Forsaking the Ark: A Course-Based Inquiry into Making the Transition from Hutterite Life

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Abstract: This collaborative autoethnographic, course-based study explored the personal stories of three individuals who chose to leave Hutterite communities and their transition experiences as they adjusted to a new life, having forsaken the ark. The purpose of the study was to add to the literature on culturally competent child and youth care practice by sharing insights into the personal challenges experienced when faced with the realities of shifting from one culture to another. Four major themes emerged from the thematic analysis of these stories: (a) don't rock the boat; feelings of not fitting in, (b) no unicorns on board; seeking the freedom to be me, (c) adrift in no man's land; severed membership ties, and (d) few tools to build a new boat; lack of skills for the life chosen.
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1. Introduction

Relational-centred Child and Youth Care (CYC) practice stresses the importance of open-mindedness and the ability and willingness to accept differing perspectives and diverse lifestyles as essential characteristics for establishing a positive therapeutic alliance with children, youth, and families (Bellefeuille *et al.*, 2012). Open-mindedness is especially important because the children, youth, and families we interact with as CYC practitioners in today's diverse world come from a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, each with unique customs, behaviours, attitudes, beliefs, and values that may be foreign to the CYC practitioner.

An important component of the CYC learning environment is encouraging students to recognize their ethnocentric beliefs and to promote the development of an intercultural knowledge base. Self-awareness of one's cultural bias is crucial because ethnocentrism presumes the superiority of the worldview with which an individual understands and judges differences of others. Though a normal part of one's social identity and self-perception, ethnocentrism functions not only as a barrier to communication, but can hinder the ability to cultivate a caring relationship. Overcoming ethnocentrism is not a simple task, even for highly motivated students who want to master relational practice.

1.1. Intercultural Knowledge

Intercultural knowledge and competence is defined by Bennett (2008) as ""a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts" (p. 97). As such, intercultural competency is not just "getting used to" cultural differences; instead, it results from a continuing personal learning process that is best achieved through exposure to the customs and practices of other cultures. We believe that the sharing of life stories such as those shared here, can help other CYC students cultivate open-mindedness and increase their compassion and appreciation for those perceived as different—core competencies of relational-centered practice.

1.2. A Brief Look at Hutterite Life

Like the Amish and the Mennonites, Hutterites are an Anabaptist group (i.e., they do not believe in infant baptism) originating in central Europe in the mid-1500s. Founded by Jacob Hutter, the Hutterites are an ethnic and religious sect that broke away from the Catholic Church in Moravia, currently known as the Czech Republic. They practice a closed communal and agrarian way of life that revolves around the belief that absolute authority resides in

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a single supernatural being—an omnipotent God—who not only created the universe but also placed everything in a divine order. Within this hierarchy roles are clearly ascribed; the younger person obeys the older, woman obeys man, and man obeys God. As such, Hutterian worldview values (a) communalism, (b) respect for hierarchical decision-making, and (c) strict adherence to a traditional code of conduct, values, and beliefs.

Not surprisingly, the Hutterites adhere to a prescriptive and orderly structure for child rearing as a means of indoctrinating their youth as faithful members of their society (Hostetler and Huntington, 1996). According to Smith and Ingoldsby (2006), it is much more important that Hutterite parents teach their children to behave correctly and accept given truths than it is to teach them to think critically or to develop moral integrity.

Children are reared within their biological families until the age of three, at which time there is a shift to communal care. Women of the colony exert firm control in the transfer of knowledge and enforce discipline to uphold cultural norms. At this age, children begin to attend kindergarten from seven or eight in the morning until four in the afternoon, six days a week from Monday to Saturday. From age six to fifteen Hutterite children receive public education provided within the colonies by government teachers. Traditionally, Hutterite youth quit public school in Grade 9, and at the age of fifteen are expected to take on full adult responsibilities. Those who rock the boat through questioning or come in conflict with these norms are commonly pressured to conform through shunning.

In keeping with the hierarchical structure and traditions of Hutterite society, men have higher status than women. There are clearly defined gender roles and divisions of labour. Women cook, clean, wash, sew and care for the children while men farm. As there is no private ownership in a colony, everything (clothing, shelter, food, and perhaps a few small personal possessions) is provided by the colony in exchange for these communal contributions. Women are not allowed to vote or participate formally in colony decision-making.

Hutterites have accepted the controlled use of technology although participants noted this acceptance has wide variance. In an interview conducted by Gerson (2012) for the *National Post*, 19-year-old Kelly Hofer talked about the relationship Hutterite colonies have with technology:

> I cannot recall a specific technology that is officially banned in Hutterite communities across the board at present. Television and radio used to be, but now there are communities who have both. Some chose to say yes to some technologies, while others say no to the same item; some will say no to TV, but at the same time they may say yes to the Internet. That said, all technologies are regulated to some degree. As far as I know, Hutterite have never really critically analyzed technology in general as to its effects on our communal lifestyle; we have those who try to stop everything in its tracks, and those who say "bring it on" to everything and eagerly embrace any new technology without much thought—it's new, it's awesome, it must be good! As a result, like many other closed societies, we then endlessly debate the merits of each other's choices internally.

Hutterite colonies exist in relative isolation. The patriarchal and highly interdependent structure of daily life leaves those contemplating life outside of the colony ill equipped to go it alone. Few have developed the skills necessary for independent life and without a support system to draw upon, the transition to the non-Hutterite world is daunting.

2. Undergraduate Course-Based Research: A Pedagogical Tool to Foster Criticality, Reflectivity, and Praxis

The Bachelor of Child and Youth Care program at MacEwan University constantly searches for new pedagogical approaches to foster criticality, reflectivity, and praxis as integral components of the overall student educational experience. As such, the design and implementation of a course-based approach, in contrast with the traditional didactic approach to research-methods instruction, offers 4th-year undergraduate students the opportunity to master introductory research skills by conceptualizing, designing, administering, and showcasing small minimum-risk research projects under the guidance and supervision of the course instructor—commonly, a professor with an extensive background in research and teaching.

Use of course-based research in higher education has soared in recent years (Allyn, 2013; Bellefeuille *et al.*, 2014; Harrison *et al.*, 2011). The benefits derived from a course-based approach to teaching research methods for CYC students are significant. First, there is great value in awarding students authentic learning experiences that enhance the transfer of knowledge obtained in formal education to practice. Past students have reported that their engagement in course-based research has enabled them to expand their depth of scientific knowledge by adopting new methods of creative inquiry. Second, course-based research offers students the opportunity to work with instructors in a relationship characterized by mentoring, which results in a greater number of students who express interest in advancing to graduate studies. Third, the results of course-based research can sometimes be published in peer-reviewed journals and online open-access portals, and thus contributes to the discipline's knowledge base.

Ethical approval required to enable students to conduct course-based research projects was granted to the course instructor by the university's research ethics board (REB). Student research groups are then required to complete an REB application form for each course-based research project undertaken in the class, which is then reviewed by the course instructor and a sub-REB committee to ensure each course-based research project is complete and in compliance with the ethics review requirements of the university.

3. Research Design

From an interpretive research paradigm, this course-based collaborative autoethnographic study sought to explore three individuals' personal reflections on Hutterite life, their decisions to leave their Hutterite communities, and their adjustment to life on the outside. Autoethnography is a self-reflective, qualitative research method that offers a means to give people a voice to tell their stories and thereby acquire greater insight into wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings (Denzin, 2003). Consequently, the researchers are both the subjects and objects of research (Wall, 2006). Collaborative autoethnograpy research is a variation of autoethnography conducted in groups, described by Denzin (2013) as "the co-production of an autoethnographic text by two or more writers. The objective of the course-based study was to contribute to CYC's body of knowledge with respect to building intercultural competence. The four main research questions that guided the course-based study were the following:

1. What do participants say about their decisions to leave their colonies?
2. What do participants say about their experiences of integrating into mainstream society?
3. What specific struggles or challenges did participants experience during and after leaving?
4. What have participants learned about themselves, and what do they think CYC workers need to understand about working with children, youth, and families who have left Hutterite life?

3.1. Participants

A nonprobability purposeful sampling strategy was used to recruit participants for this course-based research study. Purposive sampling is one of the most common participant recruitment strategies in qualitative research. Using this sample method, the researcher selects individuals who can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and the central phenomenon of the study (Creswell, 2002). Purposive sampling has been used throughout the years to recruit the ideal participants who know the information required, are willing to reflect on the phenomena of interest, have the time, and are willing to participate (Spradley, 1979). For the purpose of this the research, participants will consist of three individuals who represent two different Hutterite colonies, one from Alberta and two from Manitoba. A brief description of each participant is provided below.

Participant # 1

Participant # 1 grew up on a colony in Manitoba with her mother, father and xxx siblings. It has been 10 years since she made the transition to living off the colony. She is currently 25 years old, lives in xxxxxx, AB, and is employed on a full-time basis.

Participant #2

Participant # 2 left the colony 3 years ago at the age of 19. He self identifies as a homosexual. This part of his identity played a major role in his decision to leave the colony. He is currently 23 years old and is self-employed as a photographer in xxxxxx, AB.

Participant #3

Participant # 3 grew up on a Hutterite colony in rural Alberta with her mother, father and xxx siblings, of which she was the eldest. Five and half years ago, shortly after her eighteenth birthday, participant # 3 made the decision to move off the colony in search of a new life. She is currently 24 years old and lives in xxxxx, AB, and is a full-time university student.

3.2. Data Generation

We engaged in a group interview process facilitated by three experienced CYC educators. The conversational style of the guided but open-ended interview process encouraged an inquiry based, interactive, reflective, and engaged discussion. As Eisner (1991) states, "conducting a good interview is, in some way, like participating in a good conversation: listening intently and asking questions that focus on concrete examples and feelings rather than abstract speculations" (p. 183). Due to the demographic logistics of bringing all the participants together, the interview was conducted via Skype. The use of Skype as a synchronous online service enables researchers to conduct individual interviews and small focus groups, comparable with onsite interviews (Janghorban *et al.*, 2014).

3.3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was selected as a flexible means to analyze qualitative data because of its potential to allow data to speak for itself and to provide a rich and detailed account of the data. This involved a six-step iterative process that included becoming familiar with the collected data, generating initial categories or meaning units, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a report (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

3.4. Results

The thematic analysis revealed the following four main themes: (a) don't rock the boat; feelings of not fitting in,

(b) no unicorns on board; seeking the freedom to be me, (c) adrift in no man's land; severed membership ties, and (d) few tools to build a new boat; lack of skills for the life chosen.

(a) Don't Rock the Boat; Feelings of Not Fitting in

All of the participants talked about how their independence and curiosity about choice was severely restricted by the highly regulated doctrine common to Hutterite communal life. A common thread in all of the stories was the unsettled feeling of being moulded in a very distinctive way and from their earliest memories, the pressure applied by their parents and others to conform and not rock the boat.

All three participants shared their exhaustion at trying to "fit in" and do what was expected and deemed right behavior and their growing sense of failure when weighted against the recognition that they did not. One participant stated, "From a young age, I questioned my life on the colony. I always felt there was more to life; I yearned for equality." Another noted, "I tried really hard to fit in while I lived on the colony; it was hard to not be able to portray my true self."

(b) No Unicorns on Board; Seeking the Freedom to be Me

A second theme that emerged among the participants was lack of freedom for self-expression. The participants spoke of many occasions when their personal beliefs, values, and gender preference met with disapproval. They often felt like misfits. Much like the mythical unicorn who chose not to board the arc to preserve its' uniqueness, a desire to explore their curiosity and fully express who they wanted to be resonated deeply with each participant. They talked about wanting to live their own lives and make their own choices free from the fear of rejection and ridicule that stifled them. One participant stated how she struggled to follow the norms and expectations for women of the colony. What she perceived as a lack of meaningful voice and personal influence left her feeling depressed. She observed, "Life on the colony is structured; everyone knows what is expected of them. There was little room for growth or freedom of choice." These feelings lead to a sense of disconnection from her family and those on the colony which fueled her decision to leave. Another participant, who identifies as homosexual, remarked on his dream that elders in the colonies will be more open-minded with respect to the LGBTQ community; he noted that some individuals who live on the colony have nowhere to turn for information, no opportunities for exploration and are afraid to come out about their sexuality. The third participant stated, "I did not like to be told what to do. I love the freedom to think for myself. Living on the colony, I felt we had to fit in certain boxes."

(c) Adrift in no Man's Land: Severed Membership Ties

Each of the participants talked of the difficult decision to leave with virtually nothing at all. Varying degrees of psychological and emotional trauma resulted as the realities of being completely cut off from the world of the colony came to light. Knowing they would not be allowed to return, they belonged neither to the old life or the new. There was a sense of having left the ark to find themselves stuck in kind of a "no man's land", facing an uncertain future relatively alone.

They spoke of an extreme sense of social rejection and emotional distance from their parents and friends. Reference was made in particular to the experience with their fathers, who they worried would be held accountable for the transgressions of their children. The desire to be respectful and protective of the people and life left behind was expressed. One participant stated, "I was surprised because my father was the most educated out of our family, yet he was the most ignorant in accepting my choice to leave." "I felt so guilty," said another, "because of the amount of pressure I was putting my family under. Also, from the amount of pressure that they were putting me under. I questioned my choice in leaving the colony."

(d) Few Tools to Build a new Boat; Lack of Life Skills for the Life Chosen

Having left all that was familiar behind, participants found themselves on the next phase of their journey with few tools to build their own boats. They spoke of how the social norms practiced outside of the colony were unclear to them. This lack of cultural fluency created embarrassment at times and resulted in experiences of being misunderstood. One participant explained how she struggled with communication in English. German was her first language, and at eighteen when she left the colony to live on her own, she had only a grade 8 education. There were shared difficulties decoding conversational and relational nuances. It was said that, "Hutterites are very black and white" in their thinking and "don't beat around the bush". Another participant put it this way;

> I realized quickly that I was a very blunt person compared to others that I crossed paths with in my new life. It seemed that people were trying to please each other by saying things they didn't actually mean, which went against the way I was brought up.

Participants expressed deficits around daily living skills and commerce. They noted their understanding of money was limited and consequently, failed to budget adequately for expenses. "I had a skewed concept of money", commented one participant. "When I was on the colony, having $50 meant a lot to me. I figured out quickly, that it will take a lot more than that to survive."

Participants all felt inadequately prepared for grocery shopping and the task of planning and preparing meals, citing the systematic and communal process for feeding the masses used by the colony as leading to this short fall in personal know how.

4. Discussion

Collaborative autoethonographic inquiry is an appropriate methodology with which to present the collective lived experiences of leaving Hutterite colonies. It is a useful approach to describe and share unique life stories as a means to understand cultural experience in a meaningful and mindful way. In retrospect, we realized that the telling of these stories was in itself a personal learning process. Perhaps this is the power of autoethographic inquiry; it is not simply a way of learning about the world, but a way of being in the world. As we conducted this course-based research project, we did not anticipate that it would result in personal transformation. We expected that we would simply tell our stories. We were unprepared for the cathartic and personally positive nature of this reflection process, which was beneficial in terms of professional and personal growth. As CYC practitioners, we must recognize our ethical obligation to expand our familiarity with diversity and grow our capacity for culturally competent practice. To become more reflective about the issues and challenges that individuals face when transitioning from one cultural context to another, we must become more cognizant of the lived experiences of those who have navigated these rough waters. The aspiration of this study is that elements of our collective experience will resonate with other CYC students, help them map and inform their practice.

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