

Rediscovering Fritz Redl

If there was a Hall of Fame for Child and Youth Care practitioners, the first person I would nominate is Fritz Redl. I had been in the field for two years when I first read *Children Who Hate*, and I was amazed at the description of youth that so accurately mirrored my own experience. Fritz and fellow author David Wineman explained CYC ideas better than anyone I had ever met. The complexity of our work and the use of life spaces to create healing came alive in the descriptions of his work at Pioneer House, a group home for boys.

Redl was a German psychologist who came to the USA in the 1930s. English is his second language, so he sometimes writes a clumsy phrase, but the content is excellent. He also pokes fun at the psychiatric and psychological community with very practical and everyday diagnostic labels for youth.

Readers often scratch their heads when they encounter labels like ‘Evaporation of self-contributed links in the causal chain’ or ‘Newness panic’, because they miss the satirical intent. Redl was detailing ‘a need for more comprehensive treatment approaches than the individual interview of the usual therapy session’ (Redl, 1952, p.8), at a time when concepts like the therapeutic environment were not prevalent. Redl and his colleagues worked with challenging youth in a very real life space environment and carefully studied and articulated what is needed to create success. His psychodynamic orientation is a product of a different era, but he can easily be translated into strength-based, relational practice. When we search around for good practice models, his work and descriptions of the theory involved are excellent examples to emulate.

Redl coined the terms ‘acting out’ and ‘life space interview’, and we all would do well to reinvestigate what they originally meant to describe. Redl was opposed to behaviour modification, punishment and psychotropic medications, and suggests practical, CYC based alternatives.

He strongly resisted labelling children and states in *Children Who Hate* (1951, p.234):

The concept of a child without a conscience - the so called psychopath is supposed to belong to this category - can be maintained only in the artificial seclusion of individual therapy practice. Whoever follows a child through the totality of a residential life situation, into every nook and cranny of the trivia of the day, is bound to discover that such a concept is an oversimplification which makes no sense.

There are three books that are highly recommended for all serious CYC practitioners: *Children who hate*, *controls from within* and *when we deal with children*. You will be surprised at how much of what you know and do is articulated and expanded upon in these volumes.

References

Redl, F.& Wineman, D. (1951). *Children who hate*. New York: The Free Press.

Redl, F.& Wineman, D. (1952). *Controls from within: Techniques for the treatment of the aggressive child*. New York: The Free Press.

Redl, F. (1966). *When we deal with children*. New York: The Free Press.

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