

Using cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) tools to understand reflecting teams as a process for professional learning

John Niven

Aims: To explore the views and experiences of educational psychologists (EPs) using Reflecting Teams (RT; see Andersen, 1987) via an online virtual platform, as a new approach to practice within one local authority (LA) educational psychology service (EPS).

Methods: This exploratory research was based on a case study design (Yin, 2018) and, using Engeström's (1999, 2015) cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) as an analytical tool, sought to capture and explore how members of one LA EPS as a unique social context, used RT in practice via an online meeting platform, over the course of one academic school session. Nine members of the EPS responded to open-ended questions on an online survey after one month of using the RT method. Six EPS members responded to the same survey after ten-months implementation of the RT method. Data were interpreted through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2020) and CHAT, to explore participants' views and experiences of their RT activity.

Findings: CHAT analysis identified seven contradictions in relation to EPs' perceptions of their Reflecting Teams activity: 'learning vs. implementing' (object of activity), 'stakeholder-oriented vs. practitioner-oriented' (outcome), 'protected time' vs. 'not enough time' (rules), 'equitable participation' (roles), 'safety vs. vulnerability' (roles), 'actual community vs. ideal community' (community), and 'online platforms vs. in-person meetings (tools)'. EPs reported that Reflecting Teams provided: support with complex problems and challenges in EP casework and practice; peer-support from colleagues; and enhanced staff wellbeing. Time, training, resources, distribution of roles and the importance of ensuring a sense of safety, were highlighted as factors that mediated EPs' experience of the Reflecting Teams method.

Limitations: Findings reflect the experiences of a small sample of participants from an EPS in one local context.

Conclusions: The study represents a unique example of the use of Andersen's (1987) Reflecting Teams method, as an approach to systemic practice and family therapy, applied within the context of EP practice. CHAT provided a valuable framework which offered an insightful and nuanced interpretation of participants' perceptions and reflections of their engagement in RT as a novel process for professional learning in one LA EPS.

Keywords: Systemic practice; Family therapy; Reflecting teams; Educational psychologists; Cultural-historical activity theory.

Introduction

THIS paper presents exploratory research which involved an evaluation of a novel process for professional learning, piloted in one Local Authority (LA) educational psychology service (EPS)

in Scotland. The process was based on the application of principles and methods of systemic practice and family therapy (SPFT), which was a focus for professional learning and development for all practi-

tioners within the EPS (see Andersen, 1987, 1990, 1992; Rein & Schon, 1996). One of the key methods of practice introduced to the EPS, based on SPFT, was *Reflecting Teams* (RT; see Andersen, 1987; Rein & Schon, 1996). The research described in this paper explored educational psychologists' (EP) experiences and perceptions of their engagement with RT through an online virtual meeting platform, over the course of one academic school session.

Engeström's (2015) cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) is noted by various researchers to be a valuable and powerful analytical tool, which offers a deep, nuanced and rigorous interpretation of the activity individuals engage in, such as EP practice (Capper & Soan, 2022; Davies et al., 2008; Greenhouse, 2013; Leadbetter, 2017; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). This study provides one example of how CHAT can be integrated as part of a two-phased approach to data gathering and analysis, to understand the transformational and professional learning processes involved in the activity of EP practice, such as RT.

The decision to engage with SPFT as a focus for professional learning and development followed reflection among practitioners within the EPS, which identified a need to build capacity in relation to therapeutic intervention, as part of the services offered by the EPS. Specifically, the EPS sought to identify and explore an approach which might facilitate therapeutic intervention at a systemic level, in contrast to other methods focused on change at the level of the individual child, such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). Consequently, SPFT was identified as a suitable approach and it was considered that the RT method, in particular, had the potential to be a 'good fit' for EP practice, which aligned with the values and vision of the EPS.

Systemic family therapy and reflecting teams

The RT method belongs to a school of family therapy based on the principles of social

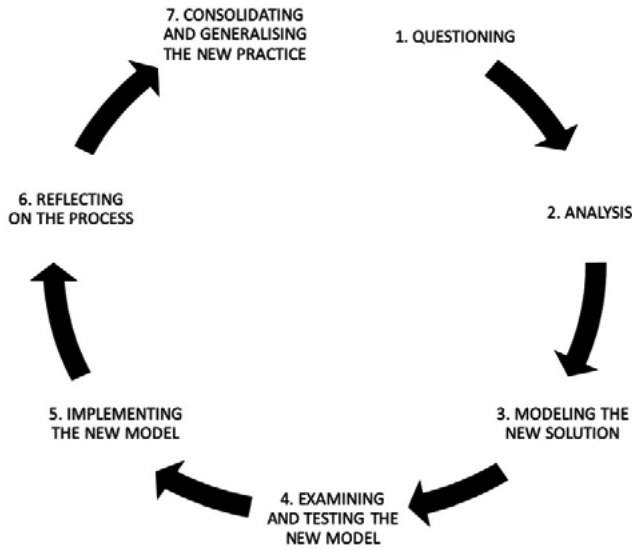
constructionism (Frake & Dogra, 2006). Developed by Andersen (1987), the method builds on the traditions of the Milan school of family therapy (see Selvini-Palazzoli et al., 1978) and was originally intended to support families who had become 'stuck', by facilitating the realisation of new ideas and broadening their perspectives (Andersen, 1987). The RT process traditionally involves a team of observers watching a therapist working therapeutically with a family from behind a one-way mirror, or from within the therapy room (Janowsky et al, 1995). As RT observers listen to the family therapy session, they formulate ideas which they think may be helpful to the family (Andersen, 1987). Then, the RT members discuss their observations, with the family watching and listening. This process is intended to generate a range of different perspectives and provide an opportunity for the family to reflect on the possibilities and alternative perspectives offered by the RT (Andersen, 1987).

Reflecting teams in practice

The RT method has been implemented in various contexts internationally (Andersen, 1992; Hawley, 2006; Mitchell et al., 2014; Rankin, 2007). In the UK, the method has been used within systemic family therapy by professionals from various disciplines, including family therapists, social workers and psychologists (Pender & Stinchfield, 2012). However, there is currently very little research to shed light on the utility of RT within educational contexts (Shah, 2019). Similarly, there is a lack of research exploring EP use or experience of RT, with only one such study having been identified internationally, conducted in South Africa (Amod & Miller, 2019). There is, therefore, a need for more research in this area and, specifically, a need for research which involves practicing EPs in the UK context.

Although a systematic review was not conducted as part of the present research, which may highlight further evidence, Amod and Miller's (2019) study highlights the appli-

Figure 1: The Cycle of Expansive Learning (Engeström & Sannino, 2010, p.8).



cation of Andersen's (1987) RT method in the context of EP practice and supervision, with findings suggesting that EPs valued RT as a process for professional learning and practice, despite various challenges experienced with implementation. High quality supervision in applied EP practice has been highlighted as an important process for maintaining individual professional development, wellbeing and the delivery of safe and effective EP services (Dunsmuir et al., 2015).

However, given the paucity of research focusing on the use of the RT method in the UK education context, particularly in relation to EP practice, it was unclear how Amod and Miller's (2019) findings might generalise or provide insight to the potential utility of RT in a LA EPS piloting the method within the UK. Moreover, no studies have specifically explored the perceptions and experiences of EPs using RT, when delivered via online virtual platforms. The current study aimed to address these gaps in the literature by using Engeström's (2015) CHAT as an analytical tool, to explore EPs' views and experiences of RT, when implemented as part of a process of change and professional learning within one LA EPS in Scotland.

Research question

1. What are the experiences and views of educational psychologists regarding their engagement in *Reflecting Teams* using an online virtual meeting platform, over the course of one academic school session?

Methodology

Ontology, epistemology and theoretical position

The methodology employed in the present research was based on a critical realist (CR) approach, guided by the work of Bhaskar (see Scott & Bhaskar, 2015). Bhaskar's view of CR is based on the notions of 'ontological realism, epistemic relativism and judgemental rationality' (Scott & Bhaskar, 2015, p.18). In accordance with this position, participants' views were regarded as indicative of their empirical experience of 'actual' events within their historical context, which may or may not have been acted upon by causal structures in their lived 'reality', which exists independently of participants' knowledge, detection or cognition. Participants' views were taken to be their own, unique interpretations of their experiences of events. CR is described as being of 'crucial

Table 1: Data Collection and Implementation.

Time/Interval	Expansive Learning Stage	Activity	Reflecting Team Issue/Topic	Description
August 2021	1, 2, 3	Professional Learning	August 2022: Modelling of the RT method and process. RT on EPS casework as a stimulus.	EPS staff engage in introductory professional learning on the principles and practice of Reflecting Teams.
September 2021	4	Data Collection (Time 1) Staff Survey 1	September 2022 RT on EPS casework.	EPS staff examine and test the Reflecting Teams model and share their reflections with the researcher.
September 2021 to June 2022	5	Implementation	<p>January 2022: RT on the topic of "working during lockdown".</p> <p>January 2022: RT on the topic of "systemic practice professional learning activities".</p> <p>February 2022: RT on the topic of "consent".</p> <p>March 2022: RT on the topic of "parental engagement".</p> <p>May 2022 RT on the topic of "parent power/empowerment".</p>	Continued implementation of Reflecting Teams within the EPS.
June 2022	6	Data Collection (Time 2) Staff Survey 2	N/A	Staff reflect on their experience and use of the Reflecting Teams model.

importance in explaining and understanding how educational psychology works and in helping to clarify and articulate the various processes underlying EPs' values, concepts and practices in effecting change' (Kelly, 2017, p.21).

Critical realists contend that individuals must ultimately exercise judgmental rationality, to select a theoretical position or lens, to interpret experiences and events (Scott & Bhaskar, 2015). As such, Engeström's (2015) Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) is a useful lens through which to further explore and discuss participants' expressions of their lived experiences. By using CHAT as a theoretical and conceptual framework upon which to base the discussion of findings, insight may be provided into the 'real' generative causal structures, which may have acted upon the 'actual' events or things empirically experienced by the participants.

Design

The British Psychological Society (2021) *Code of Human Research Ethics* provided an essential framework for decision making in the design and delivery of the current study. The research was based on a case-study design (Yin, 2018) which investigated the novel implementation of RT, as a process of change and professional learning within the unique social context of one LA EPS in Scotland, over the course of an academic school session. Case study designs grounded in the critical realist tradition are appropriate for research involving evaluation and processes of change, when theoretical frameworks are the primary tool being used to explain reality (Robson, 2011; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

To that end, a key theoretical tool used in the present study was the cycle of expansive learning (Engeström, 1999; Engeström & Sannino, 2010), which illustrates how a simple, abstract idea can be transformed through a stepwise process of construction over time, into a complex new form of collaborative practice (see Figure 1). As such, participants were invited to respond to open-ended questions via an online survey

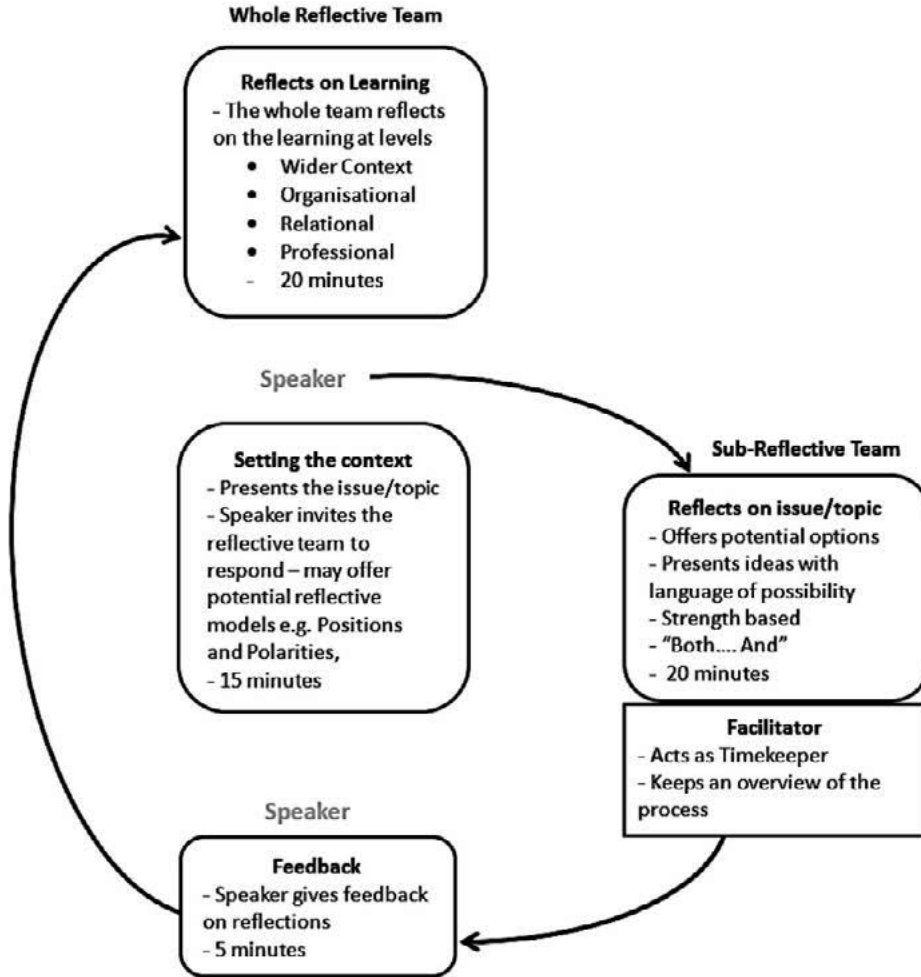
at one-month post-implementation (Time 1) and ten-months post-implementation (Time 2), mapped against the EPS journey of developing and implementing the RT process in practice (Table 1). Informed consent was obtained from participants and they were informed that they were not required to participate in the research or provide any data and could withdraw from the study at any time.

Influenced by the work of Lave and Wenger (1991), who contended that learning is a situated and context-dependent process that is deeply embedded in social practice, the researcher worked alongside participants within the EPS, to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and perspectives. As an internal member of the organisational context being studied, it was hoped that this approach would afford several advantages, including easier and freer access, stronger rapport with participants and 'a deeper, more readily available frame of shared reference with which to interpret [the data collected]' (Mercer, 2006, p.13).

Engeström (2014) similarly emphasises the importance of researchers developing *phenomenological insight* of the context, participants and activity being studied, in relation to the discourse and experiences of participants involved in the activity being explored. For example, by observing participants on-site and having discussions with those who are involved or have expertise in the activity. Indeed, Engeström (2014, p.254) suggests that 'only after relatively extensive "dwelling" in it', can an activity be properly delineated.

On the other hand, it has been suggested that the positionality of internal researchers may present challenges and give rise to other considerations. For example, some contend that internal researchers may hold pre-conceptions about participants and the context being studied and that, likewise, participants may have developed pre-conceived views about the researcher, which may give rise to *informant bias*, given their familiarity and shared history with one

Figure 2: The Reflecting Team Model.



another (see Mercer, 2006). The potential for such pre-conceptions emphasised the need for greater reflexivity on the part of the researcher in the present study. Similarly, as the participants were all known to the researcher and vice versa, there were important ethical considerations to be made with regards to ensuring confidentiality. As such, data was gathered from participants anonymously via the online survey platform and pseudonyms were used to sort the data provided by individual members of the EPS.

An online survey methodology was adopted due to the conceptual, practical and ethical advantages the approach has been credited with providing, both to researchers

and participants (Braun et al., 2020). Conceptually, qualitative online surveys with open-ended questions allow researchers to capture a range of voices and perspectives in relation to various research areas (Braun et al., 2017; Braun et al., 2020). Capturing such ‘multi-voicedness’ is an important principle of CHAT (Engeström, 1999), which was a guiding theoretical framework underpinning the researcher’s paradigm.

Practically, online surveys, when used as a qualitative research tool, have been noted for their cost-effectiveness and for allowing more expedient data collection, when compared to other remote methods such as telephone interviews (Hlatshwako

et al., 2021). From an ethical perspective, online surveys have the capacity to deliver advantages in protecting the anonymity of participants and facilitating the inclusion of those located across a wide geographical area, thereby supporting the involvement of some participants who may otherwise be harder to reach (Braun et al., 2020). Each of these factors were important considerations in the present research. However, it is also important to acknowledge the concerns which have been highlighted about the use of online survey methodologies, such as possible limitations relating to validity, the generalisability of findings and potential issues around data privacy and ethics (Singh and Sagar, 2021).

Participants

All participants were members of one EPS based within a LA in Scotland. A purposive sampling strategy was utilised to recruit only those EPS practitioners who were involved in the use of *Reflecting Teams* in practice within the service. Nine participants (n=6 EPs; n=2 Trainee EPs; n=1 EPS Researcher) volunteered to complete an online survey at one-month post-implementation of RT within the EPS (Time 1). Six participants completed the survey at ten-months post-implementation (Time 2; n=5 EPs; n=1 Trainee EP). Three participants left the EPS before completion of the study.

Procedure

Reflecting teams in EP practice

The EPS implemented a *Reflecting Teams* model based on Andersen's (1987) approach which aimed to develop reflexive practice within the EPS team, offer alternative perspectives to EPs when reflecting on their own practice and support them to break the cycle of 'sameness' when navigating their own work, particularly when EPs might otherwise become 'stuck' (Andersen, 1987). Seven *Reflecting Teams* sessions were held throughout the academic session from August to May (see Table 1), with time allo-

cated during planned Team Meetings, to support implementation fidelity and to avoid any impact on EPs' other core activities. *Reflecting Teams* were conducted following the process outlined in Figure 2.

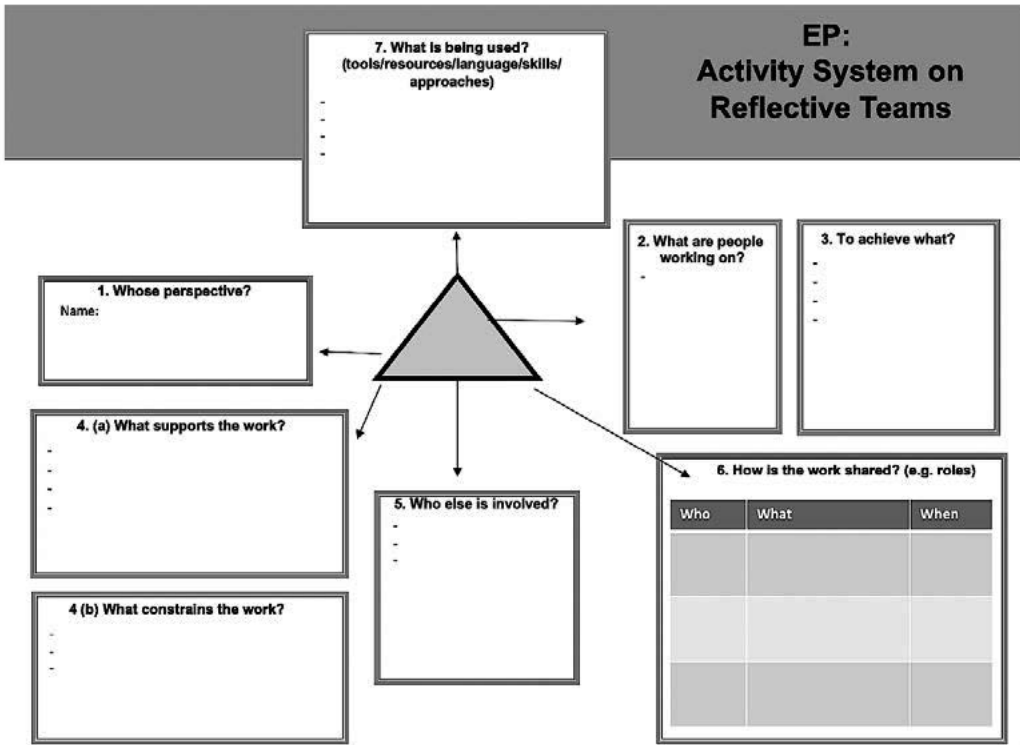
Firstly, members were voluntarily assigned roles within the RT process: *facilitator*, *speaker*, *sub-reflective team*, or *whole-team member*. Then, an initial 'setting the context' stage was undertaken, which lasted fifteen minutes. During this stage, a facilitator would ask the speaker to provide the background to an issue or topic they would like to discuss and to decide whether they would like the reflections to be structured within any specific model or framework from SPFT.

Meanwhile, a sub-reflective team consisting of three individuals, in addition to the facilitator, would listen to the speaker as they present their issue or case. During the speaker's presentation, the sub-reflective team de-activate their web camera, to replicate Andersen's (1987) method which involved *reflecting team* members being positioned behind a two-way mirror. The facilitator keeps track of time and may ask questions to encourage the speaker if they get 'stuck'.

Next, the sub-reflective team re-activate their web cameras and reflect upon the issue presented by the speaker. *Reflecting team* members would aim to adopt an approach to listening and discussion which was grounded in curiosity, strengths-based problem solving and speculative exploration, while not dwelling on areas of difficulty for the speaker. At this stage, the speaker would de-activate their own camera and listen to the *reflecting team* as they reflect upon the speaker's presentation of the issue and provide their analysis through a collaborative discussion. This stage of the process takes 20 minutes. After this time, the facilitator would invite the speaker to re-activate their web camera and provide feedback on the discussion which took place. The speaker's feedback should be summative and only last 5 minutes.

Following this, all individuals, including

Figure 3: Survey Questions Mapped to Activity System Triangle.



those not participating in the sub-reflective team, form the *whole reflecting team* whereby they reflect upon the process and implications of the discussion. This final discussion with the whole team is embedded within a learning organisation model based on the systemic levels going from the professional to the wider context. This portion takes 20 minutes. Figure 1 was provided to all team members as an aide-memoire to support their engagement throughout the RT process.

Data collection

Participants provided free-text responses to open-ended questions on an online survey platform at one-month post-implementation (Time 1) and ten-months post-implementation (Time 2), to evaluate participants’ views of RT as a process of change within the EPS over time (see Figure 1). Participants were invited to

share their views during a period of four weeks at each time interval. Survey questions were developed based on Leadbetter’s (2017, p.269) integration of the key components of CHAT ‘*activity systems*’, to explore participants’ views and experiences of their collective RT activity (see Figure 3).

Data analysis

Phase one: Reflective thematic analysis

Data analysis involved two phases. In phase one, the researcher engaged in a six-stage process of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), following the approach outlined by Braun and Clark (2006, 2019, 2020). Participants’ free-text responses to open-ended questions in the online survey were coded and categorised by the researcher, to identify patterns of meaning and recurrent themes, across the entire dataset (see Table 2). Consistent with other online survey studies

Table 2: Example of Data Coding and Identification of Themes.

Participant ID	Participant Role	Data extract	Data extract code	Theme
EP3	Educational Psychologist	Question: 'What constrains the work?' Participant response: 'Not allowing time at the end of the discussion to complete the paperwork together.'	Not enough time	Time and other priorities

(e.g. Peel, 2009), prevalence of themes was counted in terms of the number of participants who articulated each theme across the dataset.

Phase two: Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT)

Braun and Clarke (2006, p.97), whose approach to thematic analysis guided the initial phase of data analysis adopted in the present work, noted that 'thematic analysis has limited interpretative power beyond mere description if it is not used within an existing theoretical framework that anchors the analytic claims that are made.' Indeed, a key aspect of *reflective* thematic analysis involves identifying the theoretical assumptions which inform the analysis (Braun & Clark, 2020).

Yamagata-Lynch (2010, p.5) highlight the value of CHAT in helping researchers to 'make sense of complex real-world data in a manageable and meaningful manner'. Similarly, CHAT has been credited with being capable of mapping the complex practices and systems that exist in professional practice (Greenhouse, 2013). In the context of EP practice, CHAT has been used as a theoretical approach to study and facilitate service development and changes within EP service delivery over

time, on both small and large scales, in response to the need for EPs to adapt their practice in line with legislation and other priorities (Leadbetter, 2017; e.g. Capper & Soan, 2022; Davies et al., 2008). As such, it was considered that CHAT would provide a useful theoretical framework to inform the researcher's interpretive analysis of the data in this study. Similarly, given the context in which the research was undertaken, which related to an EPS engaged in adapting its practice over time using *Reflecting Teams* as a new approach within its service delivery, it was hoped that the developmental perspective of CHAT would facilitate the analysis of data over the course of the academic school session.

CHAT was used as a theoretical and conceptual framework to collect and analyse the data (see Engeström, 1999, 2015). The fundamental assumptions of this framework suggest that activities are driven by a need to transform an *object*, which can be a concrete or abstract representation of the goal of an activity, into an *outcome*. *Actions* can be undertaken by individuals or groups of people, defined as *subject(s)*, and may lead to transformations. Vygotsky (1978) contended that the actions of subjects in pursuit of an object, are mediated by *tools*, or artefacts,

Figure 4: Vygotsky's (1978) Semiotic Model of Basic Mediated Action.

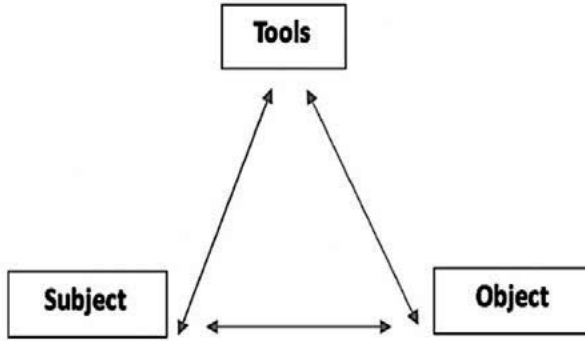
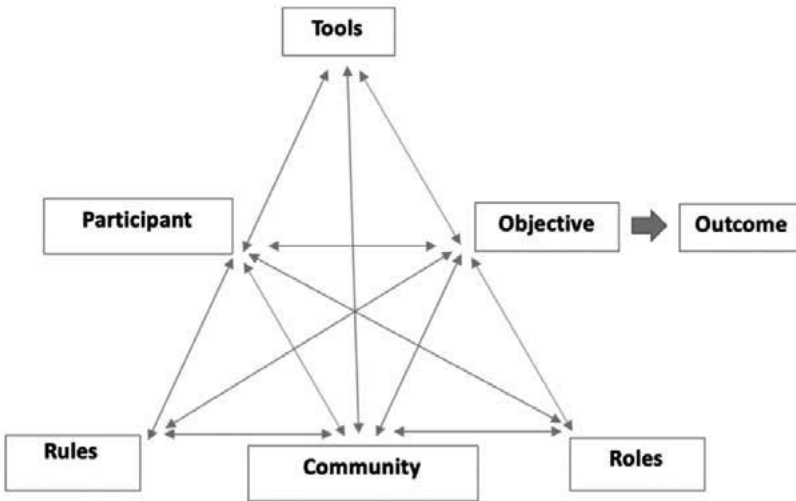


Figure 5: The Basic Structure of an Activity System.



which can be material or psychological (see Figure 4).

Engeström (2015) emphasised that the interactions between individuals to achieve the *object* of their activity mediate and are mediated by, their membership in a *community* of other participants within an *activity system*. Interactions within these communities are influenced by *rules* and a *division of labour* (i.e. distributions of roles, tasks, and responsibilities), which are usually historically determined (Davies et al., 2008; see Figure 5).

Themes identified in the data were interpreted through the lens of CHAT and

mapped onto the components of activity systems, reflecting the data gathered at each time interval (see Table 3). The activity systems for each time interval were then analysed and compared, to identify any *contradictions* and historical aspects (see Figure 6).

Contradictions are a key principle of CHAT as they are sources of tension, disturbance and eventually change and development (Engeström, 2015; Leadbetter, 2017). By examining contradictions between and within activity systems, it has been suggested that new *objects* can be created and new ways of working developed (Engeström, 2015;

Leadbetter, 2017). *Historicity* is another key aspect of CHAT, as activity systems continually develop and transform over long periods of time. Examining these historical aspects and, therefore, the formation of systems, may inform understanding of current activity systems (Engeström, 2015; Leadbetter, 2017).

Results

The results are presented as follows. A narrative account of identified themes is presented, which includes illustrative quotes from participants. A range of themes were identified in the data and interpreted through the lens of CHAT. Themes were organised in relation to the components of EPs' *Reflecting Teams* activity: *object*, *outcome*, *community*, *supportive rules*, *constraining rules*, *roles*, and *tools*. CHAT analysis of participants' views at Time 1 and Time 2 resulted in the identification of seven *contradictions* in relation to EPs' perceptions of their *Reflecting Teams* activity (see Table 3). Contradictions were identified in relation to the object of activity (1. '*learning vs. implementing*'); outcomes (2. '*stakeholder-oriented vs. practitioner-oriented*'); rules (3. '*protected time vs. not enough time*'); roles (4. '*equitable participation*' and 5. '*safety vs vulnerability*'); community (6. '*actual community vs. ideal community*'); and tools (7. '*online platforms vs. in-person meetings*'). Identified contradictions relating to each activity system component are illustrated in Figure 6.

Object of reflecting teams activity

Contradiction: Learning vs. implementing

Data indicated a more developed picture of implementation at Time 2, with EPs describing the object of activity (i.e. what they were actually working on), to be focused on 'Using RT as a model of support and supervision to address tricky issues/cases that are identified as an area that would benefit from exploration. There is also a view to see how this model could be used across the LA' (EP10). EPs reported

'Using Reflective Teams on a regular basis within team meetings to provide opportunities for problem-holders to present issues or topics and gain a range of perspectives' (EP1). Participants' earlier considerations about how they might incorporate RT into their own practice were transformed and had become focused on how implementation might even be further extended, to include colleagues from across the wider LA.

Outcome of reflecting teams activity

Contradiction: Stakeholder-oriented vs. practitioner-oriented

At Time 1, EPs emphasised stakeholder-oriented outcomes of their RT activity; that the result of their work was 'To help develop our understanding of the use of reflective teams, so it can be used to support practice with establishments and families later' (EP7). However, perceived outcomes appeared to become practitioner-oriented at Time 2, with themes related to supporting EPs' understanding of complex problems, enhancing EP practice, and strengthening EPs' skills. New ways of working also appeared to have developed by Time 2, with EPs (n=5) commenting that RT had become a mechanism for peer support and staff wellbeing.

Community

Contradiction: Actual community vs. ideal community

Those perceived to be involved in the activity changed between Time 1 and Time 2 (see Table 5). Whereas education management and systemic practice tutors were perceived to be involved at Time 1, they were not involved at Time 2. This was perceived as problematic by some who appealed for the continued involvement of the external training providers as this 'would keep us on track with the principles of the method etc and ensure fidelity to the approach' (EP10). At Time 1, there were aspirations for the future involvement of school staff,

teachers, multi-agency partners and families; though this had not yet been realised by Time 2. However, one participant (EP8) did comment that staff from an Early Level and Childcare (ELC) establishment had noted their interest.

Rules mediating reflecting teams activity

Contradiction: Protected time vs. not enough time

Participants commented that ‘Having planned and scheduled time for discussion’ (EP8), ‘Allocated time’ (EP5) and ‘Protecting significant time’ (EP3), supported participants’ engagement in RT activity. Constraining factors included ‘Finding the time to use reflective teams’ (EP6) and ‘Investing time into it (potential to fall off agenda)’ (EP2). However, data indicated that ‘...issues with time factors are being addressed (ongoing)’ (EP2). At Time 2, new working practices had been developed, with RT being ‘incorporated into team meeting time, which is protected time within the service, as part of the quality improvement calendar. This ensures RT stays on the table as it were and promotes full participation by everyone in the team’ (EP7).

Roles

Contradiction: Equitable participation

There appeared to be contradictions about how equitably roles were distributed in practice. Participants noted that ‘Roles are discussed and negotiated collaboratively’ (EP3) and that ‘The work is shared out evenly with people taking on different roles, tasks and responsibilities’ (EP5). However, there were calls to ‘Maybe rotate the membership of the sub-group after a few discussions to ensure different perspectives are experienced’ (EP3) and to ‘Find a way to ensure that everyone’s “burning issues” are considered’ (EP8), suggesting that the distribution of the role of presenter, specifically, had been limited within the EPS team.

Contradiction: Safety vs. vulnerability

There were contradictions between EPs’ perceptions of reflecting teams as a place of safety versus a place of vulnerability. On the one hand, EPs reported that ‘Roles are distributed through an opt in approach and no practitioner is coerced into a role which is important for establishing a safe place to talk’ (EP1). However, others noted that ‘presenting a case to the whole team can put a presenter in quite a vulnerable position’ (EP10).

Tools

Contradiction: Online platforms vs. in-person meetings

EPs reported advantages and disadvantages of using an online meeting platform, compared to in-person alternatives. Practical benefits highlighted that ‘...cameras can be switched off and muted whilst speakers and sub-groups are engaged in the different stages of discussion’ (EP1). However, others perceived that ‘Though the online platform has its advantages, this practice does in some ways take away from the very human experience that is arguably inherent in the RT approach and risks losing some of the interpersonal qualities that might be developed and drawn upon in an in-person format’ (EP10).

Table 3: Identified Themes and Contradictions Mapped Against Activity Systems Components.

Activity Component	Themes		Contradictions
	1 month post-implementation (Time 1)	10 months post-implementation (Time 2)	Comparing Time 1 and Time 2
Object of activity (What people are working on)	Supporting Casework (3)	Using Reflecting Teams (6): During Team Meetings (4) As a model of support/supervision (1) Using Reflecting Teams in practice (1)	Learning vs. Implementing
	Improving practice (2)		
	Collaborative work (2)		
	Potential implementation with stakeholders (5)		
	Learning about Reflecting Teams (2)	Discussing Tricky Issues and Casework (3)	
		Considering how to implement across LA (1)	
Outcome (What people are working to achieve)	Improving/developing a clearer, more effective, more consistent approach to our practice (9)	Support understanding of complex problems (4)	Stakeholder-Oriented vs. Practitioner-Oriented
		Enhance practice (4)	
	Finding better ways to support stakeholders through our practice, either through individual casework (5) with families, or working with establishments (4)	Strengthening skills to use Reflecting Teams in practice (2)	
		Peer Support and Staff Wellbeing (5)	
Community (Who is involved)	EPS team (7)	Researchers (4)	Actual Community vs. Ideal Community
	Systemic practice tutors (4)	Trainee Educational Psychologists (3)	
	Education management (2)	The whole EPS team (3)	
	Could be more in future (5): School staff/Teachers (3) Multi-agency partners (1) Families (1)	Play Therapist (3)	
		Administrative/Clerical Staff (3)	
		Educational Psychologists (2)	
Learning about Reflecting Teams (2)	Others in the past and future (2): Trainers in the past (1) ELC staff interested for future (1)		

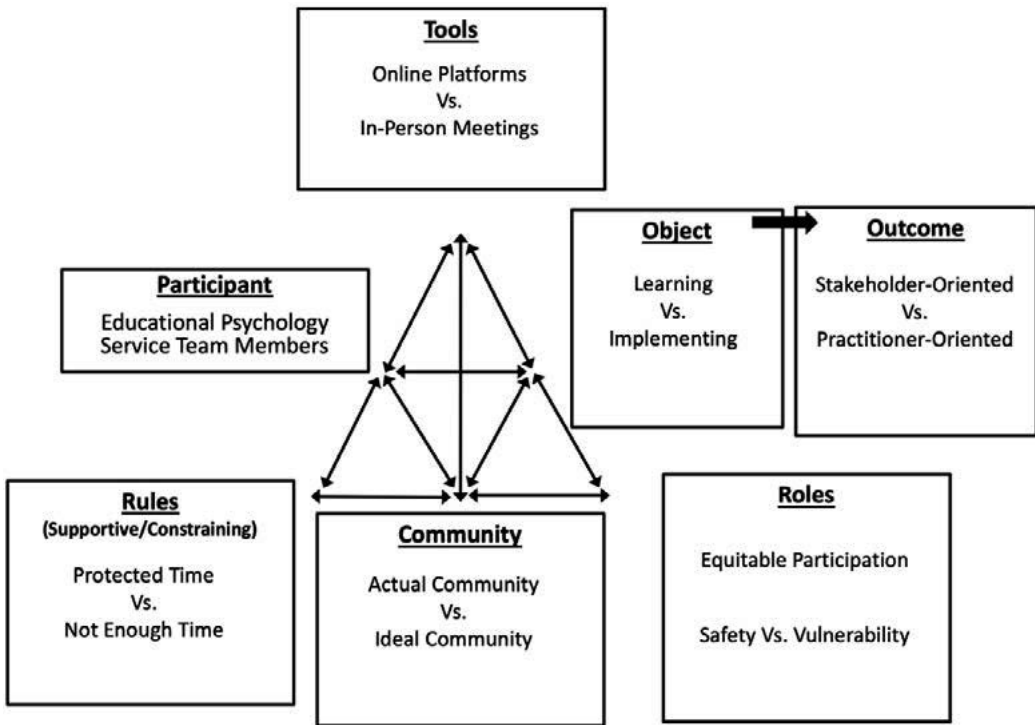
Table 3: Identified Themes and Contradictions Mapped Against Activity Systems Components. (continued).

Activity Component	Themes		Contradictions
	1 month post-implementation (Time 1)	10 months post-implementation (Time 2)	Comparing Time 1 and Time 2
Rules: Supporting (What supports the work with everyone who is involved)	Team's commitment/motivation to change. (7)	Time (5)	Protected Time vs. Not Enough Time
	Protected time given to development of Systemic Practice (7)	Professional boundaries, structure, and processes (3)	
	Training and support from Systemic Practice tutors (5)	Continued engagement in training (3)	
	Support from managers (4)	Support from management (2)	
	Having a mix of individuals within the team. (3)	Support from team (4) Non-judgemental (2) Respectful (2)	
	Discussions within the team. (3)	Listening (2) Trust (1)	
Rules: Constraining (What constrains the work with everyone involved)	Time and other priorities (7)	Time: Frequency of Reflecting Teams (1)	Protected Time vs. Not Enough Time
	Limited understanding of reflective teams. (6)	Online rather than in-person meetings (2)	
	Aspects of the approach may be too structured and may benefit from being adapted. (3)	Implementation fidelity at risk (2)	
		"The desire to fix" vs. "Just reflecting" (1)	
	Need to make sure team members feel safe and comfortable. (2)	Equity of contributions within a voluntary process (2)	
		No training input anymore (1)	

Table 3: Identified Themes and Contradictions Mapped Against Activity Systems Components. (continued).

Activity Component	Themes		Contradictions
	1 month post-implementation (Time 1)	10 months post-implementation (Time 2)	Comparing Time 1 and Time 2
Roles (How the work is shared)	Development and implementation (3)	Participants do different roles (4) Presenter vs. Reflecting Group (1)	Equitable Participation Safety vs. Vulnerability
	Evaluation of implementation (2)	Everyone participating vs. Some participating (e.g. Trainee EPs only) (2)	
	Engaging in Reflecting Teams discussions (6)	Safe Space vs. Vulnerability (2)	
	Training and learning to use Reflecting Teams (5)		
	Reflecting Teams Roles should be rotated (1)		
Tools/ resources/ language/ skills/ approaches (What is being used)	Virtual platform/WebEx (4)	Online meeting place (6)	Online Platforms vs. In-Person Meetings
	Systemic Family Therapy Model of Formulation (2)		
	Compassionate/therapeutic approaches, e.g. Active listening and non-judgemental language (6)	Systemic Practice approaches (3) Listening (5) Use of Language (4) Format/structure (2) Web Cameras (3)	
	Solution-oriented approach (2)		

Figure 6: Identified Contradictions in Participants' Experiences and Perceptions of Reflecting Teams as an Activity System Between Time 1 and Time 2.



Discussion

This study set out to explore the perceptions and experiences of EPs in one LA EPS, regarding their use of *Reflecting Teams* via an online virtual meeting platform, during one academic school session. Findings suggested that EPs positively perceived and experienced using Andersen's (1987, 1990, 1992) RT method in practice, using an online meeting platform. These findings extend those of recent research which reported that EPs perceived that they benefitted from being trained in the use of *Reflecting Teams*, via traditional in-person methods (Amod & Miller, 2019). Participants in the current study perceived that RTs were supportive and allowed them to enhance their practice; regularly explore complex problems collaboratively with colleagues; and receive peer-support, which enhanced staff well-being. These findings were consistent with previous reports that EPs perceived they enhanced their own therapeutic skills,

by learning from the insights and experiences of colleagues during the RT process (Amod & Miller, 2019). Findings from the current study indicated that EPs appealed for equitable participation and contribution from their colleagues during RT activities; supporting previous reports that trainee therapists value multi-perspective contributions (Chang, 2010; Falke et al., 2015).

Whilst EPs valued the learning experiences gained from working collaboratively with colleagues during RTs, some noted that presenting to their colleagues while being observed, could evoke feelings of vulnerability and that some EPs contributed to RTs in the 'presenter' role more than others. This finding compares with Amod and Miller's (2019) research, which found that EPs experienced anxiety when being observed by other EPs during RTs. Amod and Miller (2019) suggested that the perceived anxiety-provoking nature of being observed, may negatively affect a practitioner's ability

to engage fully during the RT process. Findings in the current study would seem to support this suggestion.

Participants in the current study described the challenges that they experienced while engaging with RTs in practice, including an appeal for increased training in the use of RT, which reflected Amod and Miller's (2019) findings. Specifically, EPs highlighted a desire for continued training and support, to ensure implementation fidelity. EPs' concerns around having enough time to engage in RT were also consistent with Amod and Miller's (2019) findings. However, encouragingly, these concerns were mitigated when time was protected, within scheduled EPS team meetings.

EPs highlighted advantages and disadvantages of using an online platform to facilitate their engagement in reflecting teams. Benefits included functional aspects of the platform, such as the ability to disable audio and visual features, which supported the RT process. However, the reliance on an online platform was perceived by some to limit the quality and potential benefits of the RT process, which some perceived may have been more fully realised through an in-person format. Békés and Aafjes-van Doorn (2021) described similar findings, noting that many therapists reported that online therapeutic approaches felt less authentic or genuine than face-to-face methods.

Limitations and future research directions

While the findings of the current study offer some insight into the potential utility and application of Andersen's (1987) *Reflecting Teams* within EP practice, there are several limitations that need to be acknowledged. Generalisation of the results is limited as a purposive sampling procedure was utilised, with all participants recruited from one LA EPS. Therefore, the views expressed by the participants in the current study may not be representative of EPs practicing in other LA contexts. Future research may benefit from including participants in other EPS contexts.

Similarly, it may be useful for future research to include EPs engaging in RTs through traditional in-person formats, to provide a more direct comparison with the findings of Amod and Miller's (2019) study. The current study adopted a two-phase approach to data collection and analysis, involving thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2020) and CHAT (Engeström, 1999, 2015). It may be suggested that supplementing thematic analyses with other methods, such as CHAT, may be unnecessary (Braun & Clark, 2019). Other researchers may prefer to interpret findings using alternative conceptual or theoretical frameworks, or to rely on an analysis of data based on the identification of themes, without a specific theoretical interpretation per se. However, it was considered that CHAT provided an appropriate and useful, evidence-based theoretical methodology, which added value to the exploration of EPs' experiences of integrating a novel approach to practice, within a complex systemic working environment.

Conclusion

This study explored the perceptions and experiences of EPs using Andersen's (1987, 1990, 1992) RT method in practice. The findings present data which may represent the only reported sample of practicing EPs using RT through an online virtual meeting platform, within a LA EPS context in Scotland and possibly the UK. EPs reported that using RT in their practice provided the following benefits: support with complex problems and challenges experienced in their case-work and general practice, peer-support from colleagues, and enhanced staff well-being. These findings reflect those of recent studies (e.g. Amod & Miller, 2019).

EPs highlighted the following supporting and constraining factors which mediated their engagement in RT: time, training, resources, distribution of roles and the importance of ensuring a sense of safety for participants engaging in RT. The current study highlights the potential value of Andersen's (1987) *Reflecting Team* model as

an approach to systemic practice and family therapy, applied within the context of EP practice. Directions for future research may benefit by including participants from other EP services in Scotland and the UK, gathering demographic data from participants to provide further scope for analysis, and exploring perceptions of Scottish and UK LA-based EPs using *Reflecting Teams* in practice, through an in-person format.

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The author

John Niven
Educational Psychologist
Inverclyde Council
John.Niven@inverclyde.gov.uk

Educational Psychology Service
Inverclyde Council
Wallace Place
Greenock
PA15 1JB

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