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The Anti-Poverty Community Organizing and Learning (APCOL) project represents a partnership effort across several post-secondary institutions and a range of community-based groups in Toronto (Canada). This project was funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, under its Community University Research Alliance program (2009-2014). Drawing on carefully designed survey and case study methods as well as a participatory action research orientation - the aim of this research project has been to offer the most intensive study of activist learning and development in anti-poverty work in Canada.

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Exploring (de)alienation in social movement learning: Case study findings on participant motivation and the role of movement organisations

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Abstract: This paper engages in questions of empowerment, transformation and de-alienation among social movement participants and reviews selected findings from two APCOL case studies. Beginning with a brief review of key literatures in sociology and adult education, I explore the following questions: How can we understand everyday activities as resistance to estrangement, powerlessness and isolation? Can further

EXPLORING (DE)ALIENATION IN SOCIAL MOVEMENT LEARNING: CASE S

This paper engages in questions of empowerment, transformation and de-alienation among social movement participants and reviews findings from two case studies in Toronto among anti-poverty activists. Beginning with a brief review of key literatures in sociology and adult education, I explore the following key research questions:

1. How can we understand everyday activities as resistance to estrangement,

treats its entire subject matter as ‘different sides of one unit’” (Ollman, 1976, p. 17).

Such a dialectic approach to understanding social relations is fundamental for a holistic exploration of how (de)alienation manifests among social movement activists. Furthermore, we may only be able to understand alienation “as the absence of unalienation, each state serving as a point of reference for the other” (Ollman, 1976, pp. 131-132). For social movement activity, this is especially important as individual and collective action is often rooted in a vision of an alternative social condition.

Empirical studies that directly address issues of alienation tend to emphasise *subjective* or *objective* forms of estrangement in

that individual and collective agency is a dynamic force engaged with existing institutions, whether to reproduce or reject them, we cannot ignore the influences of everyday activities:

[C]ulture, as Certeau has so decisively put it, is plural and at the same

society) – thus, to fully understand the complexities that individuals/groups must navigate, we must further explore how advanced capitalism has managed to distort our understanding of our needs.

As the individual's sense of reality is dominated by the commodity-form and its production/consumption, there is a distancing from her *human needs*, now determined by external, *alien* products; “So much does labour's realisation appear as loss of reality to the point of starving to death. So much does objectification appear as loss of the object that the worker is robbed of the objects most necessary not only for [her] life but for [her] work” (Marx, 1961, p. 69). Such a disconnect is at the heart of what drives collective action as there is a need to re-connect our activity to our basic human needs

convenience, face the poverty, cruelty, and tyranny that dominate the world. In bestirring ourselves to heal the world, we reassert our humanity and reclaim our lives for ourselves. Protesting our own commodification, we can affirm once again the humanity of each of us—that human beings are ends in themselves and should not be treated as means to the ends of power-hungry governments or corporations seeking fatter profits... Turning our backs on the seductive comforts and narcotizing conveniences of the world of commodities, we shall try to build a free society where each furthers his or her own well-being and promotes that of the others. (p. 134)

Though most of the literature on social alienation falls under sociology and philosophy, generally, the potential for adult educators to explore these ontological questions and consider opportunities where we may facilitate de-alienating experiences must not be ignored. While these concerns are not new in adult education (e.g. Brookfield, 2002; Freire, 2000), there is significant opportunity to broaden the potential for understanding the role of learning in collective efforts to overcome alienation.

With this brief review of Marx's theory of alienation, the importance of dialectics and considerations for theories of everyday life, I now turn to a potential framework to bring together these analytic tools in a dynamic, meaningful and fundamentally transformative approach – Marxist Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT).

CHAT, TRANSFORMATION AND LEARNING (DE)ALIENATION

[H]uman nature is a process of overcoming and transcending its own limitations through collaborative, continuous practices aimed at purposefully changing the world. In other words, it is a process of historical becoming by humans not as merely creatures of nature but as agents of their own lives, agents whose nature is to purposefully transform their world. (Stetsenko, 2008, p. 483, emphasis in original).

Among various sociocultural approaches to learning, a Marxist approach to Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) provides a distinctly dialectical approach rooted in a “transformative relation to the world” where “it posits that human development is both

We may consider this as an illustration of how certain spaces, tactics and movement dynamics affect the degree to which participants locate alienating conditions and reflect on strategies to overcome such conditions. The nature of 'activism' among participants varies significantly, where even the term is often viewed with hesitation and the forms of organizing activities are often dynamic. Based on the initial research questions, we will look at two major themes; 1) the role of organizations (and resources generally) in supporting and hindering holistic community-based activities for de-alienation, 2) motivational dimensions for community activism among paid and unpaid community workers.

ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONS IN FACILITATING (DE)ALIENATION

People here have relied on institutions to intervene whenever they have problems. How do you organize and mobilize people here when they think that...who wants to come to a community meeting to talk about security issues... we have the state we are paying taxes they're the ones to deal with issues of security, we don't need to meet as a community about that. If I have any ideas about security I will call the government and tell them about the insecurity, but it's very difficult here in Canada to organize people because the agency, you know, it kinda has taken over, and people have internalized that. (James, APCOL KGO Case Study)

In this first excerpt, James offers some insight as to why community members disengage and do not bother to make time for community concerns. Coming from a background in organizing in developing nations, he views the overly-bureaucratic nature of Canadian society as a key factor in discouraging participation. According to such a system, the role of residents is to *report their concerns*, whether calling the authorities or attending a formal public forum, residents have "internalized" their roles – often seeing themselves as consumers (tax payers) who deserve improved service, rather than residents who deserve the opportunity to make their community the place they imagine it should be. Redefining one's position as a *worker* is one of several stages we

alienating community organizing, as there is a reality facing many organizations and small groups who are working as advocates – well-intentioned, though somewhat disconnected from the experiences faced by residents.

However, potenti

this is likely one of the better models for paid staff to utilize when there is an explicit goal towards capacity-building.

Both case studies demonstrated the struggles facing both paid and unpaid community workers in navigating the complex institutions that govern how their local systems of production operate. Simultaneously, participants also recognized the value in the “little things” that could make a significant difference in their everyday lives, and demonstrate the common motivations across participants in both neighbourhoods.

MOTIVATIONAL DIMENSIONS AND OVERCOMING ALIENATION

Several participants had an issue with the term “activist” – both paid staff and volunteers engaged in various community activities. For one participant it is an issue of what motivates her to engage in the work she does;

Interviewer: Would you call yourself an activist?

Respondent: No, no... I just identify myself as a person who's doing my work, and what I can do I will do to the best of my ability... I'm a believer that we weren't brought to this earth to just live, but to actually do something. It's part of existence; you're healthy, you're well, you have a roof on top of your head, what more could you ask for? It's to do something.

(Miriam, APCOL MTD Case Study)

Partly an aversion to categories and labels, the above dialogue also presents us with a motivational dimension that may be explored at the level of one's existence –

positive social change is clearly rooted in this organizer's interest in staying present and connected to her community on varying levels.

In a similar vein, a community volunteer in KGO responded to the question by describing herself as a “worker,”

I'm just a worker... I can help get the job done...I just see a need, and I can try, especially through the people I know, I can say 'hey this is happening here, how can we fix it?' (Beth, APCOL KGO Case Study)

This focus on the object of her activity – motivated by the apparent needs she encounters everyday – illustrates the importance of learning how to “see a need” and take action appropriately. Though she entered the conversation by calling herself *just a worker*, our conversation

We live in a crazy world where there's no time to reflect. You don't have the time to even be honest with yourself because you have bills to pay, you just have to do it to make ends meet. Because of that we end up losing ourselves. This is why I'm fascinated by going into nature. Because you will always have silence and peace. Listening to your emotions, another thing that has been silenced. We are intuitive and we're not encouraged to really listen to those. Especially listening to young people, they're going through thousands of emotions. Even in working with them, though, we're not aware of how to work with it. Because you've got to have a swag and look a certain way. Because as a frontline worker, if you get all emotional, it's not something that is normal. But when you end up opening up to that level, you've connected with that young person in a whole new way

have left most of us challenged in understanding our basic human needs, thus we find ourselves engaging in activities that may not directly support our needs or those of others.

As adult educators, researchers, organizers and workers, we must consider how we may locate opportunities to reflect on our everyday activities as they contribute towards social justice – and towards the de-commodification of such activities. It is within these spaces that we may encourage the production of necessary artefacts that mediate learning de-alienation through work that contributes towards our community needs. Within social movement activity, there is promise for such learning to take place and as is evident with the responses to globalized capitalism in various communities throughout the world, we might be closer to a 'tipping point' than anyone can predict. It is our responsibility to support and encourage the development of alternative systems of production based on use-values rather than an increasingly unsustainable global economic system.

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ⁱⁱ For the purposes of this research, the term social movement is defined quite loosely and is best characterized as “conscious, concerted, and sustained efforts by ordinary people to change some aspect of their society by using extra-institutional means” (Goodwin and Jasper, 2003, p. 3).

ⁱⁱⁱ Archibald (2009a) provides further discussion of this distinction and its implications on the theoretical and conceptual development of Marx’s theory of alienation.

^{iv} Some have argued that studies in alienation have diminished as a result of people feeling less alienated, however it has been well documented that this is far from accurate. Archibald (2009a) reviews the field of alienation studies and argues that while there is a need to update Marx’s theory, there is no shortage of data that demonstrates the prevalence of alienation throughout the world.

^v We may consider Paolo Freire’s (2000[1970]) description of learning to “read the world” as an attempt to regain a sense of reality by transforming the world: “Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis.

Thus, to speak a true word is to (the field o2world: “W)ET Q 0.24 0 0 0.24 72 4732cm B2 r 0 0.24 72 474.48 cr