

Digital inclusion initiative provision in UK rural communities - a multilevel phenomenon

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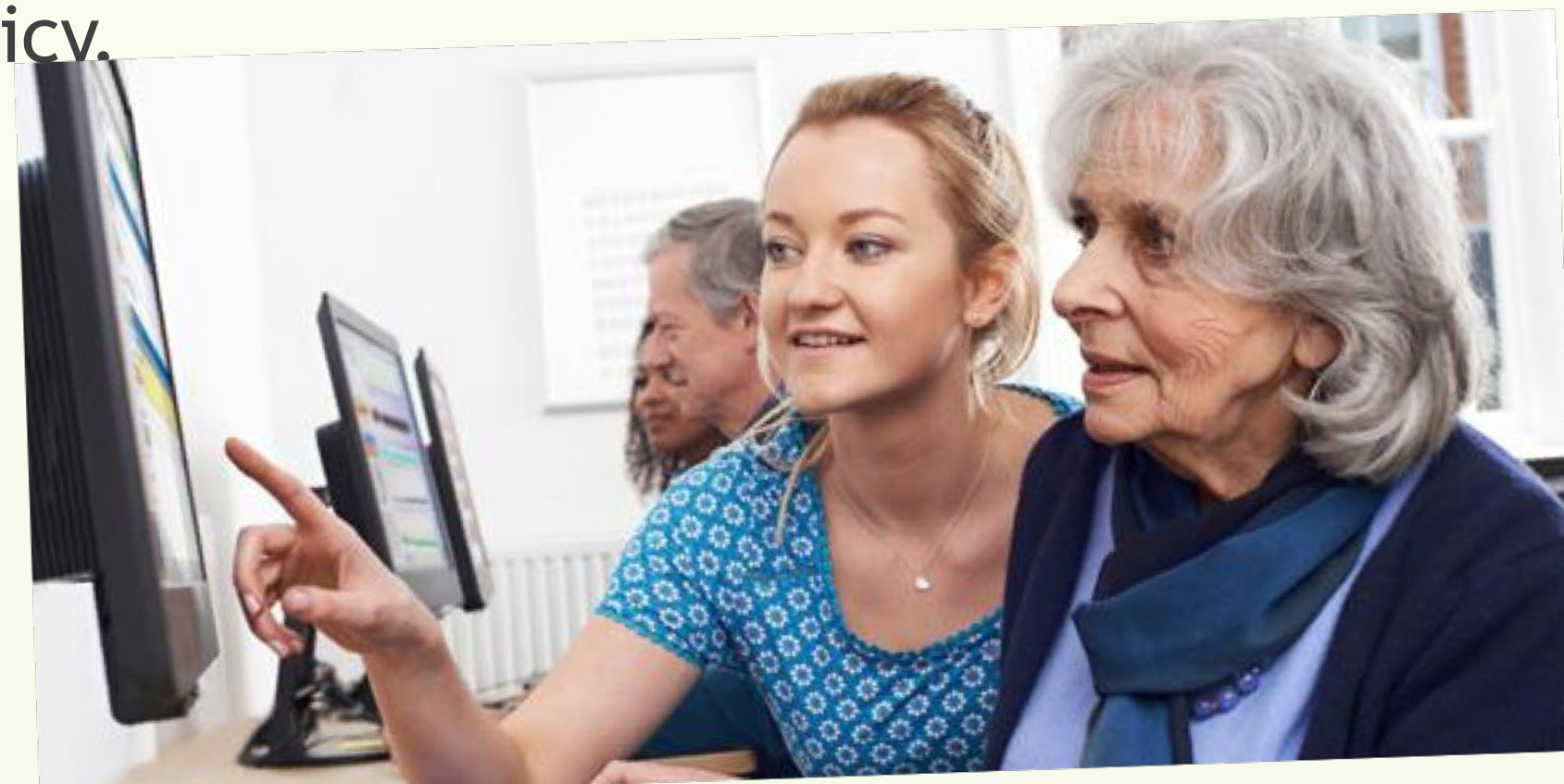
INTRODUCTION

Digital inclusion remains a priority for the UK Government, yet despite many national campaigns and initiatives to reduce digital inequality, a segment of society remains disengaged from digital technology.

At a national level 5.3 million UK adults are non-users of the internet (ONS, 2018); and 12% of rural premises cannot access a decent broadband connection (Ofcom, 2018).

Digital inclusion initiatives are designed to address digital inequalities but struggle due to the incorporation of narrowly conceived, short-term, technology-centric solutions and the multiple factors which contribute to digital exclusion

This study challenges the current 'utopian' discourse in digital inclusion rhetoric by providing a critical discussion of digital inclusion initiative provision as a **multilevel phenomenon** in the context of UK rural communities, against a backdrop of digitalisation and digital-by-default policy.

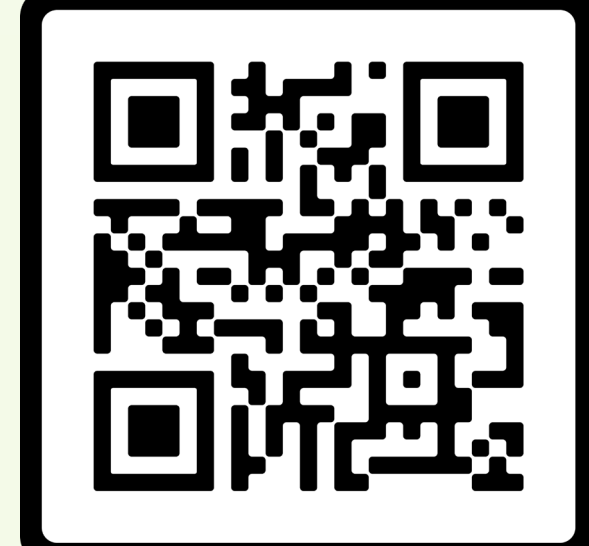


RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How are digital inclusion initiatives approached, driven and delivered in UK rural communities?

What role do digital inclusion intermediaries and actors play in the delivery of digital inclusion initiative training and support in UK rural communities?

What is the experience of people living in UK rural communities who receive digital inclusion initiative training and support?



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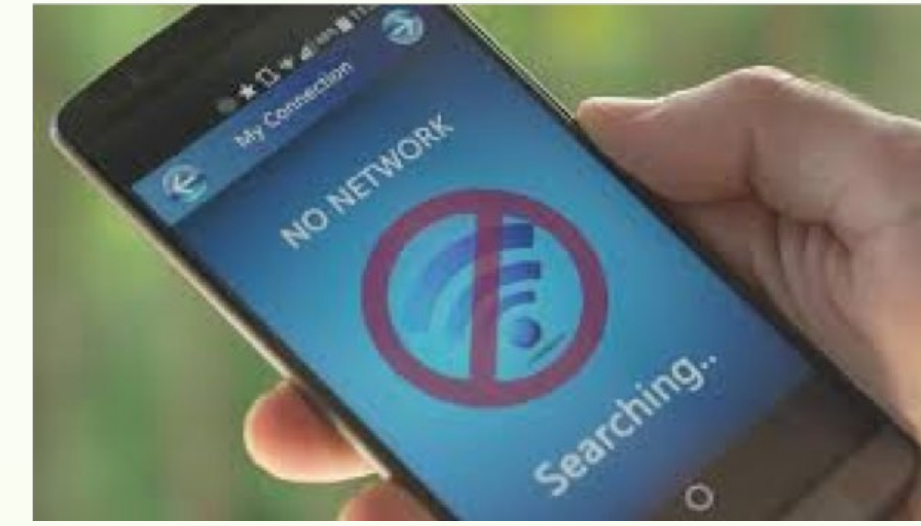
RESEARCH DESIGN

Qualitative exploratory case study

Multilevel framework

Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clark, 2005)

Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987, 2001)



MULTILEVEL FRAMEWORK

A multilevel framework is devised to capture a multilevel perspective of digital inclusion initiative provision in UK rural communities across three levels of stakeholders:

National level - Digital inclusion stakeholders that operate nationally across the UK (including those working in consultancy; government departments, and head offices of government funded bodies and national third sector organisations)

Intermediary level - Intermediaries delivering digital inclusion training and support in three specific rural regions of the UK with populations at increased risk of digital exclusion (regional branches of national government bodies and organisations, through to hyper-local organisations, such as Local Authorities, housing associations, advice centres, and library services; learning centres, sports associations, community centres, schools, and churches.

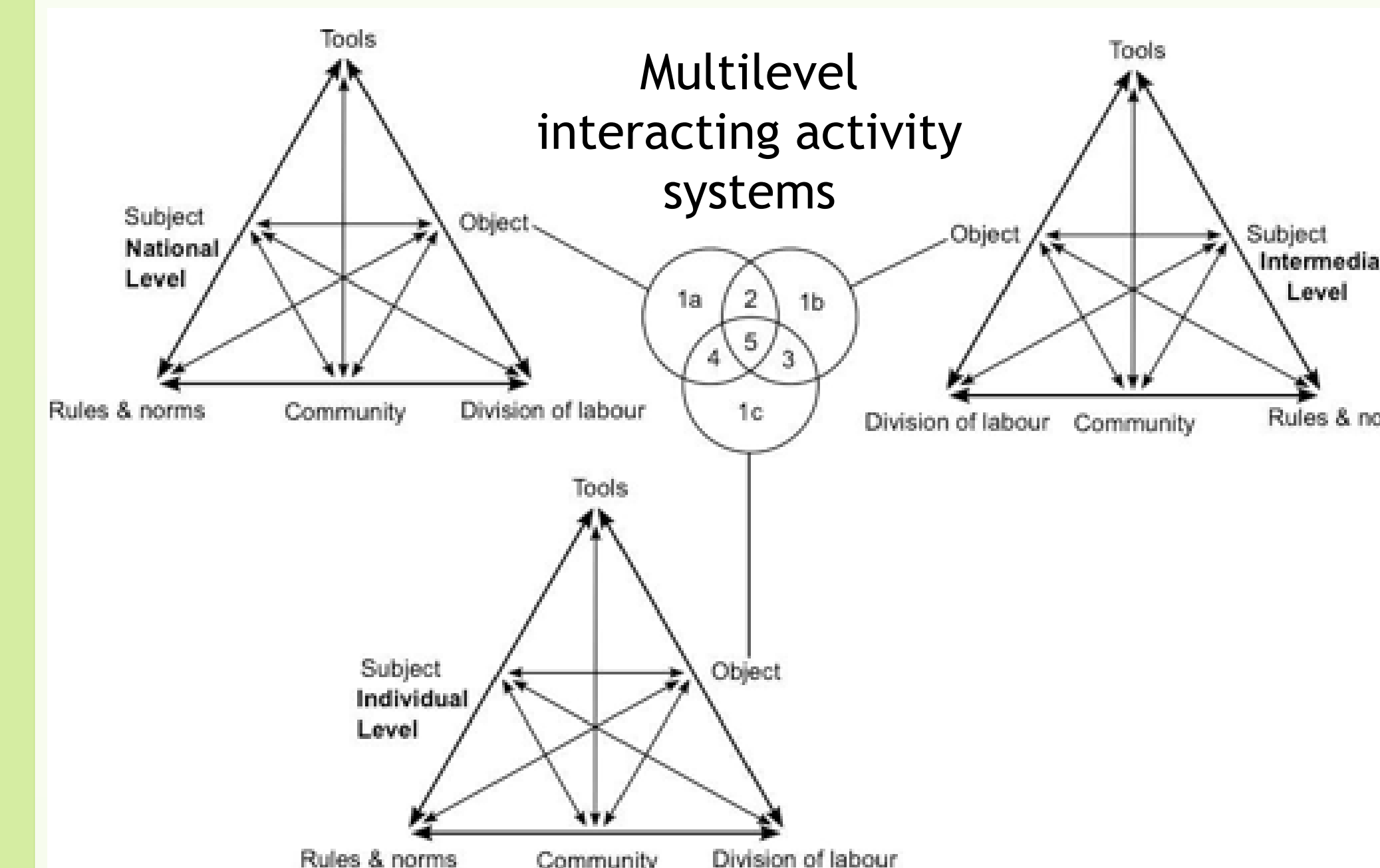
Individual level - Individuals who have received digital inclusion support within three specific rural locations (as above) that have received digital inclusion training and support for everyday life and workplace activities

DATA COLLECTION

- 50 semi-structured interviews
- 2 focus groups
- 10 Observations - training/support sessions
- Document review of national digital inclusion policy and digital inclusion training resources

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This study utilised third-generation Activity Theory as an analytical framework to explore and analyse the interplay of the elements within a single activity system at national, intermediary, and individual-level, and then analysed together through a multilevel activity system. This approach exposed contradictions in the intersections between the activity systems that are working towards a shared object (Engeström, 2001).



SELECTED FINDINGS

Intermediary organisations' play a key role in digital inclusion initiative provision, but assumptions are made that they possess adequate skills to impart onto others and have adequate resource and funding;

'Reactionary' approaches to digital inclusion have increased, due to the *fall-out* from digital-by-default online systems, placing pressure on the resources of intermediary organisations and forcing individuals seek assistance and support;

There has been a shift to 'Integrated' approaches involving the training of front-line workers (e.g. staff in care homes/housing associations) who interact with 'hard to reach' communities have increased but not all experiences are positive - *'I work with staff who are angry about digital because they see the terrible impact it is having on the most vulnerable people'*

Digital inclusion training and support is provided to individuals from 'all walks of life', not just the digitally excluded, but not everyone has beneficial outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals a significant contradiction in the UK Digital Strategy which on the one hand promotes digital inclusion, but on the other hand promotes digital-by-default, which despite the strategy's best intention is driving the digital exclusion of those most in need of support, particularly those living in UK rural communities;

Intermediary organisations and actors play a significant bridging role in digital inclusion initiative provision through knowledge sharing and boundary spanning behaviours that help align thinking between stakeholders operating at different levels, in different sectors within the digital inclusion 'ecosystem';

The utilisation of Activity Theory, enabled this study to reveal contradictions and mechanisms and a granular analysis of the dynamics, processes, experiences, and behaviours of those involved in digital inclusion training and support.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Digital inclusion policy and initiatives should be situated within the realms of community development and recognised as lifelong learning/capacity-building strategies rather than short-term digital skills training initiatives;

The nuanced nature of peoples' motivation and contextual factors that influence their attitudes, need to be considered when designing digital inclusion initiative training and support, replacing 'one-size-fits-all', approaches that lead to potential negative experiences and consequences.

CONTRIBUTIONS

New insights on how Activity Theory can be used to unpick the complexity of digital inclusion initiative provision as a multilevel phenomenon;

Activity Theory is extended demonstrated through the "granularity of the subject" which enables the multi-actor involvement of the stakeholders involved in digital inclusion to emerge.

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