

Centering Safety at Community Centers: Making Space for Youth Interest

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Abstract: Community centers hold powerful potential for interest development within marginalized youth. In order to effectively retain the presence and support the interests of such youth, fostering and maintaining a sense of safety is critical. In this work, we present preliminary findings from an activity system perspective (spanning rules, community, and division of roles) of analyzing a city-run community center. We use the Healing is Rhizomatic conceptual framework to develop an initial conceptualization of how different actors and behaviors support youth safety and interest, and the tensions that emerge in these processes.

Introduction

Woodland (2008) analyzed and envisions community centers as carrying potential to be the much needed reimagining of the traditional school day that enables rich interest development for minoritized youth, specifically Black boys. He highlights the need for a wide variety of factors including cultural relevance in programming and activities, and the need for safety. This is a particularly critical need in response to the constant and rising criminalization and victimization of Black and Brown youth (Parker, 2017).

In response to these concerns, we present pilot work at a community center run by a small midwestern city aimed at centering safety for youth from local low income non dominant communities. Specifically, we are interested in understanding the setup of the unstructured program as created and run by the YYA (Young and Young Adult) division of the city, the participation of the youth at the space, and how different interactions between youth and facilitators shape youth's sense of safety and interest.

Context & methods

In exploring youth safety here, we center the processes, tools, and relationships that offer a stable and contained space in which youth experience shifts with interpreting, feeling, and engaging with notions of vulnerability, awareness, and comfortability? We draw from Lopez's (2020) Rhizomatic framework for this investigation which describes felt sense, relationship, and place "nodes" ("anchors of being and experience"), and their relationship with experiences of "blockage" and "connection" as collectively forming a "bud". Lopez determines that focusing on the relations that form this "bud" is useful to "identify sites through which [youth] can access and channel healing".

Complementing this with Engeström's work on formative interventions (2011), we use activity theory to understand how different aspects of YYA enable (and also create tensions in) youth's experience of safety. We center youth as the Subject, and experience of safety and agency in this space as the Object of the activity system. The work is built on field notes collected over a period of 3 months by us (the primary author on this paper) who acted as a co-facilitator alongside prior YYA staff while collecting notes for potential design interventions to improve youth experiences. We start with presenting select vignettes from our notes that surfaces a mixture of tensions around safety and examine this vignette and other observations through activity theory's components: the broad themes of *Rules* practiced in the space; the varying ways that youth maintain their *Community*; and the *Division of Roles*, especially through lenses of social power that youth engagements.

Findings: Safety and interest

A particular youth who's cemented an interest in basketball enters the community center every day asking the same question, "the court's open today?" In one particular instance however, upon the youth's arrival, a YYA staff member attempted to engage him about his disruptive actions from an earlier event. Through the conversation, the youth kept evading answering any questions in the form of jokes and not responding to questions, to which the staff member firmly responded with "You can go downstairs until you're ready to have a conversation". Consequently, this decision made the youth upset as he spoke with another YYA staff member in a more intense manner. This staff member attempted to use a calmer tone with the youth to explain why the conversation was necessary. Eventually, the youth was allowed to rejoin the YYA space, but was told that the courts would not be open for him until later that evening.

The first staff member emphasized the adult vs. youth hierarchy (a *division of roles*) through his conversation style ending with the decision to initially exclude him from activities. It can also be used in tandem with Tools to describe the types of conversations both staff members had with youth. Not only do the staff members take on different roles in this conversation (stern vs empathetic, which we've observed are their respective roles in other conversations as well), they also had two different conversations, the first being punitive and the second being explanatory. This demonstrates the tension around youth safety through the reciprocity of safety for the community/activity system and safety for the individual.

Analyzing the “bud” that is nodes of felt sense, relationship, and place and their interaction with the blockage experience, it becomes clear that YYA centered safety in this interaction to make space for the youth's interest. Although the youth excitedly came in to play basketball, he was greeted with an unwanted conversation about his previous behavior. This initial felt sense (attacked, leading to humor as defense) paired with the emphasized adult-youth relationship he has with the first YYA staff member he spoke to, prompted a “blockage” to his initial interest, signaled by his tone after the first conversation ended. However, the second conversation was with a staff member he had a better relationship with, signaled by the conversational and explanatory tone. This allowed the youth to end the conversation feeling a sense of safety about being welcome in the space, dissolving the “blockage” and making a “connection” to access the place where he can explore his interests. The tool of conversation and relationships he had with the YYA staff members in the stable space of the Community Center allowed the youth to be able to experience shifts in his interpretation and engagement with feelings of awareness and comfortability regarding his previous behavior to feel safe pursuing his interest in staying in the YYA community and pursuing his interest in basketball.

Implications

We believe that this investigation offers a novel and deeper lens into different ways that safety for (minoritized) youth can be conceptualized and designed to support interest development. Our preliminary notes highlight: 1) the role of institutional *rules* and adult imposition in maintaining group safety – inviting us to explore what kinds of rules can enable such conversations and disciplinary actions to be productive while maintaining individual youth's senses of safety; and 2) the process of engaging in specific roles to affirm one's safety and comfort which might also limit the extent to which youth experiment their own potential interest in different activities – provoking us to recognize how to encourage youth to explore different activities and roles and challenge inequitable norms while staying as safe as they find comfortable (Lewis et al., 2018).

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