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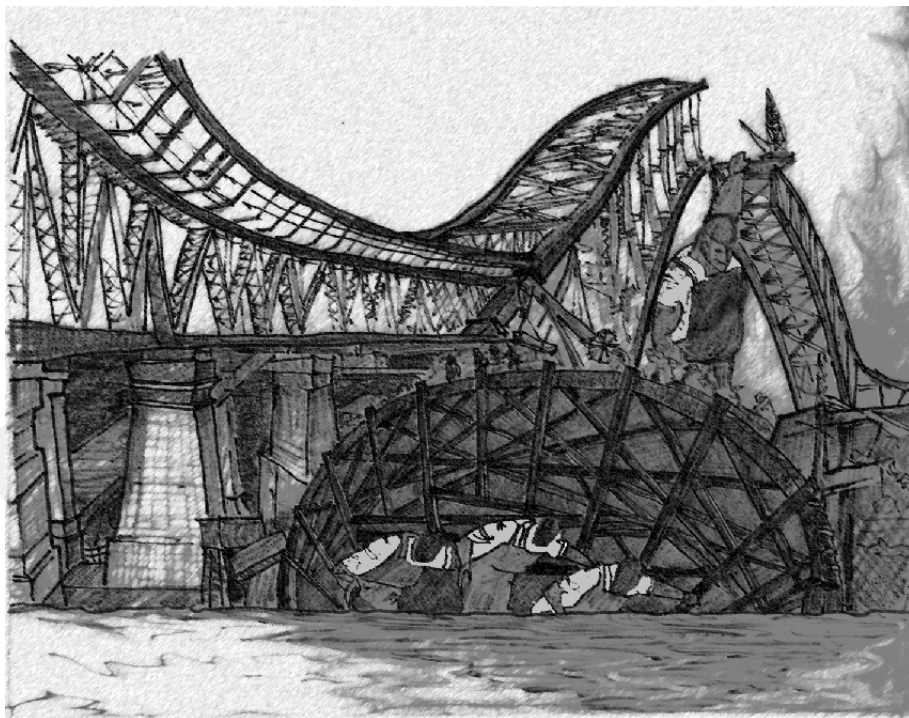
Relational & Youth Child Care Practice

(formerly *The Journal of Child & Youth Care*, established 1982) is committed to promoting and supporting the profession of Child and Youth Care through disseminating the knowledge and experience of individuals involved in the day-to-day lives of young people.

This commitment is founded upon the belief that all human issues, including personal growth and development, are essentially “relational”.

Searching for bridges in all the wrong places?

Heather Snell



As we have come to expect this issue of RCYCP offers much to the reader. From Jitters to Fritters, Pancakes to Faith, the writing is diverse, challenging, reflective and sometimes conversational. Heather Modlin and Janet Newbury, along with

James Anglin and Kiaras Ghirabaghi invite us into their far ranging and at times intimate dialogue. Janet and Heather were curious about finding ways to talk about how “we can better conceptualize and enact our collective commitments in the field of child and youth care” This is a wonderful invitation to dialogue – but I wonder if the conversation is too complex to be limited to language. As I read Heather and Janet’ conversation I imagined builders, and bridges emerging from a shared river. When I read the introduction and commentary offered by James and Kiaras – visions of fantastical structures joined by people not technology came to mind. So the opening paragraph to this editorial is wordless; and my own response to the diversity of our field is to imagine it differently.

Heather and Janet begin with the metaphor of bridge building as a way to “value the diverse commitments and contributions” of contemporary child and Youth Care practice.” Their intention is to find “a way to bring all of this together - without dichotomizing any of it.” A challenging feat. In his introductory comments to Heather and Janet, James Anglin observes that our field has a long history of conversations about a “search for a ‘unified something.’ Nearly twenty years ago, Henry Maier (1987) suggested the lack of an integrative focus in child and youth care was a problem for workers and administrators alike. Maier’s suggestion was to “achieve some sort of integrative focus - what Albert E. Trieschman called a “unifying something” - as a basis for building a coherent helping environment ... for professional child care work.” (xiv)

The bridge metaphor then leads me to understand that as a profession, we are searching to build bridges as a way to become unified. Interesting. Although the symbolism is helpful - the language is limiting. A search is a process of discovery – suggesting that the thing we are searching for does not already exist. Surely Child and Youth Care exists, has existed for sometime, and is not in need of being ‘discovered’? Like the word search, the word ‘bridge’ can also be used as a noun or a verb. A bridge is a structure that allows passage, but ‘to bridge’ is a verb that describes the tying together of two separate points. Two points? If child and youth care practice is as diverse as we maintain, then surely we need to span more than two positions? To describe our process of identity formation as bridge building limits us to two points of view positioned across a divide. The limitation here is not that we are searching and building. Seeking out, reflecting, putting things together, meaning making and collaboration are core characteristics of child and youth care practice. The limitation is in our language, not in our desire for exploration, or co-construction. Could it be that relying on verbal discourse confines our ability to imagine ourselves? Could it be that intuitively there are ways to demonstrate and illustrate that unity exists in diversity, that

bridges can emerge without moorings, and that effort is most often animated from a variety of points of view? Could it be that bridges are fluid experiences and that it is our shoulders that can span the gaps that structures cannot? Could our search for a unifying something not be about discovery, but rather a word we use when the familiar is unfamiliar? Perhaps we are what we are searching for? As you read Heather and Janet's superb writing, close your eyes every now and then. What does it feel like? How do you picture our identity? I invite you to share those images.

My response to Heather and Janet's conversation is my sketch - a visual response which I believe merits inclusion in the array of thinking, talking and writing about child and youth care identity. Perhaps visual forms can offer us what language cannot - ways of experiencing unity that are not dichotomous; ways that are fantastic, and intangible - ways that grant attention to other viewpoints, and ways to conceptualize, locate and recognize ourselves as "we who challenge the status-quo ... " What do you imagine?

Reference

Maier, Henry W. (1987). *Developmental Group Care of Children and Youth: Concepts and Practice*. Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Press. (p. xiv).

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Thinking and Doing Together 'as a Field'

Heather Modlin and Janet Newbury

Preface by Jim Anglin

Commentary by Kiaras Gharabaghi

Abstract

This article is an effort to have some of the difficult conversations about the field of Child and Youth Care (CYC), recognizing we do not all have the same starting place. Perhaps more importantly, it recognizes we do not all have the same outcomes in mind either. Knowing, however, that we are all 'in this together' in our shared commitment to the well-being of children, youth, and families, we must talk to each other. Practicing some of the relational skills we advocate in our work, with this writing we embark on the not-so-easy, but extremely fulfilling journey of learning to listen differently to each other and in the process, feel ourselves changed. Drawing on relational theories – particularly White's (2007) notion of praxis which sees relational engagement as an ongoing practice – we consider how we might better support children, youth, and families by being different kinds of allies and colleagues to each other. In the spirit of dialogue, we invited a preface from Jim Anglin and a commentary from Kiaras Gharabaghi to frame this article. We provided a short response to Kiaras and we invite readers to continue to the conversation.

Keywords

Child and Youth Care; communities of difference; praxis; professionalization; relational practice.

Preface by Jim Anglin

We are in the age of instant messaging, with text messages, tweets, Facebook posts, chatrooms and blogs abounding. While this is wonderful for basic communication, it can make true dialogue challenging. Personal experiences can become targets for drive-by sniping and points of view can be taken as other-judging positions, leading to all kinds of misinterpretations and aspersions.

In the article which follows, Heather Modlin and Janet Newbury are attempting to communicate (not simply “municate”), and I commend them for being so open, honest and vulnerable with each other; and further, for their courage and commitment to the CYC field in sharing their dialogue publicly. While they explore the *what*, *who* and *where* of the CYC field, they more importantly demonstrate the *how* for all of us, their CYC colleagues.

There have been recent electronic “exchanges” of views on the nature of the CYC field in which both Heather and Janet have participated, examining (among other things) whether there is some unity across the apparent diversity of our field. The search for a “unified something” in our field has been ongoing at least since the time of Albert Trieschman. In the words of Henry Maier (1987):

The problem for the child care worker and the program administrator alike is to achieve some sort of integrative focus – what Albert E. Trieschman called a “unifying something” – as a basis for building a coherent helping environment...for professional child care work.”(p. xiv)

Three decades later, we seem even further from having a clear sense of a “unifying something” that helps us to define who we are and where we are located within the broad spectrum of the “helping professions”. As the excerpt above indicates, in Trieschman’s time CYC was identified primarily with work in residential settings. Modlin and Newbury indicate the great diversity of roles and settings in our field today, and suggest that at least part of what holds us together is our “collective commitment to the well-being of children, youth and families”. They also identify the notion of “relational engagement” as at the core of how we as CYC practitioners work. The notion of *working relationally* is an interesting one, and initial explorations of how this differs from “building relationship” have been made in the CYC literature (Garfat, 2008; Gharabaghi, 2009). As Modlin and Newbury observe, the field of CYC is evolving (along with the rest of society) in a “fluid” manner, and as a consequence of this process of change there comes a fluidity of identity.

So, is the search for a “unifying something” a fool’s errand – a search for a mythical

holy grail? Perhaps it is. Or, perhaps the search itself is what is most important. The reality is that we often don't really know what is possible, and that discoveries only come to those who search unceasingly in a belief that what is sought is worth searching for. In his musings about a "unifying something", Trieschman was echoing the work of Albert Einstein who conjectured that perhaps physics could formulate a "unified field theory" (Heisenberg, 1966) that would bring together the diversity of theories in physics into a single formulation. To date, there is not a consensus that this has been achieved, despite many and ongoing attempts. But the search for such unity has resulted in important and worthwhile explorations that have led to many discoveries along the way (for example "dark matter" and the "Higgs boson"). Perhaps as we search for unity within CYC, as Modlin and Newbury are doing, we will make many discoveries along the way that we would not have made if we simply declared that increasing fluidity and diversity were making "stumbling through complexities" a waste of time.

If nothing else, the journey into which Modlin and Newbury are inviting us can lead those of us choosing this path to discover more of our blind spots, which by definition (and as Modlin and Newbury note) we cannot see without the aid of others. And is this not at the heart of what our profession has been created to do with children, youth, families *and societies* – to help them to see what is in their blind spots and to use this new understanding to become more integrated and more whole? It seems to me that this is what Modlin and Newbury are calling us to do, by example – to relate to each other in open, honest and respectful ways to become more whole (healthier, more just, more caring) and to have more integrity as workers, persons and as a field. None of us will reach perfection, and neither will our profession (at least in my lifetime), but surely the journey is worth taking, and is worth the struggles and the stumbles.

Thank you, Heather and Janet, for leading the way – May the Force be with you!

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In this co-authored piece, we consider how we can better conceptualize and enact our collective commitments in the CYC field, which is increasingly diverse. What we share in common is a commitment to the well-being of children, youth, and families, but what distinguishes us from one another is how we varyingly respond to that commitment. In an effort to capture just some of this diversity – which exists inside us as we write – we have chosen to use three “voices” interchangeably: The bulk of this writing is from a third person perspective but at times we fold in a first person voice, from each author, relaying our experiences and conversations with each other throughout the challenging process of writing together across differences.

CYC practitioners find themselves in a range of settings including: schools, hospitals, residential care facilities, government agencies, non-profit organizations, nature-based programs, after-school programs, summer camps, early childhood education centres, universities, child protection offices – the list goes on. Individualistic, capitalocentric logics might lead us to see our different positions as somehow representing competing interests (Gibson-Graham, 2006). However, in this article we would like to offer another alternative. We suggest that in order to move forward together – recognizing ourselves as colleagues and allies – a different conceptualization is necessary. Fortunately, we don’t have to look far, since the work we do and teach is based on relational theories that do not presume sameness as a starting place. Rather, our practices are based on cultivating the capacity to creatively and compassionately come together across differences, particularly when it is most difficult (see Fewster, 1990; Garfat, 2003; Gharabaghi, 2008).

Some of the conceptualizations of self we rely on suggest that it is in fact in the coming together of differences that identities are formed (Gergen, 1994; Gergen, 2007; Kouri, 2011). This means, of course, that our identities are fluid, changing with new conditions (something we can attest to experiencing, even in this process of co-writing). It also means that as a field, we need not reach consensus in order to get along and value the diverse commitments and contributions of those of us who identify with it. Rather, we can appreciate the possibilities for diverse actions that come with the range of skills, talents, and passions that motivate each of us differently (Cameron & Gibson-Graham, 2003; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1997) as well as the possibilities for growth that come when faced with stark differences or even conflict (Madsen & Gillespie, 2014). Change occurs when we have experiences of ourselves that are different from our previous experiences (Garfat & Fulcher, 2011; Phelan, 2001).

In preparing for (and throughout) this writing, as co-authors we were simultaneously immersed in a lengthy and in-depth email exchange as part of our own relational

engagement with one another. We knew that understanding each other as *people* (rather than only understanding our ideas or positions) would be crucial for the kind of empathy required for us to really hear each other (Madsen, 2007). In other words, we were engaged in a kind of relational practice as we wrote together. Here are some of our reflections in the early stages of this process:¹

***JN:** I think we're both interested in bridge-building, and I'm curious to find a way to talk about all of this. It feels like each time we (or others) try to break down divides it somehow further fans the flames of entrenchments that already exist. ... I like the notion of diverse possibilities for intervention. It takes all of us - as a community of practice - working together. If researchers, practitioners, families, policy makers, etc. aren't talking to each other, then it's children and families who will lose out. They will experience the support they receive as fragmented (at best) or even detrimental. But if we see ourselves as significant partners in all of this, amazing things can and do happen. ...*

I see great evidence in my community of these kinds of productive collaborations, and I get the sense from what you wrote about families receiving competent care that you probably do too.

***HM:** I agree with you completely - it's fascinating how even mentioning that there may be a divide can result in a battening down of the hatches, a (usually inadvertent) scramble to protect our own positions. I have been guilty of this without even realizing it. I am grateful for the opportunity to engage in this dialogue and I think your ideas for bridge-building are excellent. If we could find a way to bring all of this together - without dichotomizing any of it - that would be a significant feat.*

Ironically, although most of my writing tends to focus on issues related to direct practice, within the direct care context I am very focused on social justice and relentless in advocating for the rights of individual children and families, and CYC

- 1 All text that appears in italicized font here and throughout the remainder of this article is either drawn directly from the email exchanges that took place between the two authors or emergent reflections. Though they are direct excerpts, they are removed from their original context. Many details have been omitted for the sake of succinctness, and at times the order has been altered for the sake of flow.

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