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ASPIRATIONS AND BELONGING: TOUCHSTONES FOR THE JOURNEY

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Abstract: This paper explores the concept of belonging as it relates to the transitional experience of young people attempting to realize their educational aspirations. The Voyager Project is a social innovation program that sees peers who grew up in government care reach out to and mentor other young people in and from care, with the objective of encouraging them to pursue their educational aspirations. A theoretical examination of the concept of belonging and affiliation are woven together with reflections by the program participants on their experiential knowledge. Implications for emancipatory practice methods are explored.

Keywords: youth engagement, emancipatory practice, belonging, stigma, shame, oppression, social capital, voice

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Crown Wards are Canadian children deemed by the courts to be in need of protection and ordered to be made permanent wards of the state. Worldwide concern has been noted about the well-being of many young people as they transition from care services, and studies have consistently documented that many former Crown Wards experience adult outcomes that are poorer than their community peers (Cashmore, Paxman, & Townsend, 2007; Courtney, Piliavan, Grogan-Kayor, & Nesmith, 2001). The Voyager Project is a social innovation strategy that engages current and former Crown Wards in both systemic and individual advocacy, with the hope of increasing access to post-secondary training and education. The project is based "on a youth-to-youth model that used targeted supports, engagement measures, research activities and an advocacy agenda to improve educational outcomes" (Snow, 2013, p. 20).

This paper is written in collaboration with five members of the Voyager Project. These four male and one female co-authors volunteered to explore the topic on behalf of the larger group, and all were interested in publishing their ideas to help practitioners and funding agencies have a better understanding of the need for young people to have a place or places of belonging. It was agreed that the first author, a professor and the Voyager Project director, would write about what is known about the concept of belonging, and that all would record their individual thoughts, which would then be dealt with in this theoretical discussion.

We held several group discussions about the concept of belonging and during the same period the co-authors were also engaged in developing a multi-media treatment that explored the concept. Each submission was edited simply for clarity by the first author, and the co-authors reviewed these edits and the context in which the submission was contained in the order of arguments, to ensure that their thoughts were well understood and that the edits didn't misrepresent their points. The co-authors' comments appear in block quotations or with quotation marks but are not otherwise cited. Recognizing the presumptive stigma that has potential impact on the co-authors, the decision was made to not attribute specific statements to their individual authors and to indicate the names of the co-authors by use of initials. It is hoped this will allow the co-authors the choice to claim their authorship of this published article or not, depending on their needs and interests.

The first author places the discussion and the co-authors' contributions within the context of the theoretical literature in order to bring to light the practice imperative of belonging. By considering the group discussions and carefully examining the co-authors' submissions for linguistic markers, points of emphasis, and common arguments, the article weaves together youth-expert voices with the empirical literature about belonging. The intent of this discussion is to speak to the fundamental need to belong by using theory to reflect on the writing of young people with experiential knowledge about belonging within the context of Crown Wardship status.

Belonging

The concept of belonging has been discussed throughout the ages, yet – perhaps not surprisingly – a consistent definition of the concept has been elusive (Miller, 2006). Common

elements of attempts to give conceptual definition include a sense of ease, a sense of being not the other, and a place within which one has achieved a sense of mastery of the routines (May, 2011). Belonging is associated with survival and as a universal "longing" associated with human attachment (Bowlby, 1969; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Maslow (1943) placed belonging third in his hierarchy of needs, indicating that it emerges only after the realization of more basic needs. Identity formation is associated with belonging (Charles Cooley, Sigmund Freud, and William James). Social bonds are also inseparable from belonging (Scheff, 1990). There is a long history of belonging being seen as a person-centred concept connecting the individual to the social (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). Symbolic Interaction theory conceptualizes the sense of self as constituted in relation to others. It is through interactions with others that we learn the codes of behaviour needed to gain the insider knowledge necessary to master the unwritten rules and routines of a social network. Bourdieu's (1977) theory of Habitus situates belonging within the structural norms and forms of capital accrued through knowing the language, rules, routines, and rituals of social networks. One is advantaged through the social capital afforded to one who belongs.

Theoretical explorations of *not-belonging* or what some term *unbelonging* (see, for example, Christensen, 2009) have also been associated with alienation (Marx, 1844/1932), "othering" (Riggins, 1997), and stigmatizing identity pegs (Goffman, 1963). Such conceptual complexity may be why some of the co-authors struggled at first to describe what it means to belong. Our group discussions left a sense that belonging becomes most apparent in its absence. One co-author expresses this sense of not belonging by contrasting the experience of belonging in sports teams with the feeling of not belonging in a foster placement:

> Personally, without sports, as a child I was convinced that I did not belong. On my sports teams, there was something about wearing the same jerseys, training together and the desire to win as a collective that felt like home. My home did not reflect where I played with my teammates as it was quite filled with procedures. My home was a foster home that had everything a normal home had; yet, it was just not the same. Maybe I felt this because it was the third home in as many months.

Studies have identified the stigmatizing impact of being a recipient of social institutions in general and being in foster or group care specifically (Goffman, 1961; Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Snow, 2008). Sociologist Erving Goffman outlined the symbolic interactional impacts on behaviour and identity formation that are a function of the presumptive identity peg of the stigmatized other. An identity peg is a presumed identity that is assigned to an individual based on role or association (Goffman, 1963). Riggins (1997) explained the process of "othering" as an outcome of dichotomizing an ideal that results in the stigmatized other, a process that leads to marginalization. Several of the co-authors commented on their experiences of having had the identity peg of a "foster kid" (Goffman, 1963). One co-author wrote about the experience in school and observing the reactions of others when learning that he was in foster care:

> Mention in a class full of young people that you're a "foster kid" (you can't use the word Crown Ward because people haven't become accustomed to the proper terminology) and the whole class freaks out like it is something you can catch. Teachers offering you

> special treatment or harsher punishments depending on their mindset; then comes the guidance counselling and the rules around friends coming over and things. Ha! Talk about the exact opposite of belonging.

It is noted that there is a presumptive identity peg associated with being in care. Zygmunt Bauman is a distinguished professor and sociologist who has written extensive social commentary on our postmodern society and the structural mechanisms of social exclusion. In an exploration of identity, he discussed the enforced identities of the stigmatized. He notes that it is "a universally resented and feared predicament" to have a presumptive identity (Bauman, 2004, p. 39). This stigmatizing identity peg is omnipresent and one has to anticipate the emotional impacts of its detection. Another co-author noted that being in foster care impacted on feelings of not belonging and commented on needing to decide if disclosure was appropriate in interpersonal interactions:

> I feel sometimes that I do not belong with some of my friends as I choose not to disclose my background and situations that I have been through that differentiates my experiences from theirs. I feel as if I will be judged negatively or that I am somehow lacking something in my life. It would feel even worse should they somehow feel sorry for me.

The same co-author goes on to contrast this with the powerful feelings of being freed of the identity peg through commonality and finding a sense of belonging in the Voyager Project where everyone was, or had been, a Crown Ward:

> I feel it is something that I keep as a secret, being a former youth in care because it is very different from the "usual" person's background. It is a powerful thing knowing that you can be comfortable in who you are in a space and having the freedom from being judged by experiences that have forever changed you and in which you had no control. I feel a sense of family and acceptance and openness that I do not feel I have in other spaces.

Belonging is an Essential Need

The co-authors convey in their writing that it is a powerful experience to feel that you belong, and several assert that it is a universal need that helps people thrive. The language in their writing makes liberal use of words that evoke emotion and lexical markers that convey an authoritative argument that belonging is essential to growth.

Affinity and affiliation.

The co-author who earlier described his observations of schoolmates learning he was a foster child makes a clear argument that young people in care have an essential need to belong. His arguments are supported by a comprehensive review of the published findings of personality and social psychological research related to belonging, which found support for the hypothesis that it is an essential human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This co-author argues that the government, as the parent, needs to fund programs to help Crown Wards meet this basic need:

> Belonging is the unconditional sense of acceptance. For many Crown Wards being accepted means more to them than other ideals. Programming where Crown Wards are allowed to be open with other Crown Wards can provide a safe space that is a key for the acceptance piece. In my opinion, any type of Crown Ward programming, no matter what the attendance, should be funded. As people we need human connection. To some, these programs are the hub for that human connection because we are or were a Ward of the Crown and together we are, in a sense, one big family. Growing up as a Crown Ward in a rural town with limited programming, I can appreciate the programs that do exist. Now living in Toronto and attending meetings with the Voyagers office, I finally have a chance to experience honest human connections where being a Crown Ward is the norm. The program allows me to express my feelings around situations and allows me to be open, to share my experience in the system without any fear of being judged.

The expression *markers of evidentiality* refers to lexical and/or grammatical devices used to convey attitudes of degrees of certainty towards knowledge (Chafe, 1970). The use of first person pronouns conveys a message of certainty and authority (Coulmas, 2003). The use of evidential verbs expressing power and confidence is clear in the writing (for example: "I finally have..."; "I spent most of..."; "I was one of..."; "It is a..."; and, "I feel I..."). Each of the co-authors wrote with evidentiary markers and wrote comments replete with emotional phraseology when describing the profound nature of the experience of belonging. Parts of the comments are repeated here for illustration of the use of syntax markers such as first person pronouns and emotional phrasing to assert a passionately held belief in a statement:

- "I finally have a chance to experience honest human connection."
- "Personally, without sports, as a child I was convinced that I did not belong."
- "I was one of the founding members.... I feel deeply attached to this program."
- "I feel a sense of family and acceptance and openness that I do not feel I have in other spaces."
- "I feel I belong because I feel free to be myself."

The descriptions of finding a place of belonging make use of powerful phrasing and word choices representing freedom (*free*, *acceptance*, *openness*), a sense of place (*one of the founding members...; I belong[ed]...; honest human connection...*), and something longed for and worth protecting (*openness that I do not feel I have in other spaces...; without sports...I did not [feel I] belong[ed]; I finally have a chance...*). They are stated with a high degree of certainty. The impacts of affiliation are profound, with associated intra-psychic, social, and structural consequences. Through belonging, individuals find a sense of self within the collective and this provides a platform for individual and collective agency.

Belonging is motivational.

In an often-cited study of classroom belonging, Goodenow (1993) found an association between belonging and school achievement. The findings are confirmed in a study by Hamm and Faircloth (2005) that determined peer groups have an impact on belonging and school achievement. The co-authors also point to motivation gained from belonging to a space that fostered interactions with others in similar situations.

The next co-author expresses the powerful feelings evoked and the confidence gained through acceptance. Belonging facilitated learning, evoked positive feelings, and engendered a sense of citizenship:

> Belonging is also the factor in life that helps you move forward. No matter what the group you belong to, it makes people feel good about themselves. I feel that I belong to the Voyager because I feel free to be myself and I like talking and learning about the issues of the day and how to balance my money. I learn how to be a good positive member of society.

The following co-author explains that belonging is something that inspires hopes and dreams. It prompts him to want to be involved and inspires him to improve his life:

> In Voyagers, just being around makes you want to improve your life and do better because everyone is in that same mindset so progress is inevitable, and because you're surrounded by people with hopes and aspirations, you get to see their dreams and then you want to become successful too. When you're in a group full of so much positivity, you want to be involved and you want to surround yourself with these types of people because they honestly make you feel better about yourself and that makes you want to do something for yourself. In Voyager, you don’t need to be afraid because of your colour or sex or creed, all you need is to want to better yourself and help others to do so too. This is a movement I'll belong to for a mighty long time.

The co-author who earlier spoke of people presuming their identity speaks to the growth that is enabled in a place of belonging. From this shared identity, strength was gained that emboldened them to strive for their aspirations:

> Seeing other youth in care work so hard to improve themselves motivates me to do the same. Being a Voyager is a very important part of my life because as I grow within myself, I can also be there for someone that has been through a difficult experience or is currently going through experiences. This gives me confidence to continue to work hard knowing that I am not the only one that is striving to become a better person.

Thus belonging is both fundamental to being human and it is also essential for enabling agency. Through a sense of belonging, identities are formed, confidence is bolstered, and individuals gain footing from which to launch into new network connections.

Discussion

The Practice Imperative of Belonging

Fostering a sense of belonging within children’s service communities is theoretically informed practice that builds on best practices in attachment-focused developmental child and youth care. As the co-authors argue and the theoretical literature supports, belonging is a fundamental human need. Caring organizations need to actively consider the ways in which the organization meets children’s basic need to belong. In particular, we must understand the

specific need for belonging for those children and youth who are permanent wards of the state (United Nations, 1989).

Belonging as social capital.

The concept of social capital originates in the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977/2012) in France and James Coleman (1988) in the United States. Social capital refers to the knowledge, language, association, affiliation, and cultural and other assets that produce instrumental, functional, and expressive benefits to individuals and groups. Individuals and groups are advantaged through social capital by means of mechanisms such as insider language, social networking, and cultural competence. Social network theory helps us understand that individual identities and social and economic indicators are strengthened by the ability to gain insider status within a range of social networks (Granovetter, 1983). Insider knowledge and competence is a form of social capital (Piselli, 2007). Building strong social networks for Crown Wards ideally occurs in the context of foster, kin, and advocate relations. However, when young people transition from government care, unlike their community peers, the transition is determined by age-based regulation rather than developmental maturity (Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, 2012). When natural networks are disrupted, are non-functional or inaccessible to the young person, then social network development is needed to assist young people in their transitions from care and to help them build social capital.

Belonging and marginalization.

For members of the Voyager Project, the intersectionality of social divisions such as gender, class, and ethnicity is enmeshed with the identity peg of being a foster kid (Crenshaw, 1989; Snow, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2007). This stigmatized identity peg causes a presumptive identity, which in turn shapes interpersonal interactions and impacts on identity formation. Young people growing up in care need opportunities to shed the apprehension of having one's identity peg discovered through opportunities for pro-social peer interactions with affiliate in-care groups. With such groups, young people can build confidence and gain skills that will enable them to cross social networks. By actively promoting peer-centred places of belonging as transitional supports for young people leaving care, the care system encourages former Crown Wards in acquiring social capital and provides reinforcements for forming new connections across a range of social networks (Snow & Mann-Feder, 2013).

Conclusion

This paper joins a chorus of calls to reorient transitional services for youth leaving care away from preparing for independence and towards promoting interdependence and interconnection as indicators of a successful transition into emerging adulthood (Propp, Ortega, & NewHeart, 2003; Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Snow, 2013; Snow & Mann-Feder, 2013). Through belonging, individual and collective agency is fostered and social capital is developed. As such, belonging is a key enabler of emancipatory approaches to youth engagement.

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