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Relational Child & Youth 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".

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Pay More Attention to the Menu

Heather Snell

Reading Zainab Choudhery's "The Art of Apologizing" was a stop moment for me. In her article Choudhery contrasts the use of the English word "sorry" with the German phrase "Es tut mir leid" translated as "It does me harm". Choudhery then observes that in Urdu there is no one word "sorry" - rather there are many phrases, one of which is "(Please) forgive me". Choudhery observes an important distinction here, noting the difference between 'sorry' and 'forgiveness'; 'Sorry' being momentary while achieving forgiveness may take years. It is Choudhery's contention that the words used in an apology have an impact on the continued nature of a relationship. Well said. But I think there is more here.

As practitioners, we certainly know about the power of language. Gharabaghi (2008) writes that "Child and Youth Care practitioners spend a great deal of their time 'talking'". Relational practitioners know through everyday interactions that words are neither innocent nor neutral; that language can be vague, is rarely precise enough and that meaning is always subject to context. We know our word choices can inflict pain, escalate a conflict or be a first opening toward restoration and healing. In Child and Youth Care (CYC) relationships words have their own energy. They can encourage, help, harm, humiliate or humble. Why then, when we are so aware of the impact of our word choices in relationships, are we less mindful about our language when teaching and writing professionally about CYC practice? Could it be that we need to carefully reconsider the dominion of our professional vocabulary, or perhaps we simply need the services of a good editor?

When we define things, we give a word the power to express, to describe, and to represent our imagination. Wittgenstein (1922) suggested the “limits of my language mean the limits of my world.” Language in its everyday use then represents who and ‘how we are in the world.’ With this in mind, in a recent analysis of the learning outcomes used in the teaching of CYC practicum courses in post secondary CYC programs, I searched for congruence between the language of the course learning outcomes and the language used in CYC theory and practice – as evidenced in Child and Youth Care Domains of Practice, (CYCCB, 2010) and Garfat & Fulcher's "Characteristics of a Child and Youth Approach" (2011). Guess what? Even finding evidence of learning outcomes that used the words ‘care’ or ‘relationship’ was difficult. In reviewing over fifty course outlines supporting CYC field practicums, the word ‘love’ was never used; nor were the words ‘advocacy’, ‘intentionality’, ‘hanging in’, ‘rhythmicity’, or ‘meaning making’. The word ‘reflection’ was used occasionally, but typically as a noun referring to a required assignment. Why? How can we write about practice and yet not use the same language when we teach about it?

Gharabaghi (2008) writes about practitioners having a “responsibility to mitigate the impact of jargon” in that “virtually everything we say is embedded in the many assumptions and biases of language” implying that our value laden, unexamined language choices are oppressive while also conveying “superficial or peripheral conclusions” about young people. Is this observation a reminder to us about the power of language; or perhaps a warning about the language of power? In past years as we navigate paths to a more professional identity, the CYC lexicon has borrowed heavily and hastily from the jargon of ‘other’ professions. A review of CYC literature and course material used in teaching CYC reveals words such as ‘treatment’, ‘client’, ‘leaving care’, ‘therapy’, and ‘clinical’. I wonder if the adoption of these words represents the seeping through of otherwise well-guarded truths about our intentions to professionalize?

To be sure, “the menu is not the meal” (Watts, 1957). The words chosen in CYC writing are abstractions. They are not the thing itself. It is hoped then that these words do not well represent the reality of our practice. And yet the continued use of these words and other careless language is our choice. Our chosen word list internally represents our external hopes, events, and way of being with young people. It was through this lens that I reviewed Volume 30, Issue 3 of *Relational Child and Youth Care Practice*. Beginning with Zainab Choudhery's attentive article about the specificity of the language of an apology, I then read the care with

which terminology is parsed by Juanita Stevens as she considered the impact of “a very singular definition of motherhood”, and the power of the phrase “a bad mother”. I reflected on Tanitia Munroe’s particular attention and use of the identification words “Black Canadians”, and I noted the thoughtful tone and word choices by Mary Ventrella writing carefully about Mindfulness in CYC Education.

These contemplative CYC authors use words as if they matter. Language is not a fixed structure, but its use is intentional. And we need to pay more attention. This does not mean engaging in endless debates *about* language. We have too much real work to do. But we do need to be more intentional; is that not a characteristic of CYC? The longer I sit in academic or policy meetings, the more I read esoteric writing about CYC practice and theory the more I want to ask: ‘Are we even talking about the same thing?’ This is my plea then for readers, authors, CYC educators and practitioners to use words more carefully, more thoughtfully, and in ways that are congruent with the characteristics we have chosen to describe our practice.

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Heather Snell

has been involved in Child and Youth Care practice and education for over 30 years. From direct care in a variety of settings to CYC education Heather’s practice and approach is often eclectic, drawing her to the ‘in between’s’, merging disciplines, and supporting collaborations. After teaching and coordinating the CYC and BCYC programs at Humber College for many years, Heather is currently part time faculty with both the Ryerson University CYC undergraduate and graduate programs, and with the University of Strathclyde MSc in CYC. She is also a member of the Child and Youth Care Education Accreditation Board where she chairs the Research Committee.

The Art of Apologizing

Zainab Choudhery

Researchers have reported that the acquisition of two or more languages indicates impressive long-term benefits developmentally, psychologically, personally, and socially (Thomas & Collier, 1998). In fact, Cook (1999) suggests that multilingualists acquire skills that extend beyond the realm of linguistic knowledge. Personally, being multilingual allows me to compare different languages and appreciate the beauty, complexity, and intricacy among them. For instance, in English, the word 'sorry' or more formally, "I am sorry", is most commonly utilized, whereas in German, the formal phrase's "Es tut mir leid" literal translation is "It does me harm" but is equated to "I am sorry". Moreover, in Urdu, a language spoken most prominently in Pakistan and India, there's no direct translation for "Sorry" or "I am sorry". In fact, there's no one word to apologize. In Urdu, there exists only a phrase which translates to "(Please) forgive me". Smidt (1999) states that "forgiveness is rarely, if ever, a one-time event and may take years to complete". However, explicitly asking for forgiveness is a crucial stepping stone towards initiating the restoration of a relationship. This article intends to consider the lexicon of an apology, specifically to question whether the manner of our apology can influence the restoration of a relationship.

For me, there is beauty in the phrase "(Please) forgive me" as it makes the experience of apologizing feel more sincere, intimate, and personalized. The psychosocial stages that an individual passes through when apologizing can be compared to some of the stages in the Transtheoretical Model (TTM) originally developed by Prochaska and DiClemente (1984, 1986) for addictive behaviour change. For example, compared to "Sorry", the Urdu phrase, "(Please) forgive me" challenges the individual to recognize and accept that some harm has been afflicted and an apology is outstanding, proportionate to the second stage in the TTM: contemplation. This phrase also encourages one to reflect on what they've done and become cognizant of what is expressed, commensurate to the third stage: preparation. The fourth stage in TTM, action, is achieved when an individual

participates in the observable modification required to initiate behaviour change. Thus, the physical act of asking for forgiveness can be equated to this stage.

Just as the stages in the TTM guide behaviour change, similarly the manner in which an apology is conducted may lay the foundation for conflict resolution. Despite their parallels (i.e. TTM and behaviour change with apology presentation and conflict resolution), it is evident that there is a convergence with the later parts of each equation as they are both necessary components in ensuring a healthy and positive relationship with others. Furthermore, the phrase "(Please) forgive me" gives the receiving party a sense of authority over the situation as they are the decisive factor in accepting or declining the apology. "(Please) forgive me" also creates space for closure for both parties as the presentation of the phrase leaves little room for confusion as to whether or not the apology was accepted; although the sincerity of each party may well be questionable, as can be the case with any behaviour.

While mastering another language in its entirety offers many benefits, it can be immensely constructive if lessons and applications are made to every day relationship building by merely understanding simple phrases or vocabulary used in different languages. In fact, within English itself, it can be more effective if we are more cognizant of our vocabulary choice – for instance, by understanding the subtle but profound difference between "Please forgive me" as opposed to "Please excuse me". As CYCs, during conflict resolution interventions, we encourage the group to be reflective and empathetic, and we support them in effectively and positively communicating their emotions to others. Just as we may resort to a 'feelings chart' that provides a multitude of emotions and feelings with a picture of a facial reaction and the appropriate label, we should also equip them with the resources that provide them with the correct terminology for apologies suitable to the conflict. The distinction between 'regret', 'anger', and 'responsibility' in an apology is important and may well have significant impact on the outcome of the interaction. For example, telling someone that you are "sorry for what happened" as opposed to saying you "take responsibility" or "feel guilty for what happened" can elaborate not just the apology but also the accompanied emotions and thought processes. Following from Cook's (1999) research, it may well be that learning from and about another language other than our own might influence us to retreat from our single narrative and enrich our work and extend the care with which we approach relational restoration.

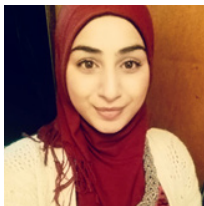
In fact, a more intentional use of language might not only impact the outcome of restoration, but also enhance the recognition, contemplation and preparation stages that Prochaska and DiClemente suggest are necessary to longer term behaviour change. Consider the use of the word 'sorry'. This two-syllable word may indeed increase the frequency with which politeness is practiced in chaotic settings. For instance, during rush hour in public transit, "Sorry" can maintain courtesy. However, 'sorry' may not be the most appropriate word. Is the transit user really remorseful, regretful, and unhappy? Or is the transit user merely asking a fellow traveler to overlook a minor transgression? Perhaps politeness does not require an 'apology' for every miscalculated act. Perhaps bumping into another traveler may not require the apology implied in the word 'sorry' as it may not be an act requiring restoration? Yet, many of us have been socially trained to say "Sorry" in response to every minor, grand, personal, interpersonal, physical, mental, or emotional obstacle that we encounter. The resulting overuse of the word 'sorry' has led to semantic satiation and habituation – the outcome of which is that when we hear the word 'sorry' we are rarely affected by it. Thus, when situations actually demand a genuine apology, the impact of the use of the word 'sorry' has diminished, seeming trite, or even glib.

Consider the depth of forgiveness required in apologies delivered in 2008 by the former Canadian Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, and in 2015 by the current Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau in response to the genocide in residential schools across Canada (Harper, 2008; Trudeau, 2015). To use the same word about these acts as one would use to excuse stepping on the toes of a fellow transit rider seems inconceivable. In fact, both government leaders set a virtuous example of how to execute an apology proportional to the situation by explicitly asking for forgiveness in their speeches as an effort to initiate relationship restoration with the First Nations communities (Harper, 2008; Trudeau, 2015). The mere repetition of apologizing for the pain caused is consistent with Shmidt's (1999) premise that forgiveness is rarely a one-time event. The English language, like other languages offers choice – other approaches we might consider when engaging in the act of apologizing. For minor transgressions, "Excuse me" or "Pardon me" might be more suitable emotionally and linguistically, thus freeing the deeper intention of "sorry" or the asking for mercy or reconciliation, for more emotionally liable situations that require introspection, reflection, understanding, and forgiveness. As relational practitioners then, it seems appropriate that CYC professionals, students, and

educators should consider not only the beauty, complexity, and intricacy of language but also the immense benefit of being mindful and respectful of the impact of their everyday language choices.

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