

Child and Youth Care

Critical Perspectives on Pedagogy,
Practice, and Policy

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Introduction

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Over the past several decades, child and youth care has developed a distinct identity as a unique field of professional practice. Although many allied professions work toward promoting human well-being, CYC has differentiated itself from other human service professions through a focus on children and youth using strengths-based, holistic, and ecological approaches and through active engagement with children, youth, and families across multiple and diverse settings.

Modernist Discourses of Professionalism

In establishing its place, the CYC field has generally been guided by a modernist discourse of professionalism that differentiates its knowledge and practice not only from other professions (Bates 2005; Phelan 2005) but also from lay or “non-professional” perspectives. Among other things, this discourse positions specialized education and training, the creation of standards of expertise, the development of a code of ethics, and the promotion of autonomous decision making as central to the formation of a specific professional identity (Beker 2001; Reinders 2008). While there has been considerable historical debate in the field about whether CYC is an emerging profession, a field of practice, or a craft (Eisikovits and Beker 2001), the development of a professional identity typically

means that practitioners are invested with authority and legitimacy from consumers, clients, and other professionals, making it an alluring goal (Prilleltensky, Rossiter, and Walsh-Bowers 1996). Physicians are often held as the exemplars of such professional power. Thus, the path to professionalization that most aspiring professions seek to follow is the one established by the medical profession. Underpinning this inherited and thoroughly modernist project is a belief in an “objective reality” knowable through science, appropriate education, and competency-driven, technical views of practice.

Professionalism as a Contested Idea

In contrast, critical perspectives¹ or postmodern views of professionalism would understand these dynamics differently, calling into question some of the underlying assumptions and beliefs about knowledge, power, and standardized approaches to practice. Through these lenses, a questioning of power and privilege arises as one considers more broadly who is served through the creation of human “services” and for what purpose. Child and youth care, perhaps due in part to its later start on the road to professional status, is somewhat later than some professions in questioning its assumptions, analyzing the forces of power, and considering other paradigms. Education, for example, has a history of approximately two decades of engagement in such critical, reconceptualist activity.

Partially because CYC is an emerging profession and still seeking some of the aspects of power and recognition held by other helping professions, critical and postmodern views are sometimes seen as threatening to the professionalization process. Although this concern is understandable, we believe that a failure to engage with critical perspectives is also potentially problematic for the profession. For example, by not holding our own practices up for critical scrutiny, or by authorizing only a restricted range of methodologies or theoretical perspectives for studying and conceptualizing this work, we run the risk of becoming insular, dogmatic, and hegemonic in our thinking and actions. We believe that a “both/and” position that accommodates diversity, fluidity, and contingency offers a particularly fruitful way forward. We can continue to seek professional recognition through established modernist

approaches; we can also increasingly engage with postmodern and critical perspectives so that we can expose the limits of these received vocabularies and transform how we think about practice, policy, and professionalism. This approach has much in common with what others have referred to as a form of double(d) practice, where we do the work and trouble it at the same time (Lather 2007).

Child and youth care, therefore, finds itself within a contested field – the forces of modernity, universalism, individualism, and positivism remain strong, but at the same time new spaces for questioning and reconceptualizing have opened up. For example, there is growing support for more critical, politicized, and discursive conceptualizations of CYC work as well as approaches that centre the agenda of social justice (Skott-Myhre 2003; Smith 2006). By shifting attention away from a primary focus on the individual toward more comprehensive and critically conscious approaches that recognize a range of socio-political influences on child, youth, and family well-being, these critical perspectives, which form the basis of this volume, ask a number of challenging and provocative questions. What is CYC practice? What might it become? Can the ends of CYC practice be separated from the means? Whom are these interventions designed to benefit? How will we decide whether we are making a useful difference? What unspoken understandings regarding child, youth, or family well-being are privileged? Are socio-political and historical contexts adequately accounted for? In bringing this collection together, we hope to provoke, unsettle, invite fresh perspectives, and generate new questions among readers. Ultimately, we want to showcase the exciting and creative work being pursued by an emerging generation of future CYC leaders as well as to recognize the expanded possibilities for pedagogy, policy, and practice that these ways of thinking open up.

Organizational Threads

In reviewing the collection of chapters, we considered various approaches to this introduction. A minimalist approach would have involved a flexible grouping and sequencing of chapters, allowing them to “speak directly” to the reader, who would undertake her own organization. We

also envisioned a more structured and intensive approach that would have included a full additional chapter inspired by the collection, with introductions woven into the new text. Opting for a middle ground, we have instead chosen a particular metanarrative that will run throughout the chapters, leaving many other threads and possibilities for the reader to generate. The organizational metanarrative we have chosen is the notion of “normative” or, more precisely, what constitutes an “acceptable standard.” Normative is but one critical metanarrative in the work of CYC; there are others, and these chapters both challenge and comply with them.

Within the West, the source of most research on children and youth (Arnett 2008; Pence and Hix-Small 2007), the “science of child development,” is typically promoted as “universal” even though it excludes the vast majority of children and youth living around the world. In other words, it is possible to have normative standards and borders that exclude the majority of child and youth experiences yet are still deemed universally good or right or true. An example from early childhood is the West’s elevation of maternal care above all other forms of care, despite the relative rarity of such exclusivity in the majority of societies of the world (Weisner and Gallimore 1977).

CYC is one of several “helping professions” that work in this “borderland” – a site of practice that exists at the border between what is considered “normative” or acceptable and abnormal or not acceptable. Within a traditional, modernist paradigm, the goals of practice are relatively straightforward, at least conceptually: a norm has been identified, and it is the responsibility of the helper to bring those beyond that norm within it or at least closer to it. From a critical or postmodern stance, the work is less clear. Questions we might ask from this perspective include the following. How has this border come into being? Who has established the border? For what purpose? Based on what information? Does the border primarily serve those within it or outside it? Should practitioners be border enforcers or border disturbers? Over the years, many CYC practitioners have found themselves asking such questions. Although the modernist quest for “objectivity” and the promotion of scientific evidence (or “best” practices) often constrain practitioners’

ability to ask such questions, critical postmodern perspectives actively invite such questions as a way to recognize complexity, partiality, and contingency, allowing multiple border crossings, transformations, and challenges to occur.

Introduction to the Chapters

The authors of these chapters have practised in a wide array of professional settings and contexts, testifying to the diversity of the CYC field. These contexts include street youth outreach, early childhood care and education, residential care, early intervention, parent support, child and youth mental health, juvenile justice, and post-secondary education. Collectively, the authors have engaged with a range of age groups, social contexts, and cultures. Their practices are located in large urban centres, small cities, rural communities, and the far North. Most authors have more than ten years of experience in the field, and they have completed a wide range of undergraduate and graduate degrees, including child and youth care, education, counselling, sociology, social work, criminology, and psychology. What they have in common is a commitment to promoting the well-being of children, youth, and their families as well as an interest in challenging taken-for-granted understandings and received views of practice, pedagogy, and policy in CYC.

The first section, which includes chapters from J.N. Little, Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw, and Jennifer White, explores the linked challenges of defining the field and preparing CYC practitioners in higher education contexts in ways that both enable and trouble professional practice in CYC. Little, who describes her own experience as a “CYC-educated” practitioner who has worked in a diverse array of settings, asks this provocative question: “Will the real CYC please stand up?” Meanwhile, Pacini-Ketchabaw describes how child and adolescent development has taken the position of “natural” knowledge in much of the CYC literature, forming one of the foundational bases of the profession. She argues that the problematic history of developmental knowledge needs to be thoroughly investigated and describes some of the pedagogical processes she has engaged in to think and teach child and adolescent development differently. Finally, White describes an approach to teaching professional

ethics that challenges the traditional and narrow view of ethics that is tightly tethered to individualist conceptions of morality and dominant discourses of professionalism. She argues for a more expansive, critically reflexive view that invites fresh thinking and reimagined understandings of everyday CYC praxis.

The next section, which includes chapters from Jonathan Morris; Sandrina de Finney, Elicia Loiselle, and Mackenzie Dean; and B. Denise Hodgins, all take up the issue of gender and other dimensions of diversity across a range of CYC policy and practice contexts. Morris describes his experience as a graduate student in a CYC class in which students were invited to engage in a process of collective biography, which included writing and rewriting their first memories of particular experiences, including their first memories of realizing and resisting being gendered. De Finney, Loiselle, and Dean examine structural determinants of well-being in the lives of children and youth. Their intersectional framework maps the role of interplaying processes of racialization, gendering, and sexing (among others) in producing unequal circumstances for some groups of children and youth, with a particular focus on the minoritization of girls in CYC. Finally, Hodgins's chapter explores some of the recent father involvement initiatives in Canada and draws on notions of social inclusion and masculinities to question what these initiatives try to change or uphold and whom they do or do not speak to.

The third section groups together chapters that demonstrate a critically reflective stance toward CYC practice, with a particular focus on challenging individualistic, modernist understandings of what it means to help and to care. Brooke Alsbury, Mark Kelly, and Janet Newbury, though representing very different CYC practice contexts, all exemplify a critical, questioning stance toward practice. Using northern Canada as a context, Alsbury asks the profession and the professional to consider how each can be locally developed and mutually constituted, and she proposes a reconceptualization of CYC professionalization through understanding the socially constructed nature of both profession and professional identity. Drawing from his own experience as a street outreach worker, Kelly examines the structures of Canadian society that impact street-involved youth and provides his current thoughts and

understandings of how the interplay of politics, policy, and practice affects youth experiencing street life. Through an exploration of the functions of loss over time, Newbury questions the increasing individualization of human service interventions. Consideration of loss is offered as one avenue through which conceptual shifts can be made from practice that centres predictability to practice that acknowledges contingency and disperses the onus for change (rather than locating it within help seekers).

The final section includes chapters from Lorinda Stoneman and Kathleen Kummen. Although these authors address very different facets and contexts for CYC, juvenile justice and early childhood education, both draw attention to the role of social and policy discourses in shaping current practices with children, youth, and families. Stoneman takes a critical look at the construction of the “young offender” over time and identifies key philosophical changes throughout the past century in Canada, including the implications of the current “managerial” system of youth justice in which actuarial predictions serve to define and identify individual dangerousness. Finally, Kummen explores the concept of readiness as it relates to Canadian early childhood years social policies. She makes visible how readiness can privilege specific ways of knowing for young children and in doing so further maintain the social inequities that are barriers to the development of young children in Canada.

Collectively, these chapters not only challenge and critique various established discourses and ways of understanding in CYC (and other professions and disciplines) but also open up possibilities for CYC practice, policy, research, and education that are not possible through those established understandings. Again, the intent here is not to postulate “right and wrong,” an oppositional binary, or to supplant what has come before; rather, it is to seek a place of acceptance that allows diverse understandings to engage with diverse realities to more fully appreciate how child and youth well-being can be understood, engaged, and supported. We see this book as adding to the growing body of knowledge that can contribute to effective CYC practice, policy, research, and education. We hope you find it a good and useful addition!

Note

- 1 Critical perspectives, as we are using the phrase in this volume, comprise a range of overlapping theoretical and philosophical paradigms. Some of these perspectives resonate with the diverse and contested intellectual terrain known as postmodernism – or what might be more broadly understood as postfoundational theories (St. Pierre and Pillow 2000). Critically oriented social theories, like some versions of feminism, Marxism, and post-colonial or queer theory, invariably analyze relations of power. Theories that engage with postfoundational thinking, including some versions of social constructionism and post-structuralism, generally concern themselves with analyzing discourses, deconstructing language, exposing plurality and contingency, and unsettling taken-for-granted assumptions. Although each has a rich history and all are taken up in different ways within different disciplines and intellectual traditions, what these perspectives share in common is a skepticism toward objective, value-free, acontextual knowledge or singular truths about reality.

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