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Rites of Passage as a Framework for Community Interventions with Youth

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Abstract

This article discusses the potential value of adopting a rites of passage framework for developing community interventions for youth and suggests principles for its application. We propose a contemporary working definition of the concept, how it could reshape the way we approach community and youth development, and 20 core components of a rites of passage process developed from our work experience spanning over 40 years.

Introduction

The terms “rite of passage” have become ubiquitous in contemporary society, being applied to as a diverse set of experiences as college student’s binge drinking (CASA, 1994), a first kiss or sexual experience (Carpenter, 2005), tattooing (Gillespie, 2009), and a President’s first war (Apple, 1989). These, and literally thousands of similar examples may represent a “first” or otherwise special experience for the individual, a *moment with meaning*, but they are not necessarily rites of passage. We believe that a rites of passage youth and community development strategy represent one of the most powerful ecological tools available to community psychologists, but that contemporary use of this term has obscured its true meaning and value. Our goal here is to describe what is meant by a community-based rite of passage and how it might be usefully applied by those who work in the community. While our focus will be on the application of rites of passage with youth, the principles can be applied to other key life transitions.

Our definition of rites of passage as well as our specification of the structural elements that compose them comes from the lead author's experience spanning over 40 years of practice in creating effective rites of passage experiences that are grounded in the community. These experiences led to the creation of The Center for the Advancement of Youth, Family & Community Services, Inc. in 1990, a non-profit institute focused on “promoting positive youth development and [to] assist[ing] children in the transition through adolescence to becoming healthy adults connected to their communities. We

accomplish this by creating effective school and community-based strategies in partnership with parents, teachers, counselors, and community leaders” (ROPE, n.d.). The Center has created ROPE[®] a multi-year intervention with communities that has been used throughout the US, Canada and Europe with an estimated 100,000 youth over the past 30 years. For more information on The Center, ROPE[®], and other related experiences, please visit www.rope.org.

What do we mean by a rite of passage?

Belgian anthropologist Arnold van Gennep coined the term rite of passage in his seminal study (1909/1960) of patterns of behavior and customs that various cultures engaged in during times of major life transition. What van Gennep described as rites of passage were *community-created* and *community-directed* experiences that transmit cultural values and knowledge to an individual (or individuals). The rite of passage process not only guides the individual’s transition to a new status, but, equally important, it created public events that celebrated the transition and reaffirmed these community values, which inform and guide expectations for behaviors essential for the group’s survival. The historical record shows that rites of passage have been present, in various manifestations, in all cultures for thousands of years. We would argue this suggests the strong “evolutionary validity” of these processes, which have remained an important part of community and cultural health promotion during the major transitions of birth, marriage and death.

What happens without meaningful rites of passage?

It could be argued that cultural rituals and secular strategies in modern American society do not effectively assist in our children's transition to adulthood. The lack of clearly established rites of passage in America is partly due to the ambiguity about when and how one becomes an adult in contemporary society (Arnett, 2000, 2004). The ages at which youth receive certain adult privileges (e.g., right to drive, right to vote, right to drink, etc.) are rather arbitrary and are not related to any actual competencies or maturity on the part of the individuals who gain those privileges. The developmental psychology literature provides considerable evidence (see Blos, 1979; Elkind, 1984; Scott, 1998) that adolescents desperately seek public markers and community approbation to verify their entry into adult status. In the absence of meaningful community-based rituals, youth will define and create their own marker events based on peer or media values, many of which may be destructive both individually and communally. Indeed, this is how binge drinking, drug use, teen pregnancy and other similar behaviors have become elevated to rites of passage reflecting adult status, e.g., CASA (1994).

So what is a real rite of passage?

We propose the following definition: "A modern day rite of passage is achieved when parents and the community create and participate in experiences which are perceived to be transformative by youth and, in fact, offer them increased status within the community and facilitate their healthy transition through adolescence" (Blumenkrantz, 1996, p. 21). Van Gennep (1909/1960) identified three common features in the various phenomena he labeled as rites of passage: *separation, transition (liminality) and incorporation*.

Separation referred to a change from the normal routine of daily life. Historically, in the case of youth, it was often a biological marker, i.e., the onset of puberty. Within the family and community this was interpreted as a significant signal that tells a child, "From this point on you must be on a journey to adulthood. You must leave (separate from) this place of childhood behind, separate from childish things and move into adulthood for the health and benefit of yourself, your family and community."

During this time of *transition* there will be a great deal of uncertainty and mystery that causes much anxiety. It is a place of liminality where social status

becomes lost or unclear while the initiate undergoes precise training in values and ethics that inform and guide behavior. There are periods of extreme stress or "ordeals" that help to compel the child to experience the full range of human emotions and potential.

From these compelling experiences, embodied in a community sanctioned rite of passage, the child grows and matures and moves into the third phase, *incorporation*. It is at this point that he or she incorporates these lessons into their life; they serve to guide and inform him or her of the community's expectation for living well and affirm them as an emerging adult ready to be integrated into the healthy functioning of community

Almost all the examples of rites of passage from the anthropology literature are highly prescriptive. They were intended to initiate youth in small, highly homogeneous communities, where consensus about community values and appropriate behaviors can be easily established, into a rather limited number of adult roles. It should be noted that certain culturally defined rites of passage for youth still exist in western culture. Such events as Bar and Bat Mitzvahs for observant Jews and La Quinceanera for Latinos are practiced by a small percentage of the population. The significance of such events for development has been noted (see Schoenfeld 1994; Stewart, 2005). But these are the exceptions. Indeed, in today's pluralistic societies where there are multiple possibilities for values and ethics that inform and guide expectations for behavior, one could reasonably ask: can meaningful rites of passage be developed? We believe they can. The challenge for community psychologists is to help the communities articulate their shared values and develop processes and rituals that effectively impart these values to youth.

The next section of this paper lays out some of the key structural elements, derived from over 40 years of practice, which can create effective rites of passage experiences that are grounded in the community.

Characteristics of rites of passage

We have identified twenty elements that contribute to an effective, contemporary community-based rite of passage (see Table 1). A more thorough description of all the elements can be found in a forthcoming publication (Blumenkrantz, in preparation. Also see www.rope.org).

Table 1. Twenty elements of rites of passage.

Component	Definition
1. Paradigm shift	Adolescent development is connected to a community development process rather than being seen solely as an intra-psycho phenomenon. Interventions are ecological rather than individually oriented.
2. Community values and ethics	The hallmark of a community-based rite of passage strategy is the creation of intentional, inclusive community dialogues to address what are the values and expectations that youth must carry forward to insure the future success of the community. There must be deliberate structures that allow these community discussions to occur so that some consensus about essential expectations for behavior and values emerge. This process must precede the creation of experiences that foster youths' understanding, appreciation and commitment to these expectations.
3. Program success relies on relationships	Meaningful outcomes ultimately depend upon the quality of the relationships between youth and adults, and between the adults and the "program." Positive outcomes only occur when people within a setting are intimately connected to the creation and/or adaptation of a strategy. It is only then that a strategy can be implemented with sufficient commitment and creativity to make it a success.
4. You can only bring someone as far as you have been yourself.	If relationships are key, then those who are initiators of youth's coming of age need training and professional development to build their personal awareness and resources. Individuals need to undergo their own <i>initiator experience</i> and <i>rite of passage</i> to aid his or her transition to maturity to be an effective initiator of youth.
5. It must happen in the home community.	Children grow up, by and large, in communities that are defined by geographic boundaries and real live interpersonal interactions. Connection to an actual geographic place, especially when there is deep contact with nature and a psychological sense of community is critical to a sense of self and security for children. Effective <i>rites of passage</i> establish a safe place for intentional conversations to occur between citizens of the community, youth and adults.
6. Rites of passage create expectations for socially appropriate behaviors	Coming of age in a rites of passage experience involves creating and supporting intentional environments that transmit essential values and ethics that guide and inform expectations for socially appropriate behaviors.
7. Rituals	Rituals represent a detailed sequence of actions that are regularly followed. Ritual, as part of the Rites of Passage experience can set a tone and impact climate in ways that help to create a productive context for learning.
8. Adversity or personal challenge	Experiences that challenge the individual emotionally and/or physically and which present opportunities to learn new values and/or skills.
9. Silence	Children and youth grow up in a cacophony of sound that makes the "call to adventure," the internal alarm clock awakening them to the coming of age process almost inaudible. Silence helps a young person develop an internal dialogue for narrating and making sense of what is going on around them.
10. Stories, myths or legends	Stories passed down from previous generations that convey morals or cultural values.
11. Connection with nature	Experiences that help individuals realize and appreciate their connection and interdependence on the natural environment.
12. Time alone for reflection	Time intentionally set aside for a person to reflect on his/her personal values, actions and beliefs.
13. Connection with ancestral roots	The opportunity to learn, value and appreciate one's connection to those who went before and the values and ethics their heritage embraces.
14. Play	The opportunity to help individuals find their "bliss," those activities that they can immerse themselves in with great passion, and from which they receive unbridled joy.
15. Giving away one's previous attitudes, behaviors, etc.	The coming of age process through rites of passage includes the giving up or giving away of some aspect, e.g., behavior, attitude, cherished item, that characterized their former status. This process conveys a reality that change – leaving something dear in the past behind – is an integral part of the transition.
16. Non-ordinary states of reality	The use of sanctioned behaviors such as vision quest, meditation, yoga, movement and dance, play in 'in the zone' with sports and hobbies to experience non-ordinary states of reality.
17. Obligation to service to the larger community	Through the initiatory process, adolescents are oriented to recognize that service to the community is an essential part of becoming a fully functioning adult in society.
18. Changes of appearance that express/reflect new status	As recognition of their transition to a new status, initiates may adorn themselves with some external symbol that symbolizes this attainment. This might include special cloths, adornments, and badges etc. that are awarded during public rites of passage.
19. Opportunities to demonstrate new competencies & status	Opportunities for participants to demonstrate publically newly acquired skills and status.
20. Celebration of status	Community celebrations in which the new status of initiates is recognized and acclaimed.

The first conceptual element, *paradigm shift* (#1), is most fundamental since the only way that rites of passage can be effective is if the process of adolescent development is understood to be intimately connected to a community development process rather than viewed as an intra-psychic phenomenon within the psychology of an individual. Interventions are ecological rather than individually oriented. Intentional experiences to help adolescents transition to adulthood cannot be seen as the job or responsibility of just one segment of the community such as the educational system or mental health; they must grow from the community and reflect extensive community discussion and reflection on what values are important. Implication for practice: Rites of passage cannot be seen as “just another program.” It requires rethinking the connection between youth and community development (see Blumenkrantz, 2009).

The recognition that adolescent development and community development are intimately tied means that the community must meet to agree upon *values and ethics* (#2) they want to convey to their children. The hallmark of a community-based rite of passage strategy is the creation of intentional, inclusive community dialogues to address these important questions. We have used techniques such as World Café (Brown & Isaacs, 2005) and Appreciative Inquiry (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003) to facilitate such dialogues among a diversity of youth and adult citizens. Our experience suggests that the Golden Rule (“Do unto others, as you would have others do unto you”) and its variants across all cultures and religions, is a good place to start. There also seems to be a consensus across communities that children and youth are expected to become good students, achieve academically, and have good physical and mental health. Clarification of values must precede the creation of experiences that foster youths’ understanding, appreciation and commitment to these expectations.

The third element—*Program success relies on relationships*—relates to issues of program replication and innovation transfer (Smale, 1993; Martinez-Brawley, 1995). We believe that the success of all youth development designs ultimately hinge dependent upon the relationships between youth and adults, and between the adults and the

“program.” Consequently, social science and educational programs cannot be simply transferred, intact, from one community to another. Successful innovation transfer only occurs when people within a setting are intimately connected to the creation and/or adaptation of a strategy. Implications for practice: First, significant preparatory time must be spent in building relationships and capacity among the participants; and second, contemporary rites of passage will appear different depending upon the culture and context of the community. Therefore, they typically lie outside the “evidence-based” program paradigm which calls for a prescriptive set of activities rather than a prescriptive set of guiding principles that inform community and youth development practice. This does not mean that the effectiveness of a particular rites of passage experience developed by a community cannot be examined, but rather, that those set of experiences may only have validity in that community, and cannot be simply transferred to another context with the expectation of similar outcomes.

If relationships are key, then those who are to be the Initiators of youth’s coming of age (Elders) need training and professional development to build their personal awareness and resources, i.e., *you can only bring someone as far as you have been yourself* (#4). Elders must come to peace with their own lives in regard to aspirations achieved and those unattained in order to move on to a place of generativity (Erikson, 1968). Individuals need to undergo their own *initiatory experience* and *rite of passage* to aid his or her transition to maturity and able to become an Elder and initiator of youth. Implication for practice: staff training is critical!

The admonition that “It takes a whole village to raise a child” implies the physical existence of a village (*home community*) (#5). While modern means of communication have created the “global village” and online communities, the reality is that children grow up, by and large, in communities that are defined by geographic boundaries and real live interpersonal interactions. Connection to an actual geographic place, especially when there is deep contact with nature, (Louv, 2005) and a psychological sense of community (Sarason, 1974) has been widely acknowledged as critical to a sense of self and security for children, (Eller 1991; Stevenson, 1998). The creation of community-based, culturally and developmentally appropriate rites of passage

establishes a special (sacred) safe place for intentional conversations to occur between citizens of the community, youth and adults, on questions that come from the heart and have meaning. Implication for practice: the creation of settings in which rites of passage occur must pay attention to the smallest details that will impact both conscious and unconscious processes.

Coming of age in a rites of passage orientation to youth and community development involves creating and supporting intentional environments that transmit essential values and ethics that guide and *inform expectations for socially appropriate behaviors* (#6).

For example, the Initiation of Scholars,[®] portion of a contemporary Rite Of Passage Experience[®], ROPE^{®1} teaches students the essential skills, behaviors and

attitudes necessary to achieve academically. It includes a “Ceremony of Commitment,” where students publicly state their intention to learn well in school and to succeed academically in front of peers, parents and teachers. This public *rite* strengthens their commitment to prosocial values, i.e., academic achievement and unites the community’s support of an emerging adult to succeed in school.

The seventh element—*rituals*—often has emotionally charged connotations; for many, it is usually associated with ceremony and sacred and religious acts. But the term also refers to a detailed sequence of actions that are regularly followed. Indeed, many aspects of school life and secular society are highly ritualized (McLaren, 1997), e.g., the regularity of change of class bells or tones, the systematic organization of classroom seating, and the routinization of the school day represents a ritual that almost all students experience, a ritual that may have unintended consequences on mediating their attention.

Rituals can play a part in social and emotional learning (McClaren, 1997) and can set a tone and impact climate in ways that help to create a productive context for learning (Sarason, 2004). In rites of passage, the “program” or design elements carefully consider the small details of setting and how the participants begin each activity, separate and change from the previous activity, and how they end

their time together in more intentional ways that can affect behavior with more potency. Sarason (1972) describes at length the importance and necessary ingredients in the creation of settings as a central consideration in a community psychology.

The creation of challenging emotional experiences—*adversity* (8)—deepens life’s lessons and sears them into our lives forever. Our new paradigm challenges us to provide “teachable moments” capable of searing into the emerging adult’s mind essential information related to values and ethics that inform and guide expectations for behavior.

The essence of resiliency is the body and spirit’s capability of resuming its shape or position after being subjected to stress and capable of rapid recovery from an emotional shock (Werner & Smith, 1982; Benard, 2004). One powerful way to gain a solid identity is to engage in structured ordeals and challenges that test one’s self and from which one can emerge with a greater sense of meaning and purpose. For example, we often give students basic training in orienteering skills and then they must find their way out of the woods without adult assistance.

Children and youth grow up in a cacophony of sound (music, computer games) and mediated togetherness (cell phones, Facebook, etc.) that makes the “call to adventure,” the internal alarm clock awakening them to the coming of age process, almost inaudible. Creating opportunities for *silence* and to spend *time alone*—the ninth and tenth elements—help a young person develop an internal dialogue for narrating and making sense of what is going on around them. It affords them a place to contemplate and consider the great complexities of the world and how they fit within it.

Such quiet, alone time could involve periods of meditation or being engaged in some learning, reading, practicing some skill, or other activity where an individual can focus their attention and become absorbed in their own thoughts. In this state of relaxation they can grow to be comfortable with themselves, which contributes to their self-awareness, identity formation and ease at being with others.

In each era, there have been *stories, myths or legends* (#11) that help to lead civilizations and cultures through the mysteries of the universe and to guide daily living practices. Today’s stories are largely superficial and portray realities that equate life satisfaction with consumption. This drives contemporary culture, especially adolescents, to look for spiritual salvation at the shopping mall.

1 The Rite of Passage Experience[®] - Initiation of Scholars[®] and ROPE[®] are copyrighted (1991, 1988, 1998, 2008) and federally registered trademarks of David Blumenkrantz licensed to The Center for the Advancement of Youth, Family and Community Services, Inc.

As Wynne, (1987, p. 482) notes, “If we want to change our lives, we must first change our stories.” At the community level, the story of rites of passage as a framework to inform and guide a new paradigm for youth and community development is rich and steeped in history. It can serve to tie many of the existing theories of youth development together in ways that really speak to both the conscious and unconscious needs of adolescents. When the community creates and enacts a rite of passage story for their children, they are really creating a way to remember what the important ingredients are for a healthy psychological sense of community essential for positive youth development

Knowing who we are at a deep and meaningful level cannot happen unless we come to know ourselves within the context of *nature and the environment* (#12). Recent research, e.g., LaChance (2006); Louv (2005), suggests that separation from nature has negative consequences for child and human development. Integrated into a meaningful rites of passage experience are opportunities that intentionally reconnect children to the natural environment. Implication for practice: intentional activities in the natural world are critical for youth to feel a sense of place.

If you don't know where you are and have no connection with where you have come from how could you know where to go in the future? These questions challenge our youth development work to help *connect them to their ancestral roots* (#13). What is the culture and religion of “their people” and what does this mean regarding values and ethics? Every community has religious and civic organizations that hold the history of their children's ancestors. Cultural identity development is one of the essential building blocks and protective factors of youth development (Hill, 2002), especially for youth of color.

Contemporary application of this element calls for engaging diverse religious and cultural constituencies and institutions within a community. Secular rites of passage do not usurp religious or cultural rites; they affirm their importance and help to forge links with our common humanity.

Contemporary rites of passage engage youth in ways that unveil the potency and importance of *play*, the fourteenth element. It establishes systematic ways for children to explore and experiment with activities that give them joy and invite transcendence. If you help a child find their “bliss” – something they can

immerse themselves in with great passion, from which they receive unbridled joy, you have given them the best “protective factor” (Hawkins, Catalano & Miller, 1992) against mental and physical health problems – for the rest of their life (Blumenkrantz, 2000).

Letting go of something important, whether it is in the symbolic act of *giving away* (#15) “childish behaviors and attitudes” or some material possession, conveys a reality that change – leaving something dear in the past behind – is an integral part of the shift in consciousness that accompanies a healthy coming of age process. Moving to a rites of passage paradigm also involves a “give away” for some members of the community. Embracing such an initiatory process may mean giving up the simplistic bromides of educational policy and youth development that routinely come into fashion, e.g., “No Child Left Behind” (testing is the answer), “Just Say No,” “Zero Tolerance.”

Awakening to Spirit and Non-ordinary reality (#16) is a challenging construct to grapple with in a society and culture that has strict codes of conduct about chemically induced changes in the perception of reality. There are age limits for the use of reality altering beverages (alcohol), and drugs whose primary purpose is to alter consciousness (e.g., marijuana, LSD, Ecstasy) are illegal. Yet, such substances are highly sought after by teenagers who are innately compelled to experiment with non-ordinary states of reality on their pathway to adulthood (Weil & Rosen, 1983). No matter how misguided and health compromising their efforts to seek non-ordinary states of reality, teenagers engage in risk taking behavior more than any other age group, (Lewis & Lewis, 1984). This desire points to their need for heightened experience, which for them helps to create meaning in their life.

We can either choose to support youth's innate desire to unveil the mysteries of life through non-ordinary states of reality in health promoting ways, such as, vision quest (Foster 1980), meditation, yoga and relaxation (Rimer, 2007) movement and dance (Michael, 2003), playing in the zone with sports and hobbies (Cooper, 1998; Jackson & Delehanty, 1995) play as promoting transcendence and secular spirituality (Blumenkrantz 2000; Donaldson, 1993) or continue to suffer the consequences.

The way we provide opportunities for youth to engage in meaningful roles and bond to their family, schools and community is critical to a contemporary

rite of passage. When children are given the skills and opportunities for meaningful involvement with their peers, family, school and community, and reinforced for their pro-social involvement, they are more likely to grow up well (Hawkins & Weiss, 1985). An *obligation to service to the larger community* (#17) is one way to help young people find meaning and purpose, while contributing to their sense of identity, as a valued and important member of their expanding world.

One way we integrate service into our work is by training high school students to become guides for the community rite of passage process. High School students can conduct lessons and serve as mentors for children entering the initiatory process in the 6th grade. Through the initiatory process, adolescents are oriented to recognize that service is an essential part of becoming a fully functioning adult in society. Such experiences come to be seen not as *work* -but as a committed act of conscience and belief in service as an expectation for living.

Growing up is a natural process accompanied by changes in the body. This physical change is often accompanied by intentional *alterations of appearance* (#18) to signal this change, e.g., tattoos, piercings and dressing in dramatic ways (Murdock, 1983). In traditional cultures and even western culture changes in body and dress through tattoos, piercing and altering clothing is the enactment of this element in a coming of age process. In a contemporary community-based rite of passage, the change of appearance may not be as dramatic as traditional cultures. External symbols might be as subtle as wearing special cloths or adornments that are awarded during public rites of passage. A high school mentor in a community-based rite of passage may wear a special identification badge or special uniform like if they are crossing guards or engaged in any other special function.

As a distinct stage of life, adolescence is a relatively recent “invention” in Western culture (Kett, 1977). In a sense it is a form of suspended animation since the physical process of coming of age - puberty - lasts about 12 to 18 months, but we essentially ask functional adults, i.e., capable at ages 11-13 of procreation, to “wait” to grow up for another 10 to 15 years. During this ‘waiting period’ society must provide a clear gradient of *opportunities for youth to demonstrate their new competencies and status* (#19) on their way to adulthood. In contemporary rites of passage, youth engage in a process where they can see opportunities for ascending to increased status

through meaningful roles. Chief among these opportunities is to become responsible for the initiation – rite of passage – of younger students. This can begin by conveying the importance of becoming a good student, achieving academically and engaging with healthy ways to play and recreate. High school students can mentor middle school students, helping them increase their commitment to academic achievement and convey the expectation that they will engage in finding healthy positive leisure time activities. Middle school students can then, in turn, support elementary school students to acquire the essential values, ethics and attitudes to inform and guide their development and attachment and bonding to school and the community.

Following different phases of contemporary rites of passage youth must be publicly recognized and affirmed via *celebratory events* (#20) for the advances they make towards coming of age. The events are marked by the initiates telling their story about lessons learned, and how they would use these lessons within their family, school and community to grow up well and become a contributing adult. Certificates of accomplishment, T-shirts, pins and other displays of recognition are provided that align themselves with the cultural context of the community, and provide for an external “change of appearance.”

Summary

The twenty elements or principles *italicized* and described above (albeit much too briefly) identify key characteristics useful for mobilizing a community to consider more promising designs for youth and community development. They provide the conceptual framework for communities to construct rites of passage, yet provide enough latitude to allow communities to creatively imagine what their rite of passage would look like.

The goal of this article has been to advocate the value of rites of passage as a conceptual framework for positive youth and community development. Indeed, we believe that such a framework represents a valuable paradigm shift and supports the adage that “it takes a whole child to raise a village.”

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