Analogizing Relational Practice: Creating Comparisons for Reflection and Dialogue

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Abstract

This article examines the use and potential benefits of analogy in relational child and youth care (CYC) practice. In addition to offering some analogies about professional issues in CYC, it offers a framework for constructing one's own analogies. Finally, drawing on examples from the CYC discourse, effective analogies for conceiving and describing core relational practice concepts will be reviewed and discussed.

Keywords

relate, relationship, analogy, analogize, creative, reflective, contextualize, restrictive, external control, monoculture

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"One good analogy is worth three hours of conversation"
Dudley Field Malone

Introduction

From the relational CYC practitioner's standpoint, people and the social, cultural, political, geographical, and historical conditions in which they live are mutually constituted through an ever-shifting web of reciprocal influences. CYC practitioners are constantly assessing the interconnections between different relationships, events, activities, cultures, values, beliefs, institutions, systems, settings, environments, and

zeitgeists (K.S.G. Skott-Myhre, 2012; Newbury, 2011; White, 2015). Therefore, developing one's capacity for analogizing can serve as a creative, reflective approach to exercising relational thinking and communication. Analogizing is the process of seeing and relating the elements of a particular idea or circumstance to those of another. Analogical processes can deepen levels of awareness and comprehension, and can help reframe the meaning of an idea or circumstance by comparing it to something more relatable or evocative.

I will now offer a few analogies for conceptualizing some professional issues in the CYC field. Subsequently, I will provide a framework structure for developing one's own practice analogies, discuss some practical ways that analogy could be used to enrich practice, and pay homage to some CYC writers who use analogy exceptionally well to describe core relational practice concepts.

Analogies for Professional Issues in Child and Youth Care

Ice Cubes (Restrictive Care Settings)

Placing youth in restrictive care settings that limit their exposure to other people, places, and activities outside the care environment is like pouring water into an ice cube tray and putting it in the freezer. Before entering such a setting, youth (like the water in the tray) may have flowed freely throughout the community and had contact with a number of people, places, and events – both positive and negative. However, once placed in the restrictive setting and subjected to its insular, rigid, structures and expectations, the young person's mobility and behaviour begin to be limited and shaped in relation to the restrictions of their environment (H.A. Skott-Myhre, 2012). This is akin to the freezing process in which the water in the ice tray begins turning into cubes.

Living relatively removed from the larger social fabric, young people come to depend more on the restrictive care setting to meet their needs, which often involves adhering and acquiescing to its externally imposed demands and codes of conduct (VanderVen, 1995). Then, like ice cubes that have fully formed and can be taken out of the freezer, behavioural indicators signifying young people's domestication prompts the care setting to gradually reintegrate them with the extended domains of the life-space. This, however, is highly dependent on how well those considered for reintegration can embody the structures and expectations of the restrictive care setting beyond its physical confines. When released for reasons like community time, an outing, a home visit, etc. they must – whether genuinely or purportedly – present as though conformed or, metaphorically speaking, as ice cubes that are resistant to melting. Sadly, this

“un-meltable” presentation is what a restrictive care setting often looks for to declare its influence “successful” and the youth in its care as having been “treated” (Gharabaghi, 2014). Like removing an ice cube from the freezer to plop it in a glass of water, the youth who succeeds in appearing treated is discharged from the externally controlled environment and, with no internalized values or goals, melts back into the margins of the outside world.

Ocean Waves (Limited Conceptualizations of Youth Behaviour and Accountability)

To define the composition of an ocean wave as a body of water that rushes toward the shoreline would indeed be a superficial definition. This merely describes the visible aspects of a wave’s larger composition. Elusive to the naked eye are the interconnected influences of the moon’s magnetism, the earth’s gravitational pull, and perpetual volcanic activity at the earth’s core, which is constantly fracturing and reforming the ocean floor. Additionally, currents at greater ocean depths play a role in what happens on the surface. Suffice to say then that a wave would be better defined as an expression of the relationships between the forces of nature just mentioned. Likewise, the same is true of human behaviour. When practitioners are quick to define and react to young people based on how they behave within a limited, predetermined set of rules and expectations of an agency setting, they fail to recognize how youth behaviour is connected to the dynamic of social, cultural, institutional, political, and historical forces through which it is enacted and given meaning (Newbury, 2012). This, of course, includes the behaviour of CYC practitioners themselves, the settings and communities through which they encounter youth, and the enveloping political climate of CYC practice itself. Youth…adults…our communities…the field…together we all make waves.

Monoculture Agriculture and Forestry (Homogenous Settings and Practices)

For those who are unfamiliar with monoculture agriculture and forestry, it is the disproportionate, human cultivation of one particular crop or plant species across a vast expanse of land. Monoculture practices are a way to maximize profit and meet supply demands that exceed any natural ecosystem’s capacity to sustain one crop or plant species. Therefore they heavily rely on the use of various pesticides and herbicides. This is necessary to kill off other indigenous plant species, weeds, and insects with which the monoculture crop or plant would proportionately and harmoniously co-exist.

Isolated from a rich, bio-diverse surrounding, monoculture crops and plants are also more susceptible to disease and dying. That said, according to Suzuki and Dressel (2002), scientists have discovered that the root systems of various forest plant species

actually supplement fungi from each other, which in turn enables all species who engage in this exchange to absorb more life sustaining minerals and water. This discovery has begun altering the scientific inclination of separately classifying plant species and seeing forests as "...a kind of composite organism of interwoven life forms that are both competing *and* cooperating" (p.206, emphasis in the original).

As self-proclaimed ecological practitioners, CYC practitioners ought to turn to nature more often for lessons on ecological diversity and cooperation. Though the historical and continued trajectory of CYC is situated in ecological or "life-space" intervention (Charles & Garfat, 2009), it has also been argued that CYC practitioners who work in different life-space settings (i.e. child welfare, corrections, education, health care) often work in separation and, in some cases, in competition with each other's approaches (Fulcher & Ainsworth, 2005). Moreover, the momentum of post-modern thinking in the CYC discourse is further challenging our tendency to work in separation, urging practitioners to re-conceptualize their relationships with young people as democratic partnerships for affecting social change (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Roholt, Hildreth & Baizerman, (2007); Shaw-Raudoy & McGregor, 2013; Skott-Myhre, 2005).

When our settings, colleagues, and the youth we claim to serve, work in isolation of each other we monoculture our communities, which only weakens our capacity to truly thrive. Just like the root systems of a forest share fungi so that numerous plant species can draw up more minerals and water, we need to share our knowledge and resources with the intent to collaborate and empower each other. In isolation we are prone to the sickness of groupthink, which requires its own type of pesticides and herbicides. These usually come in the form of hierarchical decision-making processes and various other types of external control measures that inhibit creative frontline services (Gharabaghi & Anderson-Nathe, 2013). Instead, as Skott-Myhre (2014) argues, we must "become the common" if we wish to flourish.

> *To the degree that our institutions separate anyone within them from what they can do or become, they are machines that produce misery. The alternative is to create institutions that promulgate joy. Joy is the effect of bodies together creating and innovating while collectively governing themselves* (p.40).

The process of creating the analogies can yield deeper insights and be cathartic, bringing one closer to struggles in practice while offering some context to play creatively

with critical thought. I will elaborate more on this shortly, but next I would like to offer an approach to developing your own analogies.

Developing Practice Analogies

Although the framework process for developing one's own analogies below is thought to be effective, note that it is not the *only* way to go about creating analogies. It is merely *one approach* that has been helpful to my own practice. To avoid hindering anyone's creativity, I encourage people to also consider alternate and varied approaches.

1. Without forcing yourself to come up with an idea or concern about your practice or practice in general, let your mind wander toward something that strikes you. It may pertain to something you think about often or perhaps it is something that has repeatedly arisen in your periphery which you have yet to stop and contemplate (i.e. professional development).
2. Familiarize yourself with any thoughts and feelings you may have regarding this idea or issue and the impact they have on you and others (i.e. I haven't been to any trainings or read any literature in a while; I feel like the quality of my program's services are limiting because my team is complacent about the ways in which we conceive and engage youth; I don't feel like the youth are responding to me lately; compared to how I felt shortly after graduating university, I feel less creative and excited about my work; lately I question how qualified I am to be doing this work).
3. Inquire about what these thoughts and feelings are telling you and how they may be contextualized to a broader over-arching issue or set of issues (i.e. My influence and that of my colleagues feels limited. Lack of exposure to ongoing learning materials/opportunities and a lack of collective interest in professional development is limiting our enthusiasm and ability to respond).
4. Lastly, recognize the essence of your idea or concern and ask yourself what other types of situations might be comparable to it (i.e. In what other scenario does maintaining a deep sense of engagement and team effort appear crucial to performing at a high level and handling ever shifting demands and challenges?). As you let your mind wander toward examples, pause when you feel you have stumbled upon something (i.e. An Olympic soccer team). Then deconstruct some of the elements of your idea or issue in your example to see how it may or may not be relatable (i.e. the capacity of each player is dependent on how the team supports and facilitates each member's strengths; when certain players do not try or play hard the overall team's performance is compromised; if

players were to skip practices and calisthenics they would gradually stop playing at a level that met the challenges of the league; consistently losing games and faith in one's ability to perform brings down team morale and excitement to play).

Analogizing practice opens avenues for creative thinking and communication and can be engaged in a variety of ways. For example, practitioners could use an analogizing process like the one above as a reflective writing exercise. It could also be used as a reflective team-building exercise during an agency meeting, which could help staff members in developing a sense of their organizational culture and purpose. Moreover, in our day-to-day work with children and youth, analogizing can be helpful in moments when we are co-creating and clarifying meaning with young people, enabling us to "meet them where they are at" (Garfat & Fulcher, 2011).

From a developmental perspective, analogizing may assist us to enter into young people's zones of proximal development, offering relatable ways to explain and explore ideas that may otherwise be outside their comprehension or comfort levels (see Fulcher, 2013). Additionally, as it relates to cognitive development theory, analogies are useful for building one's cognitive schemas (structures that enable us to categorize, integrate, and access information within the brain), which is applicable to both us and young people. Relating new knowledge to knowledge we already possess makes it easier to comprehend and integrate, while also creating stronger neural pathways or 'bridges' of information.

Lastly, in terms of professional development, analogizing can help us connect with fuzzy ideas and concerns and unchecked thoughts and emotions that we may be carrying around in our practice. The analogizing process requires us to allot time and effort to developing a more nuanced understanding of whatever ideas, concerns, thoughts and emotions we may wish to unpack, and may therefore help foster our critical reflective abilities.

Looking to the work of some influential CYC authors, analogizing has the potential to complement other reflective exercises, like Mark Krueger's qualitative sketching process (2006, 2007) or Janet Newbury's hermeneutic inquiries (2007, 2010), wherein she attempts to contextualize her practice experiences by mapping them onto concepts in the critical-theory discourse. Both of these writers demonstrate how reflective exercises help them to re-live, re-frame, and re-form how they conceptualize and experience moments of practice, enabling them to explore different tensions, uncertainties, hopes, intuitions, and moments of connection that make CYC work both challenging and rewarding.

In the interest of promoting and further contributing to the reflective work of these writers and others, I submit that analogical writing and communicative practices be considered as another way of developing our personal and collective reflective capacities.

Exceptional Use of Analogy in the CYC Discourse

In this final section I will share some great analogies from the CYC discourse and comment on their amplitude for articulating the complexities of relational practice.

In "'Zoning In' to Daily Life Events that Facilitate Therapeutic Change in Child and Youth Care Practice", Leon Fulcher (2013) does an exceptional job of analogizing and elaborating on Lev Vygotsky's theory on the "zone of proximal development". Playing on the word "zone", he offers us an array of terms for recognizing how and the degrees to which to engage young people, all the while respecting their safety, abilities, levels of comfort/readiness, and boundaries. Fulcher uses terms like "zoning in", "zoned out", "safety zone" "zone offence", "zone defence", and "speed zones".

Another great example can be found in Jennifer White's (2007) seminal article "Knowing, Doing, and Being in Context: A Praxis-oriented Approach to Child and Youth Care", in which she utilizes the analogy of a web to describe how a multitude of social and institutional dynamics influence the knowledge, orientations, and approaches of relational CYC practice. She explains that, like the structure of a web, various communal, interpersonal, organizational, socio-cultural, and political/institutional influences intersect and thus reciprocally shape the broader societal structure. Moreover, a web is a structure that catches and contains, symbolizing CYC's enmeshment within the broader societal structure and its unavoidable impact on our views and approaches to practice.

Lastly, Mark Krueger has left us with a body of work that is rife with examples of the proficient use of analogy. One could easily write an entire article on his expertise in this respect. However, to offer just one example of note, Krueger (2008) analogized CYC as a dance, symbolizing its connection to core relational practice concepts like "presence" and "rhythmicity". He stated that

Competent workers/dancers know and feel:
When to line up and pass through
When to be in the middle of the group and when to be at the edge
When to move fast or slow
Where to stand and who to stand or move next to
When to sit/stand close or apart
When to touch and not touch
How to touch
When to listen and speak
When to listen, listen, listen and speak energetically and quietly
How to hear and see
How to hear, see and speak deeply as we walk the talk
And sometimes how to just be (p. 7).

As you can see in Fulcher, White, and Krueger's analogies for relational practice, each one has taken a relatively advanced idea or set of ideas and, through the use of analogy, made it digestible and palpable. Terms using the word "zone", a web, dancing…all are analogies with which the majority of people are at least somewhat familiar. Their brilliance is in their simplicity and accessibility. Reflecting on this last statement, when we remember to use language and ways of communicating that we can all relate to we enact the principle of inclusion.

Concluding Thoughts

Though this article offered several examples of analogies for conceptualizing professional issues and relational practice concepts in child and youth care, my main purpose was to draw attention to the process of analogizing and to highlight some of its benefits. Analogizing can stimulate creative thinking, facilitate personal or collective reflection, and offer a way to make our ideas and experiences more relatable and accessible to colleagues and young people.

In a world that is ever changing and globalizing – socially, culturally, economically, politically, and environmentally – child and youth care is constantly being tested in its capacity to evolve and be responsive. Never in the history of the world have different cultures, industries, epistemologies, belief systems, and sites for all kinds of connection and sharing been so integrated. As it stands, utilizing innovative, collaborative ways to contemplate and articulate meanings about our ideas and experiences will only become increasingly relevant and necessary.

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