

COMING OF AGE: CYC FAMILY SUPPORT WORK

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ABSTRACT: The author describes the development in CYC literature of a substantial body of work defining and establishing a discrete CYC approach to family work. Several authors and key concepts are highlighted in this story of the journey to establish a CYC family support theory base.

Key words: natural place, experiential practice, noticing, cognitive dissonance, war cycle, nonexpert stance

For many years I have struggled to describe what CYC family support work is not because there was not clarity and definition about what it is. CYC family work is not family therapy or child protection, but it does involve systemic thinking and creating safe environments for children. The work is not based in an office or does not involve the usual family therapy models and techniques. There is no need for desks and one way mirrors, case management approaches or psychological assessments.

I am reminded of a famous statement by Michelangelo, who, when asked how he could sculpt such beautiful statues, remarked that he was merely liberating the figure imprisoned in the marble. By chipping away at what we were not doing, there was an increased awareness of what was there. Now the figure within the block of marble is ready to emerge.

This article will highlight some of the major recent CYC writings about family support approaches in an attempt to "liberate" what has been hard to describe. There have been several excellent CYC family support programs across North America. Those involved have shared their knowledge and expertise mainly through workshop presentations at conferences. Now the literature is beginning to catch up. A CYC administrator at a National CYC Conference in Newfoundland a few years ago explained the gap between awareness at the practice level and the body of literature and CYC curriculum. He stated that the creation of new approaches, strategy, and theory by skilled practitioners is more "gnarly, energetic, and physical" than can easily be fit into books (J. Ireland, personal communication, November, 2002).

Many skilled practitioners feeling too far removed from academia, are not inclined to publish. Most of the authors quoted in this article are trying to bridge the gap by staying close to practice or at least to practitioners. Some would describe themselves as full-time practitioners. This is a new trend and a welcome one.

Mark Krueger, a major thinker in our field, stated, "Child and Youth Care is in the Seventh Moment. The Seventh Moment is a term used in qualitative inquiry to describe the trend to open doors to new ways of studying and looking at human behavior, attitudes, and conditions" (2005). One recent book has greatly influenced the work and is referenced many times in this article: *A Child and Youth Care Ap-*

proach to Working With Families, which is a compilation of articles that have moved the articulation process ahead significantly.

Thom Garfat is perhaps the most prolific and influential writer about CYC family work. His preliminary definition of CYC begins with the *where* before describing the *how*: "Child and youth care work with families involves the utilization of daily life events as they are occurring, for therapeutic purposes" (2003a, p. 36). In another place, he elaborates: "Thus, our intentions are focused on the present, what is going on right now, at this moment, between members of the family, between us and them, or between them and the world in which they live" (2004, p. 19). And further: "Child and Youth Care workers are involved with families as they live their lives... While people still live out their patterns and dynamics in any environment in which they find themselves, they normally live their lives in their world, not the world of an office or a counseling room" (2003b, p. 10). Garfat coined the term "the natural place" as the youth worker's focus, rather than a neutral place or a structured office environment (2003b, p. 11) and developed the concept of "noticing" as a nonjudgmental awareness approach for workers (2003b, pp. 25-26).

The *how* of CYC family work involves "a change in focus, which has taken the child and youth care worker into new roles and areas." So that the "youth care worker was shifting to one of facilitator of the relationship between parent and youth" (Garfat & McElwee, 2001, p. 242). The dilemma of being inside the family structure without disrupting the dynamics that need to shift is managed by prompting the worker to avoid creating direct relationships with each family member but rather to "relate to the relationship between parent and child" (Anglin, 1984, p. 42).

An attempt at an overall description states that "All CYC work aims to further growth and change, yet its pedagogy is not interventionist and direct. Youthwork practice is indirect, cooperative, collaborative, and invitational" (Magnuson, 2003).

There have been many thoughts about the differences between CYC family support work and social work.

It is not our responsibility to determine if children are "bad" or if parents are "unfit." ... Our responsibility is to engage in a relationship with parents and children that may facilitate change and allows them to live together more effectively with less stress (Shaw and Garfat, p. 51).

Mark Smith, from Scotland, comments:

The CYC approach is about making connections, which involve workers using themselves to connect at a personal level with those they work with. The centrality of "self" and "self in action" approaches in the CYC tradition signifies one of the fundamental differences between CYC and Social Work. ... where the professional role seems increasingly to be about carrying out certain discrete tasks and following procedures (Smith, p.162).

The attempt to work in the "natural place" has some consequences for practice

and can create professional disagreements. The Montreal-based Batshaw Family Support Program director, Anthony Maciocia, describes an example of a team composed of a social worker and a CYC family support worker making a family visit. As they approach the family home, the CYC worker spots the dad in the backyard working on his car. He suggests to his colleague that they go into the yard and meet the dad. The social worker replies that they have to knock on the front door and be invited in. That's the correct way to proceed (A. Maciocia, personal communication, June 7, 2000).

Child and youth care work with families has an energetic quality that one author compares to dancing, moving in a natural flow, in synch with the family's rhythms and movements:

Thus the competent youth and family worker knows and senses how to move and where to be in relationship to youth and family members as he or she tries to create moments of connection, discovery, empowerment. He or she gets a feel for the circumstance and the people in it and tries to orchestrate a story... Their goal throughout the dance is to contribute moments that will enrich the youths' and families' stories (Krueger, p. 62).

This energetic quality is expanded into a form of communication and restorying by another author:

The work is less reliant on dialogue and therapeutic reflection and more on experiential, lived moments, often coexperienced by the family and the worker. The CYC approach has been characterized as the process of arranging experiences that challenge the family to revisit old, self-defeating patterns and beliefs through the cognitive dissonance that arises as a felt experience of success and competence gets highlighted through purposeful reflection in the moment (Phelan, p. 70).

Many parents feel an unconscious resentment at being expected to do something for their children which their own parents or caregivers never did for them. CYC workers may naively expect parents to eagerly attend parenting skill workshops, without doing anything to support their need to be cared for. Heather Modlin has argued that, "for parents to respond effectively to the needs of their children, their own needs must first be met" (Modlin, 2003, p. 177). She points to the need of a group for parent support because, "the parents' needs would have to be addressed before we could move on to discussions of their children. She says in one instance, for the first four sessions their children were not mentioned except as a source of frustration" (p.180). She describes one parent's reaction at a Christmas party on opening a small gift: "I didn't think anyone knew I was in the world" (p.181). She addresses the neediness and isolation of parents:

Although we were aware of this going into the group, it was still an eye-opener to grasp the reality of these parents' situations. They were dealing with all the same issues as their children and, in some ways, were in much worse shape. In many cases, parents had a lot of information about appropriate parenting practices, absorbed through years of child welfare intervention but were unable or unwilling to translate this knowledge into action (p. 183).

Wayne Ouderkerk developed the World of Abnormal Rearing (WAR) Cycle model to explain how parents with low attachment ability created child rearing behaviors that perpetuated the cycle of low attachment ability in their children. The intervention required to break this cycle involves nurturing and supporting parents before focusing on parenting skills (Ouderkerk, 1984).

The use of activity, especially play, can be a powerful way to connect with parents who are expected to nurture their children without having an experience of nurturance from anyone in their own lives. Karen VanderVen developed an elegant metaphor, the Oxygen Principle (2003, p.137). Airline passengers are familiar with the preflight instructions that direct you to put on your own oxygen mask before attempting to assist another person. "Before parents can truly accept and apply more nurturant and sensitive methods of parenting, they must first feel more nurtured and cared for themselves" (VanderVen, 2003, p.137). VanderVen instructs us to bring games and activities into these homes and play them with the parent(s) before we ask them to turn around and use them with their children.

If we consider that a healthy family provides a good diet of play and activities for the children, then activity is a key aspect of both "reparenting" and "deparenting". Some workers have had great success with parents in allowing them to experience traditional childhood "hands-on" activities: water play, finger painting, crayoning... (p. 142).

John Sullivan, who heads the Institute for Family Centered Services in the United States, has run successful CYC family support programs in several states. His research on successful outcomes demonstrates that effective CYC family support involves using a nonexpert stance and joining the family without a preset agenda. One father describes his willingness to work with John's program staff because it was the first time a worker entered his home without trying to tell him how to run his family (Sullivan, 1995). Donna Jamieson ran the successful Yellowhead Family Support Program in Edmonton, Alberta. Her team's motto was "join before you jar" (Jamieson, 1999). Many CYC family support workers describe their role to the family as helping the family to get *The System* out of their home.

Working with fathers is not highlighted in many programs, and Mark Smith exhorts us to open our minds to this sometimes scapegoated group. He offers some suggestions to CYC family workers:

- Fathers are important in their children's upbringing.

- Most men have a strong desire to be fathers and generally are motivated to be good ones.
- For a variety of reasons, men do not always fulfill as important a role in their children's lives as they would like to.
- Professional beliefs, assumptions, and ways of looking can label men as problems in family situations.
- Existing services are rarely geared towards supporting dads and may in fact institutionally discriminate against them.
- Many men would welcome support that they perceive to be credible and non-stigmatizing (Smith, 2003, p. 161).

He presents a case example to illustrate:

Mr. Granger was a gruff, heavy drinking Scot if ever there was one. The image we had of him was as an authoritarian, ne'er do well who spent his time in the pub while mum struggled to bring up four young kids. Pete, the eldest, was with us. We had organized a sponsored cycle run in aid of local charities. Pete asked us if it was okay if his dad put a bottle in the local bar to collect donations towards our sponsored effort. We agreed and later went along to the ceremony in the pub to crack open the bottle (Smith, 2003, p. 163).

Smith reflects on the story:

The only way Mr. Granger felt he could define a role for himself in Pete's life was to do so on his own territory, the pub. He would probably have loved to go cycling with us. Perhaps the task in working with dads is to try and find those spaces and opportunities where we can step into each other's territories (p. 166).

Here are recommendations to CYC family support workers who want to be effective:

- Be a real person, not someone who is "acting like" a helper. The challenge is to engage in a real life place with an energetic, physical connection.
- Work in the natural space, not a controlled, contrived environment, or just sitting at the kitchen table.
- Use relational skills to "join before you jar." Try to feel the emptiness that the family lives with daily, and try to see their logic, and thus their resiliency.
- Do what is needed to help: bring a loaf of bread, don't just talk about it.
- Try to create moments of connection, discovery, and empowerment.
- Nurture and care for the parents before you attempt to develop an adult-to-adult relationship with them.

- Have a map, so you don't get lost or enmeshed. Use your team and supervisor.
- Joining will change you, so be a reflective practitioner.
- Be interested in and sensitive to change. Know why and how change occurs.
- Leave well.

So, we CYC workers are coming of age, emerging from an undefined oral tradition, although well known to the initiated. There is much yet to be explored and articulated, but the written record is becoming substantial and available.

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