have separate spaces; others who use the space might include housecleaners, guests, burglars, and more. Each of these people learns to use the space differently.

Queer Theory in Education
Contemporary queer theory builds heavily on the pioneering work of Judith Butler (see, e.g., 1990). Butler’s intention was to highlight how gender is always performative, rather than a reflection of a stably gendered inner self. Instead, gender is seen as a context-sensitive self-referential system, in which people perform gendered ways of being in order to be recognizable to others. Just as CRT aims to challenge racial oppression, QT highlights the cost of performing gender in non-normative ways, and demonstrates that all people sometimes step out of the bounds of these gender norms, with varying costs.

QT offers CHL some methods for considering the role of emotion and desire in learning, and offers the notion of performativity as a key conceptual tool for understanding issues of identity. Considering all identities as performative acts, and studying the costs associated with performing unrecognizable or stigmatized identities, can help CHL theorists tackle gender in non-essentializing ways. Additionally, CHL can be enriched by considering the powerful emotions associated with these performative acts (e.g., the fear and pain as well as the joy and comfort of performing gendered identities, and of having these identities recognized).

In the house metaphor, QT suggests an emphasis on the importance of one’s actions being legible. New forms and structures can be created, but only with the cooperation and understanding of others. For example, one person in a house cannot decide that the living room is actually the kitchen without other people’s active agreement. Additionally, QT resonates with CHL because both state that identity shifts in relation to the context; one’s gendered way of being varies in different rooms in a house or in different types of buildings.

Significance of the Study
CHL theories, and empirical work conducted with these theories, often lacks a focus on the broad social categories that are associated with systems of oppression, and yet these categories have an impact on learning. By integrating insights from CRT and QT, the theoretical framework can consider how identities are local and contextual, as well as broadly formed and influenced. These new insights enable critical work that examines the micro-structure of how learning happens in specific contexts, while also considering the racialized and gendered nature of these contexts and therefore of the learning that takes place within them.

References