

The Cost is Unacceptable: Excerpts of an Arts-Based Inquiry with Child and Youth Care Practitioners from Care

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Introduction

Professional helping fields, such as child and youth care, social work, mental health services, addiction, etc., have developed from multiple entwined, and at times, oppositional ideologies. These have included approaches informed by moral rectitude (Charles, 2015), mutual support (White, 2000), benevolent violence (Chapman and Withers, 2019), care ethics (White, in press), eugenics (Clare, 2017), individual emancipation (LeFrançois et al., 2013), colonialism (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), cultural resistance (Lappas, 2021), and white supremacy (Amponsah and Stephen, 2020) among others. These contrasting orientations have frequently come into conflict and attempts at harmonizing the antagonistic agendas have resulted in multiple intentional and unintentional consequences. Some of these have been positively transformative, others morbidly, if not mortally, harmful. Over the past couple of decades, CYC has begun to look critically at how we are implicated into these histories, how they have informed (and continue to inform) the work we do, and the implications of these lineages for our understanding of what CYC is as a field (Vachon and Walker, 2021). Concurrently, although not necessarily in direct response to this tangled history, CYC and allied occupations have seen multiple initiatives towards regulation,

professionalization, credentialization, evidence-based practices, and related ideologies (Fusco, 2012). More recently, there have been discussions, publications, conference presentations, and initiatives towards critically reflecting and analyzing our history, claiming identities within CYC that have not always been recognized or acknowledged, the development of affinity groups, an active call for political engagement of practitioners, revamping of college and university curricula, and a re-reading (and at times a re-writing) of some of the canonical literature.

One group that traverses many of these positions, a group that has been largely unheard from until recently, are Child and Youth Care practitioners “from care” (CYCPfC, although the notion of “care” is contentious and contested within this group). These are practitioners who have child welfare, child protection, residential placement, or related experiences and now work in CYC. Drawing on the knowledge and perspective of this unique demographic provides an opportunity for all CYCPs to consider the work we do, how we do that work, and to confront embodied impacts of the previously identified entangled agendas.

Tuning into Child and Youth Care: An Audio Drama Inquiry with Child and Youth Care Practitioners Who Have lived in Residential Placement, is a doctoral research project done with CYCPfC about their experiences as students and practitioners. As indicated by the title, the study uses an arts-based approach, specifically a method called audio drama inquiry. Arts-based research (ABR) is defined by Patricia Leavy (2018) as:

a transdisciplinary approach to knowledge building that combines the tenets of the creative arts in research contexts ... ABR practices [are] methodological tools used by researchers across the disciplines during any or all phases of research, including problem generation, data or content generation, analysis, interpretation, and representation. ... This process of inquiry therefore involves researchers engaging in art-making as a way of knowing (Leavy, 2018, p. 4).

ABR is an approach that is ideally suited to CYC, in that it is relational, ethical, participatory, enjoyable, responsive to the skills, interests, and capacities of all research-collaborators, provides wide opportunities for dissemination, and may be less intimidating than other forms of research (Vachon, 2020a). *Tuning into CYC* worked within an emerging method of ABR called audio drama inquiry, which draws on applied theatre as research, ethno-theatre, podcasting, sonic agency, sound studies, and audio drama to “explore ideas of truth and resonance at the interface between art, research, education and social justice” (Vachon and Woodland, 2021, p. 1).

A challenge with ABR, in terms of academia, is that it rarely fits within the traditional parameters of scholarly literature. While ABR can lead to wide distribution across diverse communities outside of the academy, one rarely sees examples of it in peer-reviewed publications. One consequence of this is that emerging researchers (such as students, new faculty, or CYCPs in the workplace) may not be exposed to these approaches and thus not know that ABR exists as a methodological option. Further, because of this publication paucity, ABR can be perceived by fellow academics as illegitimate research, ill-suited for serious scholars, not clear, too hard to understand, not rigorous, or simply dismissed as “not good” (Pariser, 2009), and thus not an approach worth supporting or supervising. Because of all these factors, ABR remains contested within academia, including some sectors of CYC. For CYC students interested in this methodology their ability to pursue ABR is limited due to the lack of faculty qualified to supervise ABR in CYC programs, further leading to its marginal and underdeveloped status.

Conversations about what is and is not legitimate research in CYC are not new (nor are these conversations bad to have). Over the years there have been debates about the appropriateness and efficaciousness of evidence-based practices (Stuart et al., 2011), the value of transdisciplinary approaches (Land et al., 2018), CYC “authenticity” (Loiselle et al., 2012), ways of including children in research (Johannisen, et al., 2019), and the notion of a relational CYC approach (Bellefeuille, and Ricks, 2010), among other discussion topics (Stuart, 2013). While ABR arguments may only be the latest entry into the debates regarding acceptable CYC research, it does remind the reader of the conflicting founding paradigms introduced at the beginning of this paper.

While multiple examples of ABR relevant to CYC does exist, such as by and with people from the child welfare system (see [here](#) and [here](#)), people involved in the shelter system (see <https://transitioninghomepodcast.podbean.com/> and <http://homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/Long-Way-To-Go.pdf>), young people navigating COVID-19 (<https://www.childart.ca/art-work>), Indigenous perspectives on gender-based violence (<https://onlineacademiccommunity.uvic.ca/sistersrising/>), and a vast array of other topics, few emerging, or even established, scholars ever see this work.

It is useful for CYCPs – including researchers, educators, students, and other practitioners to ask how well CYC and those we work with have been served by traditional forms of research, and if CYC might benefit from developing a discipline attuned research paradigm. It is with the braided realities of historical legacies infusing CYC, the experiences of CYCPc, and the knowledge and acceptance of ABR within CYC that I write this piece, intending through doing so, to engage all these elements.

Tuning into CYCPc

The findings from *Tuning into CYC* are found within the audio dramas *ReFiled* and *Hiring Care*. To listen to the full audio dramas created as part of this inquiry please visit¹ www.ReFiled.ca. Unlike much research where each finding is named (or coded), explained, quotes shown to evidence the claims, and then a discussion is written arguing the opinions of the primary investigator(s), audio drama inquiry invites non-traditional ways of engaging with the findings. For this sonic dissertation the listener is asked to hear the words spoken, consider how they are edited, listen for what the stories reveal, and undertake their own subjective analysis emanating from their unique positionality. Each listener will hear differently the vast array of topics addressed in the audio dramas, such as stigma, trauma, healing, self-identity, anxiety, boundaries, racism, benefits and

¹ At the time of this writing, only *ReFiled*, which is season one of *Tuning Into CYC* is available. *ReFiled* is a collectively devised audio drama inquiry about a CYCPc, named Revel, who is involved in the restraint of a young person. Partaking in this restraint causes a personal & political rupture within them. This leads Revel to go and look at their own files stored in the same agency they work for. Season two, *Hiring Care*, is scheduled to be released in the fall of 2021, coinciding with when this issue is launched.

limitations of lived experience, readiness to work, doubt, disclosure, systemic barriers, safety, and care.

When I listen to *ReFiled* and *Hiring Care*, one of the (many) ways that I hear the audio dramas is through my knowledge of the “lived experience” literature. What becomes apparent to me is that CYCPfC perspectives are congruent with findings from allied fields (e.g., social work, mental health, and nursing, see Vachon, 2020b) such as identification with those they work with, role-modeling for young people, and their residential placement experience aiding in developing relationships with children and youth. The perception of some CYCPfC is that their lived experience leads to increased empathy with young people, an embodied understanding of young peoples’ situations, greater awareness of how systems work, and high motivations to initiate change regarding micro and macro systems. Along with these perceived benefits, there is an articulation of hazards and challenges related to their personal histories, the institutions in which they work(ed), and the CYC field more broadly.

Hiring Care

The remainder of this article is a script excerpt from *Hiring Care*, season two of *Tuning Into CYC*. *Hiring Care* is a verbatim audio drama based on conversations between myself and 10 CYCPfC. The conversations were conducted and transcribed in the summer of 2019. The script was written in the summer/fall of 2020. A reflective “listening panel” (Fenge and Jones, 2012) was held in the fall of 2020 with 13 CYCPs from across the country to gather responses to what was in the script, assess its relevance to a CYC audience, and to gain feedback on their emotional and cognitive reactions (for more about the process see Vachon, in press or visit www.TuningIntoCYC.org). Most of the script is verbatim, taken directly from what people said in the conversations we had. After transcribing, listening (and re-listening), and reading (and re-reading) I arranged the conversation texts into a structure whereby conversationalists were put into relationships with each other (even though none of the conversationalists actually spoke to each other). I have made composite characters of several people reducing the cast size to seven.

Hiring Care is constructed as a conversation between a group of seven CYCPfC who are meeting to talk about creating a way to support agencies who want to hire practitioners with child welfare experience. This construct came out of a quote from Charlotte² one of the CYCPfC I spoke with.

I think
what I would love,
and I actually had, like,
um
explored this opportunity with a couple of
youth in care, youth from care advocates that um
I spend time with sometimes.
Umm
is we almost like wanted to create a booklet about how to support someone with lived experience
in care in your organization.
Who works for you
ummm,
and at the same time {2 second pause}
still hold people accountable for
um
working on themselves?
I think it's hard
to hold space
for people with lived experience in care.
Um and I think people get nervous about it, ah nervous about triggering them or nervous about
kind of doing the wrong thing.

² All names are pseudonyms chosen by the people I had conversations with.

Script structure

The script is in a format that may be difficult to read in parts, it has several unique features not common to audio drama scripts or academic papers. I created these elements to track what I was doing to the words said by those I had conversations with. The formatting was initially developed for my own use. As I started to workshop *Hiring Care* (bringing in actors, doing readings, performing for selected audiences, soliciting feedback, etc.) I shared the syntactically inscribed script with the actors, the conversationalist who said the original words, and others who work in research-based theatre. Many people commented on how this way of writing the text brought awareness to research practices, including how researchers use, edit, manipulate, and contextualize material developed during the inquiry process. Further, some actors found the structure helpful in preparing and performing the roles (it must also be said, that some actors quite disliked it, and several removed the formatting when recording). Researchers, by necessity, make multiple decisions on how to best represent vast amounts of material (data) in a concise, relevant, and meaningful way. However, readers of research are not always able to see these constructions. By showing how I worked with the text, I hope to bring some transparency regarding my own process.

Here is a legend for the scored (Salvatore, 2020) text:

- Text that is crossed out and reduced to a smaller font: i.e. “...~~I~~ say” is part of the verbatim text but is not said by the character.
- Verbatim text that has been omitted by me while the character is speaking but is not crossed out is indicated by “[...]”. This is done for a variety of reasons but most importantly for confidentiality.
- Things in brackets: i.e. “[Yeah, and]” is said by the character. This is text that I have added and is not part of the original transcripts.
- If there are ellipsis not bracketed, there was a pause by the person during the original conversation i.e. “...”.
- Items italicised within parentheses are notes to the actor: “(Surprised)” or technical notes written by me.

- Items in {} are reactions or notes from the original transcript, i.e. “[laughter]”.
- Text that has a time stamp next to it is original verbatim. The time stamp is where that line was said in the original interview.
- Text that does not have a time stamp has been written by me.
- When you see the same character having multiple time stamps one right after another, it means I have removed my (Wolfgang’s) text/responses.

Characters

Three of the characters, “B”, “Ellisha”, and “Terri” are composites, meaning two people I spoke with have been combined into a single character.

All the names are pseudonyms, chosen by the original person I spoke with.

B

B is a white male in his 20s from the east coast of Canada. B is a composite character of two different people I spoke with.

Charlie

Charlie is a First nations woman in her late 40s currently living in the west coast but born in the east. She is based on a single person I spoke with.

Charlotte

Charlotte is a white female in her mid 20s from the west coast. She is based on a single person I spoke with.

Chelsea

Chelsea is a First Nations woman in her late 20s from the western provinces. She is based on a single person I spoke with.

Ellisha

Ellisha is a white Jewish woman in her mid-30s living in central Canada. She is a composite character of two different people I spoke with.

Leela

Leela is an Indo-Caribbean woman in her mid-20s living in central Canada. She is based on a single person I spoke with.

Terri

Terri is a white woman in late 50s from central Canada now living in the Atlantic provinces. She is a composite character of two different people I spoke with.

Scene context

The scene below is episode five of seven. The scene takes place on a video conferencing call with seven people present. After a previous conversation, where five of the six CYCPfC were white, Terri takes it upon herself to have a conversation with Leela, the one person of colour present. The awkward and problematic conversation is Terri's attempt to address topics related to representation, diversity, and "the difficulty in recruiting Indigenous, Black and other CYCPfC of colour". Following the scene between Leela and Terri, we are introduced to two new characters, Charlie and Chelsea, both indigenous women. The excerpt you are about to read, picks up after introductions of all the characters have been made.

Episode 5, Scene 1: The Cost is Unacceptable

Terri: Okay, um, yeah, so, ahhh where to begin. Um, so, I was thinking, we talked a little about this last time, but since we have some new people here, I'm wondering if we might start with some of the benefits of being from and working in care. Charlie?

Charlie: (Short pause) I have to right, otherwise I'd give up, right? Yeah, I mean, like, there's layers [unclear, maybe "I guess" or "of depths" or "of deaths"]. So one, one is like, there's spider roofing. Is like, using my [unclear maybe "wizards" or "resources"] where I really was just on a path to self destruction? [Um ...] Like, you know, it, [the system] on an individual level allowed me these other [some] opportunities, but I want to be clear that the cost is unacceptable. It's unacceptable.

Chelsea: Right?

Charlie: And that's the option offered to young Indigenous people. That if you want to survive, you have to like, abandon your community and your culture. And that's, like, the only choice that we're given. Yet, it's the worst violence. It's not a success. And I think you know, you could look at me and say what a success story, but it's not. It's, you know, it's it's pulling yourself with, through your teeth and your spirit. Um, in a situation that should never should never happen[ed]. Like, I should never have had to experience these things. So

Leela: The main stuff that I'm dealing with [right now] is probably around putting into where I've been into the race card. Because [I agree Charlie] I was brought up in a certain way, I was born in a specific region, born into a specific [unclear maybe state, specific home Caribbean home]. Um, but then the traditional culture aspect of life, I don't necessarily practice the lifestyles. So, for me, like one of the main things I'm like dealing with right now is how do I truly identify myself? That's going to be an equitable way, where I still recognize, like, some of the privileges I hold. But then also, what are the barriers that I face? When working with other people? Umm, is [Like] one of the big things it is, there's an over representation of Black and Indigenous youth, within [name of city] [in the child welfare system, where I work], specifically.

Chelsea: It's all across the country, Leela.

Leela: Good point, Chelsea

Chelsea: Um, well, [Like] when I was in a group home, like I, one of the common things that, especially the one that I work in right now, a bunch of the youngin's they complain that, you know, people are Caucasian. There's no First Nations youth workers. So, for me, um making the choice to go into university was kind of like, um wanting to role model that?

Charlie: [That's so important, Chelsea. You know] I've never had a First Nation mentor in child and youth care, ever.

Charlie: I've never had a First Nations instructor or {3 second pause} anything.

Charlie: And so, you know, we still don't really have a capacity as a field, to invite Indigenous students and ensure that they will receive coursework and mentors, and practice opportunities that are rooted, in you know, in a strong and diverse kind of indigenous worldviews.

Ellisha: And, and I think, I also think that the system has been so stuck.

Charlie: [But we need to ask why, Ellisha. Why is it so stuck? Who benefits when it's stuck? And to answer that requires] a critical understanding of settler history, and the ideologies, that at the heart of settler colonialism, and colonialism, which show up in different ways, in all the systems in which we work, but that are this kind of, the same throughout, which is um control.

Leela: [Control, yeah] We are often never placed with our own cultures, or religions, or families that we can identify with. And even when we are, it's often times a more traumatic experience. ~~Because a lot of the times when you do certain things, or when your~~ [unclear maybe "blood"] comes from that culture. [Which] comes from that deep-rooted

intergenerational trauma that's been happening. And then we regress [~~? unclear~~] through that ~~hole~~. We in turn almost constantly combat and fight against it. And we refuse to identify to be a part of that. And it's true for me, and it's true for others CYCP that I have met who are also from Child Welfare.

Ellisha: [Yeah] Like, we're really, it's so different based on so many experiences. Privilege, I'm, you know, I mean, as a white [Jewish] privileged person I come from, you know, a a culture that tends to be more affluent and more educated. And and then I'm talking to somebody who's of indigenous background, who came from Native Family Child Services, who went to 14 different foster homes before landing in group homes. And, and I think we hear those stories and we know those stories, but we don't really truly know those stories until we look at what the systemic issues are, and how that impacts the kid.

Charlotte: In my current role, [as a white woman working in an Indigenous agency] ~~I've been volunteering with [...]~~ I think it's really humbled me in understanding my privilege. Um and recognizing even the kind of um differences in the type of care. I wouldn't say, the privilege I have in care, because I don't want to use that terminology in relationship to foster care, but, um, under the differences in my um experience of not being racialized by the care system, not entering the care system because of systemic issues, ~~um~~ such as intergenerational trauma, ~~um~~ and colonialism. However, the relationship[s] I have to ~~them~~ [the people I work with] is lived experience in the care system. So that's actually our bonding um at the base of our relationship, which is quite interesting.

Charlie: (Pause) If [you're] working with indigenous communities, ~~they~~ [you] have to know all of the history. Um, And how each of these things, systems, residential schools, the 60s scoop, the millennial scoop, the child welfare, the adoption systems are all linked together by the same very overt ideology of of basically genocide. [...] And if you don't have that historical critical perspective, then you can't understand all the many ways that the violence shows up at the individual level, at the level of the family, intergenerationally, economically, you know, health wise, and in terms of people's triggers in terms of

people's responses, um you know, you, you, you, you've [unclear, maybe "link"] several pictures of [You have to understand] what's happening to indigenous kids, in these systems and to these families, and [without that] therefore, you're, you're, you're not effective in your intervention, because you're just responded responding to the outcome, rather than the cause.

Charlie: And so, to me, care in CYC requires an understanding of that history, it requires a critical understanding of colonial ideologies and and white supremacy and and white colonialism.

Leela: [Yeah, for sure] Being a person of colour [in this field] I feel like it doesn't change anything, in the sense of a negative connotation, though. Umm, it doesn't change anything in the sense that we're still faced with the same barriers [as] being a person of color while, working in a bank or library, or being a plumber, or wherever. You're still automatically looked upon. Umm, you're still constantly faced with the million and one micro-aggressions. Of, "oh, where are you from?" "Oh, I didn't know it was your first language." "Oh, but you're speaking so well." "Or you're not as dark as I thought you would be?" Or just little things like that. And in general, it's the same in the sense of, it's the same discrimination within CYCP.

Charlie: [That's because] the field is super white, it's, it's an extremely white field, the, you know, the leading thinkers, practitioners, and scholars in the field, for the most part tend to be white men, and, um there's a few women but, um you know? It's very difficult to think of leading um CYC specific Indigenous scholars.

Chelsea: ... [Yeah, I totally know. I mentor students and go into classes to talk about my experiences, and] I still deal with a lot of people that, you know, that are, that get frustrated that they have to take, um that that they have to learn about the residential schools and everything, but the majority of the youth that are in these, um these programs that we work in, are those youth, right? So. Um so [I try to] be patient, educate,

ask questions. And to be honest, like, um I think what kind of helps me whenever I go to work, I, I try to give my 110% energy towards things. Whether, you know, that's reflecting back to how things were done, when I was growing up, and how I can shift that focus on to like, these new, these other youth, because things have changed drastically, in like since I was like a teenager.

B: So, would you say that's why you went into this field? To mentor, or role model, being First Nations and from care?

Chelsea: ~~Yeah~~ Um, I think it's a little bit of both, it's kind of wanting to, wanting to, influence positive change. Um, for me I guess for me, like, um just because I had an experience growing up, like, at the time when I was 16, and dabbling in drugs, I definitely thought it was the end of the world. Um but now that I'm like, working in the field, if I weren't, if I never experienced those, I probably wouldn't have been in this field.

B: Right.

Charlie: ~~And All of our words is sat... just saturated with stories of being in the system, you know, res, residential schools, 60s scoop, child welfare like it's just, and it's pervasive and so I never even thought twice about not sharing or not saying like it truly never even occurred to me. Um until I think, just from being in the local, like First Nations community, through my work, um um, you know, where people kind of want to know where you come from. And what brings you to the work? Yeah. Um having grown up in care always impacted the choices I made for the kinds of um practicum or practice choices I made. [...] And that was based on, you know, my experience and my kind of understanding of these issues? And that really, shaped my whole career. My practice and research interests, like it's always been at the forefront of what, what I do, and why I do what I do, and the kinds of topics and issues that I've focused on in my front-line career and my research work?~~

Charlie: Yeah, 100% I mean, it creates a sense of lived understanding and, um you know, a sense of connection of having been through those colonial systems that have harmed our communities so much over generations. And, you know, if you're trying to do working Indigenous Child Welfare without understanding of those issues, um I think you're gonna have a difficult time, building trust and accountability to communities, and young people. And that's always been my pri, my priority in my work. You know above anything else?

Charlie: (talking about what care means to her)

[And for me, when I think about this work, when I think about care] First and foremost, um it's an, like an ideology and a life commitment. Um, it's like a way of life, it's not a profession, it's, you know, you, to me you do CYC because you have an ethic of care. If you stay in it for the long term (short laugh). I mean, it, like there's transient people in the field that kind of try it out. But if it's, if you stay in the field, um you you know, you might have like an ethic of care, that drives your commitment to this work. And it doesn't have to be in CYC, um, per se. So, it could be, you know, in any realm of your life, whether you're a foster parent, or a volunteer, working in policy, you're doing research, um it's just like an ideological commitment to like extrern... being accountable to others. And to up upholding people's dignity um and well-being. Um, through an ethic of commitment and love. And, um, kind of showing up. And, you know, the rest is, you know, okay, what tools or what framework, or what concepts do you use to do that? And so for me, that's when I get into the indigenous concepts, because they're the ones that inform how I care, and why I care.

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