EXPERIENTIAL COUNSELLING
AND THE CYC PRACTITIONER

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ABSTRACT: This article describes an approach to CYC work with youth and families, emphasizing that many young people find verbal communication difficult and threatening, and arguing that some of the other modes of interaction commonly used in CYC practice may be more effective than conventional counselling approaches.

This article describes my construction of a framework to describe how Child and Youth Care Workers create change in youth and families. I have struggled for many years with frameworks about counselling imposed by other professional disciplines, which really didn't satisfy my lived experience of how we work and what we do. I hope that this description will resonate for you in your work.

The basic premise is that experiences, not words, change the thinking of our clients and that CYC practitioners, through living with youth and families, are able to create and respond to real experience moments with a powerful set of strategies that actually create new thinking. The use of verbal interventions, counselling if you will, is background, not foreground, and presence, relationship and shared physical sensation are primary. The use of all four ingredients is essential, but verbal interaction is much less powerful than traditional counseling would assume.

Our youth and families are trapped in a past laced with hopelessness and defeat, which predicts a future of the same. The weight of this tale/tail drags them down and prevents them from living in the present in a competent and hopeful way. Our task is to live alongside them, create a safe relationship that allows them to risk being vulnerable to change, and arrange experiences that create physical sensations of competence, pride and hope. The regular occurrence of these experiences and a careful reflection on the sensation produced will challenge youth and families to shift beliefs and think differently about themselves.

My journey through a career in Child and Youth Care work has created a belief that what we do is different from other professionals, yet I get stuck explaining clearly just how we are so unique. I have spent most of my career watching as psychologists, social workers, educators and others became teachers, supervisors and administrators over CYC workers. I have always resisted this process of absorbing our field as another profession's sub-type and often created bad feelings by challenging this process. The category of counselling is one of those

battlegrounds for me. I know many CYC professionals who have aspired to be traditional counselors and often agencies use this job as a promotional step up for CYC workers who get further academic credentials in psychology or social work. My thesis is that CYC workers powerfully intervene in the lives of our youth and families that is a type of counselling that no other profession chooses to try, even though it is clear that it is very effective.

Most of the clients we work with actively resist any attempts to require them to reflect on and recall the past traumas and failures in their lives. This survival mechanism is adaptive, and the process of cognitively reliving and analyzing past experiences is both difficult and believed (often quite accurately) to be a useless and foolish endeavor. Therefore, using dialogue and attempting to create change through verbal interventions does not have much power with our youth and families. The actual experience of new information being assimilated and accommodated in a useful manner requires a felt experience that gets processed through doing things, not talking about things (Phelan,1999).

My own journey into counselling as a CYC practitioner was most influenced by the work of Fritz Redl and David Wineman and their description of the Life Space Interview (1951, 1952). As I read Children Who Hate (1951) and Controls From Within (1952), I knew that both immediacy and concrete experience were essential ingredients to produce any possibility of helping these boys to think differently. I was able to use Redl and Wineman's categories and interview types to anticipate and impact some of the behavior and beliefs of the youth I worked with. When We Deal With Children (1966) provided further insight into this complex skill. Recently I have been impressed with the writings of Adrian Ward in England who expands and explains Redl's ideas by developing the concept of Opportunity Led Work (1996). Nicholas Long, Larry Brendtro and others have also added significantly to the literature about the Life Space Interview and this work has been valuable. Even though this material is available, I don't think that it has had a major impact on defining what we do, perhaps because it looks like traditional counselling to many.

Most recently, I have found the conceptual framework of Adventure Based Programming to be very pertinent to what we do. The need to use not just experience, but also the reflection on the experience, because it doesn't actually become useful for the risk-taker until he thinks about what has happened, is a critical notion. Luckner and Nadler (1997), describe a process of working with people that is easily adapted to the CYC context. The use of physically and emotionally risky experiences to challenge people to see themselves differently is the basis of adventure programming. The leader's task is to create safe and yet challenging opportunities for individuals to push beyond comfortable boundaries and experience the successful feeling of accomplishing a task that would seem to have been too daunting to attempt.

The leader supports the person to reflect on and process the experience as well as to assist the person to generalize the new learning so that it will have a usefulness in other areas of life. The goal of the adventure experience is to create new learning, not just to thrill the person in the moment. As the teenager, corporate executive or other participant goes through the ropes course, backpacking expedition or other challenge successfully, he or she is also challenged to have learned something. This learning takes place before doing, while doing and after doing (Luckner & Nadler, 1997, p.31). Luckner describes a formula where success or breakthrough moment = S, the pre-success moment = S-1, and the post-success moment = S+1. When the leader or facilitator neglects to support an awareness of these 3 steps, the experience loses much of its value for the participant and little to no generalizing occurs to affect other areas of the person's life. The pre-success moment (S-1) can last from a moment to an hour and the facilitator focuses the participant to examine the strengths relied on, and what happened to support the leap forward or the retreat to a safer place. The breakthrough or success is also supported by the facilitator, as the participant has to see him/herself as the agent and the cause of the success. At the S+1 stage, it is important for the participant to reflect on how he or she was able to do that challenge and what can be taken away from the experience.

One skill the facilitator uses is to freeze the S-1 moment and to ask the person to focus on what he or she is experiencing right now: feelings, physical sensations, and thoughts. The facilitator makes a very important distinction between fear and hopelessness and supports the person to examine patterns of thought—beliefs, mental models, cognitive maps and mind sets.

Other counselling ideas are also helpful for us. There are wonderful beliefs as expressed by solution-focussed practitioners that only the present and future are useful to discuss. There is extensive research on the use of therapy done in the psychological community and there are some surprising findings. Based on an extensive analysis of this literature, the following data is proposed by Scott Miller and his colleagues in *Escape From Babel* (1997):

- 40% of improvement in therapy is due to "extra therapeutic" factors, which occur in the client's life, quite separate from the counselling interaction;
- 30% of improvement is based on relationship and trust in the counsellor as perceived by the client (it is not a function of time spent in therapy);
- 15% is due to the actual model of therapy or counselling technique used by the counsellor; and
- 15% is due to expectancy of successful change, hope and the placebo effect.

The authors felt that because of these findings, much of the possibility of change for people is outside of the influence of the therapist and doesn't get impacted by the counselling. They also found that the quality of the relationship for the client was a key factor and that often counselors weren't really a good judge of how the relationship is perceived by the client. Coincidentally, much of the CYC literature about relationship reinforces this connection between effectiveness and a trusting relationship.

Another book which has influenced my thinking is *No Talk Therapy for Children and Adolescents* by Martha Straus (1999). She is a psychologist who has had some success working with difficult youth. She describes 5 issues that she has found to be essential to understand in working with youth and children:

1   Talking to adults is not natural for kids.
2   Talking about problems makes problems bigger.
3   Getting in touch with bad feelings makes kids miserable.
4   Therapy talk doesn't give kids more control over their lives.
5   Change isn't inherently motivating to kids.

The author goes on to describe how she uses activities and experiences to develop relationships and to create the safety to struggle with issues for the youth sent to her. There is an appendix which lists at least 100 activities she suggests with some notes on each. This list alone makes the book worthwhile. Interestingly enough, she sounds more and more like a CYC practitioner as she describes her approaches.

As most skilled CYC practitioners know, many useful counselling moments occur in the car or van, or at the kitchen sink doing dishes, and often only last for a few moments. The Life Space Interview is exactly that and when used skillfully has great impact.

Counselling in the life space is such an ordinary behavior in CYC work that sometimes the CYC practitioner doesn't consciously attend to the fact that it is happening. Charlie Applestein (1998) describes the skill of anticipating problems and talking about them to the youth in a calmer moment when things are going well, not trying to push youth to focus clearly on what has occurred when they are only able to defend themselves through denial. He has a whole chapter on basic verbal interventions, followed by a chapter on strategic verbal interventions, where the word "counselling" is never used, although this is exactly what he is describing. We have become so used to seeing counselling as the time spent in an office during the 50 minute hour that we have automatically devalued the life space counselling that actually has more impact.

I would like to propose a framework for CYC counselling which is based on presence in the life space, trustworthy relationships, physical experience and timely reflection. Let's examine each of these issues:

Our presence with youth and families means living in the same place as they [do] and going through day to day struggles together. We can be dragged along by events or we can orchestrate our energy to create useful opportunities. The boundary dynamics are very complex and challenging, but the possibilities for creating hope and competence are great. We know that CYC work is different from other helping interventions in that we are living with youth and families, co-existing alongside each other in a shared reality. As we become more skilled in this *living with*, we will progress through stages described as "doing to, doing for, doing with and doing together" (Garfat). As we think differently about what we are doing and why we are doing it, the use of experiential counselling strategies will easily fit our framework.

Trust is a key factor in all of these discussions and there are many references to trust building as an essential preliminary step. The beginning Child and Youth Care Worker doesn't have enough trust in his own capacities to handle things safely in order to instill trust in others. The first six months of experience in one's career with youth and families are full of anxiety and nervous energy, based on a lack of both physical and emotional safety because the environment and clients tend to overwhelm the capacity to maintain control or even predictability. Until a CYC worker can come to work feeling energized by the possibility of new challenges and believing in his own capacity to be safe and grounded in the environment, there is no ability to create the level of trust necessary to skillfully use the life space. Therefore, the CYC professional should not attempt any of these counselling interventions in the early stages of his/her development. The initial six months to one year of working with youth is a time to become grounded in safety and establishing personal boundaries that allow the CYC worker to be safe enough to create safety for others and to be trustworthy in his or her interactions with youth and families (Phelan, 1990, 1999). The professional with this experience under his or her belt can begin to use the techniques described here to challenge the context and stories of youth, to create cognitive dissonance around hope versus hopelessness and to build competence beliefs with youth and families. Each interaction we have with youth and families can enable us to be more trustworthy and safe in their eyes. In order for us to be perceived as trustworthy, we must persevere through the testing of our willingness to set limits, to forgive easily, to model behaviors that really work, and to be available and caring. Youth and families have a story about the world that is very powerful and it creates safety for them. To abandon parts of this view of life will require a leap of faith that can only occur in a very safe place.

As I become more aware of how a person is stuck in his/her context, I can live with them in planful ways to help the story change. The more

I am real in their lives, the more profound is the impact of the challenge to existing frameworks. Compare this relationship to the one which counselors create with clients. The professional boundaries traditionally described in therapy are quite different from the "living with" relationship of the CYC practitioner.

The training models in therapy and counselling interventions expect that the therapist should have no connection to the life of the client outside the office. Much of the therapeutic value of the relationship relies on the counselor not having any authority or influence over the client and requires that there is no personal connection between the two outside of the therapeutic hour. The basic skill set of doing the counseling may appear to be the same, but that is like saying that because you need to use a sharp knife for both surgery and woodcarving, they are comparable.

Physical experience is a third ingredient. The strategic use of experience is the skill needed to create revisions to hopeless views of the world and self. The youth and parents who are our clients shift their thinking when enough high impact experiences alter their basic context, creating the need for them to revise their story about the world. This model proposes a use of experiences, generally shared experiences, where the CYC worker is present both verbally and physically to focus the youth's attention on the event that is happening in the life space. Generally the CYC worker will talk with the youth or family about an experience that is going to happen or is recently completed that can be useful in changing a self-defeating story. The verbal/counseling interaction is usually brief and linked to experience in the lived moment which both anticipates and creates reflection upon felt sensation or thinking that is occurring. The shared experience is not imposed or externally controlled, although it may be arranged or planned. The CYC professional also responds to unplanned and sometimes problematic experiences with equal use of the lived-in moment. The literature on Life Space Interviews describes the basic strategy well.

Timely reflection is the fourth element of CYC counselling. This is the situation that is closest to traditional counselling and is often seen by workers as a separate and discrete interaction. I am suggesting that this isn't true, the use of reflection can only be done in an experiential context and as a focussing tool for felt experience awareness, which is the real motivator for change.

The use of reflection after the fact or to create anticipation prior to a challenge requires a safe relationship and a situation free from the usual anxieties. This free place or safe moment is the responsibility of the CYC professional.

The use of traditional, wholly verbal strategies is not recommended and many beliefs about therapy may be challenged in reading the details of this model. My hope is that because you, as a professional, have been working with youth for at least a year, you will be relieved rather than distressed as you think about using this model. This type of interaction

requires me to be in the life space of the other person, and I can only be helpful when I can openly exist alongside you and create safety for both of us. I believe that a CYC practitioner must have the ability to be safe and grounded in the life space before any useful counselling can occur.

I propose these foundational beliefs for CYC treatment strategies:

- the youth and family live a context of hopelessness about the future based on past experience, and refuse to allow the present moment to alter this story about life
- the CYC professional is in a strategic place to expand awareness of the present moment for the client and can skillfully create cognitive dissonance about hopefulness and competence in the client
- the lack of willingness to be reflective and resistant to changing one's world view are challenged through felt experience, not cognitive insight
- people will only be able to allow this threatening experience into awareness within a trusting relationship
- everything that occurs either strengthens or weakens the existing world view (or story) and the people who will be able to create an impact must be regularly available
- the integration of developmental information, safe challenges, giving control and agency to the client, and strategic use of words and experiences are key skills for the CYC professional.

The use of counselling skills in CYC work is significantly different than in traditional therapy—the boundaries are not similar and are profoundly more grounded in living with people. The use of experience and sensory data to effect change is a key element and verbal strategies are background, not foreground. The relationship is based on safety and trust in a real life environment, and the CYC practitioner is experiencing life simultaneously, often sharing the experience with the client. There is a uniqueness here and these skills are not refined or even created through the use of a model borrowed from other counseling approaches. As CYC practitioners clarify what they are doing with lived experience and relationships, more strategies and skills continue to emerge.

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