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Article abstract

Social circus refers to programs that use circus arts to facilitate social intervention with people experiencing marginalization. Although some programs focus specifically on youth, little is known about how they are impacted by their participation. We examined the experiences of youth participating in a four-day social circus event. Four themes were identified that characterized participants' experiences: (a) creating a safe social space; (b) enriching your self-understanding; (c) bolstering your expressive capacities; and (d) experiencing the world around you. This research highlights how social circus activities can create safe and enriching social spaces that are adapted to the experiences of youth.

"I Feel Seen": Creating Safe Spaces to Foster Self-Understanding and Agential Expression Among Youth Through Social Circus

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Miriam Rosberg is an undergraduate psychology student at McGill University. Her honours research projects have explored musical pleasure for memory performance and the narrative capacities of bilingual children. Experienced in designing and delivering programming for youth with special needs, Miriam sits on the Youth Advisory Council to the McGill-based VOICE initiative.

Sydney Campbell is a PhD candidate in the Institute of Health Policy, Management, and Evaluation at the University of Toronto, simultaneously completing a collaborative specialization in bioethics through the University of Toronto Joint Centre for Bioethics. She is also a research assistant with VOICE. As a whole, Sydney's work aims to advance perspectives on the participation and engagement of young people, rethinking policy action and analysis with a child-inclusive lens, improving children's well-being and the consideration of children's rights, and improving the healthcare that children receive.

Daphné Morin is the coordinator for Cirkaskina, Cirque Hors Piste's national component. Cirkaskina has led her to collaborate with 20 different partner organizations across Canada that use circus for social and personal change with marginalized youth. Trained as a dramatherapist, clown, and theatre performer, she has worked in various settings using performing arts for well-being with children and youth living in precarious situations and/or struggling with trauma.

Karine Lavoie has over 20 years of experience in social circus, serving as a trainer in various countries, a training advisor at Cirque du Soleil, and currently as the executive director of Cirque Hors Piste. She has amassed a strong expertise in social intervention, having worked for over 10 years with individuals experiencing homelessness or living in significant precarity. After travelling to numerous countries around the world, she is now fully dedicated to the development of social circus in Montreal and Canada, firmly believing that circus can be a catalyst for social transformation within communities.

Social circus refers to programs that use circus arts to facilitate social intervention with people experiencing marginalization. Although some programs focus specifically on youth, little is known about how they are impacted by their participation. We examined the experiences of youth participating in a four-day social circus event. Four themes were identified that characterized participants' experiences: (a) creating a safe social space; (b) enriching your self-understanding; (c) bolstering your expressive capacities; and (d) experiencing the world around you. This research highlights how social circus activities can create safe and enriching social spaces that are adapted to the experiences of youth.

Key words: *agency, embodiment, movement, social circus, youth*

Young people[1] are commonly discounted as active morally interested agents (Tobin, 2015). This discounting is rooted in systemic "epistemological oppression" (Carnevale, 2020) perpetuated by dominant age-based developmental conceptions of children and youth that characterize them as "immature" and position them as incapable, "vulnerable," and in need of protection (Tobin, 2015). Young people are viewed as human *becomings* valued for what they can become in the future rather than human *beings* with current morally significant perspectives (Greene & Hogan, 2005; Lee, 2001). Childhood studies research has criticized universalized age-based theories of child development as based on predominantly ethnocentric (i.e., Euro-American culture), sexist (i.e., predominantly male), classist (i.e., middle or upper income) study samples rooted

in dominant Western ideological conceptions of human development (Bluebond-Langner & Korbin, 2007; Gilligan, 1982; Greene & Hogan, 2005). Moreover, these dominant developmental views align maturity with verbal capacities, devaluing the moral significance of nonverbal expressions such as bodily movement (Carnevale, 2020).

Emerging research is demonstrating that young people's experiences are embodied and that bodily expressions are essential ways that children and youth navigate the world and express their agency (Prout, 2000). However, little is known about the ways in which this embodiment contributes to how young people develop a sense of agency and express that agency. Previous research by our team on a "thick conception of children's voices" has indicated that children's expressions often push beyond oral utterances (Carnevale, 2020). Our team has also found that agency (more specifically, *moral* agency) is generally comprised of a three-fold structure (Siedlikowski et al., 2022), specifically:

- (moral) aspirations, which refers to wishes that young people express for themselves and for others, including changes they hope to see

- (moral) concerns, which refers to areas of preoccupation that usually result when aspirations are thwarted or when wishes are at risk of not being met or fulfilled

- capacities, which refers to the diverse range of abilities required to navigate these aspirations and concerns (e.g., the capacity to discern right and wrong and to express this discernment).

Social circus refers to programs in which circus arts (e.g., juggling, clowning, acrobatics, balancing disciplines, and more) are used to facilitate social intervention with diverse populations, promoting the social inclusion of marginalized youth, such as youth experiencing homelessness, those dealing with mental health problems or addictions, differently abled people, Indigenous youth, 2SLGBTQIA+[2] youth, and others facing social and financial insecurity (Rivard & Mercier, 2009; Spiegel, 2016; Spiegel & Parent, 2017).

In practice, social circus organizations use a dual-animator model (i.e., a performer/trainer and a social worker) to work with young people to help them learn various circus-related skills while also engaging within a group to explore significant personal interests and needs (e.g., questions about self-identity, belonging). These programs began in 1995 in Quebec, Canada, through a partnership between Cirque du Soleil and Jeunesse du Monde to launch the social circus initiative called Cirque du Monde, which supports programs across Quebec and internationally (Spiegel & Parent, 2017). Social circus is seen as a way of approaching social topics, particularly by empowering people experiencing marginalization to express themselves and form new connections within the society where they feel excluded (Lafortune & Bouchard, 2011, pp. 13–14). Social circus encourages freedom and creativity while requiring that participants show discipline, perseverance, and tenacity (Lafortune & Bouchard, 2011).

Social circus engages with young people as active moral agents, helping them create relationships and develop capabilities that can help them navigate the various forms of systemic exclusion and "epistemological oppression" described above (Lafortune & Bouchard, 2011). In light of this mandate, our VOICE research program (VOICE: Views On Interdisciplinary Childhood Ethics) formed a partnership with the Montreal-based social circus organization Cirque Hors Piste[3] to examine the following research questions: How do young people experience social circus as moral agents? How does bodily performance relate to agential expression? How can adapted social contexts—created by community organizations like Cirque Hors Piste—bolster young people's self-understanding, relational engagements, and agential growth? This study aimed to explore young people's feelings of belonging linked to self-identity constructions during youth and within social circus programs, along with the interrelatedness of young people and the role of social circus events in facilitating social engagement and openness. Overall, the three-

fold dimensions of moral agency (as aforementioned) were explored to investigate youth's aspirations, concerns, and capacities within their social circus engagements and how social circus programs may inform a youth's sense of moral agency.

In short, this project involved a partnership between (a) a childhood studies research team (i.e., VOICE) focused on advancing the recognition of young people as relationally embedded moral agents (i.e., calling for an ontological and ethical shift that contests oppressive age-based developmental models that construe them as incapable or immature) and (b) a community organization (Cirque Hors Piste) striving to promote social inclusion with marginalized youth (i.e., through social circus programs). We aimed to (a) advance understandings of the impacts of taken-for-granted dominant figurations of childhood and related everyday ethical, political, and ontological "inheritances" that shape young people's worlds (i.e., epistemological oppression perpetuated by age-based developmental constructions of childhood) and (b) describe how social circus can operate as an "actionable orientation" (i.e., a novel approach that can be operationalized into concrete actions). For example, engagement with social circus programs can bolster young people's resistance and (artful) invention within their communities by using innovative (pedagogical) approaches that create safe spaces that engage youth—including those who may be less verbally expressive in movement-oriented forms of expressions (NB: "safe spaces" refers here to a social context that provides a shelter from judgment and a zone of comfort to express one's individuality; Hausfather et al., 2023). We examined how some forms of social justice (e.g., inclusion) can be promoted by the mobilization of community organizations as they act to counter systemic oppression that is borne by young people, particularly youth living within marginalized social contexts.

Cirque Hors Piste organized a major four-day national event in 2022, Cirkaskina Youth Forum, involving close to 100 children and youth from seven different provinces/territories within Canada, including Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people. This event provided a study site to examine the research questions outlined above. *Cirkaskina* means "all together" in the Atikamekw Indigenous language. It is one of six main programs that Cirque Hors Piste offers. The event examined in this study was formally called the Cirkaskina youth forum. The terms Cirkaskina and youth forum will be used interchangeably to refer to this event in this paper.

Cirkaskina's principal goals are to (a) facilitate networking activities for youth and social circus practitioners, researchers, and managers; (b) promote and strengthen the recognition of circus arts as a tool for social transformation; and (c) foster the engagement and empowerment of marginalized youth in their communities (Cirque Hors Piste, 2024). The specific event that was examined in this study involved activities on Thursday evening from 4 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. (e.g., welcome activities), on Friday and Saturday from 8:00 a.m. to 10 p.m., and on Sunday from 8:00 a.m. to noon, in addition to group transit activities to and from the event site. The event included some shared activities (e.g., meals, main show) as well as breakout smaller-group activities. The latter included workshops (e.g., Inuit games, aerials, sassy dance, flexibility and Pilates, clowning), nature activities (e.g., nature walks, soccer/volleyball), jamming/unstructured activities (e.g., hoop, aerials, juggling, social games, campfire music, makeup), and Cirque Hors Piste animation activities (e.g., artmaking, relaxation, photobooth, outdoor fire pit).

Methodology

A participatory hermeneutic ethnography (PHE) methodology was used for this study (Montreuil & Carnevale, 2018). This methodology integrates participatory, hermeneutic, and ethnographic research approaches in childhood ethics to advance understanding of specific aspects of young people's experiences within a particular social context (Montreuil & Carnevale, 2018)—in this case, understanding young people's agential experiences, including the

embodied dimensions of these experiences, in the context of a social circus program. This methodology promotes rich understandings of the norms, structures, and practices that pertain to a particular group and to a particular set of experiences, focusing on "social and local imaginaries," or ways people imagine their existence in a social context in general or within a specific social space being studied (Montreuil & Carnevale, 2018). The participatory aspect of this methodology requires engagement with young people to make space for their voices to be heard and shared, respectfully taking up their views, insights, and opinions (Montreuil & Carnevale, 2018). In this project, this was promoted through the overall focus of the study centered on young people's experiences and voices, as well as consulting with youth advisors drawn from the Cirque Hors Piste youth groups. The latter assisted with data analysis and interpretation. This project was approved by the research ethics board at McGill University in Montreal, Canada.

Data were generated through interviews (formal and informal), participant observation, and analysis of key documents (e.g., Cirque Hors Piste documents that describe program aims), aligning with the PHE methodology used (Montreuil & Carnevale, 2018). A member of the VOICE Youth Advisory Council (Miriam Rosberg) was recruited as a research assistant (RA) to conduct all data collection, with guidance from senior members of the research team (Franco A. Carnevale, Sydney Campbell) and members of the Cirque Hors Piste team (Karine Lavoie, Daphné Morin).

Five primary participants (14–17 years of age) were recruited among youth who attended Cirkaskina, as well as four key informants (including three youth engaged in previous social circus programs, aged 18–26, and one Cirque Hors Piste staff member). All Cirkaskina youth attendees received a recruitment advertisement by email, forwarded from the research team by their partner organization staff member. Youth attendees who were interested in participating as primary participants identified themselves to the RA on arrival at the youth forum. Key informants were recruited from among the Cirkaskina youth advisory committee and young adults who had previously attended social circus initiatives.

Formal semistructured *interviews* were conducted with primary participants and key informants. Primary participants were interviewed to explore their previous and current agential engagements with social circus programs (i.e., what aspirations bring them to social circus programs, how they have found these programs beneficial, what other things in their lives have they tried which have not fulfilled these aspirations, etc.) and to examine exchanges observed during the Cirkaskina event. Moreover, informal interviews were conducted by the RA with primary participants and key informants during participant observation to gain a deeper understanding of participant perspectives and experiences.

Interviews with key informants—which occurred during and after the event—sought to gain advisory input on contextual and background information on social circus programs, as well as provisional comments on preliminary data analyses. In some cases, informants also contributed to data generation. They helped contextualize data and in some cases contributed to the data themselves.

Formal interviews were oriented by an interview guide with open-ended questions (see Appendix). These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the RA. Moreover, the RA prepared detailed field notes regarding the interviews to document nonverbal expressions. Informal interviews conducted during participant observation were not audio-recorded. These were documented solely within detailed field notes. Interviews with participants and key informants lasted between 20 and 60 minutes. For all interviews, primary participants and key informants provided signed consent to participate in the study. (One key informant provided verbal consent because they could speak English but were not able to read the form adequately in English/French or e-sign using a device.)

Participant observation (PO) was conducted by the RA with the primary participants during the four-day Cirkaskina event. The aim of PO is to record—within field notes—aspects of interactions and communications between and among group participants that can reveal dimensions of their experiences that are not as readily accessible through an interview. An observational guide was developed to orient PO (see Appendix), focusing on participant and environment characteristics, activities, and interactions (e.g., during transportation on buses, arrival at event, greetings, participation in activities, departure), activity organization, and less tangible factors (e.g., nonverbal messages, informal interviews/chit-chat between RA and research participants). Study participants were made aware of the observational component of the study during the consent process. They could consent or decline to being observed for research purposes by signing a specified question on the consent form. Participants could ask the RA to stop observing them at any time (e.g., a cue was developed between the participants and the RA to indicate when observations should be paused).

Relevant documentation was analyzed to enable a deeper understanding of the Cirkaskina program specifically and social circus programs in general. Documents provided additional information on how programs were conceptualized, program background and structure, materials used for learning/training purposes, planned activities and timelines, and reports regarding the Cirkaskina event. Interviews with key informants helped determine which documents should be reviewed.

Data analysis

Within the PHE methodology, a hermeneutic approach is used for data analysis wherein "hermeneutical interpretation seeks clarity by identifying the object in which clarity is sought, distinguishing this underlying clarity from its presenting expression and specifying the subject for whom the underlying clarity is meaningful" (Hunt & Carnevale, 2011, p. 659). Practically, the analysis process involved (a) generation of critical reflections and detailed interpretive comments throughout the data collection period (in the form of footnotes) and analysis process (in the form of analytical notes); (b) coding of all interview transcriptions, field notes and key documents to highlight all data specifically relevant for the study's research questions; similar codes were categorized to create themes, which were in turn grouped to form thematic categories; (c) creation of narrative syntheses for each primary participant based on all data generated with or relevant for that participant, highlighting which themes were identified with that participant (these were also informed by contextual information derived from key informant interviews and analysis of key documents); and (d) development of a master narrative, integrating all participant narrative syntheses, striving to identify shared and unique features of participants' experiences. This master narrative is presented in the Results section. For a detailed description of the data analysis methods used, see Macdonald et al. (2023).

Results

Our analysis identified four thematic categories that characterized participants' experiences: (a) creating a safe social space; (b) enriching your self-understanding; (c) bolstering your expressive capacities; and (d) experiencing the world around you. Each thematic category consisted of several subthemes, which are described in Table 1. Verbatim data exemplars are provided to illustrate each theme/subtheme.

As described above, a narrative synthesis was generated to describe the experience of each individual participant, integrating all data relating to that youth. These narrative syntheses were further integrated to generate the following "master narrative" to describe the ways that identified themes were shared—or not—among participating youth. Themes are highlighted in italics within the master narrative.

Master narrative of youth social circus experiences

(Note: Subthemes are highlighted in *italics*; "participants" is used to simplify "primary participants"; "informants" is used for "key informants.")

Participant interviews revealed that many attendees shared common takeaways from the Cirkaskina youth forum and from their wider social circus experience. Among identified themes, one was commented on by every participant: *connecting with others*. Every participant noted that social circus facilitates social interactions and allows them to form deeper relationships than they have elsewhere. Participants and informants asserted that this is due to multiple factors, including bringing together people who (a) share an interest in circus and (b) have faced significant challenges (e.g., homelessness, loss of family, poverty, physical and/or mental illnesses, bullying). A sense of shared understanding among social circus participants was fostered by *feeling safe and comfortable*, as the social circus activities create a welcoming and safe environment for expression and exploration.

Connecting with others also involved a desire to meet new people and feel connected. All study participants agreed that their circus connections are like family, and in some cases, the only family they have. Social circus provides opportunities for participants to find meaningful relationships and build a support network that might not be available to them elsewhere. In several cases, participants shared that they have been inspired by certain people they have connected with within social circus activities.

Connecting with others also entails travelling and learning. Social circus programs aim to create learning experiences by connecting communities. Many participants were initially drawn into these programs by this opportunity to learn about new places, things, and people. These experiences are important for enriching their own self-understanding.

Another major commonality was the experience of *building confidence*. All but one participant referenced confidence as a benefit of their social circus engagement. Participants noted that this increased confidence was transferable to other aspects of their lives.

Some participants benefitted from social circus by *developing skills*, which was corroborated by three informants as well. Confidence was described as important for communicating one's needs, aspirations, and identity. Participants felt able to communicate more easily, within and outside of circus contexts. In some cases, skills referred to technical aspects of circus performance. In any case, these skills that are being developed through social circus engagement helped participants feel a sense of accomplishment and feel better able to succeed in other aspects of their lives.

Most participants also described the importance of *valuing participation and individuality*. Social circus values individuals' unique talents and efforts. This helps create a welcoming ambiance within social circus activities. By recognizing the things that make each participant special, all can have fulfilling experiences and feel comfortable to express themselves (i.e., to better reveal their agential aspirations and concerns as well as their personal identities). An informant added that valuing individuality helps attract a diverse range of participants.

Feeling good about yourself was highlighted by participants and informants as an important impact of social circus. Participants described feeling good about helping others and succeeding with their art. Participants are given lots of encouragement, coaching, and time to develop their acts. They are also offered mentorship roles and opportunities to reach out to others through instructional and outreach programming. One participant explained that the feeling he gets from helping his circus friends and students leaves him feeling proud and inspired, letting him approach new tasks with a better mindset. By helping participants have meaningful experiences, social circus helps improve how they feel about themselves, which participants think enhances their successes in other endeavours.

Some themes were less widely shared (highlighted among two of the participants) yet no less important. These included *feeling safe and comfortable*, *learning about yourself*, *learning about the world*, and *framing your viewpoint*.

Feeling safe and comfortable relates to feeling welcomed and understood within the social circus setting. However, some participants did not feel comfortable at the youth forum. They tended to stay in their dorm room, hide from view when outside, and limit their gestures and conversation. This result highlights how each youth comes to social circus with their own relative sense of dis/comfort within social situations. Participants expressed, however, that efforts to create a safe space by bringing together a group of young people with similar struggles helped them express themselves and step out of their comfort zones.

Learning about yourself related to *feeling safe and comfortable*, as participants could examine their self-understandings when they felt at ease. Participants shared how social circus provided opportunities for exploration to learn about their physical abilities and limits, as well as how they can use their bodies for personal expression and other storytelling.

Learning about the world involves the importance of opportunities to travel and have novel experiences. Participants described how they have been significantly changed (i.e., been inspired to do or to learn more or have had their mindset changed) by visiting new communities and meeting with new people. Informants described how social circus values of connecting communities and creating space for the sharing of knowledge and skills can help participants develop their aspirations and often promoted a changed sense of self.

Along the same lines, two participants highlighted the theme of *framing your viewpoint*. The experiences they had within social circus programs have changed the way they think about everyday things, how they approach new tasks, and how they think of themselves.

Some themes were notably unique, as each was identified within one sole participant's responses. This uniqueness does not diminish the importance of these themes, as they are meaningful for the youth who revealed them and they may reflect the experiences of other youth who did not participate in the study. These included *feeling understood*, *using movement for communication*, *feeling connected to nature*, and *feeling inspired*.

Feeling understood seemed related to *feeling safe and comfortable*, particularly through the supportive ambiance described by participants at social circus events. Bringing together people who share specific struggles or who feel they do not belong can help create a sense of shared understanding and comfort. Participants and informants described how attendees at the youth forum were so welcoming and made efforts to validate everyone's identities. This was especially meaningful for participants who feel that they are not heard or validated in other settings.

Using movement for communication was described explicitly by only one participant but was widely evident within observational data from the youth forum. Attendees primarily spoke one of three languages (i.e., English, French, Inuktitut), and many were not multilingual. Therefore, youth either experienced language barriers throughout the youth forum or found a way to adapt to the linguistic diversity. Movement was an effective medium of communication for several participants who could not communicate verbally. They were able to express themselves through dance and improv workshops and take or offer feedback during skill workshops by demonstrating and copying movements. Participants agreed that the movement-based workshops lessened the language barrier. They also expressed that they occasionally find it easier to express themselves through movement rather than verbally, referring to the expression of serious emotions or more private aspects of themselves.

Feeling connected to nature was described as especially important by one participant. She described how her experience at the youth forum was improved by the fact that she was able to be outdoors and away from the city.

During a post-event youth committee, attendees confirmed that this was the case for many of them, feeling the power of nature and having a chance to disconnect (figuratively and literally) from their day-to-day life. Appreciation of a connection with nature was also evident in observational data within several group performances at the youth forum.

One participant described *feeling inspired*, referencing a connection they made with a mentor from their circus group and how it had changed their life. They felt inspired to move out of their town, continue with circus engagement, and follow in that mentor's footsteps. Within observational data, other attendees at the youth forum also mentioned having meaningful connections and experiences that inspired them.

Some themes were identified solely through participant observation data (i.e., they were not evident within interview data). These included *creating space for exploration*, *supporting and listening to youth*, and *experiencing barriers*.

Creating space for exploration describes a major element of social circus programs: jamming. By creating safe spaces for exploration and expression, social circus programs encourage exploration of movement and of oneself. Jamming is an opportunity for participants to share, learn, and connect with others. (A more detailed description of jamming is presented at the end of this section.) These settings for exploration can allow participants to feel less nervous while forming connections, defining their identity, learning about their bodies, and developing ideas of what is meaningful to them.

Supporting and listening to youth relates to how social circus values listening to the experiences of participants to recognize their agency in their engagement and help ensure any adaptations that they may need. Many youth forum attendees expressed not feeling accepted or supported in other parts of their life. Informants confirmed that social circus works to make its programs accessible, facilitating opportunities for meaningful engagement. For example, accessibility can be established in some cases by offering grants, and opportunities are created for youth to provide feedback to help youth attendees feel in better control of their circus experience.

Experiencing barriers was evident among some youth participants at the youth forum, particularly with regard to language and age. As described above, some communication barriers were lessened when employing movement during the circus workshops. These barriers may have inhibited some participants from immersing themselves fully in the youth forum experience and from reaching out to make new connections.

Realizing the pillars of social circus was described by an informant. These pillars were developed by Cirque du Monde (i.e., Cirque du Soleil's outreach program). They inform the values embedded within programming, which are adapted in various ways depending on the particular contexts where they are applied.

Jamming is a crucial feature of social circus activities. The following description is drawn from the Cirque Hors Piste website. Jamming involves creating a social space of gathering, inspiration, and social transformation where everyone can feel supported and listened to by a caring community, a safe space where everyone can dare in their own way. This fosters a mentoring environment between social circus youth who wish to develop their circus skills and professional circus artists. This space allows young people to learn circus techniques, create meaningful connections with people who inspire them, and develop artistic skills in addition to offering a space for supervision in the development of circus acts. Within this social space, you can practice circus activities within informal exchanges, games, or collective practices (e.g., juggling passes, patterns for handling instruments with several people, hand-to-hand, acro-yoga, balancing, solo acrobatics with parades) where all participants can teach and be taught in an egalitarian dynamic of playful mutual help.

Table 1: Identified Themes (in bold) and Subthemes (underlined)

Description	Data exemplars
Thematic category: Creating a safe social space	
<u>Connecting with others</u>: Overall, participants have found it easier to make friends in social circus contexts. Social circus brings together individuals with shared interests and struggles, facilitating connections. Many participants also express desires to connect with, teach to, and learn from new people. Social circus enables these interactions by providing opportunities for travel to new communities. Participants find that the connections they have made become like family to them, providing support and inspiration.	(From field notes, conversation with staff informant) *Social circus became their support system: "I can honestly say it saved my life."* *For them, and for others, social circus is an opportunity to connect with others who share similar feelings and experiences.*
<u>Feeling safe and comfortable</u>: The Cirkaskina youth forum was effective in the aim of creating a safe space where participants felt comfortable to express their true selves and step out of their comfort zones. Participants are understanding of each other's struggles and actively look to validate others' feelings. This support leads them to feel safe expressing themselves without fear of judgment.	(From youth informant) *"People feel really seen and really valued and feel like their identities are valid and, like, the things they're going through … they're not alone in that. And I think that circus kind of is the sort of opportunity to open yourself up to people that are like you."* (From participant interview; translated from French) *"You can let yourself go, because people won't judge you."*
<u>Valuing participation and individuality</u>: Social circus places greater emphasis on individual efforts and talents rather than competition or comparing participants to a standard. This helps to diminish barriers such as age differences. It also encourages participants to be themselves and try new things. Valuing individuality also leads to diversity in circus settings, attracting a variety of individuals.	(From participant interview) RA: *"Do you think that being good at tricks or being strong is important at circus?"* *"It's very different. If everyone was strong, it would be abnormal. So, for that, it needs a whole different set of abilities or strengths."* (From youth informant) *"I think that the jam spaces and the emphasis on, like, I'll share my skills with you and you'll share your skills with me and all that stuff kind of breaks down that competitive barrier."*

<u>Creating space for exploration</u>: Social circus programs are dedicated to creating welcoming and safe spaces for exploration and expression. This exploration can be of movement, or of oneself. Jamming is a valued element of circus contexts where participants can share, learn, and connect with others. These opportunities for play can allow participants to feel less nervous while forming connections, defining their identity, learning about their bodies, and developing ideas of what is meaningful to them.	(From youth informant) RA: *"Why do you think circus is good for kids; does it help them?"* *"Yes; to find their spark, [their] true personality."* (From staff informant) *"What it kind of opens up for some people, or the people I've seen, are opportunities to discover yourself as somebody who's participating, who's participating in your community in a meaningful way, and that gives a lot of meaning, I think, in general, to people."*
<u>Feeling understood</u>: Social circus programs provide a setting where participants can feel understood and validated. Participants feel they are not always heard in other settings but that social circus programs create communities of similar people who understand each other.	(From field notes) *An attendee shares that there is a friendliness between all participants at Cirkaskina; there is a fear of judgment in not fitting the rules of society, but circus allows them to redefine the rules so they can live in peace.*
<u>Supporting and listening to youth</u>: Social circus values listening to the experiences of participants to afford them agency in their engagement and adapt to their needs. These youth participants may not feel accepted or supported in other parts of their life, but social circus works to make their programs accessible and create opportunities for meaningful engagement.	(From staff informant) *"The need that I've seen from the participants that I've come into contact with is to have a space that's accepting, that's inclusive, where their contributions are valued and they're accepted, whatever they're coming in with. So, a lot of the time that can just mean a space that is alive with them, and can shift in its content, the way it's facilitated, in the common goals."*
<u>Realizing the pillars of social circus</u>: Social circus programs have structural aspects that aim to fulfill their values. Their pillars guide the programming that is offered and organization of that programming.	(From staff informant) *"We try to offer every year a social circus training, and it's kind of a way to keep those values alive and to just think, as a group of different people who run social circus programs, what does it look like to implement these pillars? There's always something new we're learning about how to implement those values in programming."*

Experiencing barriers: Several youth participants at the Cirkaskina youth forum experienced barriers, particularly with language and age. Because circus arts are movement based, some of the communication barriers were lessened during the circus workshops.	(From field notes) *Due to a language barrier, she experienced difficulty in activities that required verbal communication. One youth, whose first language was neither English nor French, appeared more at ease during movement-based activities where she could feed off of others' actions, such as the improv games.*
Thematic category: Enriching your self-understanding	
Learning about yourself: Experience in circus contexts has allowed participants to learn about what their bodies can do and how they can express things with them.	(From staff informant) *"It's an opportunity to explore myself or explore my comfort zone. Where is outside my comfort zone? And what does it mean to me, or what does it feel like in my body to do this kind of circus exercise, to perform a show? I think there's more of a space that's about care and self-exploration than about making something or learning a skill."*
Building confidence: Participants find themselves having increased confidence as a result of their social circus engagement. They are now able to overcome certain emotions that have inhibited them in the past and be open to new experiences. This confidence can be applied both in and out of circus contexts, and often leads participants to develop feelings of accomplishment.	(From participant interview) *"Being in circus, it built up my confidence being around people and doing the things I love."* (From staff informant) *"I think that's really something that impacts them on a longer term, having the memory of being so loved and so accepted in that moment."*
Feeling good about yourself: Engagement in social circus programs provides participants with opportunities to feel good about themselves, such as teaching or helping others. In the case of teaching others, social circus programs offer formal mentorship roles to these individuals once they have graduated from being participants. The feelings of success and worth that participants experience when they feel good at circus can carry over into other aspects of their life.	(From participant interview) *"The time I felt good about myself is when I was able to teach people Inuit games."*

Framing your viewpoint: Experience with physical and/or artistic expression can affect the way participants view the world and approach tasks.	(From participant interview; translated from French) RA: *"Does bodily or artistic expression have an impact on the way you see the world?"* *"I would say a little everywhere, because basically everything around us is a kind of art; it depends on how you see it."*
Feeling inspired: Engagement in social circus programs provides participants with meaningful experiences that leave them feeling inspired. Participants find inspiration through close relationships, travels, watching older participants, seeing others form connections, and performance contexts (to name a few).	(From participant interview) RA: *"Do the relationships you've made in circus affect you and how you think about yourself?"* *"Oh yeah. Once I started getting to know people I've met in circus, it kind of made me believe that I could do so much more in my life than now."*
Thematic category: Bolstering your expressive capacities	
Developing skills: Participants find that their social circus engagement has helped them to develop a variety of skills. These skills often include confidence and communication, both of which can contribute to ease of self-expression. Participants also find that the skills they develop in circus contexts can carry over to other settings.	(From participant interview) *"I did notice myself that I've been able to communicate much better work-wise, circus-wise, and even off work."*
Using movement for communication: Movement can be a tool to overcome barriers in communication and expression. Participants in circus art programs prefer to physically demonstrate and copy when learning new things. Movement is also important to the storytelling aspects of participants' identities and circus performances.	(From youth informant) *"I think it's hard sometimes to share your experiences, especially if you feel you're not being heard or listened to. And I think that's what's so amazing about performing, is that it's another way to share your experiences."*
Thematic category: Experiencing the world around you	
Learning about the world: Social circus programs offer opportunities for travelling and learning about new places and cultures. A value of social circus gatherings is learning, including learning about other communities, new circus skills, or other life skills. These experiences can foster new aspirations within participants, develop inspiration, and leave them with a changed sense of self.	(From participant interview) RA: *"Do you think that circus impacts how you make choices?"* *"Yes, it does. Because we get to experience different places, different cultures, and different activities."*

Feeling connected to nature: Participants with strong personal connections to nature found it to be a prominent part of their experience at the youth forum.	(From participant interview) *"Just being at that camp, like not being in the city and being surrounded by trees and nature, that really calmed me down mostly. You could hear the wind going and hear the leaves, birds, and just the place there was amazing."* (From field notes) *The feelings of connection to nature were also brought up in a post-youth forum committee. They shared that unplugging from the Internet and their lives at home allowed them to fully embrace everything they were encountering with an open mind and to relax.*

Discussion

This ethnographic study of a social circus event (i.e., Cirkaskina) has generated results that advance our understanding of young people's agency and how community organizations can create safe social spaces that can enrich their experiences and create needed opportunities for agential expression while building relationships within an inclusive community. This investigation identified four broad themes that describe how the event affected these young people's experiences: (a) creating a safe social space; (b) enriching your self-understanding; (c) bolstering your expressive capacities; and (d) experiencing the world around you.

Building on our previous work that demonstrated (a) the three-fold structure of young people's agency (i.e., morally meaningful aspirations, concerns, and capacities; Siedlikowski et al., 2022) and (b) how their agency is socially embedded (i.e., social contexts can bolster or impede agential expression; Carnevale, 2020; Carnevale et al., 2021; Esser et al., 2016; Hausfather et al., 2023; Siedlikowski et al., 2022), this study has demonstrated specific ways that social circus programs can be beneficial in supporting young peoples' development of their self-understanding as moral agents. We discussed these results in further detail in the sections that follow.

Many youth feel excluded within their daily lives, where dominant practices in the social institutions they try to navigate (e.g., school, work, family, community organizations) impede their meaningful participation in common activities (Hausfather et al., 2023; Makansi & Carnevale, 2020). In turn, this limits the types of opportunities that are open to them that can help them better understand their own hopes and worries and learn skills and capabilities that can help them flourish (e.g., building confidence, learning how to connect with others). Practices in these social institutions are commonly rooted in conceptions of young people as immature, incapable, and/or misbehaving—based in outdated views on child development—which they can experience as oppressive and harmful (Carnevale et al., 2021). In contrast, social circus activities like the event examined in this study promote young people's inclusion and participation by acknowledging youth as unique agents—whose voices and experiences are morally meaningful—who require youth-centered social spaces where they can *be* in the ways that they each feel most "themselves" (i.e., by creating safe social spaces where they can jam). Social circus activities can bolster young people's agential capacities, which can be especially helpful for youth who may experience particularly pronounced forms of exclusion, including those who are living with "homelessness," substance dependance, disability, and/or

mental illness, as well as youth within socially disadvantaged social contexts (e.g., some Indigenous youth, youth living in poverty). Participation in social circus can help young people develop the political dimensions of their agency by learning how to better express their interests as well as those of other young people. For example, some youth participate as leaders or advisors within their local community organizations while some participated in this study, demonstrating their capacity to confront the social challenges they encounter and advocate for social justice through the recognition of their interests and those of their peers.

Some young people appreciated the embodied focus of social circus activities, experienced by youth as innovative pedagogical approaches, which enabled them to learn new ways to express themselves and feel connections and belongingness with other people while also better appreciating the social and material world around them. Although "bodily" engagements seem particularly beneficial for some young people who feel limited by their verbal capacities, these physical activities were appreciated by other youth as well. This reveals some of the ways that these young people embodied their agency. They are sentient beings whose experiences and expressions are rooted in corporal sensations and movement. The embodied dimensions of human agency are commonly underrecognized or suppressed, which has been related to the dominant Cartesian dissociation of mind and body within Western outlooks (Carnevale, 2020; Carnevale, 2021; Carnevale et al., 2021; Esser et al., 2016; Taylor, 1985). Dominant disembodied outlooks value verbal and "rationalistic" social exchanges, where social actors who communicate differently or who are more comfortable with nonverbal communication modes—and who may be drawn to more "bodily" modes of engaging with their world (e.g., young people)—are systemically disadvantaged and socially excluded. Social circus activities provide opportunities that can help redress this systemic exclusion.

The study results also highlight the value of play in agential life. A recent study by our VOICE team within another community organization highlighted the vital importance of playfulness in creating safe social spaces where young people could develop rich self-understandings and relational capacities (Hausfather et al., 2023). This result challenged widespread views of play as frivolous or an "immature" occupation (e.g., "child's play"). Aligning with these prior results, this study of a social circus event has demonstrated that playfulness—"clowning around"—is a necessary agential activity for young people. Indeed, the importance of play toward ensuring a flourishing and meaningful life is likely relevant for "grown-ups" as well, although this point is beyond the scope of this discussion.

In short, this study has shown how social circus can exert social and political influence within communities to help redress systemic oppression that is borne by young people, which is perpetuated by dominant (epistemologically oppressive) conceptions of young people. Social circus operates as an actionable orientation that mobilizes innovative (pedagogical) approaches rooted in the (ontological) recognition of young people as active agents, where youth feel seen. Social circus creates opportunities to develop safe, inclusive, and meaningful relationships as well as movement-oriented forms of agential expression. Specifically, Cirkaskina social circus activities (a) promoted young people's inclusion and participation by recognizing their agency and voices as morally meaningful; (b) created a social space where youth can "be themselves"; (c) helped young people develop the political dimensions of their agency (e.g., learning how to better express their interests and those of other youth); (d) acknowledged young people's embodied agency (which helped them to learn new ways to express themselves and feel connections); and (e) demonstrated that playfulness is a necessary agential activity for young people.

Despite the significant contributions to knowledge generated by this investigation, the study also had limitations. A chief limitation was that the study focus was limited to a relatively short four-day event. Although the immersive participant observations and follow-up interviews helped ensure data depth and richness, we were unable to examine the longer-term impacts for young people participating in social circus activities. We believe that this study has laid out important groundwork for larger-scale ethnographic research on social circus in the future.

Concluding remarks

This ethnographic study has demonstrated the vital importance of social circus activities for creating socially inclusive spaces where young people can feel seen and recognized as active agents and can mobilize embodied dimensions of their agency, which can help them flourish within their daily lives and participate more safely and meaningfully within their communities. While these results can inform the ongoing growth of social circus programs, they can also help orient the future development of youth-oriented programs and research more broadly.

1   The terms *children*, *youth*, and *young people* are used here interchangeably. Along with *childhood* they refer to persons below the age of majority, in congruence with terms used in the field of childhood studies and with the definition of children in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989).

2   2SLGBTQIA+ refers to two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, and asexual and/or aromantic. "+" represents a diversity of ways people from equity-deserving groups choose to identify their gender identity and/or sexual orientation.

3   *Cirque hors piste* translates loosely to "circus outside the ring."

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Appendix: Data Collection Guides

Notes

1) Guides not included in Appendix: (a) *Pre-Event Interview Guide (with Youth)*; (b) *Key Informant (Young Adult) Interview Guide*; (c) *Key Informant (Staff) Interview Guide.*

2) These guides were provisional and were continually adapted throughout data collection, in consultation with the project team, based on their effectiveness in generating data related to youth's experiences, their sense of agency, and the ways in which social circus activities affect their sense of agency.

Participant Observation Guide (data recorded in written field notes)

1. The physical setting

- Description of the room/space

- Sitting/standing arrangements during activity time

- Description of COVID-19 restrictions that may be in place in the space

2. The attendees

- Number of participants in setting

- Characteristics of attendees in setting (in general, what are the approximate age, gender, etc.)

- Relatedness (friends, from same social circus organization/geographic location, etc.)

3. Activities and interactions

- Drawing on the three-fold conception of agency used for this study, what can be seen about participants' morally meaningful aspirations and concerns as well as the capacities they mobilize to fulfill their aspirations and address their concerns

- What participants are doing and saying

- How they are expressing themselves through bodily movement

- How participants are interacting with one another

- Frequency and nature of interactions between participants

- Emotions shown during interactions between participants

4. Precipitating factors

- Motivation behind the event

- Elements that contribute to how the event or interaction unfolds (e.g., pandemic influence)

- How participants arrived at event

- Participants' familiarity with setting (i.e., how long have they been attending social circus organization(s), have they previously attended a *Cirkaskina* event, etc.)

5. Organization

- Organization of the event

- Structure of relationships

- Norms or rules in operation (e.g. "safety rules," tacit vs explicit rules)

6. Intangible factors

- Nonverbal messages between participants and attendees

- Events and interactions that are disruptive to the activity or situation (i.e., things that were not planned and happened)

- Things that were planned but did not happen

7. Guiding questions for initiating informal interviews with participants

- What do think (how do you feel) about this activity?

- What do you like/dislike about it?

- Follow-up probes

Post-Event Interview Guide (with Youth)

Icebreaker: How have you been feeling since Cirkaskina? What was your favourite part of today?

Introduction: So, [first name of participant], as you know, this interview is a follow-up to the observations that took place at Cirkaskina. Thank you again for letting me collect important data for our study during that period.

1. How did you find the Cirkaskina event?

    a. Probe: What was your favourite activity? What were some memorable moments?

2. If you could change anything about the event, what would that be?

3. Based on the data collected, I would love to learn more about [outline key moments or phenomenon that

you wish to inquire more about, and consecutively ask the participant about these]:

    a.   Example: what did you mean by X? In what ways did X shape your experiences? etc.

4. Was there anything that happened at the event that you'd like to tell me more about? If so, please feel free to share.