



Richard McGrail

Lecturer, Civic, Liberal, and Global Education

Bio

BIO

I earned my PhD in Anthropology here at Stanford in December, 2024. My dissertation described what daily life was like at two therapeutic group homes for children California's foster care system. Group homes (which are now called "Short Term Residential Therapeutic Placements, or STRTPs) can be very stressful places in which to live and work. The kids don't always get along with each other and may not always be kind or respectful towards themselves and others. Meanwhile, staff members spend a lot of time trying to enforce house rules. But the kids don't always like following the rules, and they definitely don't like receiving consequences when they break the rules. Staff members, in turn, don't like giving the kids consequences; they don't like being "strict," and they even harbor misgivings about adding additional stress-fuel to the fire.

During my research, I noticed that many adults who work in child welfare, such as social workers, therapists, et al., were quick to emphasize the role that the kids' traumatic pasts play in the kids' present-tense behaviors—especially their aggressive behaviors. I also noticed that none spoke of the role that "culture," as it were, might also play in said behaviors. Finally, I noticed that all manner of—for lack of a better phrase—"cultural values" often seemed the catalyst for aggression. The kids (and even some staff) expressed the most prominent of those values as "Don't be a little bitch!"

Those observations have made me question whether or not popular ideas about (past-tense) trauma's purportedly causal role in engendering (present-tense) aggression are, perhaps, shortsighted. I have no basis to claim that those ideas are wrong—just that they are incomplete. One such idea—which has become popular among all manner of service providers—is known as "Trauma Informed Care." I worry that the ongoing perpetuation of Trauma Informed Care may have adverse implications for our collective ability to understand, and to change, many of society's behavioral-health problems.

ACADEMIC APPOINTMENTS

- Lecturer, Civic, Liberal, and Global Education

PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

- B.A., The University of Texas at Austin , Anthropology (2005)
- M.A., Columbia University , Anthropology (2010)
- Certificate, University of Alaska Southeast , Outdoor Skills and Leadership (2020)
- Wilderness First Responder, National Outdoor Leadership School , Outdoor Education and Leadership (2017)

SERVICE, VOLUNTEER, AND COMMUNITY WORK

- Court Appointed Special Advocate (8/30/2012 - 5/1/2016)

Research & Scholarship

CURRENT RESEARCH AND SCHOLARLY INTERESTS

Ethnographic research describes the daily lives of children in California's foster care system who live in therapeutic residential group homes. Research questions how relationships of trust and attachment are formed between children and their adult caregivers, as well as among the children themselves.

Teaching

COURSES

2025-26

- Citizenship in the 21st Century: COLLEGE 102 (Win)
- Just Biotech: Who Benefits and Who Is Left Behind in Global Biotechnologies: COLLEGE 117 (Spr)
- Why College? Your Education and the Good Life: COLLEGE 101 (Aut)

2024-25

- Citizenship in the 21st Century: COLLEGE 102 (Win)
- Justice in Biotechnologies: Who Benefits and Who Is Left Behind: COLLEGE 117 (Spr)