Chapter 3

Youth work as a profession

Summary

The last chapter discussed the idea of a profession, arguing that the professions are constituted by their commitment to serve a vulnerable client group, and that a profession fundamentally describes a kind of relationship, rather than a status. I argued that on this understanding, youth work was, and couldn't not be, a profession. The point of this chapter is to try to sketch out what that means. We will need to work out a clear understanding of the young person as a client, and the nature of the commitment of service which we undertake. From this, we can start to define what youth work is as a professional practice.

Defining youth work

Defining youth work isn't easy. Ideally, a definition establishes what all youth workers have in common, and what marks them off from other professionals. Lots of things that we do, other people (like social workers or psychologists or teachers) do as well. And there are things that some youth workers do, but other youth workers don't (like organise camping trips). A definition needs to find those elements that are true of all youth workers and not true of anyone else, that include practice that is clearly youth work and exclude practice that isn't. And, ideally, a definition should be short and easily remembered.

The trouble is that the contexts in which we work are incredibly varied, including (among others) drugs counselling, outdoors/adventure programmes, theatre, faith based work, residential work with homeless young people, working on the street and work in schools. The problems that we engage with are just as varied, including crime, illiteracy, unemployment, refugee resettlement, school disengagement, homelessness and boredom. Our work might be specific to young people in their early teens, or their mid twenties; specific cultural groups; only young women or only young men; or young people with disabilities. Some youth workers are paid, some unpaid volunteers.

The attempt to define youth work has a long and diverse history. Generally, the definitions try to catch what it is that youth workers do, who they do it with, how they do it, and why. There isn't space here to document all of these contributions, valuable though they are. Rather, I'm going to try to set out the inner logic of youth work, and see if that helps.

Defining youth as a client group

Who youth workers do it with might be the easiest place to start. Or so one would think. We work with young people. But what is a young person? Serious question.

It just isn't good enough to take our client group naturalistically, "just as young people". The historical and sociological literature describes in great detail how the modern concept of youth has emerged historically and socially (see Springhall 1984; Sercombe 1996; Bessant, Sercombe et al. 1998; Epstein 2007). Some societies don't seem to feel

the need to define anybody as "youth" or "adolescent" (Seig 1976; Epstein 2007), and even in societies which have always had a "youth" category, it has not always meant the same thing as it does now (Gillis 1974; Kett 1977; Dyhouse 1981; Springhall 1986). The age range embracing young people has changed, the traits attributed to young people have changed, the nature of their position and function within society has changed.

Even in the current environment, different professional groups have strikingly different conceptions of what "youth" is about, and different languages and theories with which to describe them (Sercombe 1996). It isn't a natural category, given to us by biology or the natural world. In the contemporary world, different notions of youth compete, and different professions compete for their notion of youth to be regarded as the authoritative one. Ours is one of those professions.

The term that youth workers use of their clients is "young people". Again, this is not a natural term. Not everyone uses it. Police, for example, almost never do, and psychologists and medical practitioners tend not to either (Sercombe 1996). It is a term that has a specific politics, that makes claims, refutes alternatives, and stakes out territory. It isn't innocent. It is engaged, operational. For example, it is an active rejection of the language of the "adolescent" and of "youths". In order to understand our practice, we need to understand the broader context for the emergence of the youth category, how the category is constructed socially, and how our conception of youth as "young people" also actively constitutes and shapes youth as an object of intervention.

This is not a process of finding out what youth "really" is. All concepts of young people are social constructions. The point is to look critically at the dominant frameworks that are *out there*, to be clear about the concepts *we* use, and to take responsibility for them, for the way that they shape our dealings with young people, and what we try to create as outcomes for and with them.

Age ranges

Core documents internationally tend to define the client pragmatically, by referring to an age range. So, for example, a New Zealand survey of youth work refers to the World Health Organisation's definitions of "young people as aged 10-24, youth as 15-24 years, and adolescents as 10-19 years" (Martin 2006). The definitional statement of Youthlink, the Scottish youth peak organization, states that "Youth work's focus is on the 11-25 year age group with particular emphasis on 11-18 year olds" (Youthlink Scotland 2005). Key UK policy documents like *Transforming youth work* use 13–19 years as their core age range for service provision, with targeted services for some 11–13 and 19–25 year olds (Smith 2002).

This kind of definition is OK administratively, but is worthless conceptually. Ten year olds have very little in common with 24 year olds. Most ten year olds are biologically children. Most 25 year olds in the world (notwithstanding the trend to delay parenthood in the West) are parents. And there is no material difference between a 25 year old and a 26 year old. The diversity of age ranges proposed to define youth, and the multitude of ages of majority, also indicate that this way of categorizing young people is entirely arbitrary. A European survey of youth work policy documents notes that the category can begin from 7 years old and end anywhere up to 36 (Institut für Sozialarbeit und Sozialpädagogik 2007: 23).

Adolescence

The dominant conception in the professions (eg teaching, psychology, medicine and social work) is the notion of *adolescence*. North American youth work, or at least child and youth care, tends to be reasonably comfortable with this (The Draft Committee for the International Leadership Coalition for Professional Child and Youth Care 1995) but youth workers in Britain, Australia and New Zealand generally haven't.

A fuller discussion is available elsewhere (Sercombe 1996; Bessant, Sercombe et al. 1998; Sercombe, Omaji et al. 2002; Epstein 2007). In brief, however, the idea of adolescence is based on three core concepts:

1. that adolescence is a stage of life, qualitatively different from other stages of life
2. that it is universal, programmed into all human beings
3. that it is inherently traumatic or troublesome.

The empirical truth of all three of these assumptions has been heavily challenged over decades of inquiry. And the fact that the concept constructs young people in deficit makes it questionable as a basis for youth work practice. It is and continues to be the basis on which many of the practices of exclusion in law and policy are justified: if young people are qualitatively different from adults, and are particularly susceptible to trouble, they need different treatment and different models of governance. Especially, they need containment and control. While the discourse of adolescence continues to shape public discourse about young people, its rejection by youth workers is well-founded.

Transitions

The most common idea about young people in the youth work field is that youth is to do with transitions (Institut für Sozialarbeit und Sozialpädagogik 2007). This has been central to youth policy development in most of Europe and Australasia, particularly within the field of employment, education and training. Fundamentally, according to this set of concepts, human beings move in a linear and one-way developmental pathway from childhood to adulthood. The period known as "youth" is concerned with the transition from child to adult, and along with this, the transition from dependence to independence, school to work, from the family home to a home of your own, from being someone's child to someone's parent, single to married (Havighurst and Dreyer 1975).

Initially, the concept of transitions was useful as a way of talking about the failure of social processes in the context of high youth unemployment. However, the fragmentation of the linear transition to adulthood is now so widespread that the usefulness of the concept of transition is questionable. Most of the statuses which might have once guaranteed accreditation as adult – marriage, a job, leaving home, parenthood – are now seen as unavailable, temporary, unreliable, or not really conferring adult status. Or they come much later in life: in the late twenties or thirties. Accreditation as adult now emerges vaguely and unevenly, one step forward and one step back, across a range of contexts in which the individual lives, rather than the product of a predictable and reliable set of developmental tasks. It is influenced by strategic choices made by the individual, but is also limited by circumstances that are beyond his or her control (Sercombe, Omaji et al. 2002).

It is also difficult to see why transitions should particularly distinguish young people. Life is full of transitions, and it seems doubtful whether the transitions between 12 and 25 are really more profound than between 25 and 38, 38 and 50, or 60 and 73.

Youth as exclusion

Increasingly, intervention with young people has worked around the language of exclusion (Spence and Devanney 2006). In the modern context, especially in the UK this has filtered down from the policy environment, but this thinking is also indigenous to youth work at the practice level (Sercombe 1989) and has been around theoretically since the 1970's at least (Seig 1976). Fundamentally, the story goes like this.

There is a broad range of psychological and anthropological evidence to demonstrate that once puberty has settled down (usually by the age of about fourteen to sixteen) young people are biologically adult. There is no substantial evidence to indicate that the inherent capacities of young people are different to those of other adults (Melton 1983; Epstein 2007). Inexperience is an issue, of course, but this is only incidentally age-related, and in many areas young people may be more experienced than their elders, particularly in an environment of rapid social change (Benedict 1935).

The youth category is a product of the practice of *excluding* certain biologically adult members of a society from full participation in society, basically because they are judged to be "too young". What "too young" generally means is that they have not yet assimilated the dominant social codes, and are therefore deemed to be "unsafe". Our society deems young people to be unsafe drivers, drinkers, tenants, financial managers, voters, and marriage partners. This is not because of any inherent lack of capacity: young people have both the physical and mental abilities necessary to make perfectly competent drivers or financial planners, and in many parts of the world, fourteen year olds are doing all of these things. Inexperience may be part of the story, but that is not the logic of their exclusion (Epstein 2007). Young people are excluded from engaging in these roles or practices because it is *assumed* that they don't yet have the right "attitudes" on these things.

Just for example

John is sixteen. He works on a building site. He is strong and likes working and has a reputation as s good worker. However, he earns significantly less than the thirty year-old beside him does, even though it is the same job. He would like to apply for a job in a mine in his area, but the mine has a rule that he can't be employed if he is under 18. He pays taxes: direct taxes on his income, indirect taxes on his expenditure. He isn't eligible to vote, so has no say in how his taxes are spent.

John's family life is not ideal, since his parents broke up and his mum began a new relationship. Three months ago, he moved out of home. He is working, so could afford his own flat. But real estate agents reject his application as soon as they find out his age. He is living in a supported accommodation project, but wants to be independent. Public housing could be a possibility, but waiting lists are long and he is a low priority. The authorities presume that as a single man, he can find housing in the private market.

He has a girlfriend, Kathy. They have been going out together for a year. She is a year younger than him. For the last month, they have been having sex, although both of them know that he could be charged with a serious offence if someone in authority finds out and decides that he should.

From this perspective, becoming an adult is a process of accreditation. Youth is not fundamentally a *stage* that people *grow* out of. It is a *status* that they are *promoted* out of. There are things that they can do to facilitate this process of promotion or accreditation, ways in which young people can signal to the society at large that they are ready for recognition as adult. But it is up to the society to recognise their status. And society can, and does, withhold accreditation in its own interest.

The very existence of the youth category is a product of exclusion. So exclusion is not accidental when it comes to young people: it is how the youth category is created. If you don't exclude this group of young adults, you don't have a youth category. To put that as a definition:

Youth is that biologically adult population which is excluded from full participation in the common wealth because of a perception of age-based risk.

Hence the professional language-marker of youth work: the term "young person" (Sercombe 1997). A young person is primarily a person: a normal member of the human race, not some different kind of species. They just happen to be young. The rest of the drama is created by the social relations under which young people live.

If that is youth, what is youth work?

In our own time, the scope and length of exclusion has been increasing exponentially. At the turn of the last century, puberty arrived later and adulthood earlier: the gap between biological adulthood and social adulthood was about five years. Now it is closer to fifteen. This has meant an elongation of adolescence and dependency, what Epstein calls the resulting infantilisation of young people, and increasing restriction on their movements and their fundamental human rights (Epstein 2007). Emergent adults who in any other time and place would have been parents are classified ever more rigidly as children.

But the risk of excluding a population is that it becomes not only excluded but disengaged. And a disengaged population, particularly of young men, is socially dangerous and individually destructive. Since the industrial revolution, youth work has responded to this risk, mostly by connecting with young people and trying to engage them, preferably on their own terms. Youth *policy* has responded to it mostly by being concerned with the potential for social disruption. Policy and practice has met, often awkwardly, in the middle.

"We'll engage the young people and you might get some social order out of it", say youth workers.
"You improve social order, and for that we'll give you some resources to build relationships with young people" say those in power.

What "engagement" might mean for youth work, and to what end, has varied (Smith 1999, 2002). For much of youth work's history, the point has been to re-engage young people in "decent" society: to facilitate, often uncritically, a greater conformity, to render young people docile without challenge or change to the established order. At other times, the point has been to leverage young people's disengagement in an attempt to challenge a power system based on exclusion, on injustice, and ultimately on violence.

Mostly, youth work lives in the tension between these two poles. We live in a capitalist society, and capitalism is the most powerful engine for the generation of production, and wealth, that the world has ever seen. And innovation, and diversity, and indeed change itself. But what it has never generated is equality. Disproportionately, young people bear the brunt of that: especially if they live with multiple exclusions like poverty, class, gender, race or disability. We work in the tension between helping young people survive their exclusion, often by re-engaging in social and economic processes, and confronting a system that excludes in the first place.

The aims of youth work

There are a number of documents around which provide statements, often carefully worked through, of the aims of youth work (National Youth Agency 2004; Youthlink Scotland 2005; Institut für Sozialarbeit und Sozialpädagogik 2007). Again, the aims of youth work rest pretty firmly on the conception of young people that you have. If you think youth is about adolescence, or about transitions, that will shape your practice.

If youth is indeed "that biologically adult population which is excluded from participation in the common wealth because of a perception of age-based risk", then the vulnerability that creates a need and a mandate for professional intervention is the vulnerability that flows from exclusion.

Exclusion creates a range of difficulties in living, ranging from poverty to a greater likelihood of conflict with police to the sheer difficulty of getting things done because you don't have the power and you can't get people to do what they are supposed to do. Youth workers intervene here, sometimes advocating for individual young people, sometimes acting on their behalf, sometimes managing risk for them so that those who have the power will let them do what they need or want to do.

For instance, a key need for young people, as for anyone, is space. They don't own their own homes, can't go to the pub, and commercial, affordable under-age spaces for informal sociability are rare. Their incomes are low and they can't sign contracts, so they can't hire their own premises. The need for youth workers to work with young people to create these spaces flows from this reality. Their parents could do it, but the point is that these are people who are biologically adult and should be capable of acting independently of their parents. Constant dependence on their parents frustrates the very process of life that they are about pursuing. Dependence on youth workers might not seem that much better, but because the young person is the client and therefore in control of the relationship, not a child and dependent on it, it is a substantial improvement.

At the same time, youth workers confront the inequality and injustice of young people's situation, and work at the structural level to try and bring about change: to eliminate structural causes of exclusion, and to remedy the compounding effects of poor policy and decision-making.

So youth workers do work with a problem: but the problem is not, in the first instance, the young people. The problem is the systems of exclusion that make it difficult for them to participate in the common wealth, in social and political processes, and to step up into the roles of citizen and adult which are their birthright. Of course, this system creates

problems for young people, and exclusion can easily become disengagement. Youth workers also work with the consequences of exclusion for young people, including the violence, problematic drug use, poverty, isolation and alienation and ill health that predictably follows social disengagement. This experience can cause spiralling cycles of damage which become self-reinforcing and self-replicating, and individual young people and groups of young people can themselves become secondary sources of violence and damage (Searle-Chaterjee 2000). But at the core, the source of this damage is structural, not personal, and it originated in the decisions of the powerful, not the decisions of young people.

They do this by engaging young people in a professional relationship, in which the youth worker sees the client first as a young **person**, not as a criminal or a problem or a label or a potential adult (Jeffs and Smith 1999). Within that relationship, the youth worker helps the young person negotiate the difficulties created by the exclusion of young people from the common wealth, including the loss of autonomy and agency that results, and to maintain or regenerate the capacity to be actors in their own lives.

Defining youth work

Given the difficulty of defining youth work by what youth workers do, the literature has mostly constructed a definition by trying to tie down the key elements, or by prescribing the purposes of youth work practice, or both.

For example, British youth work has been deeply influenced by the templates laid down in the Albemarle Report of 1960 (Smith and Doyle 2002). The Report was written in the aftermath of World War Two, with a burgeoning youth population in most of the Western world and a widespread concern about levels of delinquency. It saw youth as a time of risk, where young people could lose their way, perhaps permanently, in the transition to adulthood. Youth work was seen as an adjunct to home, school and work in facilitating that transition. The key elements captured in the Report were:

1. Voluntary involvement. Youth work should happen in places where young people could choose to be, and so could explore emerging adulthood in their own terms and in their own time.
2. Association. Youth work should use the developmental potential of association, of people coming together and learning to work together and make decisions together. Generally, this meant that the peer group was positively valued.
3. Informal relationship. The power of youth work is in the quality of the relationship between the youth worker and the young person. This is by no means unique. However, unlike many other professional relationships, youth work operationalises friendship-type relating styles, overtly pursuing a more equal style of relationship.
4. Educational intention. There was a strong existing tradition of informal and community based education in the UK, including in youth work, which became established as the core of youth work practice. Youth work was therefore generally attached to education departments, and adopted educational discourses. It was seen as an adjunct to the school, and complementary to school based education (Spence and Devanney 2006).

While these elements are probably important everywhere, they haven't always been seen as constitutive of youth work. Youth work in the United States has been closely aligned with welfare discourses, and with crime prevention, rather than educational ones. In practice, this has been the case in Australia as well, though theoretically youth

workers there have promoted advocacy as the key framework for understanding practice. What changes is how central, how constitutive, these discourses are for youth work as a profession and a practice.

European youth work has often promoted informal education as the key framework for practice, but has also had a strong emphasis on labour market programmes and facilitating the school to work transition. A major survey of youth work in Europe defines youth work as

a summary expression for activities with and for young people of a social, cultural, educational or political nature. Increasingly, youth work activities also include sports and services for young people … The general aims of youth work are the integration and inclusion of young people in society …

The survey locates youth work in *both… the social welfare and … the educational systems …* noting that

the difficulty with state systems to adequately ensure global access to education and the labour market, means that youth work increasingly deals with unemployment, educational failure, marginalisation and social exclusion. Increasingly, youth work overlaps with the area of social services previously undertaken by the Welfare State. It, therefore, includes work on aspects such as education, employment, assistance and guidance, housing, mobility, criminal justice, and health, as well as the more traditional areas of participation, youth politics, cultural activities, scouting, leisure and sports …

(Institut für Sozialarbeit und Sozialpädagogik 2007)

The key problem has generally been that commentators have tried to find an *embracing* definition of youth work: thus the (abbreviated!) "summary expression" above. It isn't difficult to talk about what youth workers do: the literature is able to do that quite articulately. The difficulty is to say what makes youth work *distinctive*: different from what parents, police, schoolteachers, commercial leisure proprietors, psychologists and sports coaches do. A good parent of teenagers, for example, will do informal education with their kids, will engage them voluntarily in that, and will be concerned about their personal and social development in the process. Other professions and role/relations probably don't do the spread of what is described in the European survey, but individual youth workers or agencies don't either. Yet we know that youth work *is* distinctive: you know youth work (and youth workers) when you see it, and it doesn't look like anything else.

The alternative is to find an *analytical* definition of youth work. Echoing Koehn's method, let's forget about what youth workers *do*. What is the *ground* of what they do, the central dynamic? This is where Koehn's idea of the professional becomes useful (again!). If a profession is constituted by an ethical commitment to a client group, around a particular vulnerability, then the definition of youth work is established by a clear idea of the client, a clear idea of their vulnerability, and a clear idea of the sphere of action or intervention.

Who is the client?

It's a simple question. It has a simple answer. The client is the young person, or people, with whom the youth worker is engaged.

But the practice is not as simple as it first seems.

First, youth work has a range of clients. Because youth work does not have an independent resource base, it is generally dependent on the benefaction of the state or of the wealthy. The state is therefore a stakeholder, and certainly sees itself as a client. Youth workers generally work for organizations, and managers and boards of such

organizations are certainly stakeholders as well. Then there are parents, schools, police, shopkeepers, local residents, the community at large - all of whom have a stake in our intervention with young people.

Within this range of very real obligations, the youth worker makes an active and positive choice about priority: the interests of the young person are primary, above all others. In the words of the Western Australian youth work code of ethics, **the primary client of the youth worker is the young person** with whom they engage (Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia 2003). All other obligations, including those to the funding body, are secondary. Funding bodies give money to youth work organisations on this understanding. Or they should.

This places youth work in radical distinction to most other forms of engagement with young people. Most work with young people is not primarily concerned with what the young person wants to happen, but with sorting out a situation: alleviating problems or discomforts that young people might cause others. Social work, for example, youth work's closest relative, does not unambiguously engage the young person as the primary client, even if the young person is in the frame. Their responsibility is to balance the various interests of different stakeholders, and try to achieve the best resolution. Frequently, the state will be their primary client, as they take on statutory roles mandated by Acts of Parliament. This could include, for example, recommending a term of imprisonment for a young person in representations before a court.

Balancing these interests is an important role, and I'm not arguing for any kind of moral superiority for youth workers here. It is just that we take a different position. Young people need to know that someone is unambiguously acting for them, is on their side, and will not act against their interests, whatever the interests of other stakeholders.

It means, for example, that youth workers can't do family mediation. Mediation requires the mediator to be neutral, and youth workers are not neutral. They may have a role in family mediation or case conferencing or restorative justice processes as an *advocate* for the young person, but not as a mediator. If you want a mediator, get a social worker.

There are some other professions who would argue that if they are working with a young person, then they are unambiguously their client. Lawyers, doctors, and psychologists are (or should be) in this category. If a doctor is treating a young person, it should be the interests of the young person (rather than their parents, for example) that have absolute primacy.

The difference between these professions and youth workers is in their sphere of action. If youth is a function of social exclusion, then work with young people needs to take seriously this status, and to work with young people around the elements of their social context which impact on them. At the most benign level, young people have to negotiate their accreditation as adults, and to manage the consequences of their exclusion, including, for example, their containment through compulsory school attendance. The second condition of the definition is therefore that the youth worker engages the young person **in their social context**. The ethical imperative is that the exclusion of young people from the common wealth represents a fundamental injustice, and that we engage with the social context within which young people live, to do what we can to right that injustice and in the shorter term to mitigate the harm that it can cause.

So doctors work with young people around the health of their bodies; lawyers engage them as someone accused or aggrieved; psychologists and psychiatrists about their intra-psychic life and emotional health; the clergy around the state of their souls. Youth workers work with young people to understand their social context, to change things in their social context that need to be changed or to help young people adapt better to them. The North American tradition, with a discourse rooted primarily in developmental psychology rather than critical sociology, describes this as an *ecological* focus. (The Draft Committee for the International Leadership Coalition for Professional Child and Youth Care 1995). Same thing.

The final part of the puzzle is that this is a **professional** relationship, in the terms that we have discussed earlier.

A definition, then. Actual practices and settings can and do vary widely, but youth workers hold in common their commitment to give priority to the interests of young people, and to work not only towards the transformation of the young person in their social context but also the transformation of that context. Thus:

Youth work is a **professional** relationship in which they young person is engaged as the **primary client** in their **social context**.

This definition holds whether the youth worker is paid or a volunteer, a student or a manager, trained or untrained, a bureaucrat or an academic. If you take up the challenge of being a youth worker, your primary client is young people, and your sphere of intervention is the social context in which they live. Training doesn't make you a youth worker. You seek training because you have committed yourself to be a youth worker, and ethically, it is your responsibility to be skilled and informed in your intervention. As a policy maker or an academic, for as long as your research or your policy work has young people as its primary client, you remain a youth worker. The moment young people cease to be your primary client, you cease being a youth worker, even if you are working with them every day and your job title says "youth worker".

So, to summarise.

Youth work is a relationship. It is a professional relationship, so it is defined by a commitment to a vulnerable client group for the purposes of transformation. In this case, the client group is young people. Young people are those members of the biologically adult population who are excluded from full participation in the common wealth because of a perception of age-based risk. Youth workers engage young people as the primary client, working with them within their social context, and with the structures that impact on them, to mitigate the harms resulting from this exclusion, and to facilitate their engaged and ethical agency.

Things to think about

If youth work is usually funded by governments or "adult" organizations that have their own objectives in the work, how realistic is it for youth workers to claim that the young person is *ever,* in principle, their primary client? Isn't this just aspirational, and doesn't it set youth workers up?

Can the idea of the “client” ever be redeemed from its connotations of condescension and helplessness? Can you think of an alternative?
In the work that you do, what concept of “youth” is being used?

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