Rethinking Common Practice in Child and Youth Care

Ashley Do Nascimento

Ashley Do Nascimento, MA, child and youth studies from Brock University, conducted ethnographical research in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 2012. Concerned with child and youth care (CYC) work relationships as they relate to racialized and segregated practices, specifically within the slums of Rio, Do Nascimento focuses on CYC work outcomes and legitimacy. Her research looks to the practices and role of CYC work in young individuals' lives and uses critical theories, specifically postcolonial theories, to ask critical questions regarding the relations between those who execute services (the CYC worker) and those who receive services (the child and/or youth/family). Email: ashley.nascimento78@gmail.com

This paper deconstructs the dominant Western discourses of childhood innocence and dependence to better understand the importance of cultural contexts in child and youth care (CYC) work. It challenges dominant discourses as they relate to work in CYC settings cross-culturally. Exploring her personal experiences doing CYC work in a favela (slum) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the author argues that CYC workers must be flexible and reflexive about the realities of the people with whom they work, or risk reifying the very issues they seek to address. In short, CYC workers can become part of the problem if they are not deeply aware of the ways they might reproduce these dominant discourses.

Keywords: childhood, discourse, child and youth care work, Western, Brazil, *favela*

It was a hot, sunny afternoon in Rio de Janeiro in 2013, after a less than productive English class with a group of Brazilian children at the community centre where I was doing ethnographic research as a child and youth care (CYC) worker. I sat at a table with a group of other volunteers and two coordinators, feeling frustrated and exhausted. We had sent all the children back into the streets because they were shouting over each other, getting up from their seats, and ignoring instructions. We decided that we needed to develop rules for the community centre to maintain some kind of order. As we discussed the behaviour of the children and our expectations for them, we began to outline a list of rules that would have to be followed by every child who attended the community centre. It was also decided that if the rules were not followed, a child would be punished by losing privileges (e.g., the use of pens, markers, balls, books, etc.), and as a final step, they would be asked to leave. Lastly, we agreed that if the children as a group were not behaving according to the rules, they would all be sent home early and the community centre would close for the day. During the development of the rules, we discussed keeping the children safe and the need for them to show us respect by

listening to us. We described some of the children as "not knowing better." We used words like "vulnerable" and "immature." Later, the list of rules with their consequences was presented to the children as nonnegotiable, and the children were told they needed to accept the rules or deal with the consequences.

While we felt we were acting in the children's best interests, what we did not see at the time was how we were reinforcing dominant discourses of childhood. We repeatedly viewed the children as dependent, innocent, naïve, and at risk. Our attempt to take care of the children through disciplinary actions (i.e., rules and punishments) felt safe, practical, and responsible. Yet our framing of the children as needing protection is precisely the problem this articles seeks to address. Mark Smith (2003) warns child and youth care (CYC) workers about getting caught up in the protection discourse, arguing that such notions of care draw heavily from developmental psychology. Like Burman (2008), Smith suggests that CYC is rooted in developmental notions of children as immature, unknowing, reliant, and less than adults. These dominant ways of classifying young people condense children's varying experiences and social contexts, creating a one-size-fits-all model that does little to create real connections between children/youth and adults. While developmental psychology informs the way CYC workers view children and, in turn, how we practice CYC, it universalizes, and thus trivializes, circumstances that instead must be more deeply and contextually understood (Bernhard, 1995; Burman, 2008; Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2011; Pacini-Ketchabaw, White, & Armstrong de Almeida, 2006; Watkins & Shulman, 2008).

This paper takes a critical approach to the predominantly Western way that CYC is practiced. Using my experience of CYC work in a slum in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, I challenge the common perception of children based on the developmental frameworks of innocence and dependence. I argue that this approach neglects to consider context and, in fact, works to reproduce inequalities among children

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in the Global South. Further, I argue that a developmental framework has specific consequences for those doing CYC work in Brazil (Gharabaghi, 2010). If taken as truths, Western discourses of innocence and dependency work to further produce inequalities by reflecting a Western superiority and way of viewing childhood that does not work for families in the *favelas* (slums). In fact, CYC programs set up to reflect such frameworks will inevitability collapse, because they will fail to deliver the services necessary to make change in these young peoples' lives.

Before exploring my experiences further, I briefly outline the history of childhood as a way of explaining the framework upon which CYC is premised, followed by a complication of the developmentally based approach to Western CYC work. I also explore the *favela* as a specific cultural reference point within Brazil in order to more deeply contextualize *favela* childhoods—particularly childhoods in the neighbourhood where I worked. This context informs my recommendations for CYC practices. I then reflect on my experiences through the field notes I took while working in Brazil, and situate them within the dominant Western and developmentally framed discourses of childhood as a time of innocence and dependence, arguing that using these frameworks overlook certain aspects of *favela* life, and therefore when applied by CYC workers, underserve the children whom they are attempting to help. I then suggest how these frameworks, when used in CYC work environments cross-culturally, can create a barrier between worker and child or youth that produces questionable CYC work outcomes. In conclusion, I offer some thoughts that speak to the implications that can arise in CYC settings in which workers are not culturally sensitive to the populations with whom they work.

The "New"-er Sociology of Childhood and its Implications for CYC Work

There are a variety of ways to approach how childhood is conceptualized both historically and currently. Historically, in the "old" sociology of childhood, children were understood in relation to socialization and, in turn, to their development (Burman, 2008; Matthews, 2007). Children were never fully viewed as being complete and competent beings, but rather were viewed as individuals who were incomplete and in the process of becoming an adult. Matthews (2007) argues that this perspective constricts the ways in which researchers understand children and childhood. He claims that research tends to be solely focused on the child in relation to their dependency on adults who control the ways in which children are socialized.

James (2004) proposes a new paradigm for childhood where the experiences of childhood and adolescence do not consist of one universal form constructed through biology, but rather are mediated through culture and through social experiences. As Gittins (2004) points out, these social experiences suggest that certain social groups in relation to a historical period have defined the term childhood. Childhood has therefore been mischaracterized as being "equal, universal and in some ways, fundamentally identical" (Gittins, 2004, p. 35). These assumptions have implications for policy, education, and other public provisions because practices are then framed with assumptions that children should act "like this" or behave "like that" (Moss & Petrie, 2002; Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2011).

Burman (2008) also deconstructs understandings of how childhood has been conceptualized in different cultures and through time, with influences such as religion and scientific discovery causing major shifts in how childhood has been understood. She posits that developmental psychology has been a major contributor to the understandings of childhood, and therefore has had a huge influence on childcare practices. In *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*, Burman (2008) takes child labour in third-world countries as an example of how failing to understand context and culture can be troublesome in practices. She claims that "the issue here is to proscribe exploitative and dangerous work practices rather than pathologise Third World cultures and families for failing to uphold modern Western notions of childhood as a period of dependency, play and irresponsibility" (p. 93). While looking at child labour (as an example), she warns against the "abnormaling" of another country's practices because they do not reflect Western understandings of children. Instead, she argues that context and cultures are critical components to how childhood should be viewed and how children should be treated.

James (2004) states that through seeing childhood as something that is mediated by culture, childhood became "open to interpretation, and thus variation, rather than a simple and unproblematic description of a universal developmental phase" (p. 28). These varying understandings of what childhood should be are often difficult to understand because countries have different "legal, social, and cultural expectations about children" (James, 2004, p. 28) and their competencies, abilities, rights, and health. Seeing childhood through stringent legal, social, and political boundaries can limit and prevent a child from being seen for who they really are, and can negatively influence services that are available to them. Specifically within CYC work, workers then frame their practices with children and youth around these boundaries, creating potentially negative consequences for the groups they are working with.

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Western Notions of Childhood

Western discourses tend to value and emphasize innocence and dependency by privileging the idea that children should not be in adult roles. There is a clear distinction between adults and children that works to create dichotomies between the two classifications, placing more emphasis on adults as beings in the present with responsibilities (Gharabaghi, 2008; Krueger, 2000). Children are often left out of adult spheres and adult roles, and when they are included, the roles they assume are often looked down on. For a child to develop into an adult, the child is seen as innocent and must be treated as such, in order to protect them from potentially compromising their development into adulthood. Children as dependent also fall under the developmental trajectory where dependency relates to innocence and children need to be under constant supervision and guidance by an older, mature adult (Krueger, 2000). Therefore, when other cultures depict children in adult roles, they are often "othered" and seen as being abnormal (Gharabaghi, 2008).

Pacini-Ketchabaw (2011) claims that "the study and treatment of developmental psychology in CYC need to be contextually specific, critically embraced, and not necessarily treated as one of the foundations of the field" (p. 20). Developmentally based understandings of children can reflect a superior race paradigm that often privileges white, Western, middle-class values around how children should act and be treated (L. T. Smith, 2012). Bernhard (1995) cautions against these developmental understandings when she demonstrates how educators struggle to cope with the rapidly changing culturally diverse groups of students. She warns of the dangers of educating these students using developmental theories that have been based on white, middle-class Western children.

Specifically, within the slum in Rio de Janeiro where I did my research, these ideas around how children should behave and how they should be treated worked to constrict and limit my interactions with children and understandings of childhood within the *favelas*. Instead of working for the children, culturally biased misunderstandings of who these children really are and their reality as children in/from the *favela* further hinder the children's and their families' potential in the *favela* and in society. They work to keep those individuals in a state of dependence on social services, further distancing them from equal citizenship. The dependence on services is further implicated when the services provided neglect to consider how greater historical, social, and political discourses frame their practices. In my experience, these misunderstandings demanded a better understanding of the *favela*.

Locating the Favela

The favela has historically been linked with the social stigmas around poverty, dirtiness, instability, danger, and diseases that cast its inhabitants as "scum" (Richardson & Skott-Myhre, 2012). It has been reproduced within popular culture, especially within Brazilian films such as Tropa de Elite (Elite Squad), and Sonhos Roubados (Stolen Dreams), to represent an area of chaos, garbage, drugs, and weapons, with streets lined with prostitutes and other social outcasts. Richardson and Skott-Myhre (2012) look at spaces like the *favela*, or hood, and argue that Bourdieu's theory of habitus relates to the occupied spaces in the favela that have been stigmatized by society but are really only understood and appreciated by their own inhabitants. The *favela* then becomes a "dwelling place" (Robin Cooper, 2005, as cited in Richardson & Skott-Myhre, 2012) only having value for those who physically embody it and manoeuvre through its space. When one thinks of a habitus, the authors claim, we often are only able to associate within our own habitus, therefore giving it status. Thus hoods, or *favelas*, only have one main characteristic, which is its "marginalized relationship...with the mainstream" (Richardson & Skott-Myhre, 2012, p. 13). In situating the hood historically, Richardson and Skott-Myhre look to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of catastrophe, claiming that catastrophe occurs when there is mistrust created between individuals within a society. They then claim that hoods are a result of the catastrophes of colonialism and slavery and their links to postcolonial settler colonies. It is important to understand this "social birth" of the hood in relation to the *favela* as it relates to the spaces of the *favela* in which programs and services are focused and practiced. The favelados (people inhibiting the favelas), and the favelas themselves "were depicted as a problem to be solved, a roadblock on the way to inclusion" (Do Nascimento, Skott-Myhre, & Skott-Myhre, 2015, p. 264). Often then programs are created within spaces where notions of individuals in need of liberation are the focus, and not created in spaces that work themselves to produce liberation (Richardson & Skott-Myhre, 2012).

Taking On Adult Roles: Challenging Innocence and Dependence

I question the notion of childhood as understood through the developmental frameworks of dependence and innocence in relation to the children living within the *favelas*. I argue that because of the various life circumstances that children are faced with when living in the *favelas*, children are often found assuming adult roles, contesting what it means to be innocent and challenging ideas around dependency.

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I encountered numerous instances while doing my fieldwork where children were left alone. Children as young as 3 were found by themselves wandering the streets, and 5-year-olds were found taking care of their younger siblings. At age 6, they might be at the bakery buying buns or at the pharmacy buying medication for their families.

Below I provide four different examples from my work in the field that challenge notions of childhood innocence and dependency. After these examples, an analysis of these discourses relative to how they inform CYC services is explored.

Alone in the streets

One morning in May 2013, I was going for a run around the neighbourhood. I remember passing a young boy who couldn't have been any older than 6 or 7 who was walking alone. I noticed that he had a young baby in a carrier attached to the front of his body, and I immediately began trying to think of ways to justify the young boy's situation. Maybe the baby was his brother and his parents had no other choice but to leave him with the young boy because they had to work. Or maybe his mother was ill and his father was dead and so it was the young boy's responsibility to look after his mother and the baby. Either way, I had an uneasy feeling about the situation, so I began to question the way I felt. Were the dominant Western discourses so instilled in me that the only way I was able to understand and make sense of the world around me was to try and justify the situation through various made-up circumstances that could somehow be used to justify (in my mind) what I had seen? Why was it that I even felt uncomfortable with the situation in the first place? Was it not appropriate for a boy to be walking by himself in the streets with a baby strapped to his front? All of the questions seemed to attack the dominant, Western part of me that was so used to relating to and seeing children from developmental perspectives as beings in need of protection and guidance from adults. Was the notion of childhood innocence so firmly framed within a Western developmental discourse that it overlooked various ways of looking at innocence socially or culturally? Would not seeing children as innocent and dependent be of particular value and importance within Brazilian favela cultures, acting like a survival mechanism for young individuals? Perhaps in favelas, being innocent would be a disadvantage for those children because they would be less likely to make it in the streets? Perhaps lacking innocence was key to understanding the ways in which society marginalizes certain groups of individuals and reproduces inequalities? Therefore, to lack innocence might be of great importance to children and their families growing up in the favelas.

Who is dependent on whom?

On another day in June 2013, I was at the community centre where a meeting was being held with a group of residents who were involved in a project run through World Vision. The lecture focused on the dynamics of family relationships within the *favela*. As I sat back observing the talk, there was a group of four toddlers, all under the age of 2, whose parents and guardians were sitting in listening to the talk. I noticed that these young children, who could barely walk or talk, were left alone to play. There were no volunteers from the community centre or other adults left to watch over them and watch their every move. I found this to be interesting. I continued to watch as the infants poked each other and sucked on each other's soothers until one of the fathers approached me. His daughter, who at the time was 12, had not been spending much time at the community centre because her mother had given birth to a baby girl. She had been given more responsibility to help her mother at home and was often left to take of the infant and her other sisters. The father began talking with me about how children from the *favelas* were different, and many knew more than adults. He told me that because of the greater life circumstances for those living within the *favelas*, children were often forced at a young age to take on more responsibilities, often taking on adult roles at ages as young as 5 or 6.

What I found to be interesting regarding our conversation was that even though he mentioned that it was due to life circumstances that children had to take on adult roles, he did not seem to feel pity for these children. It seems that this is a common reflection from people living within the *favelas*. A child taking on adults' roles was just the way it was, and it was an important and necessary aspect to living within the *favelas*. But what types of consequences do these notions have for individuals providing child and youth care? If children do not depend on adults as much as we think they do, then what does this mean for child and youth care workers? What type of "care" should be provided, if it is needed at all? If these children at ages 7 and 8 began to take care of their younger siblings, then what does this mean in terms of the care we should be providing as workers?

Sex, and drugs, and death: Oh my!

There were many times when I was involved in conversations with the children of the community where we discussed topics that are generally considered inappropriate for children from a developmental perspective. The conversations would certainly not be considered appropriate in the various CYC contexts that I worked in back home in Canada. While I never explicitly talked about sex, some of our conversations centred around ideas of sex and sexuality. Children at times would talk about *baile funk* (more specifically, the Proibidão

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subgenre) and the associated dance routine. *Baile funk* is a traditional Brazilian *favela*-cultured music and dance. Proibidão, more characteristic in the *favelas*, has very sexual lyrics. Proibidão is a specific subgenre of funk music that relates to the gang culture as reflected in that area. Proibidão, which translates to *prohibited* in English, has lyrics that reflect gang culture, including control, power, violence, drugs, and crime, and it often degrades women, in contrast to other forms of funk music, or *funk carioca*, which can be seen as more pleasant and often reflects the lived realties and struggles of those growing up within the *favela*. On weekends, the drug lords of the *favelas* would often hold *baile funk* parties that went late into the early morning of the following day. These parties were often considered to be dangerous because men with guns would control the influx of people, and there were often many drugs being sold. The way you danced to the music was to suggest that you were having sex—women would be bent over from the hips and men would close the gap with their waist fitting tightly behind them. Children were found in the *favelas* singing along to the newest funk songs that would play from their cellphones, or they were found dancing with their peers, often making up their own versions of the dance moves. Although many of the children themselves did not discuss ever going to a *baile funk*, there were two children who continually showed up late to the Saturday morning classes at the community centre. They said that they were late every Saturday morning because on Friday nights, they had to go with their mother, either to the *baile funk* or to the bar, and would not return home until late the next morning.

In other conversations, the children and I talked about drugs and the drug dealers. These children knew who the drug dealers were, how they worked, and where the drug addicts could be found. The children often told me stories about people being killed, either as a direct result of an issue with a drug dealer or because they got caught up in the crossfire between the police and the drug dealers when the police would enter into the *favela*. Children told me stories about their parents or other close relatives who were killed directly by the drug dealers or who were injured indirectly by bullets from the police who were looking for the drug dealers. Other children were directly related to some of the drug dealers, who were either their cousins or brothers.

Asking the questions that need to be asked

How could these children who were faced with so much responsibility and who had to be aware of the ways in which their community functioned be treated as innocent and dependent? In regard to their survival within the *favela*, wouldn't being innocent and dependent put them more at risk? How would being innocent and dependent serve the families in which adults had to work multiple jobs to provide for their children?

In the *favela*, where its relationship to mainstream society places the people who live there in complicated political, social, and economic relationships, I argue that the aforementioned developmental discourses located within Western frameworks serve as ways of "othering" and complicating childhood in relation to CYC work.

In the incidences above—the young boy who had the baby strapped to his front, the conversation regarding a girl taking care of her younger siblings, and the various conversations I had with the young individuals in the *favela* regarding drugs, sex, and death—all seemed in some way to contradict the notions of childhood innocence and dependence. The young boy with the baby is seen to be challenging the developmental aspects of innocence and need for protection because his parents had perhaps relied on him to look after his younger sibling, which also demonstrates his independent behaviour. The young girl having to take on more responsibilities to look after her younger siblings also challenges notions of dependency and innocence.

In North America, ideas of innocence and childhood play can closely be linked (Burman, 2008). Therefore, one could question the reality of the young girl who had no choice but to assume more responsibility around the house by doing laundry, cooking, and looking after younger siblings. In situations where young people need to be street smart, need to be aware of how life in the *favela* works, and need to resort to creative ways to occupy their time and manage family responsibilities, how are we to conceptualize their childhoods? Perhaps the ways we actualize understandings of innocence are more important than the definition of innocence itself, which means that culture and context become critical pieces in how the discourse of innocence is understood in CYC practice.

Although being innocent and dependent in North America may serve children and their families well in relation to achieving the American dream and becoming competent adults, being innocent and dependent in the poorest areas of the Global South (such as the *favelas*) actually works to further reproduce inequalities. If it was valued for children to be innocent and dependent, then these families in some of the poorest areas of the Global South would need to arrange other ways to have care for their children who are currently left alone at home or in the streets, having to fend for themselves or look after their siblings. These families have no other choice but to work, oftentimes at multiple jobs, meaning that more social services would have to be created to help protect and look after their children. This would therefore further reproduce inequalities because dependence on these services would be increased, making it even more difficult for these individuals to become self-reliant through their own economic means.

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This also becomes complicated when looking to notions of care as an outcome in CYC work. Being a white, middle-class female from the West forced me to reflect on my own bourgeois assumptions of care in order to have a more relational approach with the children.

Child and Youth Care Services: Providing Help or Reproducing Inequalities?

Fewster (2006) argues that within the process or trajectory of development, children are seen as innocent beings in need of shelter from outside corruptions and who therefore rely on adults. As they manoeuvre their way into adulthood, they rely on adults in order to develop their personal autonomy and self-efficacy, and it is not until adulthood that they are viewed as being independent, capable beings. Fewster (2006), however, questions how children can develop autonomy when they rely on adults who enforce certain values and beliefs about how they should be raised. How is one able to develop self-efficacy when adults "actively encourage a dependency-based view of the Self through contrived strategies of approval for behavioral performances" (Fewster, 2006, p. 2)? Therefore, the question is, how can children successfully become independent beings who develop self-efficacy and autonomy if children are relying and depending on adults (here in CYC settings) who reinforce and promote certain ways of being that do not line up with the realities of the children's lives?

More specifically, in areas where children's life circumstances cannot support dependency, and where CYC workers reinforce the developmental discourses of innocence and dependence, how are these children supposed to rely on adults and their guardians to guide them? In other words, if CYC services practice and support Method A to guide children and reject Method B, while the families in the *favelas* support Method B and reject Method A, then the services risk reifying the very issues they seek to address. In getting caught up in the industry of protecting children instead of looking to the reality of how these individuals live, and without practicing their own self-awareness and positionality in the work they do, these workers, and therefore the services, will fail to provide what children need (Fulcher, 2014; M. Smith, 2003). In offering after-school help and framing success strictly in terms of educational outcomes, and in offering sports or art classes, CYC services get caught up in a need to protect these children and fail to look at the bigger picture of the structural and societal inequalities the children face. While I agree that these services better equip these children with protective factors to help them manoeuvre their ways through the heavily politically, socially, and economically charged world, I argue that CYC workers are only providing band-aid solutions to the larger problems when they fail to understand the reality of those with whom they work. These band-aid solutions appear to reflect colonial relationships where the individuals who provide the services (often white, middle-class individuals) reproduce dominant Western practices via trajectories of care and protection, often to an individual who is of minority or lower class standing. Therefore, the practices as noted above in relation to CYC work are contested as the workers become part of the problem and therefore provide a disservice to those individuals they are attempting to help.

Making a Change in CYC Practices

Mark Smith (2003) notes the importance of a need to "put a stutter into dominant narratives of child care" (p. 1). Because many CYC services get caught up in a desire to protect children, to not protect children, on the other hand, would suggest that those offering these services do not care about the child's welfare. In his analysis of Foucault, Smith (2003) claims that "we need to ask questions of dominant discourses—to 'problematise' them or 'make the familiar strange'—to challenge taken for granted assumptions by asking awkward questions of them" (p. 2). He argues, much like Foucault, that discourses are powerful in the ways that they force us to think and engage with the world. He argues that "rather than question the discourse itself, what so often happens in organizations and at a wider social level, is that they retrench and seek answers in better science and greater logic" (M. Smith, 2003, p. 2). This is problematic as organizations look to the science and logic of the West (L. T. Smith, 2012) and continue to actively reproduce these discourses through their practices, further creating inequality and distancing themselves from the individuals whom they hope to support.

Conclusion

It is important and in many ways necessary to disrupt normative ways of classifying childhood from mainly Western, developmentally framed perspectives. As demonstrated, Western ways of viewing children and childhood should be contested so that CYC practices privilege other cultural ways of being in order to avoid colonial practices.

Western ways of classifying childhood developmentally privilege certain ways of being or conceptualizing childhood that limit understandings of how specific cultural contexts enable or disable children's capabilities. Policies often reflect notions of children

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being innocent and dependent instead of seeing children as adult-like and challenging notions of innocence. These policies inform CYC practices, creating counterintuitive services that do not look to the reality of the groups they serve. As noted above, these services then only provide band-aid solutions that are framed in Western notions of care and protection.

Similar to how Zinga (2012) attempts to recentre practices to reflect Indigeneity in CYC practices, and how Pacini-Ketchabaw (2007) pushes toward an ethics of resistance in CYC practices, I argue for the importance of retuning and restructuring practices in CYC work. If we look at shifting the ways in which we think about children's abilities and look to some of the realities of children who grow up in different areas, we can modify and accommodate other ways of producing childhoods (Gharabaghi, 2009). It is important to acknowledge and not dismiss other ways of being a child, and to challenge the dominant discourses of children and childhood that have been reproduced by white, middle-class, Western standards. It is imperative that we, as CYC workers, begin to valorize other discourses to deconstruct the hegemonic ways of being a child, or of representing childhood. Without doing this, an imperialistic view of how children should be raised will prevail, which will have further implications on policies and services offered to children and will further reproduce inequalities.

It is therefore important when doing cross-cultural work that discourses not be taken out of context (Gharabaghi, 2010). Although dominant discourses serve a purpose contextually and can be used as a lens to view certain aspects of a given society, once removed from their context, the understandings of these discourses need to be reexamined. This reexamination of the understandings of previously implied discourses can often be uncomfortable. As Fulcher (2014) states, "it's one thing to acquire knowledge about race, culture and cross-cultural communication in preparation for practice, but cultural safety in direct practice with young people, family and extended family members involves learning hard lessons outside our personal comfort zones" (p. 5).

In conclusion, without rethinking our practices in CYC work, we run the risk of becoming part of the problem as we reify the very issues we seek to address. It is not until we as CYC practitioners become more aware of our practices, take a step back from our commonplace understandings, and challenge our own assumptions that we will be able to truly work *with* children and youth, and not for them.

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