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Junghwan Kim
Pennsylvania State University

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Empowering Community Leadership and Learning for Immigrant Right: A Cultural-Historical Activity Theory Investigation of an Urban Korean American Community Organization

Junghwan Kim
Pennsylvania State University

Keywords: Learning in the community, Community Leadership, Community organization,
Cultural-historical activity theory

Abstract: This study aims to understand how a Korean American community organization's activists engage in learning throughout their daily activities for community leadership. For this purpose, the study uses cultural-historical activity theory as a theoretical framework and critical ethnography as a research method. I identified a community leadership network that includes three activities for community leadership and contradictions in the network as (possible) obstructions and potential driving forces for community leadership and learning. By resolving contradictions, expansive learning including individual transformation occurs. Based on the findings, conclusions and implications are discussed.

Problem and Purpose Statement

Community organizations (COs) comprise the heart of social movements in that they lead by organizing and bridging members/partners for collective social action (Green & Haines, 2002; Harbermas, 1987; Rubin & Rubin, 2008; Zinn, 1994). In the case of Korean Americans (KAs), they have played a critical role in creating social communities by effectively building relationships among diverse stakeholders to solve problems, react to social issues and generally improve the life of the community (Chung, 2007; Min, 2006). This collective relational phenomenon can be explained by the notion of community leadership, defined as a capacity building process by creating diverse and interactional relationships among specific individuals, groups and organizations through ongoing planned and organized efforts to achieve common purposes. In the process, learning is considered as a significant factor and occurs dynamically and complicatedly (Kirk & Shutte, 2004; Pigg, 1999).

Additional studies indicate that dynamic social learning in the community of daily lives is important to strengthening capacities through developing community leadership (Bickford & Wright, 2006; Kirk & Shutte, 2004; Mündel & Schugurensky, 2008; Pigg, 1999). However, they do not suggest an appropriate conceptual framework to thoroughly examine community leadership and learning in the community. Besides, despite its historical contribution and importance for developing KA community development in the U.S., not many studies have comprehensively considered diverse relationships based on socio-cultural contexts. Furthermore, most studies on KAs pay little attention to daily or informal learning in the community/CO (Chang, 2006; Chung, 2007; Ecklund, 2006; Zhou & Kim, 2006).

Therefore, this study is aims to understand how a KA CO's activists engage in learning throughout their daily activities for community leadership. For this purpose, the study examines the following research questions: (1) How do the activists build and develop community

leadership activities? (2) How does learning occur throughout these activities? (3) What features hinder or facilitate community leadership and learning?

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

COs' activities have significance in a lifelong learning society in that they result in creating alternative learning communities as an interactional field in daily lives beyond that of formal educational settings (Jarvis, 2007). Their activities are not just conducted by organizational employees but rather include diverse stakeholders across boundaries.

Community leadership emphasizes not a hierarchical or linear process between individuals, but interactional relationships among diverse stakeholders in the community driven by the socio-cultural contexts surrounding them which allows the building of collaborative relationships, sharing repertoires/thoughts and learning together for building capacities (Kirk & Shutte, 2004; Pigg, 1999). Furthermore, community leadership is a dynamic process that negotiates different power relations and overcoming challenges among them (Pigg, 1999; Rubin & Rubin, 2008). To effectively build and develop community leadership by resolving challenges, learning is critical (Kirk & Shutte, 2004; Pigg, 1999). However, there is no conceptual framework to thoroughly understand community leadership development and learning.

Due to its diverse and dynamic attributes, learning in the community is understood not as a simple/one-dimensional or cognitive phenomenon/psychological concepts of individuals in a formal setting but rather as a complicated/multi-dimensional phenomenon based on various socio-cultural contexts in everyday life (Illeris, 2004; Sawchuk, 2003). However, adult learning theories that do not focus on a social dimension/process of learning have proven to be inadequate to meet the challenges of understanding learning in the community based on dynamic interactions among diverse stakeholders (Cunningham, 1998; Engeström, 2001; Sawchuk, 2003).

Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) allows researchers to thoroughly examine the process of community leadership and learning by suggesting the concept of collective activity as a minimal unit of analysis comprised six components (subject, object, abstract and physical mediating artifacts (cultural tools and signs), rule, community, division of labor) within a triangular model (activity system) and outcome (Engeström, 1987, 2001; Leont'ev, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978). The *collective activity* includes diverse goal-directed *actions* at the level of individual or sub-group and unconscious/conditioned *operations* at the customized human or machine. In the third generation of CHAT, the basic model has evolved to include, at a minimum, two interacting activities in an activity network (Engeström, 1987, 2001).

The role of 'contradiction' in this theory is significant for the higher-level development or expansive transformation of both individual and group/community. Contradictions are considered as "sources of change and development." They "are not the same as problems or conflicts" but "historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems" (Engeström, 2001, p. 137). Contradictions can occur at each component (primary) and between the components (secondary) within each activity system, and between/among activities (tertiary and quarterly) in the activity network (Engeström, 2001). The "contradictions become actual driving forces of expansive learning (higher-level learning of human or learning of social and individual transformation) when they are dealt with in such a way that an emerging new object is identified and turned into a motive" (Engeström & Sannino, 2010, p. 7, italics added).

According to CHAT, learning in this study is defined as resolving systemic contradictions through activities. The possible and procedural learning outcomes of this process can be described as: (1) an new object/activity, and socio-cultural/structural change/creation (social level), (2) new actions (individual level).

Research Design

Because of the cultural diversity of KA community members and differences with other Asian groups (Chung, 2007; Min, 2006), studies of KA communities cannot be subsumed under generalized categories from a quantitative approach. Hence, the research design includes critical ethnography as a methodology that aims to investigate problems or challenges of a group based on social issues and helps change the constraints of a group through the in-depth description and interpretation of the cultural group or community (Carspecken, 1996; Thomas, 1993).

The study site, one well-established KA CO embedded in a large KA community in Queens, NY was selected. I used four criteria to select a research site: (1) KAs' symbolic meaning of the area as a representative town in the U.S., (2) cultural dynamics among ethnic groups, (3) a leading CO which employs positive approaches for social movement, (4) accessibility. By following the principles of critical ethnographic research (Carspecken, 1996), I served as an intern in the organization while doing participant observation over six months. Extensive field notes were kept in order to understand the organization (Emerson, et al., 1995). To allow for multiple in-depth interviews, I selected 17 activists who have worked in the organization for at least a year as the purposive sample (Patton, 2002). I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with them, for a total of 35 hours. I transcribed these interviews myself in order to become deeply familiar with the data and then received feedback on the transcriptions from each interviewee (Creswell, 2007; Fetterman, 1998). Moreover, informal interviews were conducted with the activists. A variety of relevant documents were also analyzed. Across the whole process, triangulation strategy was considered and peer view was conducted by four educational scholars (Merriam, 2002).

Data analysis started with a thick-description of the local area and the organization. Next, following ethnographic procedures, I created initial codes and sub-codes, and then identified meaningful themes and their relationships based on CHAT framework using N-vivo 9 software (Carspecken, 1996; Emerson, et al., 1995; Thomas, 1993; Wolcott, 1994).

Findings

Background

Flushing, located in north central Queens, is the largest community district in the New York City and a gateway for Asian immigrants. The area itself includes low-income and limited-English speaking Asian American communities with large Chinese and Korean communities (Kui, et al., 2007; Min, 2006). The office of KA CO has been located in the center of Flushing since 2003.

Since the KA CO was established at a family house in 1984, it has evolved into one of the leading COs and the only KA CO in New York City to organize, mobilize, and advocate for immigrants. With approximately sixteen board members, seventeen full-time staffs, and seven interns, this organization has six programs: advocacy and organizing, social service, civic

participation, education and communication, youth, and culture. Between 2008 and 2010, the KA CO has dramatically changed. The organization not only increased its annual budget from approximately a half million to one million dollars, it also recruited ten new full-time staff and started services for the Chinese immigrant community.

Activities for Community Leadership and Contradictions

Findings are based on three relational dimensions that were identified as necessary to build community leadership; external partners, community members and internal activists of the organization. By identifying objects (as conceptualized by CHAT), three activities for community leadership were found: “Coalition” to advocate for marginalized KA immigrants by building partnerships with diverse stakeholders; “Empowerment” to empower KA/Chinese community members by not only providing social services/information/knowledge, but encouraging civic participation; and “Collaboration” to comprehensively approach immigrant issues by collaborating among activists. Additionally, an “Education” activity, as related to subject-production (Engeström, 1987), was founded to enhance the activists’ capacity for successfully engaging in the three activities.

These activities are driven by each fundamental object through historical accumulation of the organization’s background and internal/external socio-cultural contexts. The activities objects, according to CHAT, mean a desire or motive that reflects why community leadership building is required with whom, what capacities are limited, or why constructing relationships among activists within the organization as well as between the activists and diverse stakeholders is critical. The objects always present a latent primary contradiction because of the potential to generate a future target or expanded object (Engeström, 1987, 2001).

Diverse contradictions were found within an activity and among activities. The contradictions of these three activities have the potential to hinder community leadership building and learning. The activities were strongly interconnected and facilitated by organizational spirit (working as a coalition to overcome the limits of a KA immigrant community as a minority (survival) and bringing together community members as partners) and organizational culture (working together with a family-like culture to comprehensively serve the immigrant community) within the developmental history of the organization, as well as the inter-related attributes of immigrant issues. Hence, by the organization’s formal/informal rules, all activists basically engage in various additional actions beyond conducting their original tasks. Also, the large dependence on governmental and foundational funds (77.3% of the total annual budget in 2010) increases the work burden because they need to maintain or raise the number of coalitions, social services offered, and voter registration etc. according to the funders’ rules. This work burden, and newer activist lack of knowledge (primary contradiction within the subject) sometimes leads to low-level participation in coalition, empowerment, and collaboration actions as well as questioning why they have to do specific actions to perform the activities.

In addition, secondary contradictions occurred in the “Coalition” activity by the unavoidable competition with partner organizations under the capitalist economic system, the capacity limit of partner organizations, and passive appeal in a specific project assigned supporter’s role. Although activities try to build coalitions under the survival ideology, they struggle to accomplish the object.

By increasing non-Korean clients, activists became confused over who should be served and it led to a secondary contradiction with the object of “Empowerment” activity. A conflict

also emerged between the professional services role and grass-roots activist role. It resulted in a contradiction with community members' ideology (e.g. Confucianism based on age and request for expediency by appealing to ethnic homogeneity). Moreover, the attribute of marginalized immigrants (stability) by unstable economical/social status, political indifference, language difficulty, and conservatism of older first-generations (born and educated in Korea and China) weakened the ability to accomplish the object. Furthermore, limited space in the organization, low use of online spaces by community members, media's lack of professionalism, and age-biased volunteer groups triggered contradictions.

In the "Collaboration" activity, identifying cultural differences between senior and newer activists was important to bring out contradictions. While most activists in the senior group are first-generation Koreans, the newer group is composed of largely the so-called 1.5 generation (born in Korea but educated mostly in the U.S. or other countries before pursuing higher education) and second-generation (born in the U.S. or another country (or adopted in infancy) and educated mostly in the U.S. or other countries). The senior group is composed of persons who served in the organization from the beginning or for at least ten years. They believe that newer activists should keep organizational traditions (working together on the same page) and positively engage in organizational activities. On the other hand, newer groups sometime have difficulties adjusting to the traditional organizational culture.

Sometimes, activists are burdened by a lot of meetings in the organization (staff and department-every week, inter-department-once in two weeks, board-quarterly, senior-frequently and so on). Also, the newer group has complained about decision-making processes and questioned why they cannot participate in senior meetings.

As I mentioned above, three activities are inter-related and all contradictions within each activity lead to contradiction (quaternary) among the activities' objects. These contradictions become an actual driving force for learning when activists make efforts to positively overcome them. Through formal/informal meetings and an intensive retreat/annual planning session to resolve contradictions, KA activists created a new (expanded) object among the three activities, 'to organize, mobilize, and advocate for Asian immigrants by enhancing organizational capacities under the current situation.' The object led to various intended/unintended outcomes for community leadership development and unintended outcomes for learning including socio-structural transformation and new actions. These learning outcomes resulted in the revision of existing activities. Also, they already include both positive and negative learning of activists at the instrumental, communicative, affective, interpretive, essential, critical, political, passionate, and moral level (Newman, 2012).

Boundary-Crossing, Knot-Working, Social Discourse/Reflection, and Power

Four important themes were analyzed that facilitate community leadership and learning by overcoming challenges. (1) "Boundary-crossing" among departments/other persons within the organization and outside partners leads to develop community leadership and learning of activists. In particular, the role of seniors in terms of facilitation, guidance, and the allowance of decision-making are significant when practical newer activists seek to expand boundaries. (2) A "knot-working" strategy that indicates a relatively loose and flexible relationship based on concrete roles was effective to enhance community leadership. In fact, it facilitates diverse new coalitions for activists in that they clearly perform assigned roles in a specific project with other partners. (3) Having "social reflection opportunities through the discourse" enhances community

leadership development and learning. Those allow activists to verify their temporary thoughts/reflections with others and reflect by themselves recursively. (4) “Balance of power” among activists and departments, “power across” between activists and community members are the most critical factors to facilitate community leadership development and learning. In fact, this organization has a good structure to check power imbalances and a steering committee, composed of a president, vice-president, ED, and senior staffs beyond board members, that plays a role in deciding important organization issues (e.g. organization direction, expense etc.).

Conclusion and Implication

The findings indicate that community leadership development and learning should be understood by considering historically accumulated socio-cultural contexts across boundaries and should also more positively reflect power issues. The findings suggest that we need to focus more on higher-level outcomes of learning through activities beyond individual foci. Furthermore, the findings provide an in-depth understanding and strategies of practices for community leadership development based on socio-cultural urban contexts as well as daily learning in the CO.

The practical implications of this research suggest that all CO activities need to be understood as learning events. This means that programs, staff development, leadership development, decision making, relations with the community, and questions of professionalism, must be designed, conducted and understood as a process of learning. Only in this way can contradictions or problems that arise in the complex environment of community organizations be resolved. Moreover, the study’s significance for the broader field of education is that it promises to provide a theoretically sound and grounded analysis of how informal learning occurs in everyday life, a much discussed but poorly understood phenomena (Engeström, 2001; Sawchuk, 2003).

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