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Learning through On-Farm Apprenticeships: Labor Identities and Sociocultural Reproduction within Alternative Agrifood Movements

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Abstract: On-farm apprenticeship is a site of sociocultural learning for beginning farmers, and also for identity politics, mediated by social movement learning processes. This critical ethnographic case study used cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) to illuminate ways in which institutions mediated this cultural work to both reinforce and challenge dominant narratives.

Keywords: Beginning Farmer, Apprenticeship, Cultural Historical Activity Theory, New Social Movements, Social Reproduction

Literature Review

On-farm apprenticeships are gaining momentum as an important strategy for beginning farmer training and preparation. A programmatic response aimed towards beginning farmers has developed in the U.S. from grassroots, governmental, and higher education institutions (Niewolny & Lillard, 2010; Niewolny & Wilson, 2007), especially as the current farmer population is quickly aging out of farming, and fewer beginning farmers are arriving to replace them (Ahearn, 2013). On-farm apprentices are learning farming *in situ*, through working on the farm, and engaging in farmwork (Lave, 1988; MacAuley & Niewolny, 2016; Paradise & Rogoff, 2009). On-farm apprenticeships, as sites of networked sociocultural learning (Engeström, 2000) for adults, are variably understood as beginning farmer training (Hamilton, 2011), as inexpensive farm labor (MacAuley & Niewolny, 2016), and situated between economic and non-economic attributes (Ekers, Levkoe, Walker, & Dale, 2016).

On-farm apprenticeships are also a space for learning, identity work, and rehearsal of social movement practice, as alternative agrifood movement participation (AAMs; MacAuley & Niewolny, 2016; Pilgeram, 2011). AAMs embody and discursively construct values of biophysical sustainability, food quality, egalitarianism, and agrarianism (Constance, Renard & Rivera-Ferre; 2014). However, AAMs have been critiqued for disproportionately representing upper- to middle-class white cultural norms (Allen, 2004; Guthman, 2008a; Slocum, 2007), for an ideological orientation towards romanticized agrarianism (Carlisle, 2013), and for mechanisms through which neoliberalist values are unknowingly perpetuated (Guthman, 2008b). All of these discourse

elements may function to reinforce and reify hegemonic power relations. If on-farm apprenticeship practitioners are engaging in AAMs, these learning and labor experiences may be regarded differently than merely job training or merely labor, because they are seen as part of one's cognitive praxis (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991) as a participant in a social movement (Endres & Armstrong, 2013; MacAuley & Niewolny, 2016).

As Hall (1996) writes, individuals embrace signifiers of identity in identification processes to reproduce distinct categories and difference. Practitioners' cognitive praxis is articulated into these identification processes as part of the learning taking place on farms, especially if AAMs are acting as ideological state apparatuses (Althusser, 1970). If one's cognitive praxis causes learning and labor to be experienced in unexpected ways, a mismatch may arise between the express purpose and the outcomes of the activity. Through the cultural work of education (Giroux, 1992; hooks, 1994), social reproduction occurs that reproduces hegemonic constructions, which is problematic if power inequities are being reproduced, such as those surrounding race, gender, and class within AAMs and/or the dominant food system. This paper explores this multiplicity of objects and identity play that produces, maintains, and/or challenges the power relations within the activity system of the on-farm apprentice.

Theoretical Framework

We illuminate these dynamics within on-farm apprenticeships through the theoretical lenses of cultural historical activity theory (CHAT; Fenwick, Edwards, & Sawchuk, 2011), cognitive praxis of new social movements (Eyerman & Jamison, 1996), and cultural identity theory (Hall, 1996). CHAT provides the primary foundation through which to examine how the sociomaterial mediates all activity within a network of actors in context. CHAT underscores how rules, tools, and division of labor impact the social interaction toward a common object, and contribute to an outcome of apprenticeship. Cognitive praxis constructs from new social movement theory provide a way to examine the collective movement identity formed within AAM discourse, including forms of knowledge and skills from AAM praxis, and helps to understand the outcomes of apprenticeship in relation to AAMs (Eyerman & Jamison, 1996).

Cultural identity theory informs subjectification of participants, including how they negotiated forms of knowledge in power, and to describe identity politics at play (Hall, 1996; Foucault, 1984). More generally, use of critical theory (as understood within Carspecken, 1996; Fraser, 1989; Kincheloe, 2005; Macedo, 1994) within theoretical constructs in the case study were important in dissecting the hegemonic discourses within the cultural work of education and social movement activity, while lending a rich descriptive potency to the identity politics that emerged in the data.

Fenwick, Edwards, and Sawchuk (2011) articulate the need to understand networked systems of learning in a way that accommodates considerations of structural and sociomaterial elements. Among other approaches, they put forth cultural historical activity theory (CHAT), which dimensionalizes material elements and shifts the focus of the researcher towards how physical elements (tools, artifacts, materials) are interacting with other dimensions within the network (subjects, community, division of labor, etc.). This interaction can be crucial to understanding how social reproduction is happening within a historical materialist framework. (Fenwick, Edwards, & Sawchuk, 2011; Daniels, Edwards, Engeström, Gallagher, & Ludvigsen, 2013). Brookfield (2001) argues that in order for adult education to be transformative it must acknowledge those elements of its Marxist roots. Thus, CHAT offers us a way to underscore those sociomaterial elements from a materialist perspective, toward a deepened understanding of physical, structural, and political factors that impact learning.

Methodology

We employed critical ethnographic case study methodology to explore issues of power, social reproduction, learning, and equity. The unit of analysis consisted of an activity system of practitioners of on-farm apprenticeship (apprentices, farmer educators/hosts, educators and coordinators of educational programming, and all others present), who were all in conversation with each other through joint participation in educational programming coordinated by an AAM-oriented agricultural organization. Data collection occurred throughout May to September of 2016, through 53 days of participant observation, working alongside 19 apprentices on six different farms; interviews (n=25) with farmers, apprentices, and educators; and document analysis (n=407) of educational materials, communications, and other literature circulated within the activity system. All data was compiled and/or transcribed verbatim, subsequently analyzed through a semi-open coding process, and analyzed for meaning using Greene's (2007) complementary strengths stance.

Findings and Conclusions

The interaction between these theoretical orientations has enabled us to dimensionalize elements of the sociomaterial that were at play for apprentices and farmers to construct and maintain identities. The bodies of the apprentices, often were inadequately sutured into the role that the apprentices intended to perform as ruggedly individualistic (romanticized) agrarians. As the data showed, many of the apprentices were thus unable to bridge the gap between their intended identification process and the sociomaterial reality of manual labor on the farm.

Because most of the apprentices were white, college educated, and middle- to upper-class, they were attempting to translate their manual farm labor in ways appropriate to their class expectations of work (for example, viewing it as “healthy exercise” in the “fresh air.”). However, these expectations were challenged within the everyday sociomaterial reality of dirt, sweat, and routine tasks. This created cognitive dissonance, possibly even disillusionment, among the apprentices. Given the materialist foundation through which to understand the identity politics of this phenomenon, it is unsurprising that the majority of the apprentices in this study lacked commitment to go on to become farmers themselves. The participants’ lack of commitment to continue farming has been described in other studies (Levkoe, 2018; MacAuley & Niewolny, 2016; Terry, 2014), but here, we go farther into sociocultural explanations as to why apprentices are unable to negotiate expert identities as farmers.

This study benefitted greatly from a network analysis with considerations of identification processes through sociocultural identity theory. Network analysis through CHAT provided a way to conceptualize how the sociomaterial exerted force on identification processes of system actors. The works of Hall (1996), Butler (1993) and Foucault (1977, 1984), due to the influence of psychoanalysis, are occasionally stranded in the cognitivist language of the individual thinker. This language, focused around the deconstructive politics of identity and body, does not have a straightforward way to allow for elements of the material to exert force on the body. As we found in this study, CHAT provides a way for these theories to break free of individual-level talk into identification as concerning systems of actors and environments in fluid exchange, enabling possibilities for material factors to be taken into account and new explanations to be derived that take into account the political economic factors present in the activity system.

Further, our study shows the ways in which symbolic oppositional and hegemonic discourse was expressed to maintain privilege and power relations in the activity system. Specifically, as mentioned above, we observed that white spacemaking and class-related work ideologies were employed in producing and maintaining on-farm apprenticeship activity. Also, CHAT analysis underscored three distinct objectives, or reasons why actors undertake the activity within the activity system. These were: (1) beginning farmer training; (2) inexpensive labor for sustainability-oriented farms; and (3) an authentic, “meaningful” farm lifestyle experience. In contrast to the first two, this third objective, the authentic farm lifestyle experience, resists easy explanation through capitalistic market-based logics. CHAT analysis has highlighted how sociomaterial elements mediate activity according to social norms and a division of labor, which generates a system of interdependencies that exist in a nonmarket/quasimarket third space. The rules that govern behavior do not appear to be reduced down to market-based explanations. We found that important factors governing behavior of actors within this study include: (1) membership in a movement (AAMs); (2) an ascetic bent; (3) the valorization of farmers and

authentic/nostalgic farm lifestyle; (4) alignment with clean, healthy, and/or 'dirty' parts of the job; and (5) communitarianism. These logics point towards the creation of a third type of nonmarket/quasimarket space (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, & Healy, 2013). This is a start to understanding and theorizing community relationships that are governed by rules other than capitalism. The explanation is an important step towards validating those noncapitalistic 'rules' as equally important in their ability to predict and theorize behavior, and to maintain community wellbeing. Describing nonmarket interdependencies is an academic attempt to create a "stable intermediary" (Latour, 2007, p. 257) of possibility outside of capitalistic explanations and market-based logics, or essentialized categories, made possible through CHAT analysis.

Thus, this empirical study serves as a methodological example of how CHAT may be applied in combination with cultural studies constructs in order to wrap the sociomaterial into the analysis, and derive a more nuanced theorization. The interaction of theoretical frameworks here allowed for interdisciplinary discourses to appear and be expressed complementarily within the research. CHAT, as a 'baseboard' theory to provide several ontologies to carry weight within our study. CHAT yielded an emphasis on the sociomaterial, while cognitive praxis examined AAM discourse elements, and cultural identity theory showed the suturing and interpellation of the body into signifiers. All of these together yielded a strong dimensionalization of how to communicate symbolic interactions at various levels of the activity system. Also, through seeing the discursive and psychoanalysis constructs of cultural identity theory through the CHAT lens, the study allowed cultural identity theory a productive way to incorporate elements of materialism into considerations of identity, into which its own language hitherto has limited its progress (Hall, 1996). Thus, another attribute of CHAT is its ability to combine with constructs from other disciplines and discourses for a materialist analysis.

Implications for Adult Education Theory/Practice

Adult educators are clearly engaged in a political act (Fenwick, 2003). Their position as educators makes them uniquely placed in society to act as sustaining or transforming society, as well as creating effects of empowerment – and disempowerment – of adult learners (Giroux, 1992; Freire, 2005). If education constitutes cultural work, there are deep sociocultural implications in deciding which/whose knowledge is sanctioned through education (Fanon, 1961/2004; Freire, 1970; Kincheloe, 2008; Macedo, 1994). This study has demonstrated how AAM praxis supports the cultural transmission of forms of knowledge, while excluding others, in an in/nonformal site of adult education, mediated by historical and material factors embedded in the food system and our systems of learning and knowing about it. Here, we have shown one way in which this institutional mediation of learning is creating social reproduction of dominant sociocultural norms, within this activity system.

Brookfield (2001) writes that adult educators must embrace ideology critique as a pedagogical tool toward the liberation of adult learners. Learning is not necessarily a conscious goal of practitioners within social movements, and, at times, this cultural work may be unacknowledged and unexamined (Sawchuk, 2011). This study demonstrates how, by using CHAT analysis to illuminate mechanisms through which ideology re/creates hegemonic constructions *in situ*, adult educators may facilitate dialogue to make visible the ideological underpinnings of activity, in order for practitioners to become self-aware and reflexive, and ultimately to critique it. In so doing, scholars, theorists, and practitioners may contest discursive elements that maintain oppressive power relations within their lives and work.

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