

THE LOGIC OF CHRONOS: AGE-BASED AND OTHER MANDATED TRANSITIONS

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ABSTRACT: Age-based triggers for termination of care are often cited as a concern for youth who are asked to reflect on their experience in the child welfare system. Planning for the transition to independence is a significant task for both workers and youth, and it is often done in the absence of guidelines on how best to accomplish this successfully. This presentation suggests that there is a parallel transition near the other end of adulthood called retirement, in addition to other mandated transitions in life. By familiarizing ourselves with the literature in these areas, we may come to understand better the experience of youth leaving care and to improve how we manage this transition.

Key words: child welfare, transition from care, youth transitions, retirement planning

INTRODUCTION

There are several sources of job satisfaction in the life of an academic. One is that every decade, give or take a bit, we get to take a sabbatical year to pause and reflect, to travel, to review career directions, to plan for the future. The other is that it is possible to reinvent oneself every so often, carving out new areas of interest and seeking new sources of stimulation. This paper is the product of a recent period of reflection and renewal in which I was able to consider some of the similarities between my own experience of role transition and the experiences of youth in transition from care, mature workers entering retirement, refugees compelled to leave their countries of origin, youth experiencing changes in foster placements, and youth who move from country to country as the result of parental employment. As a pedagogical tactic, we encourage our students to draw on their own experience, both for course essays and for submissions to our journals. This paper constitutes my attempt to see my experience in a broader context of life transitions. T.S. Eliot's lines in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" about how there will be time "for a hundred indecisions, and for a hundred visions and revisions" (Eliot, 1964, p.18) resonated in my efforts to understand my experiences and plan future directions.

ROOTS OF REFLECTION

An interesting recent article by Nehring (2003) in Harper's magazine discussed the essay as a form of writing in which generalizations are made from the individual particular to the general universal. For several

years, I have been involved in research related to youth in transition from the care system. One theme that emerges from that area of research is that a chronologically determined imperative of transition (whether at age 16 or 18 or 21) is artificial and unreasonably early in comparison to normative data on transition from the family home. Another theme is that the transition from care also differs from the normative data in that it tends to be more abrupt, lacking what behaviourists might refer to as a shaping procedure of successive approximations to true independence. Children not in the care of the state or of religious organizations can move out of the family home to go away to school and then move back in for the summer. Children not in care can always come back to visit, often staying in their old bedroom. Children not in care can move out and back in repeatedly with virtually no constraints save for parental exasperation and neighbourhood gossip. Youth in care have no such option. Their time is up.

These issues moved from being an area of study to something more personal for me when I reached the chronologically mandated end of my term as Director of the Child and Youth Care program at Ryerson University. Personnel policies (as well as common sense) dictate that two consecutive terms in an administrative position is quite enough. But the unalterable fact was that my role changed because time ran out, just as it does for the youth who turns 16 or 18 or 21. Serendipitous chats with recently retired colleagues introduced the third thread to this fabric, leading me into an exploration of the range of settings in which the phrase "Your time is up. Time to move on" was operative.

Some writers and researchers are able to recognize the openings or passages between parallel realms, and in doing so demonstrate complementarities that illuminate both areas of interest. One example of this was an article by Janet Finn in the feminist social work journal *Affilia* (1990), in which she made a strong case for the recognition of the parallel interests of social service providers and recipients. Another example is the article by Eisikovits and Schwartz in *Residential Treatment for Children and Youth* (1991) in which they suggest that affluent youth in boarding schools and disadvantaged youth in group homes have more in common than might originally be expected. In each of these examples, the general idea is that those on one side of the fence (or the tracks) can learn more about themselves through the analogous, and perhaps vicarious, study of those on the other side. Inspired by these models, I began to wonder whether there were researchers in Organizational Behaviour, Human Resource Management, or even Gerontology who have written on the phenomenon of, and preparation for, retirement, no less a chronologically driven imperative than the transition from care. The topic of mandatory retirement has received considerable attention in recent years, but it was the experiential side of this phenomenon that captured my interest in this context. This was nicely captured in a recent newspaper article by Katherine Harding (2003), which opens with the following.

Don Nelson's birthday in February was met with a terse and unexpected order from his human resources department at the CBC. He was told it was time to pack up his desk as the coordinator for guest relations and get out. It's nothing personal, he was told. His bosses were just following the company's mandatory retirement policy. "I'm only 65 and I'm healthy. I don't understand why they don't still need me." (p. C1)

The similarity between this and the experience of youth ageing out of care was striking. The youth leaving state care at 18 or so and the elder preparing to enter it at 65 or so, may have more in common than first meets the eye, like the youth in care and those in boarding school, or like the common cause of social service providers and recipients. In addition, my exploration led me to consider the breadth of potential generalization as I asked what other particular phenomena might be experientially similar.

MANDATED TRANSITIONS

My thoughts on this topic have gradually expanded beyond the original idea of transitions simply governed by the calendar to what I have come to think of as "mandated transitions". My use of this term has two essential characteristics, namely that they have some inevitable trigger and that they are externally imposed. The trigger could be chronological, with a person reaching a certain age or having completed a specified period of time in a role. The trigger could be a provision of the law or a collective agreement. The trigger could be something that happens to someone else that affects you because of your connection to that person. The "externally imposed" component of the definition means that the transition is something done to you as opposed to something you have chosen. The element of choice arises from the range of ways in which you can respond.

I began to develop a catalogue of mandated transitions, some of which may not completely fit the definition of unavoidable change externally imposed, but that have elements that may be useful in elaborating on the ways in which one prepares for transition. In casting this net a bit more broadly, I am working within what the philosopher Wittgenstein referred to as a "family resemblance". You and one of your siblings may have the same eyes, whereas you and another sib have similar chins, but your two siblings may share a hair colour that is different from your own. So, with that in mind, I began to make lists of time-triggered events and other transitions.

Starting with a focus on children and a chronological narrative, I would assume that anyone reading this who has been pregnant and given birth could think of that as a type of externally imposed, inevitable transition. Staying within a child development framework, there is also the child's chronologically triggered first day of primary school and then the first day of secondary school. There is the onset of puberty, becoming old enough to drive, becoming old enough to drink, becoming eligible for a

military draft in countries where that exists, and becoming too old for coverage as a dependent under your parents' health plan.

Our colleague Karen VanderVen has long been an advocate of life span development and care as a proper area of concentration in this field (e.g., VanderVen, 1992). With that in mind, we can also consider some of the transitions of adult life, including the ways in which they affect children and youth. Leaving one job and starting another is a relatively common adult experience. In the context of mandated transitions, this is one of the themes of a book called *Third Culture Kids* by Pollock and Van Reken (2001). They look at the experience of kids growing up in internationally mobile families, most typically ones in which one or both parents are employed by diplomatic organizations, religious missionary groups, military organizations, or NGOs. The children often are away from their home culture, living within a host culture, existing collectively as a "third culture", and significantly at the mercy of decisions made by the sponsoring organization such as where and when the next posting will be. One section of the book that struck me is as follows.

When a tree is transplanted too often, its roots can never grow deep. So it is with these young people. Some third culture kids refuse to get involved in a new place because they fear that liking this new place would mean betraying the friends and places that they have known and loved before. Others don't settle in as a protection against being hurt again in a future move they know will inevitably come. If they refuse to make close friends, it won't matter when they have to say good-bye next time. (pp.71-72)

This was with reference to kids whose experience of mandated transitions was due to parental employment changes. But those same words could easily be found in discussions of the experience of youth in care with multiple foster or group home placements.

One other example, brought to my attention by someone working in the criminal justice system, is what some jurisdictions call "mandatory release". After completion of a certain portion of a sentence, the convicted person is put back into the community under supervision. This recently triggered controversy in Toronto when it was learned that someone convicted of child molestation was being moved into a halfway house in a neighbourhood that had just experienced the abduction and death of a child. Nonetheless, the practice of mandatory release under supervision represents one of the very few examples I have found of a shaping toward, and a preparation for, mandated transitions. It is this topic to which we turn to next.

PREPARATION FOR TRANSITION

While changes or transitions, sometimes mandated, sometimes sought, are a standard part of life and human development, much of the

literature and practice tends to emphasize the transition point itself while placing less emphasis on how one prepares for transition and even less than that on evaluating the success of the transition. In this segment, I would like to focus on the preparation for transition.

In a recent collaborative project with a street youth service agency and the child welfare system (Leslie and Hare, 2003), one of the questions we asked youth focused on their preparation for leaving care. The child welfare agency wanted to ask, "Did you leave care in a planned way?" by which they meant, "Did you have a series of meetings with your worker shortly before your emancipation from care?" However, for the youth the question meant, "Did you give some thought to leaving before you went?" as illustrated by one youth who said something very similar to, "Forget this, tomorrow I'm gonna get out of here." Note that this was a planned leaving, not an impulsive act, albeit one with a very short time frame.

For me, the question then becomes: "What is the appropriate time frame in preparing for a mandated transition?" This brought me back to my two original areas of inquiry, namely transition from care and the move into retirement. What I found interesting in my literature review is that there is very little in the organizational literature or the gerontology literature on how one best prepares for the mandated transition from the workforce. To the extent a literature on retirement exists, it tends to focus on financial planning issues, with a sub-category in the organizational literature on whether contractually mandated retirement is a necessary condition for a solvent pension plan (e.g., Gomez, Gunderson, & Luchak, 2002). My original hope of finding illumination in the organizational literature that would tell us how to prepare youth for transition from care was not realized. This is not to say that the literature is totally non-existent. An article by Rosenkoetter and Garris (1998) in the *Journal of Advanced Nursing* on "Psychosocial changes following retirement" used a questionnaire and identified a factor that they called "pre-retirement preparation outcomes", although the emphasis is primarily on adequate financial planning. Another article, in a German-language gerontology journal (Mayring, 2000), reported a longitudinal study that followed respondents from a point prior to retirement to a period two years after retirement. They reported in the English abstract that people were generally pleased with the increase in leisure time but had some concerns about financial issues and the loss of status. Each of these studies, and others like them, tend to look at a narrow time band. The basic research method is to find people about to retire and ask, "Are you ready?" and then find people after they retire and ask, "How are you doing?"

One interesting exception to this general trend in the literature was a paper published by Purdon, Cefalo and Stenchever in the *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* (2002). The American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology conducted a survey of physicians and discovered that "The information that was obtained confirmed that most practitioners, whether academic or community based, had made little or no preparation for the

non-financial aspects of changing careers or retirement" (p. 828). As a result, the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology has launched an initiative to deliberately build in preparation for retirement workshops at conferences and the like, primarily structured on the assumption that a physician has to "retire to something to maintain a sense of worth" (p. 829). Emphases include developing skills, interests, hobbies and volunteer interests. This last point regarding the development of volunteer interests is something to which I will return in my final section on a research and service agenda.

So what do we know about preparation for mandated transitions? Relatively little is done in the child welfare and residential care sector, and what is in place tends to be offered late in the day and often in a somewhat bureaucratic manner. Relatively little is done in preparation for transition to retirement, with the exception of financial planning which, while significant, is not the only issue. There are a few longitudinal studies that start before retirement and follow a little while after it, and there are moves in some areas toward encouraging professionals to plan for the non-financial aspects of retirement, but my review suggested that organizational retirement planning is only marginally ahead of transition from care planning and both represent areas ripe for further investigation.

EVALUATING THE SUCCESS OF TRANSITIONS

One of my principal areas of interest in recent years has been the evaluation of programs and services for children and youth (e.g., Hare and Katryan-Gale, 2001). I am thus constitutionally incapable of speculating about the need for programs to prepare youth for leaving care or programs for physicians leaving their practice without asking the question, "Does the program do what was intended?" Given that the literature on preparation for mandated transitions is so sparse, it is not surprising that the literature evaluating the success of that preparation is rare. There is some work on care outcomes (e.g., Trocmé, 1999), but the focus tends to be close to the point of leaving care rather than further down the road. Articles by McKenzie (1997, 2003) have reported on long-term follow-up of graduates of orphanages, but these are exceptional.

Employers maintain contact with retirees if only to mail out pension cheques. However, there is relatively little work that I am aware of in which employers investigate the psychosocial adjustment to retirement of their former employees or ask how well the company prepared them for this new life. Child welfare and residential services, it could be argued, have even less incentive to maintain contact with system grads and thus assess how well the organizations did in preparing them for independence. Budgetary realities being what they are in the system, there is barely enough money to provide service to those still on the caseload, let alone those no longer being funded. At least, in the old days of orphanages run by religious orders, maintaining contact with graduates could be incorporated into the fundraising and donor cultivation functions

of the order. This incentive does not exist for the care system, which means that any such work must be done by people funded from outside that system.

A RESEARCH AND SERVICE AGENDA

While my original hope of finding the answers to how to prepare youth for transition from care by looking at how organizations prepare employees for retirement was not realized, I am convinced that the family resemblances among various forms of mandated transitions offer the potential for rich learning opportunities. A recurrent theme is that financial planning is but one element of a successful transition. Retiring not just from something but to something with an intact sense of self-worth is crucial, as is leaving care with a set of skills and a sense of hope. The literature on retirement preparation and the literature on transition from care ought to be developed each for its own sake, but also for the ways in which they can contribute to each other. Among the projects that could be undertaken are the following.

- Conduct an in-depth review of the preparation for independence activities offered by child welfare and social service agencies.
- Establish collaborative links with researchers in the organizational area of retirement preparation and with professional organizations that are developing workshops to prepare their members for retirement from practice.
- Gather information from those who have experienced mandated transitions, seeking their advice on what was helpful and what was not in their preparations.
- Explore the extent to which the inevitable and imposed nature of mandatory transitions complicates the ability to respond effectively.

Expanding beyond the core issues of transition from care and preparation for retirement, one of the co-authors of the *Third Culture Kids* book (D.C. Pollock, personal communication, September 5, 2003) has suggested that the experience of refugee children might have a lot in common with the children of diplomats and missionaries who were the respondents in his previous studies, adding to the already noted similarity between their experience and that of children experiencing multiple foster placements. Preparing children for, and supporting them through, such transitions requires evidence-based best practice guidelines but, at present, the research foundation for these is not sufficient.

One practical service implication of this research agenda is buried in the organizational literature on preparation for retirement. The suggestion is that, in preparing to retire, one should be developing interests and volunteer activities, with the goal of maintaining self-worth by retiring to something. If we place this on the table next to the literature on mentoring and the mutual benefits of the mentoring relationship, it would be possible

to imagine retirees-to-be entering into mentoring relationships with care-grads-to-be, sharing their insights on their parallel transitions. There is some literature that suggests that a significant predictor of a successful transition from care is the available presence of a caring adult. There is also a literature that suggests that the transition to retirement is enhanced by developing volunteer activities that contribute to the community. The development of mentoring programs, with provisions for their evaluation, may be a way to allow these two realms of mandated transitions to contribute to each other.

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