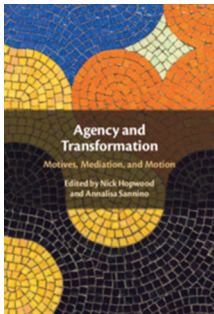




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BOOK TITLE:

Agency and transformation: Motives, mediation, and motion



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ISBN:

9781009153676 (hardback, 426 pp)

PUBLISHER:

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; GBP124

PUBLISHED:

2024

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HOW TO CITE:

Hammond SF. Reviewing 'Agency and Transformation' from a South African perspective. *S Afr J Sci.* 2024;120(9/10), Art. # 19144, <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2024/19144>

ARTICLE INCLUDES:

- Peer review
- Supplementary material

PUBLISHED:

26 September 2024

Reviewing 'Agency and Transformation' from a South African perspective

The graphic cover of this publication superbly illustrates the multi-vocal clustered mosaic of contributions bound together by Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). Academics and students applying CHAT principles would benefit from the contents, as would practitioners of organisational development, education and training professionals, and public servants entrusted with all aspects of socio-economic development. Crucially, the editors, Hopwood and Sannino, elucidate the urgency of transformative agency, where "... the givenness of the future is illusory".

Theoretical approach

CHAT offers an alternative to the qualitative stance of a neutral observer, in a theoretically grounded interventionist approach. The foundational concepts of Vygotsky¹ underpin the four generations of activity theory², inspiring the motifs of motives, mediation, and motion. Agency is not neutral, nor exclusively a facet of the individual, but conceived of as a dialectical inclusion of a socially and culturally situated individual capable of contributing to collective achievement.³ Change Laboratory interventions, involving Vygotskian concepts of mediated activities and double stimulation, enable new learning and the development of transformative agency. Envisioning beyond social inequality, or the existential threat of climate change, evokes the philosophies of Gramsci and Freire⁴, and post-colonialist African leaders, such as Nyerere⁵.

Relevance to South Africa

The content resonates deeply with contemporary South African expectations. Envisioning enactment of utopias and a social justice agenda speaks to post-apartheid challenges of: land restitution and agricultural inclusion; provision of health and housing services; recognition of first nation languages, religions, histories, and cultures; and the decolonisation of school curricula, and provision of education and training.

South African studies provide an exemplar of developmental research. Land restitution and sustainable community development interventions in "agency from below"⁶ address the legacies of colonialism and apartheid in seeking cognitive justice and the transgression of class structures. Similarly, in a Brazilian rural community consisting of farmers and workers from an agricultural association, the objectives of achieving environmental recovery and social inclusion by strengthening family farming resonate with the objectives of South Africa's recently formed Government of National Unity.

Directly comparable to South Africa, Brazilian health services are described as broadly differentiated between: younger, less educated, lower-income mothers in the public sector, with older women of higher income and education in the private sector. The variable quality of maternal care across Brazil produces a level of maternal mortality in excess of that expected in a middle-income country. Agentic promotion of women's rights increased empowerment in childbirth care.

The operationalised oppression within the health system is comparable to the education system described by first nation citizens, and to colonial empire education systems. The Finnish homelessness project includes resolution of societal imposition of stigma, significant in resolution of apartheid-era geographical demarcations in public housing. Identification of positive practices potentially encapsulated in isolated units is addressed in a bottom-up approach of frontline workers sharing successes. The approach of uniting transformative processes with supportive pedagogic instruments enables movement forward during periods of uncertainty – a process relevant to contemporary challenges.

On the youthful African continent, education and training are key to enabling agency and achieving a transformed post-colonial future. In India, a study of teacher discourse during teacher-sharing meetings demonstrates that agentic action is not a generic formula, identifying a complexity of institutional demands, relationships, and development of common knowledge. Similarly, the impact upon students of differing circumstances and policies is evidenced in a UK study of adolescents excluded from school following inappropriate behaviour, confirming how cultures and histories mediate individual development and institutions. Confirmation of socio-cultural influences, rather than interpersonal relations, is informative when considering nine provinces of vastly different histories and cultures.

Psychological and sociological static categorisations of youth future orientation are countered by non-profit volunteer work, civic engagement, and climate change activism. In China, analysis of children's story-telling narratives of their response to educational disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic shows that children's agency derives from contradictory motives, confirming Vygotskian perspectives on social crises/human development relationships. The encapsulation of traditional educational subjects into relatively short discrete blocks is also questioned. The proposal for an interventionist methodology focusing upon the generation of use value would potentially benefit South African curriculum developers – given persistently high levels of youth unemployment.

Conclusion

The editors have successfully collated global research – inclusive of the Global South and BRICS nations – and addressed content of direct relevance to the South African challenges of poverty, inequality, and unemployment. We carry with us our historically derived social positioning. Commencing from that positioning and the social circumstances of individuals, focuses upon cultural tools, thereby releasing the potential for new learning, the

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creation of new cultural tools, and a better future – precisely the challenge of the newly created Government of National Unity.

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