Fostering Autonomous, Age-Integrated Communities

Introduction

Youth workers have unique opportunities to design and lead youth-oriented programs with more flexibility than most adults and youth interacting across age gaps. So many age-crossing relationships are in a disempowered context. When the autonomy of young people is disregarded- be it in school, family or other programs- it disempowers the involved adults from building symbiotic relationships or programs. Therefore, any youth worker in an open-ended environment with opportunity to support autonomy can play a profound role in the design of empowering groups and relationships.

On the larger scale, one of the significant barriers to developing communities is age segregation- the extreme separation of kids and adolescents from the greater outside society. To overcome this barrier, youth workers (and beyond) must transition towards integrating youth into the rest of society- aka "age integration" (Gray, 1999, 2004 & 2011). This emphasizes community and relationships; the goal is to form an "autonomous, age-integrated community".

One critical component of this challenge is the paradox of developing autonomy. The trainer can't lift weights for the athlete any more than the youth worker can pursue autonomy on behalf of the adolescent; the individual's autonomy is developed by their own willful action, exploration and exposure to learning (Wehmeyer and Schwartz 1997; Ryan & Deci, 2019, p. 111-156). This is why the emphasis in this paper focuses on the spaces and environments created that foster self-determination naturally. People need spaces that allow for transition to these autonomous, age-integrated environments. Starting with this paradoxical struggle between individual and group development, the central question of this paper is: what can youth workers do to foster autonomous, age-integrated communities?

This paper pulls together research from Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2019) and the third space to build a framework of values and skills. Existing youth programs are explored through these lenses. This analysis highlights effective methods and tools to foster more functional and symbiotic outcomes. In the end, recommendations are provided for youth workers who can take an opportunity for design or leadership, and for youth workers to improve upon existing or more rigid programs.

I. Self-Determination Theory as Foundation

Every human being needs autonomy- the agency and freedom to make choices over their own life. Yet every human being also needs interconnection- symbiotic and healthy relationships in community. To maintain this balance, each person participating needs competence- the relevant skills and knowledge. Referencing this as a foundation also protects against corruption and dysfunction.

Specifically, if every individual's autonomy is respected as a basic boundary, no individual can act as an authority that forcefully demands or bullies others into obligations. This also naturally helps people overcome dependence and become empowered through autonomy. Likewise, if everyone is encouraged to become competent, a baseline of understanding and skill is necessary to protect safety, prevent harm and support the most skillful individuals in their best roles. This protects against ideology- having blind faith, superstition, or rigid attachment to a set of beliefs at the expense of truth. In this open environment, people naturally overcome ignorance and become empowered through competence. Lastly, if everyone is supported through interconnection, conflicts must be resolved and respect is paramount in relationships. This protects against abuse, by showing each person the value of boundaries, collaboration, and close bonds with others in their community. Through a respectful environment, people overcome isolation and become empowered through interconnection.

In an environment where self-determination is the foundation, participants overcome dependence, ignorance and

isolation by becoming empowered- and therefore self-determined. This resilient community protects against authority, ideology, and abuse- because the community has set boundaries that work for everyone (Beer & Packard, 2012, p.5, p.10).

II. The Third Place

Defining the third place. The "third place" is a concept first developed in 1989 by Ray Oldenburg in his book *The Great Good Place*. Home is considered the first place, and work is the second place. The "third place" is an open-ended social environment with minimal rules or requirements. People socialize directly- spending time with each other conversing in a café- and also indirectly, by sharing the space with others. There is often a co-mingling of acquaintances, friends, family, neighbors, and strangers. Oldenburg and other researchers (Myers 2012; Quandt and Kröger 2013) have discovered 8 key characteristics that define a third place:

1. Neutral ground
Occupants of third places have little to no obligation to be there. They are not tied down to the area financially, politically, legally, or otherwise and are free to come and go as they please.
2. A leveling place
Third places put no importance on an individual's status in a society. Someone's economic or social status does not matter in a third place, allowing for a sense of commonality among its occupants. There are no prerequisites or requirements that would prevent acceptance or participation in the third place.
3. Conversation
Playful and happy conversation is the main focus of activity in third places, although it is not required to be the only activity. The tone of conversation is usually light-hearted and humorous; wit and good-natured playfulness are highly valued.
4. Accessibility and accommodation
Third places must be open and readily accessible to those who occupy them. They must also be accommodating, meaning they provide for the wants of their inhabitants, and all occupants feel their needs have been fulfilled.
5. The regulars
Third places harbor a number of regulars that help give the space its tone, and help set the mood and characteristics of the area. Regulars to third places also attract newcomers, and are there to help someone new to the space feel welcome and accommodated.
6. A low profile
Third places are characteristically wholesome. The inside of a third place is without extravagance or grandiosity, and has a homely feel. Third places are never snobby or pretentious, and are accepting of all types of individuals, from several different walks of life.
7. The mood is playful
The tone of conversation in third places is never marked with tension or hostility. Instead, third places have a playful nature, where witty conversation and frivolous banter are not only common, but highly valued.
8. A home away from home
Occupants of third places will often have the same feelings of warmth, possession, and belonging as they would in their own homes. They feel a piece of themselves is rooted in the space, and gain spiritual regeneration by spending time there.

The magic of the third place lies not just in the open-ended nature of the environment, but in its reputation for community and interconnection. Social comfortability, playfulness, curiosity and acceptance are cultivated together; people show up excited, courageous and passionate. With each person self-directed, they discover shared values, new ideas, creations and inventions.

Comparing SDT and the third place. The third place is a compatible lens to Self-Determination Theory- noting that within the description of the third place are each of the 3 needs. Traits 1 (neutrality) and 2 (leveling) reference autonomy and nearly all of the traits reference social needs (interconnection). While competence isn't explicitly referenced, a degree of social skillfulness, conflict mediation, humor, play and conversation are all integral to these traits- looking especially at 3) conversation, 4) accessibility, 7) playful mood, and 8) home away from home. It takes empathy, imagination, listening and exploration to create a third place particularly tailored to that community, while overcoming obstacles- such as lacking in any of the 3 basic psychological needs. For youth workers and the challenge

of age-integration, traits 2 (leveling) and 4 (accessibility) are highly relevant. While a third place is not always inhibited by tailoring to certain groups or audiences, an age-integrative third place is rare in many societies- especially where neighbors interact and strangers make introductions.

Declining Social Capital and Interconnection. It should be noted just how much social interaction and immersion is prominent in the third place, because the modern reference to cafés, parks, and so on brings up a different idea than in times past. In the book *Bowling Alone,* Robert Putnam shows how people have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbors and their society in the 50 years between 1950-2000. The third place of 1989 that Oldenburg describes showed a remarkable decline since then. Coffee shops, parks and other public spaces may still be open-ended and shared by many people, but it's become uncommon and even socially uncomfortable to interact with strangers. Additionally, people are much more likely to be strangers with their neighbors and local surrounding area. This combination results in an empty shell that may resemble the remnants of a third place, but now has no social cohesion, communal identity, shared goals and values, or shared experiences.

One of Putnam's critical hypotheses for the cause of declining interconnection was the rise of the internet. Another contributing change is transportation technology - cars, planes, modern trains and more that allow people to travel much further and easier, while major cities continue to expand. If people go all over their cities and meet their needs in a variety of places, what's left of the third place becomes not much more than a public area to pass through from point A to point B. The critical interconnection and social needs described in the 8 traits emphasize the importance of the place being personal, intimate, accepting, and therefore creating a unique communal identity. Looking specifically at 5, the regulars- suggests that a core ongoing smaller group provides the social capital that fuels the larger community. The regulars can be seen not only as participants, but as part of the framework itself.

Building Third Places and Transitions. While SDT looks at these 3 needs in combination as a lens for the individual's liberation, the third place emphasizes the environment and space created as a result. If self-determination can be considered a form of social capital, everyone in a community benefits from others' increasing empowerment, and this "raw material" of empowerment can be used to create the space itself. Natural third places may arise out of growing self-determination, but this can be reverse-engineered too. A struggling local area can create community by developing a third place deliberately- creating the environment that both allows and encourages the critical components of self-determination. While being disempowered and lacking resources can be significant barriers, just the willing struggle of building a new community can become the catalyst to the initial relationships and communal foundation. Analyses of different youth programs through the lens of SDT and the third place will give youth workers critical tools and skills to transition existing organizations to become authentically liberated, thriving communities.

III. Youth Programs and Examples

Different youth programs can be used as examples to study through the lenses of SDT and the third space- revealing more in detail what the fundamental building blocks and barriers are.

East New York Farms Study. In a study of the East New York Farms youth program (Delia & Krasny 2018), researchers discovered critical factors to its success that strongly overlap with both SDT and the third place. It also illustrates how this community is cultivated even with young interns initially being strangers, coming from backgrounds lacking in these kinds of experiences. Looking at multiple studies in their introduction, on the shared traits of high quality youth programs, we can already recognize SDT as the underlying theme. Such programs:

1. foster positive relationships among youth and between youth and adults [interconnection]
2. include activities that build life skills through setting expectations, posing challenges... [competence]
3. empower youth by providing opportunities to use life skills as... leaders of community activities [autonomy]

(Eccles and Gootman, 2002; Roth and Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Lerner and Lerner, 2011)

Additionally, it was found that well-designed programs create a positive feedback loop where the development of Self-Determination and/or a quality third space are created as forms of social capital:

"...youth in environmental action and club programs shape their environment to meet larger social goals—such as planting a community garden to enhance community cohesion and food access—which in turn provides a setting for youth to develop competence and self-efficacy." (Clark and Uzzell, 2002)

This summary applies accurately to the ENYF programs as an example, focused on creating communities around growing food and creating business from the ground up through farmer's markets. Interviews with participants showed 5 factors critical to its success:

1. somewhere to belong *[interconnection]*,
2. somewhere to be pushed *[competence & autonomy]*,
3. somewhere to grapple with complexity *[competence]*,
4. somewhere to practice leadership *[competence & autonomy]*,
5. somewhere to be yourself *[self-determination; result of all others]*.

These 5 factors overlap with both SDT and the characteristics of the third place, creating a welcoming, safe and caring environment as a starting point to break the ice. Once relationships develop, participants can push each other to develop responsibility, competence, wisdom and social cohesion. This co-development of values and patterns act as a foundation for participants to practice leadership, and become experts capable of teaching others.

One notable outcome was the significant and positive impact on youth empowerment by becoming experts- which made them natural leaders and put them in positions of leadership. Access to gaining essential skills was created by a welcoming environment that supported autonomy- which is arguably the opposite of traditional schooling, for example, that associates learning with authority (Gray, 2013 & 2018). Youth workers running the program acted as examples instead of authorities, which kept the door open for developing intrinsic motivation. They continually created space for interns to take on challenges and responsibilities- fostering both expertise and leadership.

Developing Social Capital Through Youth Programs. A 2005 study (Jarrett, Sullivan, Watkins) analyzed different youth programs with a primary focus on social capital. The importance of transitioning from childhood into adulthood through adolescence is emphasized- acknowledging how unnatural it can be due to extreme age segregation between "adults" and "kids". This leaves "adolescents" in an undefinable purgatory, pulled in contradicting directions. Additionally, age segregation creates alienation and even prejudice that acted as feedback loops or even self-fulfilling prophecies:

"The lack of contact between youth and community adults manifests itself in negative attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that adults direct toward young people (Camino, 2001). Youth notice these negative perceptions and behaviors, which, in turn, fuel their negative views of adults and reinforce their isolation from them (Gilliam & Bales, 2001)."

As a result of isolation, or lacking interconnection, younger people are disconnected from communities and social capital. The definition of social capital used shows the power of competence and interconnection together:

"...social capital represents the sum of all the assets available to members of a network or group… social connections benefited individuals in key ways. Affiliations with people having diverse "expertise" increase individuals' access to knowledge and cultural capital; social connections are also a source for obtaining economic resources."

Quality social structures and communities will create trust, reciprocity, and common standards. The value of the community, just like "the regulars" of a third place, creates value simply through people knowing each other well, and caring for each other over time. It can be seen as a process of both creating value and recognizing existing value. Acting as if that is already true creates the vision and the behavior that shows care, authenticity and investment.

Starting with an understanding of how extreme and disempowering age segregation is, the researchers looked to youth programs as a starting point for age integration. Just this alone is a distinct improvement upon the issue, and "youth programs" or "youth work" has developed into a loosely defined yet innovative field. Seeing these programs as prototypes or early developments, a few key factors were noted:

1. Bringing together youth and non-family adults, including staff and adults from their communities
2. The interactions between youth and adults were frequently supportive in nature
3. Programs explicitly valued intergenerational relationships
4. Adults served as mentors and role models

While these factors alone can form an incomplete picture and may not create self-determination or a third space naturally, they show an important beginning stage to societal transition among individuals who likely knew little to nothing about SDT, third spaces, and so on. Additionally, much of the pre-existing research leading up to this study in 2005 is from the 1980s and 90s, which predates significant research in power-sharing and youth development. These factors and this lens can be viewed as "recently historical" in a sense. The fact that researchers, program designers and adults from their communities all valued age-integrative relationships and developing social capital this way strongly suggests an underlying set of needs that aren't being met. In other words, they were drawn towards self-determination unknowingly, and the programs had strong elements of both SDT and the third place.

Because this transition was such a distinct change and directly targeted the epidemic of age segregation, the researchers identified a common process shared across all programs to overcome this barrier, comprised of 3 stages:

1. Youth-Adult Disconnect
Adults and youth feel alienated from each other and perceive themselves as in distinctly different groups. Adults would deepen the rift when claiming to be more "experienced" or "competent" than youth, and end up dismissing them based on age instead of actual skillset. Youth would then reconfirm their convictions that adults are condescending and controlling.

2. Interacting with Adults
The ice gets broken and individuals start to become familiar with each other and the program. Youth and adults get to see more sides of each other and build authentic, more natural relationships. Common interests build bridges. Working together creates more social comfort and opportunities to step outside of their age-restrictive roles.

3. Connecting with Adults
Once routines, familiarity and empathy is established, adults transition to becoming more authentic and skillful mentors- setting aside references to being more competent or experienced and focusing directly on their shared experience at that moment. Youth relate to adults better through shared interests; participants across ages begin to recognize each other as individuals and imagine themselves as the other more easily.

This process puts competence at the forefront, but without quality relationships (interconnection), competence acts as a barrier. In fact, adults transitioning from arrogance and authority into authentic relationships with youth as individuals is a process of becoming competent in a new area where they lacked skill, cultural knowledge, and empathy. The adult prejudice against youth was viewing them as immature, while youth prejudice against adults was the bracing for being bossed around and ridiculed. Young participants also gained more competence through cultural knowledge and empathy- making this a two-way street. Additionally, respect for autonomy made a critical difference in participants

feeling accepted, heard, and valued. This strongly suggests the three universal needs improve upon and symbiotically support each other. Ultimately this process shows how people from different worlds, alienated from each other, can come together and overcome the awkward and unpredictable initial interactions. Together they create profoundly meaningful and authentic communities.

This paper ties economic structures of the "adult world" to relationships to the point it becomes clear that a social structure is simultaneously an economic structure. People have needs; some of those needs involve resources, and some needs depend on relationships. Most needs will involve a mix of both together. If economy and ecosystem are intrinsically tied together- or different representations of the same structure, this can be recognized as a universal principle that applies to people across ages and cultures. Be it self-determination, social capital or asset-building, age-based segregation is usually arbitrary and at odds with universal human needs.

Self-Determination and Positive Youth Adult Outcomes. A study of previous high school students with disabilities compared lifestyle outcomes and experiences through the lens of SDT. The paper showed distinct and significant differences- students with higher self-determination were more likely to have achieved positive outcomes such as moving out of their guardians' home, keeping a job and earning higher wages. (Wehmeyer and Schwartz 1997). Wehmeyer defines four key traits of a self-determined action:

1. The individual acts autonomously;
2. The behaviors are self-regulated;
3. The person initiates and responds to event(s) in a "psychologically empowered" manner;
4. The person acts in self-realizing manner.

The interviews and analysis found that students with higher self-determination not only had more positive and empowered outcomes in their lives becoming independent adults, but also valued autonomy more. Those who still lived with their parents were more than twice as likely to desire living on their own compared to the low self-determined group (44% versus 19%). This distinction shows a shift in understanding and values through experiencing autonomy. Paradoxically then, before self-determination is experienced, it often isn't understood, recognized, or valued. Therefore, one of the critical challenges for any individual who wishes to create gateways to self-determination is to expose people to the paths of empowerment in ways that they can understand and that sparks authentic curiosity and motivation. Because SDT is a theory of how *intrinsic motivation* is developed, this means disempowered people start in a place lacking intrinsic motivation. If their needs can be met in small ways and a quality starting environment is created, they are much more likely to begin their path on their own terms.

Wehmeyer summarized key skills that must be acquired to become self-determined: *decision making, problem-solving, goal setting and attainment, self-observation skills, self-evaluation skills, self-reinforcement skills, internal locus of control, self-knowledge.* All of these skills could be recognized as a combination of autonomy and competence, or more specifically, becoming competent about the function of autonomy itself. This takes autonomy from the place of being a "right" or natural reality (perceived as free will), and transforms it into an actualized experience of individual empowerment. Because these skills are referring to the individual, interconnection is not necessarily involved. However, in the process to gain these skills, individuals exist in environments, and therefore around other people. It is almost guaranteed that these skills will be most attainable in a high quality social infrastructure that acts as an environment- such as a third space.

Wehmeyer makes recommendations for how facilitators and mentors can foster the development of these skills:

"Student-directed learning strategies, including self-management procedures like self-instruction, self-monitoring and self-reinforcement, are important to employ...teachers should provide activities that optimally challenge the student and promote autonomy

by supporting student initiation of activities and allowing choice. Students with disabilities need to learn that they are causal agents for their own lives, and excessive external control is detrimental to this outcome… (Van Reuson & Bos, 1994).”

This reinforces the delicate nature of developing autonomy and how external control gets in the way of progress. It also helps to imagine the breakdown of why autonomy can't be manufactured, and why this can put youth workers or facilitating staff in a paradox. Staff who are tasked with leading, designing or initiating a program must have a significant degree of autonomy, and at least some margins for leadership (e.g. decisions that invariably impact others) to be effective in their work. In this way, the teacher can be seen as the student, learning how to design and run a program. Yet this has multiple layers to it, and requires nuance to balance this need with the same need for autonomy and exploration in the student or youth participants.

Facilitating staff can get tricked into impeding participants while pursuing their own autonomous development and creativity, without the understanding of how to create space for other participants' decisions. The struggle often seen with attempts at "power sharing" is a **competition of autonomy**; this is often exacerbated by the need for competence and setting boundaries on what degree and type of power young participants have over the program. In the ENYF program, youth naturally entered leadership positions over time because they had autonomous and open-ended opportunities to become competent and specifically practice mentorship skills with others- thus making them authentic candidates for leadership instead of just being handed a position with the goal of power-sharing. Age should be taken out of the equation entirely; focusing on the underlying needs of each person is a better starting point. One of the best methods to overcome "competition of autonomy" is to foster more symbiotic and reciprocal relationships. Sharing a common interest or activity as participants- without authority involved- is a way of practicing autonomous relationships, and can develop this more deeply and broadly over time.

IV. Related Theories, Context and Issues

Since there are an infinite multitude of evolving theories and practices, it can be useful to cross-compare through different lenses. This can help identify biases, limitations, or missing factors in any particular lens. SDT and the third space are not often referenced in youth work, and the third space is particularly "niche". Combining them together is thus, rare and unusual. Bringing in more well-known, researched and practiced theories can provide a greater context and put this novel lens to the test more thoroughly. In this way, it can help envision how SDT and third space philosophy would function in practice.

The 9 Guiding Principles of Youth Work. A cooperative of youth organizations in Minnesota came together as the StreetWorks collaborative and developed 9 principles to create unified values, a foundation for boundaries and a clear definition for healthy progress. *(Note on bias: the author of this paper works within the StreetWorks collaborative).* These organizations focus on overcoming the barriers youth face with housing, homelessness, crisis, poverty, and related experiences of volatility and disempowerment. The resulting principles are, in order: *1) Journey-Oriented, 2) Trauma-Informed, 3) Non-Judgemental, 4) Harm Reduction, 5) Trusting Youth-Adult Relationships, 6) Strengths-Based, 7) Positive Youth Development, 8) Holistic, 9) Collaborative.* Incorporating these principles into a unifying vision, StreetWorks describes the following mission:

*"The principles begin with the perspective that youth are on a **journey**; all of our interactions with youth are filtered through that journey perspective. This means we must be **trauma-informed**, **non-judgmental** and work to **reduce harm**. By holding these principles, we can build a **trusting relationship** that allows us to focus on youths' **strengths** and opportunities for **positive development**. Through all of this, we approach youth as **whole beings** through a youth-focused **collaborative** system of support."* (StreetWorks et al. 2014)

Journey-Oriented could be another way of referencing the "hero's journey", or the path to self-determination. It's useful to be aware of people's individual experiences in the bigger picture and remember that each person has a history

and a context that others don't see. This can create empathy, and even a deeper intuitive nuance that can be used to foster more symbiotic ways of interacting with each person individually. This is similar to **Trauma-Informed**, which highlights awareness of trauma in individuals who have experienced deep loss, shocking or extremely stressful experiences. Facilitators having context in mind are often more aware of how much they don't know about a youth, and can recognize important stories and experiences the young person shares over time. This can deepen empathy by being an *imaginative* process to build an immersive picture of that person's life.

Harm Reduction, **Non-Judgmental** and **Trusting Youth-Adult Relationships** all work around creating space and respect for autonomy, which becomes a bridge to building authentic relationships. Harm Reduction formed as an acknowledgment that external control or authoritarian methods don't work in helping people transition from harmful behavior to healthier choices. The alternative is to discover better ways the client can meet their needs over time, and this is often a process of self-discovery. Facilitators can strategically expose clients to new ideas in ways they can understand and imagine, piece by piece. This is an ongoing series of conversations, involving deep listening from the facilitator. Creating refuge- a safe and welcoming, accepting space, and listening deeply to the young person, can naturally allow deep issues and pain to come to the surface. In this way, the facilitator is along for the ride in the young person's self-discovery. For this to function, they must be **Non-Judgmental**, and the ideal result is a **Trusting Youth-Adult Relationship**.

As this relationship and process of discovery develops, it helps facilitators and adolescents uncover and create opportunities. Youth participants begin to have unique realizations about their lives, what they really need, and what they really want- the birth of intrinsic motivation. In high quality environments with the right support, disempowered youth can become aware of their own barriers and untangle confusing problems effectively. Facilitators often struggle with the lacking competence of their clients in certain areas that keep them stuck. The challenge for facilitators and mentors is to set aside their own skill set they rely on to create empowerment and solve problems in their own lives- because the youth might not understand it or see it as valuable. The method mentors can use to overcome their unique "competence lens" is to use a **Strengths-Based** approach. Actively listening for and paying attention to what youth say and do to uncover their natural strengths can deepen an empathic understanding of that person's unique circumstances, while also highlighting potential that can be used to their advantage more organically. This can help show young people they are valuable and cared for, while fostering intrinsic motivation by creating an authentic, relatable vision for self-empowerment. In this way, **Positive Youth Development** is created.

Holistic and **Collaborative** look at the bigger picture and aim to create a context of interconnection. To be holistic is to consider all factors in the individual's life that come together to open pathways to empowerment. Not only is it more effective for facilitators to be mindful of needs and areas of life outside of their expertise, it's also important to become competent in how these different aspects impact each other. For example, physical health and mental health overlap and are not definitively separate categories.

Some of the basic building blocks of economic empowerment include keeping a job, budgeting and conserving resources, maintaining housing, getting proper physical and mental healthcare, close and healthy friendships, access to greater community, and having long-term meaningful goals. Just in these categories alone there could be many different experts and high-level specialties. Ideally, they form interconnected relationships professionally and personally. Being holistic, an effective youth advocate would discover quality experts in different areas of care, and be able to competently refer clients to services. They would also have some degree of competence in economic empowerment to help clients with the challenges around jobs and housing- especially considering the risks of abuse or scams. To effectively be holistic, a youth advocate cannot act alone. By reaching out to others and recognizing the value of each individual's expertise, a youth advocate accesses the power of an interconnected, competent community and helps their client get connected into their world.

Youth Empowerment Through Freire's Pedagogy. Researchers examined empowerment programs for vulnerable youth through the lens of Freire's Pedagogy, looking at barriers to design, definitions of empowerment, and effective tools for creating empowerment (Mohajer & Earnest 2009). A core tenet of Freire's work was development of "critical consciousness: *"(Freire) continued to refer to the development of consciousness or awareness of the person's place in the world and being able to act upon the world in a transforming way...The facilitator's role was to bring the participants from one level of consciousness to another."*

Critical consciousness is often recognized as a shift in awareness where disempowered people begin to recognize their own situations from a new lens. Often this includes expansion in view, seeing oneself in a greater context, becoming aware of or defining barriers to empowerment more accurately, and recognizing one's own potential to become empowered. Freire's discoveries bring to light a process for developing this critical consciousness. This can be seen as akin to "competence of autonomy" that introduces new and foreign concepts to people who may not understand in detail how they are disempowered, and who might lack intrinsic motivation. One of the tools Freire recommends for facilitators is the "cultural circle", where people sit or stand in a circle, play games, dance, play music, and hold conversation: "*The facilitator is an equal participant in the dialogue (Freire, 2000) and the end result is cultural action. The facilitator is required to show qualities such as love, honesty, trust and hope in order to create an empowering dialogue with the participants."*

This highlights the ways a well-designed and culturally compatible social process- combining competence and interconnection- can create the right environment for fostering critical consciousness ("competence of autonomy"). As the *inverse* of critical consciousness, sense of mastery can be regarded as "autonomy within competence", or the ability to become competent on one's own terms and independently of external control. A study referenced by researchers found the following relationship to sense of mastery:

"...the influence of psychological empowerment (sense of mastery), socio-economic status and perceived discrimination on the health of 969 vulnerable youth found that only sense of mastery affected both physical and mental health, whereas discrimination affected only mental health and socio-economic status affected only physical health (Caputo, 2003)."

This suggests that competence and autonomy together play a powerful role that can be impacting on a holistic level. If both physical and mental health are affected, it could be recognized that critical consciousness, sense of mastery, and other forms of competence and autonomy in tandem can be tools to promote healing and health-related empowerment. While facilitators often interact with participants who face significant barriers- and many of these can relate to health- the barrier itself could be subverted. Poor health can perpetuate disempowerment, but listening and looking for the strengths of individuals (Strengths-Based) and listening to their own definitions of their problems can act as a starting point to create pathways to self-determination.

Looking at the types of relationships, boundaries and social infrastructure formed in programs, the "competition of autonomy" theme arises again: *the level of participation was limited to consultation and that when expectations about the results of participating were not clear from the beginning youth were disappointed if their suggestions were not implemented (Groves, 2003).*

While learning through mistakes and failures can be equally valuable for staff and youth, it is a disservice to make false promises or attempt to create power-sharing in an environment or program that is too resistant, rigid, disempowered or dysfunctional. Realistic goals must be set, and gradual changes made over time that programs and their surrounding communities are ready to embrace. In cases where a goal is unrealistic or too far into the future, the process of developing critical consciousness, self-determination, or power-sharing can be shifted from a macro-view to a micro-view. Finding ways to build an autonomous, competent relationship as one individual facilitator with fellow staff and

youth, one by one, can be a tool for becoming the example. This helps create access to setting personal boundaries, standing by one's own morals, and showing people the outcomes of self-determination or critical consciousness before they yet understand.

Researchers found 5 themes of empowerment across their study of Freire's work:

1. A clear vision of the goals of empowerment agreed on by all stakeholders [competence & interconnection]
2. Formation of groups/circles who develop critical consciousness through dialogue and problematisation [competence & interconnection]
3. The content of the programme should involve skills development [competence]
4. The content of the programme should involve an examination of culture, beliefs and values of both the facilitator and the participants ["competence of interconnection"]
5. Community involvement [interconnection]

Consistently competence and interconnection have been tied or integrated together in the aim to create social capital and tools for empowerment. The fourth theme stands out as specifically highlighting cultural competence, which can be seen as a form of competence with interconnection itself. In other words, being aware, skillful and effective within many different social environments. Freire even emphasizes the necessity of individuals deciding the definition of empowerment within their local setting- recognizing individual autonomy, and "autonomous interconnection" as a form of group empowerment. The methods consistently aim to keep facilitators out of the way from these developments, and suggest their role is to "hold space" or even create space. This parallels the risk of attaching authority to competence as seen with the social capital study: *"Tengland (2007) claims that unless the "experts" and those in authority relinquish some of their power and control over empowerment programmes, most programmes will be unable to achieve their goals."*

The caution, between Freire and Jarrett (et al. 2005) is to separate competence from authority. While boundaries in programs are often set based on expertise, competence, and skillset, there still must be a clear shared understanding of basic human boundaries around autonomy and respectful relationships that doesn't change. In most cases, there are universal boundaries that serve as the foundation for all other interaction. While individuals, youth or adult, with quality knowledge, skill or expertise should be given opportunities to create and innovate, it shouldn't interfere with the autonomy of any individual. This can be seen as a "competition between autonomy and competence". As with most competitions, conundrums or paradoxes in this context, forming symbiotic and reciprocal relationships can help people overcome these barriers through authentic bonding. A facilitator can create space for participants' to express autonomy by giving them opportunities to take on a responsibility (even if small), being open to youth ideas, and giving space for organic development of individual roles. When each person fills a role that fits them well, they naturally have opportunity to take on responsibilities and be of service to others.

In examining culture, researchers found that spirituality, morality, religion and faith were common values of youth programs. They also found that American research emphasized individual empowerment and developing assets or resilience. There may be higher value or interest in the individual, and using economic tools like asset-building as the method for empowerment. One consideration for possible and American bias (though may not be solely American) is a lacking awareness or value of interconnection, and oversimplifying autonomy as a highly individualized process. Research on romantic relationships through an SDT lens showed that this simplified and incomplete view of autonomy is very common. Relationships can suffer when couples value "separateness" as the equivalent to healthy boundaries, which can result in less cooperation, lacking symbiosis, devaluing of caregiving and less awareness of the other's needs (Anderson 2019).

In contrast, some researchers found that emphasis on interconnection can counterbalance a limited or hyper-individual

perception of independence and relationships: *"Building relationships between the facilitator and the participants is crucial to the empowerment process (Laverack and Wallerstein, 2001) and the facilitator, to be effective, must create an environment supportive of trust and openness (Tibbitts, 2005)."* Bringing it full circle, Freire claims that facilitators must aim to foster values such as humility, joy, hope, love, generosity, and caring.

The community involvement theme looked not just at building relationships within the program, but at layers of cooperation and collaboration between groups that form a larger social infrastructure: *"Community involvement includes community service (Lakin and Mahoney, 2006), capacity building of organisations, involvement with social networks (Dugan, 2003) and the building of inter-generational community supports (Hinnant et al., 2004; Nitzberg, 2005)."* The emphasis on intergenerational support is part of a Holistic view, and references the importance of age integration again.

Age-Specific Methods for Young Kids. While age integration is often a process of evolving beyond rigid, stereotypical or even "tribalistic" roles based on age, there are biological and environmental realities around personal development over time, and the physical process of aging. Referencing different strategies to meet needs at different ages can more accurately support people and transition away from dependence on authority. Maria Montessori made discoveries of kids' natural tendencies for learning through play and direct experience, especially between infancy and age 6 (Crohn Guiffrey 2006). Her principles include:

1. Normal children have a desire to repeat, and can enter states of intense concentration.
2. The teacher must rely upon the child's spontaneous interest as the inspiration of her work.
3. Children should be allowed to choose their own activities and materials at will.
4. The ideal Montessori environment would be 40-50 kids ranging between ages 3 and 6
5. Age 6 is the "age of reasoning", when kids begin to use cognitive reasoning

Dr. Montessori made these discoveries accidentally, by creating an environment to observe kids with minimal interference. When she did interact with kids, she often demonstrated an activity, and backed off to observe how the kids acted as a result. Her unusually high level of comfort with allowing autonomy and sitting back as an observer put her in a position to facilitate and foster the environment itself, instead of falling into an authoritarian role. Montessori theory states that kids have natural tendencies, and these tendencies produce learning through directly interacting with their world. Montessori criticized the traditional schooling perspective that treated kids as dependent on authority and external direction to learn. As a result of this exploration, Dr. Montessori discovered innate tendencies to all human beings:

"...self-preservation, orientation, order, exploration, communication, abstraction, imagination, concentration, repetition, self-perfection, exactness (precision) and activity (movement and manipulation). From the Montessori point of view, these human tendencies are motivators for human activity in positive, life-affirming directions."

At times, these tendencies fall into a chronological order. Self-preservation, orientation and order create the foundation of a person integrating into a new environment. To create and determine one's own safety, then orient and familiarize with the environment, and create routines and organization as a result. Exploration and communication take off once this foundation is established, and cultivate relationships with other people in the shared environment. Abstraction and imagination develop communication competence more expansively into less tangible, more hypothetical and imaginative modes of thinking. Concentration, repetition, self-perfection, exactness, and activity all interact with each other as tools of developing mastery and independence. This chronology describes the co-development of competence and autonomy, particularly within young children (Crohn Guiffrey 2006).

All of this suggests that very young kids benefit most from interconnection as environment, or a high quality third place

atmosphere that acts as a social fabric. Specifically, the kind of interconnection or community foundation that creates high quality space to express autonomy, and creates safety through relationships- even if kids are not initially aware of this social safety net. Very young kids learn through direct play and exploration to an even larger extent than as they get older, because their stage of development limits the range of collaboration with older kids and adults. Direct physical exploration is one of the simplest and fastest ways for kids to become familiar with their environment, physicality, and other people. Studies referenced by the ENYF researchers in the pre-analysis lays out this process of attaining physical competence:

"*children in environmental education programs can use and shape features of the physical environment, such as making a sculpture from branches or building a dam with small rocks in a stream(Chawla, 2006; Said, 2012). Being able to use and shape these physical affordances contributes to learning and action...when children are able to see changes in their environment as a result of their actions, they learn not only about physical properties of the world but also about their own capabilities, and thus develop competence.*"

Third places tailored to be kid-friendly would create a supportive environment with as much space as possible for free, self-directed play. This means different rooms or areas of an indoor environment, and different areas of an outdoor environment, can be best utilized by segregating by type of activity, instead of age. When age is a natural factor, participants will fall into roles that incorporate their current stage of development, yet maintain flexibility and autonomy. As an example from the ENYF researchers:

"*Clark and Uzzell (2002) proposed the notion of integrated socio-environmental affordances, such as a young person's home, school, playground, neighborhood, or city center, which integrate physical (e.g., plants, buildings) with social features, such as people with knowledge, observable behaviors, attitudes, and cultural values.*"

Designing programs to have different interlocking components, in the structural environment, relationships, and program activities, can foster a balance between flexibility and sense of organization. To give participants across roles and ages (that is, youth workers, parents, kids, interns, and so forth) maximum access to choice of activity would create the most natural and organic growth of self-determination through pursuit of one's own interests. This type of structure can also balance the autonomy of multiple participants without anyone needing to step into the role of authority figure. This kind of flexibility also recognizes how people change organically and gradually as they age.

Lacking Autonomy in School Settings. In his book, Free to Learn (2013), Dr. Peter Gray lays out the long history of schooling and its opposition to childhood autonomy. This demonstrates in detail the ways schools associate authority with competence, and divorce it from autonomy. The results of widespread authoritarian schooling are worse since the turn of the century, as compared to 50 and 100 years ago. A critical part of Dr. Gray's work illustrates how children's lives are less autonomous and far more controlled over all now than they were before the 1980s (despite some significant improvements). Dr. Gray describes a series of long-term studies between the 1960s and 2002 that showed childhood and adolescent sense of control shifted from internal to external- called a "locus of control", akin to a loss of perceived autonomy:

"*Those who believe they are in charge of their own fate are much less likely to become anxious or depressed than are those who believe their are victims of circumstances beyond their control...the data indicate that young people's sense of control over their own destinies has declined continuously...for both age groups that over this period, average scores shifted dramatically, away from the internal toward the external end of the scale, so much so, in fact, that the average young person in 2002 was more external (more prone to lack of personal control) than were 80 percent of young people in the 1960s.*" (p. 16-17)

By contrast, Dr. Gray describes the importance of free play and the ways it supports the development of the 3 universal needs symbiotically in kids. He emphasizes the importance of age-mixing as well as play without adult involvement, contrasting autonomy-supportive environments from authoritarian school environments:

"Free play is nature's means of teaching children they are not helpless. In play, away from adults, children really do have control and can practice asserting it. In free play, children learn to make their own decisions, solve their own problems, create and abide by rules, and get along with others as equals rather than as obedient or rebellious subordinates…In school, by contrast, children cannot make their own decisions; their job is to do as they are told…children who felt most pressured by their parents to achieve in school and were most frequently shuttled from one extracurricular activity to another were the most likely to feel anxious or depressed." – p. 18

Youth workers, parents, facilitators and other program designers should enter and initiate programs with an awareness of how damaging schools can be to childhood autonomy, and this is likely even traumatizing. Using Journey-Oriented and Trauma-Informed, youth workers can create environments where young people, and participants across ages, can heal and evolve beyond their rigid and disempowered roles. Yet, to aim for this, youth workers must be aware of the barriers they're starting with, and the ways in which participants in a variety of roles are likely to be deprived or experiencing intrinsic poverty- be it dependence, ignorance or isolation. Acknowledging the greater context can help any facilitator prepare the environment to deal with these challenges, and ideally transition to be a place of healing and resolution.

V. Author's Note - Intrinsic Abundance

Throughout the writing and research for this paper, I explored the implications of Self-Determination Theory through an "if this, then that?" style of analysis. Accidentally, I ended up discovering a bigger context that SDT fits into, that needs to be explored through many different lenses extensively to even begin to envision what it really means. I've called this theory "Intrinsic Abundance". The core claims of Intrinsic Abundance, relevant to this paper, are:

1. Self-determination is intrinsic wealth: autonomy, competence, interconnection
2. Deprivation of self-determination is intrinsic poverty: dependence, ignorance, isolation.
3. The materialistic myth is the belief that wealth is based on *extrinsic* material goods or resources; in reality, resources are only tools.

Comparison of Intrinsic Abundance with related theories, research and value systems can help create a larger and more adaptable view. I recommend any readers of this paper to be aware of the *lenses* used to analyze the research beyond just the studies directly.

Conclusion

Most studies referenced in this paper showed similar relationships between the 3 universal needs. The path to self-determination is a very personal and individualized path- and this is not to say isolated or without interconnection. Interconnection served as the environment itself, meaning relationships between people one on one and as a larger group are what formed high quality environments that allowed for greater autonomy and competence. The best social frameworks ebbed and flowed, allowing both individuality and intimacy to develop expansively, uninhibited. Closeness, gratitude, mutual challenge and responsibility all pushed and motivated participants to develop leadership skills, sense of mastery, and potentially even "critical consciousness". Yet respect for boundaries and autonomy in quality programs created a wide sense of space that allowed for the co-development of autonomy and competence.

Programs that had established foundations of interconnection created the "regulars" effect and fulfilled many of the criteria for the third place. The 8 traits of the third place can be used as a guide to discern the quality of interconnection in any new or existing group. This provides insight on lacking areas and ways the environment itself can be structured to foster self-determination and intrinsic motivation, especially in early stages.

The 3 universal needs impact each other in symbiotic ways and cannot be fully separated. The individual's

development as an empowered and capable person is the developing relationship between autonomy and competence, and is possible within a framework of interconnection that values and respects these needs. Creating the environment that turns challenges and responsibility into opportunities for development is a way of subverting difficult circumstances into empowering tools. This kind of mentorship and facilitation is most effective when the values, challenges and needs are identified by the participants in their own lives and communities- akin to Freire's concept of "problematisation".

For this kind of community to develop, roles need to become more flexible, symbiotic and overlapping. Youth workers should let go of the "professional" role as much as possible to converge with youth, while also making it a two-way street so youth are allowed to step into the "professional" world. Similarly, age groups often can be segregated and consequently turn into tribes that can alienate each other initially. Adults and youth can overcome the cultural poverty caused by age segregation by discovering common interests and immersing in shared activities. These experiences act as exposure therapy by simply giving people time to become familiar with the other. It can also create a leveling ground and sense of neutrality if facilitators encourage everyone to focus on the task and social bonding instead of establishing superiority based on perceived competence or age. However, it is natural for these issues to play out initially and for participants from different "age tribes" to experience the conflict as a learning process.

While competence must play a role to ensure tasks and responsibilities are properly handled, boundaries maintained and safety established, competence should not be used as a way of showing superiority or justifying authority. Autonomy is still integral to the process of building trust and respect in relationships. Likewise, autonomy for the individual is highly important when in deep learning phases- it is in those times where they need the social fabric to create maximal space as opposed to times where more close-knit intimacy is needed.

Because autonomy is so important to learning, especially development of leadership related skills that allow for functional and genuine power-sharing, facilitators should recognize authority is at odds with competence. Unfortunately, this means youth workers need to be aware of how commonly schools and school subcultures associate authority with learning, and thus handicap students from their own development. Many youth entering programs will start in a place lacking intrinsic motivation because they have so little autonomy in their own lives. Many of their relationships, especially with adults, are authoritarian instead of respectful of autonomy.

Age segregation has also caused widespread isolation throughout childhood into young adulthood, robbing young people of social capital and competence of their own environments and economies. Creating opportunities for young people to enter "adult worlds" and disconnect from age-based roles are valuable aims youth programs can serve. Creating a third place based on the values of core participants can act as an example in the wider community, and ideally would be interconnected beyond itself. This allows for the most natural development of interconnected competence- a community of skillful and wise people that can offer support and services from a wide variety of specialties. Youth workers can build bridges between their inner group and people in many different parts of the community, building a wider variety of relationships (Holistic and Collaborative).

Authority figures can get in the way and impede the transition of a program to become more self-determined. Youth workers, even youth participants and other supporters, can learn conflict mediation as a method of advocating for autonomy and setting boundaries. Youth workers can also collaborate with youth to discover what areas are the most open and "unsupervised" by authorities in the young person's life, thus creating space for autonomy to develop competence and intrinsic motivation. The youth worker should also examine their own role and what ways they can act more autonomously from the program to lead by example. The more autonomous, unconventional or even "rebellious" an individual acts from their environment, the more necessary it is to practice high level conflict mediation skill, to take on the conflicts that can arise with the best chance of creating transformation- or critical consciousness- in other

colleagues.

If youth workers or any individual developing these communities examines their own life through the lens of self-determination, they can address areas of limitation, barriers, or intrinsic poverty and create empowerment in their own lives as a starting point. Sometimes this is more accessible because it doesn't involve relationships that could be supervised or scrutinized by external authorities. Creating the strongest foundation for oneself and the highest degree of self-determination possible can be used as a source of inner power that can create accessible paths and solutions for others.

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