



## Perception of social climate by welfare/justice-involved girls in out-of-home placement centers



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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Many critics consider that the cognitive behavioral approach (CBA) doesn't sufficiently take into account the needs of welfare/justice-involved adolescent girls in out-of-home placement centers, especially the centrality of interpersonal relationships (with other adolescent girls and care worker) and the establishment of a positive social climate in the placement environment. A gender-responsive approach such as the *Caring and Just Community Approach* (CJCA), could better establish this positive social climate.

**Objective:** This study aims to explore whether the social climate is perceived more positively by adolescent girls who participate in the CJCA, compared to those who participated in the CBA.

**Methods:** Participants are 213 welfare/justice-involved adolescent girls in out-of-home placement centers located in the Canadian province of Québec (CJCA = 60; CBA = 153). This study combines self-reported measures and clinical administrative data.

**Results:** Among adolescent girls, the CJCA democratic community values seem to be associated with a social climate which could facilitate a feeling of being more involved in their out-of-home placement unit. Both clinical approaches seem to address the centrality of interpersonal relationships and respond to the needs to feel listened to, to be respected, and to be treated with fairness by care workers.

**Conclusions:** This study reaffirms the importance of including gender-responsive aspects to efficient practice principles when adolescent girl intervention programs are developed. This is because different approaches, although effective, do not address all the needs of welfare/justice-involved adolescent girls in out-of-home placement centers.

### 1. Introduction

Paralleling the rising proportion of adolescent girls in state care due to disruptive or delinquent behaviors, the development and evaluation of intervention programs aiming to reduce such behaviors has begun to take gender into account over the past fifteen years (Bloom, Owen, Deschenes, & Rosenbaum, 2002; Chesney-Lind, Morash, & Stevens, 2008; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2014; Hubbard & Matthews, 2008; Kerig & Schindler, 2013). One of the main questions is whether gender-neutral intervention programs are truly adapted to adolescent girls' needs. Presently, within the welfare/justice system, intervention settings wishing to use practices known for their efficiency mainly turn to the cognitive behavioral approach (CBA). To this day, this approach's

efficiency is the most empirically supported for a variety of problems, such as mental health problems (Butler, Chapman, Forman, & Beck, 2006; Hofmann, Asnaani, Vonk, Sawyer, & Fang, 2012; Tolin, 2010) and delinquency (Andrews et al., 1997; Landenberger & Lipsey, 2005). Even though CBA was initially developed for a male population, some studies have evaluated its use with welfare/justice-involved adolescent girls. A meta-analysis of 29 studies on program characteristics for youth with disruptive behavior problems reported that cognitive skills training programs can have some positive effects for both genders but are significantly more effective for adolescent boys ( $g = 0.87$ ) than for girls ( $g = 0.68$ ; Granski, Javdani, Anderson, & Caires, 2019). This result gives weight to studies questioning the CBA's sensitivity to welfare/justice-involved adolescent girls. Notably, this questioning relates to the

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lack of attention devoted by the CBA to adolescent girls' needs regarding their placement environment characteristics. Indeed, a placement environment should promote respect, empathy, safety, and agency so as to be sensitive to adolescent girls' pathways into the welfare/justice system (Bloom & Covington, 2001; Hipwell & Loeber, 2006; Hubbard & Matthews, 2008; Ravoira, Graziano, & Patino Lydia, 2012). Promoting a positive social climate in the placement environment could be a way to address these needs (Hubbard & Matthews, 2008; Lanctôt, Lemieux, & Mathys, 2016). As such, the *Caring and Just Community Approach* (CJCA; Dionne & St-Martin, 2018) could be more suitable than the CBA in establishing a positive social climate.

## 2. The centrality of relationships among adolescent girls

Many risk factors associated with disruptive and delinquent behaviors are the same for adolescent girls and boys. This is the case of polyvictimization, trauma exposure and posttraumatic stress disorder, diagnosed mental health disorders, and association with deviant peers (Kerig, 2018; Kerig & Schindler, 2013; Lanctôt, 2010). However, those risk factors do not manifest in the same ways for adolescent boys and girls. For example, while both adolescent boys and girls in welfare/justice-involved samples have been disproportionately exposed to multiple forms of victimization (Laurier, Hélie, Pineau-Villeneuve, & Royer, 2016; van Vugt, Lanctôt, Paquette, Collin-Vézina & Lemieux, 2013), victimization types differ by gender. Adolescent girls are most likely to have experienced interpersonal traumas such as physical and emotional maltreatment by caregivers as well as interfamilial and extrafamilial sexual abuse, whereas adolescent boys report more exposure to community violence (see Kerig, 2018 for a review). Also, adolescent girls demonstrate a sensitivity to interpersonal traumas that often translates into difficulties such as relationship problems, psychological distress, and shame (Bloom & Covington, 2001; Cauffman, Farruggia, & Goldweber, 2008; Garcia & Lane, 2013; Hipwell & Loeber, 2006; Kerig & Schindler, 2013; Leve, Chamberlain, & Kim, 2015; Schaffner, 2006) whereas adolescent boys tend to present more behavioral problems such as substance use and delinquency involvement (Cotton et al., 2019). These gender differences shed light on the centrality of interpersonal relationships for adolescent girls' development (Lanctôt, 2017; Zahn-Waxler & Polanichka, 2004).

Moreover, in the context of welfare/justice system interventions, adolescent girls are particularly sensitive to their out-of-home placement unit's environment. Adolescent girls assign more importance to the following needs: being listened to, being respected, and being treated with fairness (Hubbard & Matthews, 2008; Lanctôt, 2017; Ravoira et al., 2012). Managing the social climate of the placement environment is of paramount importance, considering that many adolescent girls in care of the welfare/justice system present serious disruptive behaviors coupled with severe experiences of interpersonal trauma \*\*\* (Lanctôt, 2018). For traumatized adolescent girls in particular, it is important to provide a therapeutic community environment that lets them have a voice and participate in all aspects of their program, with the goal of overcoming their sense of victimization and promoting feelings of empowerment (Lanctôt et al., 2016; Leipoldt, Harder, Kayed, Grietens, & Rimehaug, 2019). Studies also emphasized the need to establish healthy relationships with traumatized adolescent girls, with practitioners focusing more on support than on control, and on the sense of physical and emotional safety within the placement environment (Gaarder, Rodriguez, & Zatz, 2004; Lanctôt et al., 2016).

Consequently, some have suggested that conventional intervention programs be adapted in such ways as to make them more sensitive to adolescent girls' intervention experiences, difficulties, and needs (Bloom & Covington, 2001; Bloom et al., 2002; Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 2014; Gaarder et al., 2004; Hubbard & Matthews, 2008). Gender-responsive approaches have built on this to offer interventions taking into account welfare/justice-involved adolescent girls' relational needs, with a particular focus on the sensitive nature of the program's

environment and social climate (Chesney-Lind et al., 2008; Gaarder et al., 2004; Lanctôt, 2017; Schaffner, 2006).

## 3. CBA and caring and just community approach (CJCA)

In the province of Quebec (Canada), the CBA is one of the dominant intervention approaches administered to both adolescent girls and boys in out-of-home placement centers through a program developed by Le Blanc, Dionne, Proulx, Grégoire and Trudeau-LeBlanc, 1998. This program combines individual and group activities. The aim of the program is to reduce antisocial cognitions and behaviors, through cognitive restructuring and teaching prosocial alternative behaviors. Individual activities consist of an evaluative analysis (functional and excess/deficit analyses), self-observation reports, and a behavioral contract to promote prosocial behaviors. The group component consists of four workshops targeting communication skills, anger regulation, stress management, and problem solving through modeling and role-play. More generally, change is achieved through reinforcement of desired behaviors and punishment of inadequate behaviors. All youth within one residential unit follow the same rules and sanctions as established by care workers.

Within this same system of care, and in an effort to provide an intervention program matching adolescent girls' needs more closely, the *Caring and Just Community Approach* (CJCA; Dionne & St-Martin, 2018) was implemented in eight Québec out-of-home placement units for girls aged 12–17.<sup>2</sup> The CJCA stems from Kohlberg (1984) cognitive developmental intervention approach, the *Just Community Approach* (JCA). This approach was initially developed with youth offenders, then adapted and implemented in out-of-home placement units for adolescent girls presenting externalized and internalized problems. Dionne (1996) integrated a caring perspective to this approach, through mutual aid and interactional justice, so this approach would be more suitable to adolescent girls' needs. The JCA then became the CJCA. As for CBA, the aim is to reduce or eliminate adolescents' problematic behaviors and delinquency. In contrast with the CBA, the CJCA is based on developing social competency through prosocial interpersonal negotiation strategies, sociomoral reflection, and moral judgement in a caring environment.

More specifically, the CJCA considers the shared educative experience as a rehabilitative tool promoting development. This shared educative experience is comprised of interactions between the adolescent girl, the care workers, and the peer group in the out-of-home placement unit's daily moments, such as during meals, as well as in structured clinical activities. In the CJCA specifically, the living environment is seen as a micro-community where the search for democratic, mutual aid, and justice values is omnipresent. The members of this community are the adolescents, generally nine to twelve girls, and the care workers; all are considered equal. Powers, responsibilities, and privileges are shared fairly between members, through democratic votes concerning regulations of life within this community. To consider adolescent girls' needs for fairness, trust, respect, and harmonious relationships, the CJCA also integrates a daily search for mutual aid and interactional justice through a constant preoccupation for each community member's respect, recognition, consideration, and feeling of being heard (Dionne & St-Martin, 2018).

Structural questioning, as used by care workers, is another important intervention technique specific to the CJCA. This type of questioning goes further than a simple search for content, as it attempts to deepen and to understand the adolescent's reasoning process, as well as supporting this process development by giving her clues and different angles to tackle a question. For example, the care workers could

<sup>2</sup> The CJCA is currently only used in adolescent girls' out-of-home placement centers. However, boys could also benefit from this approach (Dionne & St-Martin, 2018).

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