



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF OPEN YOUTH WORK

Theory and Practice





## Dear readers,

Welcome to “The International Journal of Open Youth Work”. The editorial board are pleased to present the first issue of this journal.

The Journal is the result of an Erasmus + Programme funded strategic partnership project: “European network of youth work research TRI Network”, Project No. 2014-2-NO02-KA205-000450, between Newman University (UK), Ungdom og Fritid – the Norwegian national youth club organisation (NO), Malmö University college (SE), the University of Iceland (IC), the Institute for Policy Research and Analysis (LT), and Professional Open Youth Work in Europe (located in Austria, while representing seven European countries). It is the culmination of two years of hard work as well as good fun. The Journal aims to privilege the narrative of youth work practice, methodology and reality. It is a peer-reviewed journal providing research and practice-based investigation, provocative discussion and analysis on issues affecting youth work globally. The Journal will present youth work issues and research in a way that is accessible and reader-friendly, but which retains scholarly integrity.

The Journal aspires to promote and improve the professional status of open youth work – celebrating and interrogating professional youth work skills, and enabling critical reflection on both policy and practice. Through a shared commitment to critical pedagogy, the Journal enables practitioners and

academics to engage in a mutually respectful dialogue that seeks to explore the tensions, dilemmas and contradictions inherent in professional open youth work. A commitment to the co-writing process means that we are taking seriously the notion of practice informed by theory and theory based on practice. The community of practice that is open youth work does not operate in isolation: alliances are formed with other professionals and agencies, often through cross-sectorial work, to ensure that the rights of young people are protected and advanced.

This first issue focuses upon theory, practice and research with contributions from some of the partner countries represented. We have chosen to call this first edition “Theory and Practice”. This is as broad as it is accurate. Our ambition is to create a journal which highlights perspectives relevant to youth work practitioners in a variety of national contexts; our contributors are encouraged to develop theoretical frameworks for youth work. We acknowledge that youth work holds many traditions throughout Europe, some of which are shared and familiar, while others are unique, and we aim for this journal to be a space for us to explore and to learn from each other. Both practical capital and intellectual capital are brought together in the Journal; harnessing such powerful forces is an ambitious project. It is hoped that you will be inspired by the differences in realities, writing styles, perspectives and experiences – and that you might be encouraged to contribute to future editions.

The first article introduces digital storytelling from a Norwegian perspective, as a way of promoting advocacy. This is followed by a Swedish and UK joint paper that identifies the multiple demands placed on youth workers and explores these hybrid agendas. A controversial article follows next, which highlights the role of open youth work in the prevention of radicalism and extremism from an Austrian perspective. Subsequently we are taken back to Norway with an article that seeks to argue that modern youth work in Norway requires a revitalising of its roots in popular education, to function as popular education of the future. We are then introduced to a question from an English youth work perspective, which asks: Can youth work be seen as a therapeutic process? This contested starting point is explored via interrogation of practice and by examining some proposed working models. The following article is set within a Swedish context and looks at LBGTQ youth work trying to explore and understand the practice as well as the consequences of open youth work in a closed targeted setting on individuals who are considered to be marginalised. Iceland is the next country context, where the paper argues that group work is an important part of the work being carried out in Icelandic youth clubs. Finally, we are introduced to the theoretical concepts of Paul Willis and Howard S. Becker. Their influence is discussed in relation to youth work practice.

This journal provides immediate open access to its content based on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge. The Journal is published twice a year, and is run on a not-for-

profit basis. Editors, Associate Editors and Peer Reviewers all work in a voluntary and unpaid capacity.

The Editorial Board is a cross-sectorial partnership: the contributors of this text also represent several actors in the field of youth work and youth policy. The professional interests of the Editorial Board represent a broad spectrum of youth work: in the academic context, researchers, lecturers and authors; and amongst the practitioners, street-based workers, workers in centres, and those who work in schools and other settings – some of the practitioners also engage in research, teaching and writing about their work, and some of the academics continue to work in youth work or community settings. This collaborative combination of practitioners and academics is committed to promoting the values of open youth work and advocating improvements in both policy and status: that good youth work makes a significant contribution to cohesive and thriving communities.

The Editorial Board is well aware that in this first edition the perspectives offered are from northern Europe; we anticipate that future editions will include contributions not only from wider European perspectives but also from elsewhere in the world. In the European context, it is easy to become consumed by our domestic crises: shifting political allegiances; an increase in militarism; ongoing financial restructuring; large-scale youth unemployment; reorganization of public sector services; and a seeming impasse over migration policy. All of these issues impact on the lives of

young people and demand skilful youth work interventions. Open youth work is a worldwide endeavour and we hope you will be inspired to tell everyone your stories. We hope you agree that the result is a unique resource presenting thoughtful, multifaceted approaches to youth work, which it is hoped can be better understood and recognised.

**Chief Editor, Pauline Grace and Managing Editor, Heidi Anderssen-Dukes**

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# 1. Youth work and mental health: A case study of how digital storytelling can be used to support advocacy

*Mariell Berg Huse and Anna Opland Stenersen*

## **Abstract**

*Youth work and mental health: A case study of how digital storytelling can be used to support advocacy.*

*A current challenge according to recent national research in Norway (NOVA, 2015) and something we experience in our youth work is mental health issues among young people. As youth workers we have a responsibility to advocate and listen to the voices and needs of young people in arenas where it is challenging for them to attend. Our service was eager to find out more about the situation in our district, and how we could meet potential challenges. This article is based on a local survey we conducted in a district in Oslo, Norway, and a movie project that followed. Two main themes emerged from the survey, namely “pressure” and “being different”. Young people said there is a lot of pressure to do well in several arenas in their life, and they have a feeling that they need to be “good at everything”. We chose to illustrate what we found through digital storytelling. Digital storytelling is a method of making short video stories and follows a certain manual that gets young people to reflect and express their thoughts and needs. Four youths told their story, and the movie ended up asking the question “How can adults have an impact on youth’s mental health?” This article is an example of how digital storytelling can be used to support advocacy.*

**Keywords:** youth work, advocacy, digital storytelling, mental health, outreach work

## Introduction

According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children “shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child” (UN General Assembly, 1989). Advocacy can be understood in different ways according to the context, and includes several nuances. The understanding that underlies this context is that advocacy seeks to ensure that people, particularly those who are most vulnerable in society, are able to have their voices heard on issues that are important to them, and furthermore to have their views and wishes considered when decisions are being made about their lives (SEAP Advocacy n.d.).

As outreach workers, one of our main goals is mapping youth environments to be able to meet the current needs among young people in the best possible way. We also have a responsibility to advocate the voices and needs of young people in arenas where it is challenging for them to attend (Erdal, 2006). To understand the actual needs and initiate appropriate measures – both in day-to-day youth work and also on higher levels within the municipality – it is crucial to hear young people’s own experiences and descriptions of reality.



A current challenge according to recent national research in Norway (NOVA, 2015) and something we experience in our youth work is mental health issues among young people. Our service was eager to find out more about the situation in our district, and how we could meet potential challenges. This article is based on a local survey we conducted in a district in Oslo, Norway, and a movie project that followed. This is an example of how digital storytelling can be used to support advocacy.

## **Mental health among youth in Oslo**

“Young in Oslo 2015” is one of the largest youth studies that has ever been conducted in Norway, and summarises responses from more than 24,000 adolescents from Oslo’s 15 districts. The purpose of the study is to clarify various aspects of teen life including their living conditions, and to examine changes over time by comparing it with three former Young in Oslo studies (1996, 2006 and 2012). The newest Young in Oslo research shows that mental health problems are large and growing in all segments of the young population, and are particularly large among girls growing up in Oslo (NOVA, 2015). The proportion of girls reporting a high level of depressive symptoms has almost doubled since 1996, and the problems peak towards the end of upper secondary school, when about three in ten girls show signs of depressive symptoms (NOVA, 2015). The study showed that our district is among the top three districts in regard to young people

reporting depressive symptoms and among the bottom two districts in reporting that they feel good about themselves. Although there is not one clear explanation for this trend, research connects it to the fact that young people are facing huge amounts of pressure – not only in terms of academic results, but also in striving for perfection in all aspects of life (NOVA, 2015).

The report concludes that mental health problems and stress create significant limitations in young people's everyday lives, and that we have to work harder to find good ways of preventing these problems (NOVA, 2015). As traditional youth work is more focused on preventing social problems such as crime and drug use, mental health issues are for many youth workers a new area. The challenges these young people face are often more invisible and harder to discover, and may require a change of practice for youth workers wanting to meet these needs.

How do the national findings of growing mental health issues apply to young people in our district and what implications could this have for our work?

## **Local survey – “Situation, Analysis, Measures”**

Against the backdrop outlined above, we used a method called “Situation, Analysis, Measures” (SAT) to find out more about mental health issues among young people in our district. SAT is a tool developed by the Competence Centre,

Oslo to analyse a certain situation, and help youth services in gathering information about the youth environment and target groups. In using this method the goal is to obtain sufficient knowledge to prioritise youth work practice on individual, group and system levels (Pedersen, 2015). Our intention was to adjust our practice according to the needs of the young people in the area we are working in, with a specific focus on those at risk of developing mental health problems. This tool is not a scientific research method, but a way to get a snapshot of young people's perceptions with a view to raising awareness and informing local programme planning.

To gather information we had four different meetings with relevant informers: one internally in our outreach service, one with a sample of young people, one with professionals doing preventative work with the youth in our district (social counsellors in schools, the police, child welfare services, youth clubs), and one with local organisations for young people (sports clubs, local church). The meetings were all structured in the same way with standard questions developed for SAT. The questions were about different aspects of mental health among young people in our district, and concerned the present situation, development, possible consequences, what works, what is lacking and suggested measures. We also asked for thoughts on how we in the outreach service could change our practice to meet the current needs.

The young people we talked to were randomly picked out by the social counsellors at two upper secondary schools in

the part of the district with mostly families with high socio-economic status. There were in total 40 youths, half of them aged 13 and the other half aged 16, both girls and boys. The reason why we chose to interview young people from these schools was to hear from those not traditionally reached by youth workers, and that statistically are at risk of developing mental health issues. Additionally, we had a look at statistics and reports about young people and mental health, nationally and locally, so that we could put our results from a relatively small sample into a bigger context.

Based on the transcripts from the interviews and the statistical information, we looked for patterns and themes that could describe the situation, using simplified analysing tools from SAT. In the following summary of the results we focus mostly on descriptions from the young people.

## **Pressure to be “good at everything” and hard to be different**

The statistics and reports showed that, as mentioned, many young people report challenges in their own mental health. Two main themes emerged when we analysed the interviews, namely “pressure” and “being different”. Both the 13- and 16-year-old youths said there is a lot of pressure to do well in several arenas in their life, and a feeling that they need to be “good at everything”. The adults working with youth also see lots of stressed young people, putting a lot of pressure on themselves (SAT, 2015). Both young people and adults feel

that it is hard to stand out from the crowd and be different from the majority. The youth say they have to follow the styles that count and fit in, while at the same time it is important to “be yourself”. Furthermore, they say that it is hard to tell anybody if they experience difficulties in their life, and that they are afraid that friends and family will know if, for instance, they are talking to a psychologist (SAT, 2015).

## **Need to bring forward the stories**

When we asked the young people and the adults working with them about what we as outreach workers could do differently, they mentioned several things. For instance, better cooperation between our outreach service and health services was needed. Schools called for closer cooperation with the outreach service to improve the psychosocial environment in schools. Furthermore, the young people wanted more group activities organised by the outreach service, a higher presence of outreach workers in schools and longer opening hours – mainly to have grown-ups to talk to other than teachers and parents. Another important need revealed was to highlight the situation regarding young people and mental health to other people working with youth and policymakers.

Since the SAT was initially conducted to adjust our practice, we needed to work out how to best meet the needs revealed. In addition to focusing more on the cooperation and practice connected to health services and schools, we wanted to bring forward some of the stories behind the numbers and statistics

to make politicians and other influencers in young people's lives reflect and act on how they can contribute to preventing mental illness among young people. How can adults working with young people reduce the pressure and make it easier for young people to be themselves? We decided to make a movie to illustrate what we found, using a method called "digital storytelling".

## **Digital storytelling**

Digital storytelling is a method of making short video stories. The method has its origins from the StoryCenter, brought forward to us through cooperation with the social entrepreneurs in World Wide Narrative. The method itself is fairly easy, and can be used to reflect many different subjects. The idea of young people recording their stories on film is not intrinsically new. However, digital storytelling follows a certain manual and is, according to our experience, an effective way to get young people to reflect and express their thoughts and needs.

After having tried to recruit young people through posters at schools without success, we asked a group of youths we knew if they wanted to join the film project. Four girls from one of the schools included in the survey said yes. We agreed with the girls that the movie would be about their thoughts on different aspects affecting their mental health – and that the goal was to show this to politicians and adults working with young people. Over a period of six weeks, the girls made their

own personal video answering different questions related to mental health and well-being. Below is a description of the process and results.

## **Opening up for creativity and writing**

The first phase of the process in digital storytelling is to open up for creativity and remove self-editing. To do that, we asked them to fill in 30 circles with things and people that they associated with feeling good, guided by the questions: “What do you do to feel good?”, “Who are you with when you feel good?” and “Where do you feel good?” They only had three minutes, and the goal was to fill in as many circles as possible. There was no time for perfect drawings.

Then we gave them a list of so-called “trigger questions”, all related to young people and mental health. Their task was to choose one or two of them that they wanted to answer. These four questions were chosen: “Tell us about how you experience life on social media and the Internet”, “How is your spare time?”, “Tell us about one time you were afraid of not being good enough” and “Tell us about one time you felt alone”.

After deciding which one to write about, they had to write non-stop for 10 minutes. If they could not think of anything to write about, they were told to write “bla bla bla” until they had new thoughts. Again, this was to prevent self-editing. After the first writing session they read their stories out loud and got feedback from the others: What did the listeners

find interesting? What made them curious? What could the storytellers write more about? When they first read their text out loud we were all moved – even the young people reading their own story. These were really personal experiences. Based on the feedback they were given more time to finish their texts at home.

## **Making the story into a video**

A week later the girls had written four stories, each sharing different experiences related to mental health. The next phase was to make their stories into a video. First they used a smartphone to record the story, reading their story in their own voices. Then they took pictures, made drawings or small video clips to illustrate the story and added music or text. Lastly they edited their video, with support from each other and us.

Together with the young people we put the short videos together into one movie and added statistics and results from the local survey in between; we called the movie *Young People About Mental Health*. The movie ended up asking the question “How can adults have an impact on young people’s mental health?” One need revealed was the need for open activities during the lunch break at school, and to change the rules about where youths can eat their lunch – all this to counteract loneliness. Furthermore, there was a need for spaces where there are no requirements for skills to participate. Lastly, it became evident that adults interacting with young people should have a better understanding of



the positive and negative aspects of social media to be able to support and guide young people when it comes to online bullying.

## **Bringing the voices forward**

As we mentioned, our goal with this movie was to show it to politicians and other adults with power to impact on the frames of young people's everyday life. Luckily, we were picked out to host a politician just after we had finished the movie. The City Commissioner of the Department for Health and Social Services in Oslo came to visit the outreach service to learn more about the preventative youth work in our district. One of the things she wanted to learn more about was digital storytelling. The girls showed her how to make a video on her own, telling the story of why she is dedicated to fighting for young people's right to speak. The city council participated with great engagement and with good guidance from the girls. After making her own video, she watched the movie made by the girls and was clearly touched. She said: "This is so much more powerful than reading statistics."

## **How can digital storytelling promote advocacy in youth work?**

There are many ways and methods being used to raise young people's voices all over the world. Making them express their thoughts through a video format is not revolutionary; yet it is still a powerful way of telling a story. In this case,

digital storytelling was part of a bigger process. The national statistics led to the local survey, which further led to the theme of the movie project. Thus the movie illustrates four stories behind the numbers, which, together with the numbers, send a powerful message to the policymakers. However, the process of advocacy is never without choices that could have been made differently, which is also the case in this process. In the following we will use our own experiences to discuss whether and how youth workers can use digital storytelling to advocate young people about mental health.

## **Low and high threshold: How can digital storytelling lower the barrier to participation?**

Low-skilled young people, young people from low-income families and young people from ethnic-minority backgrounds – often lumped together under the label “vulnerable young people” – are under-represented in the youth movement (Larson, 1994; Williamson, 1997). In the same way, young people struggling with mental health issues may also face barriers to participating in the traditional ways of youth involvement. Jacobsen, Jensen and Aarseth (1982) show that access to health care and social services, and the possibilities and skills needed in order to cross thresholds in social services, are unequally distributed. In the same way, young people have different access to participation. In the political platform of the current Norwegian government (2013) it is stated as a goal to improve low-threshold and preventive

measures targeting children and young people. As youth workers, we may identify what kinds of barriers may impede the young people in question, to be able to lower the threshold to participate.

To attract participants to the movie project we hung up posters at the two schools involved in our initial survey. However, no one signed up for the project. Instead we ended up asking a group of youths we knew from our outreach work and group activity, explaining the process and purpose of the project face to face. The four girls doing the digital storytelling in the end did not come by themselves. They had to be reached out to by youth workers they knew and trusted. These young people may otherwise not have sought ways to make their experiences and voices affect the system According to Edland-Gryt and Skatvedt (2012), some level of trust must be reached before a person even considers seeking help from a service. In the same way, young people might not have wanted to share experiences and advice about mental health, without knowing and trusting us as youth workers.

Another factor that might have lowered the threshold to participate was the fact that we are outreach workers. Skatvedt and Schou (2010) argue that outreach work is one of the most effective ways to lower the threshold in a low-threshold service. Wherever there is a door to open or close, there is a threshold (Skatvedt & Schou, 2010). However, youth workers at a youth club could also reach out to young people attending the club in the same way. The main difference in this

case might be that many young people experiencing pressure and struggling with mental health issues in our district rarely attend youth clubs, because, they say, they are too busy with schoolwork and organised spare time activities.

The main difference in this project compared to participation in traditional youth involvement was perhaps the frames and format. Through digital storytelling we had a chance to challenge the conventional way of hearing young people's voices. The fact that the youths' voices were expressed through a movie format may have got other stories and voices heard than would have been the case in a political meeting. Although youth councils, meetings and political parties are great arenas for many young people, there are others who need different environments to demonstrate their capacities and opinions. Since young people have different barriers, is it great to have several ways to involve them. Young people struggling with mental health issues, and who are insecure about themselves, might find it easier to express their feelings through a creative process. This became particularly evident for one of the girls in the project. She came to the second meeting with seven computer-written pages. She said she became inspired and wrote for hours, and answered almost every trigger question. She told us she usually hated writing essays at school, and for the first time she found it easy to write. Similarly, a research investigating the effects of digital storytelling on young people affected by childhood cancer concluded that it is necessary to find creative ways to address mental health. While most of the participants in this research

spoke of mental health issues – fear, depression, anxiety, learning difficulties – they all indicated that they were keeping it to themselves and that most would never see a therapist (Laing & Moules, 2015). Although the therapeutic effect of digital storytelling was not in focus in this project, both our own experience and this recent research might show that digital storytelling is an effective way to lower the threshold for young people struggling with mental health issues to raise their voices.

A downside of the low-threshold approach might have been that we did not reach all the voices that needed to be heard. To start with, the youths that were interviewed in our initial survey were not necessarily representative of those young people that struggle or will struggle with mental health issues. Although the social counsellor at the two schools randomly picked them out, there could have been different schools and different youths. However, the young people interviewed described many of the same things as shown in the results of Young in Oslo, which implied that at least some of the youths interviewed were representative of those that we wanted to reach. In the following movie project the participants were less randomly picked out than originally planned. We did not know the struggles they were or weren't dealing with, and whether they could represent young people in the target group. What we did know, however, was that they were young people growing up in a part of the district with high pressure from school, parents, society and themselves. In addition, the sample was small – too small, one can argue. Another way

to look at it is that even though it was a small sample, they raised well-known aspects of young people's lives. Another approach might have given a more diverse sample. Despite the absence of a random selection of participants and the small sample in the video project, the stories they made into a movie seemed to be representative of those young people in our district that we wanted to say something about. As youth workers, we were in a position to raise and advocate these young people's voices – voices that otherwise wouldn't be heard. However, we had to reach out to them, they did not come on their own.

## **Documentation as part of advocacy**

The knowledge and insights of outreach workers are valuable in giving a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of young people's situation and living conditions (Utne Berg, 2006, p. 307). In other words, youth workers in low-threshold services may have great potential in gathering information and documenting knowledge about young people, which can be used to raise their needs and voices to a higher level. However, the documentation practice in youth work has large variations, which might influence the effects of working with advocacy.

Our curiosity about mental health and young people in our district came partly as a result of documentation from conversations with youths, outreach work and interdisciplinary

meetings with collaborators. Over time, mental health among young people was a consistent theme among several of the services and institutions working with young people. There seemed to be a need to explore more and raise this issue to a higher level, which was the starting point for the SAT and the digital storytelling project. Without the documentation over time, we might not have noticed how mental health issues were mentioned in several settings. As outreach workers, one of our long-term goals is to improve services from organisations and institutions targeting vulnerable groups within the youth population. We have a certain responsibility to contribute with information, assessments and input (Pedersen, 2006, p. 265). Without good routines for mapping and documentation, our service might lose some of its unique foundation in conveying what we see and hear in our daily youth work, and therefore in improving services for young people (Pedersen, 2006, p. 266).

However, there might be structural barriers in low-threshold services that make it challenging to document. In smaller low-threshold services, like an outreach service or a youth club, there might not be time or systems to document youth workers' experiences and knowledge. On the other hand, there are services with higher thresholds, like the Children and Young People's Psychiatric Out-Patient Clinic (BUP), that document every conversation they have with young people. These services have lots of information about young people's thoughts, but often without the resources or time to forward these thoughts directly to influence politicians.

Digital storytelling might lower the threshold for youth workers in smaller services or clubs to document and bring forward young people's voices.

## **From raising awareness to political action**

According to CEDPA (1999), advocacy does not stop at raising awareness, but is complete when a decision-maker takes a prescribed policy action. Therefore, the work does not stop when young people have shared their thoughts with youth workers. If the project ended after completing the SAT and the digital storytelling, it would not be characterized as advocacy in this sense. It makes sense that politicians and decision-makers need to know what the young people actually need and what challenges they are facing, to be able to adjust youth work accordingly. Youth workers may have an important role in bringing these young voices forth. It is not always necessary for decision-makers to get involved for youth workers to adjust their practice. However, politicians and decision-makers are in a position to make sure that good youth work becomes less arbitrary and more systematic. In that case, they are dependent on youth workers that listen to the young people and report what they hear.

So far the movie has been shown both to politicians that have the authority to allocate funds and make decisions, and representatives of school management at different schools that can adjust practice. The school management can make decisions that promote social interaction and reduce



loneliness by changing, for instance, where students can have their lunch, as one of the girls in our movie project raised this as challenging. However, there are many more potential politicians and decision-makers that might be influenced by the movie to make decisions aimed at improving young people's mental health. This means that the process is not over, and that it is important to continue to advocate and address this topic in future work.

## **Conclusion**

Through the local survey and the ensuing movie project, an issue that was somewhat intangible was investigated from different perspectives, and an attempt was made to make voices from otherwise invisible young people heard. With an increasing trend of mental health problems among young people, youth workers need to understand and find ways to deal with this issue – as well as advocating what these youths need in order to promote systemic changes in favour of young people's well-being. Digital storytelling can be one way of doing just that.

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## 2. Managing hybrid agendas for youth work

*Mike Seal and Åsa Andersson*

### **Abstract**

*Increasingly youth workers in the UK and Sweden are positioned between the multiple demands of municipal organisations and young people. Through data gained from interviews with youth work practitioners this article explores how workers manage these positions of hybridity. Extending Goffman's brief discussion of the relation between "team", here being the organisation and municipality, and "clique", here being young people, we suggest a third orientation, mediating between team and clique. Within this orientation we found three mediative approaches: unifying mediators, innovative mediators and manipulative mediators. We also found that unifying mediators tend to reproduce past relations and regimes, innovative mediators tend to produce new relations while manipulative mediators are often revealed at cost to the worker.*

**Keywords:** hybridity, team, clique, mediation, youth work.

## Introduction

“ We were basically told that you need to go in and set up a youth club in this run-down snooker hall cos that’s what young people want. Even though there was a sense that we were told to do it, we etched out some flexibility that meant we could do it our way. So we were able to do it from a development point of view, we were able to investigate, you know, and then we were able to go back to the people who told us young people wanted this and slap the report on the table and say “these are our findings from young people, from professionals that you guys know, this is what they are saying and what young people were saying was we don’t want a youth club, we are happy with the park and everything that we’ve got” (youth worker 2). ”

As illustrated above, working as a modern-day youth worker means placing oneself in a hybrid position where you frequently need to function in a space consisting of more than one objective for the activity and thus at the intersection of competing agendas for the work: the workers’ ideas and principles, those of young people, and the ideas and agendas of others. Davies (2005, 2008, 2009) and Smith (2013) argue that youth work practice has moved from long-term, open, universal practice, underpinned by an emphasis on relationships, to an increasingly short-term, individualised, bureaucratised, targeted and target-driven practice underpinned by an emphasis on whether predetermined goals

are achieved.

This means that the context in which youth workers are employed in the UK and Sweden has shifted from being a community of practice (Smith, 2013; Wenger, 1999) to an organisational culture based on neo-liberal business management and results-orientated “New Public Management” approaches (Evetts, 2009, p. 248) that dictate centralised, distanced management approaches. On the other hand, neo-liberalism also conceptualises individuals as autonomous and responsible (Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 25), where the choice of activities shifts from the municipal organisation to individuals (McDonald & Marston, 2005, p. 376). Young people are increasingly commodified and individualised in the expression of their desired activities (Davies, 2005, 2008, 2009). The result is that youth workers’ professional judgement is squeezed between an organisations official goals and managerial agendas and young people’s individualistic ideas about activity.

While these organisational tendencies were around prior to the dominance of neo-liberal and new public managerialism, they have certainly intensified as a result of this dominance. Youth workers need to find ways to deal with the multiple demands to which they are exposed and how they do so is the subject of this article. In a broad sense, we found that youth workers developed “hybrid” professional identities that incorporated elements from different, sometimes contradictory approaches. Previous research on how workers manage

hybrid situations suggests that these challenges are solved by trying to keep incompatible logics separate (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2008; Tilcsik, 2010; Bromley & Powell, 2012), reconciling them through compromise (Oliver, 1991; Kraatz & Block, 2008) or selective coupling of complementary elements within each logic (Pache & Santos, 2013).

This literature seems to provide a useful framework when trying to understand how workers manage their hybrid positions. However, we found two other phenomena. Some workers, in trying to keep incompatible logics of young people and management separate, could be manipulative and ran the risk, if exposed, of being excluded from either or both sides. Other workers went beyond tactics of separation, compromise or coupling and created innovative solutions that challenged the underlying nature of both management and young people's agendas, which sought and achieved mutual recognition of each others' positions. At the same time, these workers managed to maintain their professional legitimacy and remain authentic to their own, and others', principles. The former we have called "manipulative" mediation and the latter "innovative mediation".

We believe this article makes an important contribution on three levels. Theoretically, we found that within hybrid situations workers can go beyond unifying strategies to create innovative solutions. Practically, our analysis offers insight into contemporary work situations and shows how youth workers often approach hybrid situations. In a social dimension, it



shows how youth workers not only strive to maintain their own legitimacy, which seems to be an important orientation in the aforementioned research (Davies, 2005, 2008, 2009), but in doing so potentially jeopardise their status in the eyes of both young people and their organisations/managers.

### **Methodology**

The research project was a qualitative study located, in the main, within the interpretative paradigm (Cohen et al., 2000) where the emphasis is given to unearthing the voices of practitioners and young people, but claims are not made for all situations. However, the project also has critical concerns in examine how participants constructed their meanings within a sociocultural context. In this way, the research can be considered post-methodological (Bonner, 2003), rooted in the interpretative tradition, but drawing on other traditions. In other words, we did not just take what people were saying at face value, but questioned them. We hope that the findings will illuminate others' practice and that they find resonance with what we are saying.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with six participants, three from the UK and three from Sweden. This was a strategic sample, selected on the basis of trying to establish a mix of those who had worked in the dynamic as described, but within different organisational contexts and who had a number of different perspectives on it. They had all been working in the field for at least eight years, and up to 20. Consequently,

the age group was between 30 and 55. We chose not to examine issues of race and gender within this research.

We had six main areas of concern and co-wrote questions and prompts based on them. Piloting the questions highlighted a number of nuanced linguistic and cultural interpretations of words and underlying concepts; it was important to reach a mutual understanding of these. We agreed on our understanding of them and allowed ourselves as interviewers to adapt the questions according to the situation, as long as our understanding remained the same. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

We were keen to avoid youth workers simply reproducing youth work “tales” that justify current practices without critique. We also sought to avoid a wholly uncritical acceptance of the workers’ voices and recognised how those voices might be shaped by the limits of their own awareness and the influence of hegemonic discourses. We started with an assumption that youth workers are located within an intersection of competing agendas that was not clearly defined. Alternative understandings of youth workers’ meaning-making emerged through our reflections and gradually gave the fieldwork its focus.

Our approach is reminiscent of an abductive explanatory model (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p. 4; Fangen, 2005, p. 228; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014, pp. 239–240). The implication is that we alternated between theory and data material in

determining our analytical tools. Thus, our analysis can be seen as several “dialogic moves” between previous theoretical views as initial guiding codes and surprising results from the interviews continuously revised our guiding codes.

As researchers, we held a series of iterative reflection sessions, discussing and reflecting upon the meanings and context of our data, as well as our own contexts, understandings and biases. As authors, we reworked our interpretations many times from multiple angles in order to develop more specific understandings and explanations of how youth workers manage their hybrid position within an intersection of competing agendas.

Åsa read the Swedish scripts, and Mike the English ones, and then together we identified emerging themes. We then went back and recoded the data according to these themes, developing subthemes as the coding progressed. We then questioned each other on quote selection to add to our reflexivity and then reflected further on emerging themes.

The research passed through the ethics committee of Newman University. All participants signed consent forms and we were mindful that the research may induce some anxiety in participants, reminding them of the difficulties they are facing. Space for an informal debrief after the interviews was therefore built in and participants were warned of this possibility beforehand.

## **Theoretical framework**

Our initial analysis was framed by Erving Goffman's dramaturgical sociology and its theoretical interactionism perspective developed from George Herbert Mead's (1912) theory of the "generalized other". Mead was interested in how individuals interact with each other depending on the social context in which they are placed (Mead, 1912, p. 406). In accordance with Mead, Everett V. Stonequist (1935) pointed out that people who grow up in a complex cultural situation are unwittingly initiated into at least two historical traditions: moral codes and language (Stonequist, 1935, p. 2). He explored the idea that there are two kinds of people: those who are in stable cultural conditions where the social inheritance is controlled by more or less harmonious patterns, and those who are in a melting pot of cultural conditions where the elements that shape their personality and behaviour are dynamic. The peculiar feature of the latter is not only that they have cross-border social relationships, but also that they possess a divided as well as overlapping symbolic understanding, placing them in a symbiotic position.

According to Stonequist, such individuals either "pass" to maintain their own culture and are not disturbed by another culture or find themselves influenced and attracted by the other culture. His categorisation might be without nuances, but is none the less related to classic sociological problems such as how individuals manage their situation in an increasingly heterogeneous society and how this affects their ability to

act like subjects and make agentic choices. Similarly to Stonequist, several sociologists have described the need to recognise a gap between norms shaped by their culture and norms shaped by another culture for the individual to discover a different point of view (see, for example, Bourdieu, 2004, p. 111; Flisbäck, 2014). Often these analyses are connected by discussions about the relation between coercion and freedom and where the individual's possibilities for subjectivity are directly dependent on what Du Bois analysed as a "double consciousness" which emerges by being placed in a bicultural position (Du Bois, 1903/1989, p. 5).

Quite similarly to Du Bois, Erving Goffman pays attention to what happens between different actors in specific situations. In particular, he is interested in how patterns of normality and individuals' deviation from these patterns affect both individuals and the order of the situation (Goffman, 2009, p. 9; Hacking, 2004, p. 288). According to Goffman, individuals are seen as holders of roles and do their best to control other individuals' impression of an expressed definition of a situation (Goffman, 2009, pp. 16–17). Even if Goffman's sociological perspective might be called into question as being too cognitive (see, for example, Hacking, 2004, p. 288), we will in this article place his perspective in a sociological understanding of hybridity as a cultural phenomenon (how the world is framed, understood and acted upon), and by focusing on the relation between his concepts of *team* and *clique* argue for its usefulness.

A *team* can be regarded as actors who together must maintain and preserve an expressed definition of a situation. A team is a group in relation to an interaction or a series of interactions where team members are interdependent to create a specific definition of the situation (Goffman, 2009, pp. 78, 95). Team members thus have a valuable and significant relationship when it comes to making routines and maintaining a definition of the situation in interaction with other teams (Goffman, 2009, pp. 75–78). For a performance to be successful, it is necessary to bring team members who are performing inappropriately to order. One requirement for a functioning team community is that all members affirm the definition of the situation that is dominant. This means that within the team, there is no room for individual differences that violate common norms. Being in a team is thus a process of socialisation in which the individual internalises the norms, values, thoughts and ideas of the team.

A *clique* can be described as an informal grouping protecting individuals from an undesirable identification with a team (Goffman, 2009, p. 79). In the clique, the individual fulfilment is central and clique members have a constant need to express their own subjectivity (Goffman, 2009, pp. 75, 78–79). The relation between the team and the clique can be described as a constant negotiation between the team's definition of the individual and the clique's conservation and enhancement of the production of the individual. Therefore, the relation can be described as a relationship between a social order and its resistance, where the team either considers the individuals in

the clique to be demoralised, uncivilised and degenerated or as if they consciously resist.

While Goffman in his dramaturgical sociology has accounted for how individuals are considered to be active actors controlling their actions to appear in a good light in the eyes of others and to position themselves within a group, we will focus on the individual as a link between the conflict-based order of municipal organisations (*team*) and authentic individuals (*clique*). It should be noted that Goffman's notion of a team is based on a consensus perspective. However, since municipal organisations take advantage of a discourse shaped in occupational groups and their consensus-based valuations of performing a good job by placing it within a competitive agenda (Hanlon, 1998, p. 51; Evetts, 2003, p. 29; Evetts, 2009, p. 251), the notion of *team* seems to work perfectly well as an analytical tool in this study. However, by reinforcing the importance of Goffman's undeveloped clique concept we not only move Goffman's theory in the direction in which the individual's past experience and context have a greater significance, we also create a conceptual framework whereby it is possible to understand and describe youth workers' individual experiences of their development of both symbolic dependence and opportunities to create innovative solutions. Thus, we extend the previous research on how practitioners handle multiple agendas within their workplaces. In particular, this theoretical framework conceptualises workers within hybrid situations by showing how they, on the one hand, stay close to either municipal or young people's ideas, or on the

other hand (if they do not fail) contribute to selective coupling or innovative solutions beyond spatial restrictions.

## Findings and discussion

Firstly, we must clarify how youth workers manage positions of hybridity and make interconnections between competing agendas. As indicated, youth workers' role-taking and thus options for action, over time, become an integral part of their professional personality (Goffman, 2009, p. 27). We found three positions that youth workers in hybrid situations adopt over time: team orientation, clique orientation and mediating orientations. Within the mediating orientations we found three approaches: innovative mediators, unifying mediators and manipulative mediators.

### The team-orientated youth worker

At times, youth workers' performances can be characterized as team-orientated activities. The basis of team activities is that youth workers operate together with organisational intentions and thus maintain legitimacy among other organisational actors (Goffman, 2009, p. 79). As one youth worker expressed:

“often we try to do what is expected of us, namely capture young people who hang around and do illegal things. I have noticed that we are still respected for doing that, even if I personally think it is an outdated image of



*youth workers” (youth worker 4).*

”

Whether they liked it or not, youth workers often conducted team performances while preserving organisational values. In these situations, they were no longer able to make use of what Bromley and Powell (2012) describe as decoupling strategies and thereby separate the prescriptive structure of organisational ideas from their operational structure promoted by young people’s ideas. As one youth worker stated:

“ *“in recent years the organisational rules have become much more visible and both we and our boss know that we have received information, which means we do not always solve situations in the same creative way as before” (youth worker 5).*

”

Our research revealed that for some youth workers, belonging to an organisational team had become a performance of impression management. They joined the direction indicated in municipal goals (Goffman, 2009, p. 80) to maintain a semblance of self-respect in front of colleagues and managers. In this sense, the youth workers were positioned within the disciplined team unit of open youth work and assessed by the social order prevailing within municipal policy documents. For example, team-orientated youth workers strived to accomplish predetermined theme weeks of health, environment or LGBTQ issues by more or less successfully convincing young people of their value, implementing the theme week with or without young people’s engagement

and then reporting it back to the organisation and/or the municipality as a completed activity. However, team-orientated youth workers' self-control is affected in the sense that the youth workers, in the knowledge of being monitored by their colleagues and managers, adapt to (and gradually internalise) the social order of municipal organisations. As one youth worker expressed:

*“you can’t really bend or break the rules that much because senior managers are sort of having to work within the system, so it’s a knock-down effect, we are becoming scrutinised more” (youth worker 2).*

By adopting the organisational agenda, the team-orientated youth workers in the research had, over time, developed an organisational sense of what is right or wrong or good or bad. In this way, these youth workers' professional performances were increasingly affected and integrated within the organisational agenda. Apparently, by adopting organisational intentions, participants maintained their organisational legitimacy while they tended to decrease their legitimacy among young people. This, in turn, affected their options for action in an increasing coherence with the municipal agenda.

## **The clique-orientated youth worker**

At times, youth workers' performances can be characterized as clique-orientated activities. The basis of clique activities is that youth workers operate through motivations developed

in contexts other than the municipal organisation. In our interviews, several activities were identified where youth workers did not scrupulously follow the prevailing municipal order. As one youth worker expressed:

“*I navigate by some sort of humanity; often you can read what needs to be done in the young people’s eyes, it may be offering free coffee, driving somewhere with your own car or bending financial regulations to perform an activity*” (youth worker 6).

”

Youth workers thus exhibit a subtle form of resistance on purpose to steer individual efforts in the specific direction of young people’s ideas instead of persuading them of the legitimacy of municipal goals by using what Oliver (1991) describes as compromising strategies, or enacting organisational ideas in a slightly altered form, creating acceptable balances between organisational ideas and young people’s ideas and thus contributing to the municipal formation of a team identity. Some youth workers recognised that this explicitly put them in conflict with the management and the wider organisation, and it became an active choice to be on the “side” of the young people. Unlike the team affiliation, which is framed by an organisational physical region, the clique affiliation is formed by identification with both specific and generalised young people (Goffman, 2009, p. 78). As one youth worker commented:

“*I’m effectively collaborating, so it’s like yeah, how true*

*do I want to stay to myself or how well do I want to get on with my management?" (youth worker 3). ”*

In this sense, the youth workers' actions were shaped by their professional understandings of one or several cliques of young people. Their ambition is to increase young people's space for action. Therefore, they consciously challenge decisions based on organisational values. For example, the youth workers can lend their keys to young people, offer free sandwiches or go to work a few hours earlier just to meet some young people for a special activity. However, clique-orientated youth workers had to consciously and constantly try to retain their position within a group of young people. As one participant said:

“ “being consistent may have a different meaning than to treat everyone equally. It depends more on the situation and the youth, certainly situations occur where we have little secrets, meaning that they know that I know that I broke organisational rules, maybe this is why they return” (youth worker 5). ”

However, another worker notes how this affects the young people and is not actually consistent:

“ “I think that's when it's hard when I get on really well with them and I think cos when I was probably new, I think I blurred the lines a bit because I wasn't sure where my boundaries were, then it's hard for them to figure it out because I didn't know myself” (youth worker 1). ”

The implication is that youth workers in such positions are never finished with anything, but they are rather in a constant review of their position. In this way, youth workers' professional performances are increasingly affected and integrated with one or several agendas of young people. Therefore, youth workers maintain their legitimacy among one or several young people while they tend to decrease their legitimacy within the municipal organisation. This in turn affects youth workers' options for action in accordance with young people's demand.

### **The non-sustainability of both team and clique orientations**

Ultimately we found that trying to maintain either a clique or a team orientation was not sustainable. With the increasing gap between these two positions they often resulted in the team splitting into two factions. Participants recognised this: *"There's a split – half collude with young people, half with management."* The split even manifested itself physically and as one youth worker expressed:

“You can see tensions between staff sometimes and conflicts like, cos there's like two little offices across the corridor from each other, management in one and everyone else in the other one. Two of the workers just locked the door because they didn't want management to keep an ear on them and then management would walk in and they were like what are you doing in here?

*It was like a real boundary, that corridor was, proper us and them” (youth worker 3).*

”

To avoid this, and manage hybridity, some form of mediation was needed.

## **The mediation-orientated youth worker**

At times, youth workers are placed in mediating situations. In our research we found three mediating approaches: the innovative mediator, the unifying mediator and the manipulative mediator. In general, mediating youth workers are located in the space between the disciplinary unit of the municipal organisation (*team*) and the controlling function of young people (*clique*). In such situations, they sometimes develop overlapping symbolic understandings, placing them in a symbiotic position between organisational ideas and ideas of young people (Stonequist, 1935). By being placed in these multicultural situations, youth workers are not only able to discover gaps between competing ideas, but they are at least sometimes able to break free from both organisational agendas and young people's agendas, and thus create the basis for new points of view.

In general, mediators try to enable, catalyse and make exchanges between management and the ideas of young people both within and beyond unifying consensus approaches. Unifying mediators aim to produce what Oliver (1991) describes as a compromise acceptable to all, even if

the decision taken is not anyone's first suggestion, or what Pache and Santos (2013) describe as performing selective coupling of intact elements prescribed by different logics. However, innovative mediators aim to remove the social distance between the municipal organisation and young people so that organisational ideas and the ideas of young people change character, although it is often a slow-moving process (Goffman, 2009, p. 179).

To unifying mediators, it is important to produce reflexive and value-rational analysis of how different groups in the society are affected by different values and interests and seek a compromise. An example of this is when one youth worker mediated with a local politician who, unthinkingly, wanted to open a youth club, when in fact the young people were happy with the local provision and just wanted to be left alone. They did this by spending three months investigating the need and the type of club that would be wanted, and using data the councillor would understand presented the result in a way that could not be disputed.

“So we were able to do it from a development point of view, we were able to investigate you know and then we were able to go back to the people who wanted this and slap the report on the table and say these are our findings from young people, from professionals that you guys know, this is what they are saying and what young people were saying was it ain't a quick fix, there's no turnaround here over say three months because you

need to spend time and put effort in, we sort of looked at the cultural side of where young people are at to give us more understanding so that we could have the case for them from an evidential base but also from, again, their starting point” (youth worker 2). ”

However, it did not change the perspective of the councillor, as he simply went to the neighbouring borough and got them to set up the club instead. This can be compared to what an innovative mediating youth worker expressed:

“ *“it seems like it does not matter which mission I get from the organisation or young people, I always come back with an answer to another question, as if both the mission and the answer mutate during the process”* (youth worker 4). ”

In both roles, youth workers work with young people and managers/organisations participatively and deliberatively. While innovative mediators actively decrease the distance between the municipal organisation and young people by encouraging new solutions, they run the risk that youth workers as unifying mediators completely seem to avoid, namely that their result will be assessed as a fiasco in proportion to the original purpose. This does not make unifying mediators immune from risk or mean that their mediation will not collapse. They rarely create arenas where organisational ideas and ideas of young people actually meet and evolve mutual gain, which in turn can lead to an impasse.



An important difference between unifying and innovative mediation is illuminated, namely that innovative mediators not only mediate between different interests but also encourage these interests to grow and evolve and that the new mutual agenda is a product of real interactions and processes. As one innovative mediating youth worker commented:

“*I try not to get caught up in the approaches of young people or the organisation, but to put these people together in a dialogue and thus achieve something new; an example is our role-playing game that emerged from an action for young unemployed and which today is a well-functioning association*” (youth worker 4). ”

Crucially, innovative mediators regard agendas as something in the making and thus enter into an open-ended process while unifying mediating youth workers regard agendas as distinct products that should be merged. Thus, unifying mediators mediate a consensus-based reproduction of dominant interests while innovative mediators mediate a recognition-based production of new interests.

### **The excluded (and manipulative) mediator**

As we can see in the example of the councillor who wanted a youth club, there is a substantial risk that youth workers as mediators fail as mediators and become excluded. The larger the gap between competing agendas of the municipal organisation and young people, the more careful and

meticulous the youth worker has to be:

“ *“it is a bit like walking on a tightrope, the larger the gap the more it moves, the harder it is to keep the balance and sometimes you just fall” (youth worker 4).* ”

There seems to be particular danger when the worker has chosen the separation tactic (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2008; Tilcsik, 2010; Bromley & Powell, 2012), particularly when the gap between the impressions each side has of each other, which the youth workers attempted to control (Goffman, 2009, pp. 16, 31, 52, 55, 58), becomes visible. In such situations, particularly where a material falsehood is revealed, it results in a double loss of status, with the youth workers becoming excluded by both sides. Some of our participants, in order to maintain the separation, start being manipulative with either or both sides:

“ *“maybe the free coffee I offer sometimes or some strange theme I agree to implement, both of which are some sort of rule valuations in different directions, are essential to building a ‘we’, but also indescribably problematic if my double secrets get exposed and questioned” (youth worker 4).* ”

Going back to the images of sides being drawn between team and clique, some workers were trying to maintain separation by giving the impression to both young people and the team that they were on “their side”. When this illusion is shattered the worker is seen as a betrayer. With no attempt to

mediate, the positions of both sides are all or nothing. Where a mediator can weather being seen as not on a particular side at all times, here there is a dynamic where a single false note destroys their entire appearance. The worker is viewed as improper, erroneous and inept by both the municipal organisation and young people.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have highlighted how youth workers manage their hybrid position at their workplaces in at least three ways. *First*, youth workers seem to act as being team-orientated and adhere to the agendas of municipal organisations. In this position, youth workers maintain organisational values and thus their own legitimacy within the municipal organisation at the same time as they seem to decrease their legitimacy among young people. In this way, youth workers' options for action are affected by an increasing coherence with the municipal agenda. *Second*, youth workers seem to act as clique-orientated and adhere to the ideas of young people. In this position, youth workers maintain the ideas of young people and try to create some space for the development of such ideas. Therefore, youth workers maintain their legitimacy among young people at the same time as they seem to decrease their legitimacy within the municipal organisation. In this way, youth workers' options for action are affected by an increasing coherence with the ideas of young people. *Third*, youth workers seem to act as mediating-orientated and thus

as a link between organisational agendas and the ideas of young people. Youth workers seem to approach this position in at least three ways: as *unifying mediators*, *innovative mediators* and *manipulative mediators*. Unifying mediators actively seek compromising solutions while innovative mediators seek solutions beyond spatial limits. In this way, unifying mediators seem to reproduce past conditions while innovative mediators seem to produce new conditions, if they do not fail and end up as manipulative mediators. There was flow between these positions depending on circumstances, but workers tended to have a general tendency, although this also developed over time.

The literature has placed an emphasis on workers searching for conformity, with further emphasis on keeping people apart, finding common interests or seeking compromise. When this separation is not possible, as illustrated above, or where the interests are so wide that there is no common ground or little room for compromise, unifying is not possible and exclusion of the worker can follow, particularly if the worker was trying to keep agendas separate and there were any falsehoods or duplicity used in trying to do this. While these tendencies have existed for some time, neo-liberalism's increasing dominance makes the division between the organisation/management and young people's agendas starker. The current emphasis on centralised, predetermined targets makes organisations' agendas increasingly distant from young people's agendas (Davies, 2013), which are becoming ever more individualised and commodified (Smith, 2013). Mediation that is innovative

and based on mutual recognition may be able to challenge the hegemony underpinning both the position of the team and the clique and find mutuality and common interests based on more communal values. We hope the concept of the innovative mediator makes a further theoretical contribution in its extension of Goffman's (2009) framework. He talks about mediation between teams; we have added that this can also happen between team and clique and that an innovative approach is needed, which is an epistemological departure from his work and has the potential, in its innovatory approach that aims to change both parties, to have wider social reach – although perhaps youth workers as innovative mediators only create new teams where those who were active in the mediation process are members of the new team and those who did not participate in the mediation process are the new cliques. To date we have chosen not to employ Lipsky (1969) in our analysis as he largely refers to workers operating in institutions with high levels of scrutiny and where public policy weighs heavy, which has not historically been the case with open youth work. However, given the current neo-liberal trajectory of public services, we imagine that we will need to incorporate his insights in the future.

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### 3. The preventive role of open youth work in radicalisation and extremism

Werner Prinzjakowitsch<sup>1</sup>

#### Abstract

*This article will not provide another theory of the phenomenon of (youth) extremism. It will rather highlight the role of open youth work in the prevention of radicalism and extremism and why the general principles of this approach are one of the keys to young people at risk. Exemplified by the practice, more specifically the principles leading the practice in Vienna's open youth work, it points out the importance of this approach towards young people vulnerable to extremism, sometimes even violent extremism. Being aware of an ongoing threat from right-wing nationalist extremism, most recent practice in Vienna has been focused on religiously justified radicalisation as currently youth workers are mainly confronted with this phenomenon.*

**Keywords:** Islamic radicalisation, prevention work, youth work, municipal management.

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# Introduction

Open youth work in Austria, specifically in Vienna, means both working in youth centres, youth clubs and drop-in centres and working in public areas in the form of outreach work or detached youth work. It is financially supported mainly by the municipalities, sometimes by provincial governments, and carried out by non-profit organisations. As Austria does not have specific education for youth work professionals they come from different kinds of educational background (social workers, social pedagogy, arts etc.).

## Migration and radicalisation

In contrast to countries like the UK and France, the topic of “radicalisation” – especially focused on young people sympathising with Jihad – was not present in Austria until 2014, either in public discussion or in scientific dispute. This is remarkable as it is usually linked with (Muslim) migrant groups, and Austria, and specifically Vienna, has had an extremely high percentage of those for a long time.

When it comes to foreign-born inhabitants, within the EU-28, Austria is constantly in the top five countries, and currently third with more than 17% (Eurostat, 2016a). This does not yet include figures for the 2015 refugee movements, when Austria took the second largest number of refugees per capita after Sweden (Eurostat, 2016b). Focusing on citizenship from non-EU countries, Austria has the third highest rate after Latvia

and Estonia, without taking into consideration the fact that these two count their Russian ethnic minority as “foreigners”. In Austria’s capital, Vienna, people not born in Austria make up 35% of all inhabitants (Stadt Wien, 2014, p. 37), including strong groups from western Balkan countries (10%), Turkey (4.3%) and Germany (2.9%). Taking a more broad definition of “migrant background” (at least one parent not born in Austria), the migrant population reaches 49% and more than 60% in the age groups under 19 (Stadt Wien, 2014, p. 39).

Since the year 2012, thus long before the “Islamic State” media hype in summer 2014, youth work practitioners have increasingly reported that religion has a significant relevance for many youngsters. They also detected an increase in one-sided-polarising ideology and a significant increase in anti-Semitism among a large proportion of youngsters. These observations were recently proved by a study (Güngör K./Nik Nafs C., 2016). There were already a few cases of young men leaving for Syria or planning to do so.

Since early 2014, extremism has been a hotly debated issue in Austria, especially in the media. On the one hand, it is an issue about young men, usually (but not always) with a migrant background, who have “radicalised themselves” or “been radicalised” depending on one’s point of view. Some of them are even ready to kill for their belief, their religion and their ideology. On the other hand, Austria has new movements like the “Identitären” (Identitarian movement), which has attracted significant attention among young

autochthon Austrians. Even though they do not play any role in youth work in Vienna, other Austrian states have more significant trouble with their, to put it mildly, “extreme views”. In December 2014, an Extremism Information Centre was established by the Austrian Federal Network of Open Youth Work (BOJA). It is financed by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Families and Youth. The centre clearly points out that it offers advice, prevention and intervention in all cases of radicalism, including religious, political, extremist right-wing or radical Islam<sup>1</sup>.

So far 2014 has been the height of the “Islamic State” issue in Austria. Until the end of 2015, according to Austrian Intelligence<sup>2</sup>, 267 people had left for Syria as foreign fighters or supporters (some stopped before leaving, 44 confirmed dead, 67 returnees, the rest still there or unknown), and about 20 of them were youngsters known by Viennese youth workers. Those movements came almost to a standstill<sup>3</sup> and the verbal support or at least sympathy has significantly decreased. But this is true only if you limit the issue to “Islamic State” – or “Daesh” as they would be called in Arabic. I would like to severely warn against doing so. The main issues are still there and need to be dealt with. Anti-semitism, homophobia, debasing, pejorative and insulting behaviour

1 <https://www.familienberatung.gv.at/beratungsstelleextremismus/en/> [19.6.2016]

2 [http://diepresse.com/home/panorama/wien/4958349/Gridling\\_Wir-sind-keine-Sozialarbeiter](http://diepresse.com/home/panorama/wien/4958349/Gridling_Wir-sind-keine-Sozialarbeiter) [7.6.2016]

3 259 people until 2015 [http://www.bmi.gv.at/cms/BMi\\_Verfassungsschutz/Verfassungsschutzbericht\\_2015.pdf](http://www.bmi.gv.at/cms/BMi_Verfassungsschutz/Verfassungsschutzbericht_2015.pdf) [20.10.2016] compared to a total of 278 [https://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/VHG/XXV/AB/AB\\_09300/imfname\\_556177.pdf](https://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/VHG/XXV/AB/AB_09300/imfname_556177.pdf) [20.10.2016]

towards females and absolutely everybody with a different opinion is – in connection with (often pseudo-) religious or “ethnic” values – still prevalent (Güngör K./Nik Nafs C., 2016).

The Viennese Youth Department launched a large research among users of open youth work providers in winter 2014/15: “Jugendliche in der Offenen Jugendarbeit – Identitäten, Lebenslagen und abwertende Einstellungen (Youth in Open Youth Work – Identities, Live and Pejorative Attitudes)” (Güngör K./Nik Nafs C., 2016). A total of 401 interviews on 65 items and 20 in-depth interviews with youngsters were carried out and the results will bring useful information about several issues. Already a pre-study among 45 youth work unit directors has pointed out that the diversity aspired to among users of the services (youth centres and detached youth work) has been reached, and in doing so there is even a shifting towards people with migrant backgrounds.

As it is declared policy that this municipal service should focus on socially disadvantaged children and young people, this can be considered a success, which is also confirmed by a comprehensive evaluation of the services in 2013 that includes more background data on the people reached (L&R Sozialforschung, 2014).

## Principles of open youth work and their role in extremism prevention

The theoretical debate has shown that some of the principles of open youth work in Austria play an essential role in the prevention of extremism, if they are adequately applied.

Referring to the Theory of Change of Open Youth Work in Vienna, youth work is aimed at “enabling youth” (youth in the sense of adolescence). The period of adolescence nowadays is no longer a protected space period in which young people grow up largely unchallenged by economic compulsions, develop their identity and prepare for job and life – usually predetermined by the family and its social status.

*“Jugend reibt sich immer weniger an der Erwachsenenwelt, sondern sucht früh sich in ihr zu verbergen, in ihr unterzukommen* (youth challenges the world of adults less and less but rather tries to hide away in it, to be accommodated in it)” (Böhnisch, 2012, p. 140). In this regard, Lothar Böhnisch, one of the leading German youth researchers, says it is more and more the function of open youth work to “enable youth”, meaning to give them the chance to act beyond the requirements of the adult world and the working environment. *“Sie trifft dabei vor allem auf sozial benachteiligte Jugendliche, denen der Experimentierstatus Jugend verwehrt ist, oder den sie sich risikoreich zu erkämpfen versuchen und dabei immer wieder in riskanten Bewältigungslagen hängen bleiben* (It [youth work] encounters mainly socially disadvantaged youngsters, who lack the opportunities of having different

experiences, which they then try to have sometimes with high risk and often get stuck in negative circumstances)” (Böhnisch, 2012, p. 142).

Hence key tasks for open youth work are enabling self-expression and self-efficacy, and creating an appreciative environment (Verein Wiener Jugendzentren, 2014, p. 10). The Association of Viennese Youth Centres’ theoretical concept summarises: *“Offene Jugendarbeit ‘ermöglicht Jugend’ in diesem Sinne, indem sie Raum, Zeit und Beziehungen zur Verfügung stellt und dabei insbesondere die emotionale Komponente, die Lust und den Spaß an der Sache, an der Begegnung und Auseinandersetzung ins Zentrum rückt.* Open youth work ‘makes youth possible’ [enables adolescence] as it provides time, space and relationships and particularly focuses on emotional components, fun, encounters and things young people are keen to debate on” (Verein Wiener Jugendzentren, 2014, p. 11).

Following this model certain principles of open youth work gain significant importance when it comes to the prevention of radicalism and extremism<sup>1</sup>:

**Openness:** Open youth work is generally open to all young people in the respective age groups, regardless of origin, education, conviction or any other precondition.

Following this openness, a **low threshold** is another essential

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<sup>1</sup> Compare with Verein Wiener Jugendzentren (2012) p. 14 and Bundesweites Netzwerk offene Jugendarbeit (2011).



element, the conception, time and space of the services allow easy access, offers and themes are led by the reality of the life of young people. There is no pressure to consume; offerings are free of charge, direct and without precondition and obligation.

The key principle, from which the specific methodology is mainly deduced, is undoubtedly **voluntariness** of participation and the ability to leave the activities at any time without consequences.

The **professional relationship**, which also includes confidentiality and transparency, enables a reliable, functional and emotional escort for adolescents. This stable frame offers orientation, social competences, diversity of opinions and actions at a time of testing yourself and finding out your and the society's limits.

A special role in working with young people vulnerable to extremism is played by the principle of the **biased mandate**. Open youth work generally acts with regard to the interests, rights, competences and needs of young people. In cases of conflict, youth work is on their side. In the context of radical and extremist views, many colleagues see this as leading to a number of contradictions. Firstly, many of the viewpoints of the young people are totally contrary to the individual values of the youth workers and also those outlined and propagated in the youth work conception. And secondly, those youngsters' behaviour is also often connected with verbal and sometimes

even physical violation of other young people (e.g. in a youth club). But those others must also be protected and supported by the youth worker. Often it is hard to keep track of those who offended and also not to neglect those who were their victims.

## **Causes, triggers and motives**

If there is at least one thing research on violent terrorism can globally agree on, it is the fact that there is no unique identifiable reason for people affiliating to extreme violent groups. Magnus Ranstorp offers a comprehensive collection of reasons (Ranstorp, 2016) that have more or less influence in various cases. Among others, individual, socio-psychological, social and political factors count. The role of religion is one of the most widely discussed. “It’s Islam” and “It has nothing to do with religion” seem to be the most frequently heard viewpoints.

Poor inclusion in society and a lack of personal perspective and orientation have always been a breeding ground for extremism. Individual traumas might trigger, group pressure, social media and others are supportive. But in the same way, inadequate demarcation of mainstream politics to the far right offers them justification for inhuman politics, even violence, and religion sometimes has the same offer. Ruud Koopmans did extensive research on this topic (Koopmans, 2014) and shows how deeply some pejorative narratives and prejudices are rooted in certain religious communities.

Anyway, when we are talking about youth and radicalism, a lack of personal perspective is the major factor. No or poor education, scarce opportunities on the job market and expensive housing are essentials to raise vulnerability. Another, often underestimated point is young people's search for orientation in a metaphysical or spiritual sense. The search for "sense in life" is not only a matter for well-educated, distinguished middle- or upper-class youngsters. Youth workers in Vienna have faced an increase in the level of discussion and number of questions in recent years. And it is those educationally disadvantaged young people, often with a migrant background, who are asking.

And for them, religion often has an offer. Simple patterns of good and bad, guilt and innocence provide simple solutions or at least explanations. "Us" and "them", deliverance of own responsibility and sweeping judgement of "them" being guilty of causing individual and universal suffering are typical of any extremist viewpoint. Additionally, in Islam, imams promoting a fundamentalist viewpoint stick to easily understandable basic rules that would, if strictly obeyed, bring relief whatever the person has done before.

If other agents of socialisation fail in their educational function – or sometimes even support the process because they first see stabilisation of the person rather than radicalisation – it's an easy game for rabble-rousers of any kind.

Jochen Müller, Götz Nordbruch and Deniz Ünlü describe all

this in a comprehensive way and in relation to religiously motivated extremism. According to them, the three key attributes of radicalisation are: ultimate authority of the putative original and only doctrine, degradation of dissidents and strict denial of democracy. The motives for radicalisation are: the search for knowledge and truth, obedience, community and justice. All these convey identity and “sense” using basic, easily understandable paradigms (Müller, Nordbruch, Ünlü, 2014, p. 149ff). Biographical research on young neo-Nazis in Germany brings similar results and the conclusions drawn by Kleeberg-Niepage (2012) can be transferred to young people with a tendency for religiously determined extremism.

Open youth work per se can represent one of the often searched alternative narratives when it comes to preventive work with young people at risk. Open youth work is positioned directly in the daily lives of youngsters and holds credibility and authenticity. Furthermore, open youth work can offer support for individual deradicalisation programmes for people ideologically already consolidated. The “*Good Practice Guidelines and Principles*” (Weilnböck, 2013) of the Europe-wide recognised “Violence Prevention Network”, which are trendsetting in deradicalisation, show significant similarities with the principles of open youth work.

## **Principles for the work with youth sharing extremists' opinions in open youth work**

Based on the findings so far, we can draft the following principles specifically for open youth work in the context of extreme polarising and downgrading attitudes, behaviours and identities of young people. Those principles are generally applicable, independently of the extremist background, whether it is religiously motivated or ethno-nationalist. They are derived from the general principles, partly outlined above, are action guiding and must be adapted to the situation and target groups concerned.

### **Openness for all**

As outlined in the general principles, openness in the form of a “positive welcome culture” for everybody, combined with the voluntariness in participation, is the structural key, the entrance to open youth work. It enables the youth worker to get into contact and form relationships with groups who are often no longer approachable for anybody else. This is also facilitated by an absence of any formal barriers, no pressure to commit to anonymity.

### **Create an open but also safe and constructive environment for dispute and discussion**

There is a quite demanding and ambitious challenge behind this principle, namely take and accept the youngsters as

they are, with all their opinions (including the narrow-minded, downgrading and negative ones). Give them some safety but at the same time don't let them take over and exploit the whole youth club. Active participation of the youngsters and their taking over responsibility are important parts of this principle.

## **Have one's own clear and arguable political position**

Having an attitude of acceptance towards young people does not mean having one's own, maybe different political opinion. Quite the contrary – in the context of extremism it is essential to develop one's own standpoint and also to **clearly express it**. In this respect, open youth work acts as a part of the education system in terms of human rights education, the scope of which includes the equality of all human beings and in this sense it is a counter narrative to all ideologies (and religions) of inequality. At the same time, it stimulates the articulation and the promotion of one's own interests, which is beneficial for young people. This principle is also particularly challenging because it requires the full authenticity of the youth worker. In this sensitive area it is not possible to promote standpoints that one does not support personally 100%.

## **Know the world of young people**

What is evident for youth work in general also especially applies here. Explicit knowledge about the immediate living environment, the social, economic and cultural conditions of young people, is a fundamental precondition for working with them.

## **Professional knowledge about issues that are important for young people**

Hardly any other issue is so frequently discussed in the current dispute about the work with “radicalised youngsters” as this one. Hidden behind this discussion is the question of the role of religion in radicalisation in general. With regard to current developments, there is one thesis saying that only religiously well and intensely educated people (such as religious educators or imams) are able to sustainably work with those kids, because only they can show them the “right” (religious) way by delivering the “right” translation and interpretation (of religious text). However, this is in contradiction to another thesis – often held and promoted by the same people: that radicalism doesn’t have anything to do with religion.

In the end it is about striking a balance – the social worker, youth worker, therapist, whoever is working with those youngsters, has no other choice than to deal with their themes and this includes religion as well. But it is not about deep, it

is about SOLID knowledge, such as for all other themes and issues that are important for young people. For example, when one is working with youths at risk of drug abuse, it is important to have certain knowledge about legal and illegal substances and their effects, but it is not necessary to be a medical doctor.

As in the drug example, in working with radical youths, it sometimes makes sense to consult and involve a religious expert. In working with those kids, professional and solid knowledge about religion is also important for the youth worker. It is not necessary to have attained one's own degree in religious studies, especially when it is about prevention.

## **Judge behaviour, not the person**

A permanent professional relationship on a volunteer basis can only work with the mutual appreciation of the people involved. So in the case of verbal or physical offence, the misbehaviour of the person must be the focus of criticism and not the person themselves, especially when it is about violence, glorification of violence, about racism, no matter whether it is verbal or physical.

## **Set clear borders while still respecting the person**

Borders must be absolutely clearly defined, meaning borders both in terms of behaviour and expression (verbal, written, ...).



Borders must be explained coherently and should not appear to be random. Violation of those borders must be addressed immediately and in an appropriate way, sometimes also requiring sanctions. This is a principle that is sometimes hard to follow, because it challenges the quality of the relationship between the youth worker and the youth. But for people searching for orientation in particular, clear boundaries are all the more important and frequently it is surprising how gratefully they are accepted. Not least, they are a sign of taking those youngsters seriously, that it matters for the youth worker who they are, what they are thinking and doing.

## **Time and continuity**

It is important to be aware of the fact that prevention (and also deradicalisation) is something that needs time and continuity. You have to keep an eye on the ongoing process and need to formulate proper (intermediate) outcomes, and regularly reflect and evaluate this to adjust your strategy if necessary.

The European Union recently acknowledged the importance of the youth sector in countering extremism. On 30 May 2016, the Council of the EU adopted conclusions on the role of the youth sector in an integrated and cross-sectoral approach to preventing and combating violent radicalisation of young people. Several issues, such as the holistic approach, the role of the youth sector in developing an own identity and the cooperation with other sectors, specifically formal education,

are outlined. Member states are invited to strengthen support for the youth sector in several fields and actions.

It is not necessary to develop new principles, not even new approaches. As this paper tries to explain, the basics and also a lot of best practice have already been developed,, nevertheless in many countries this has to be promoted and proper resources have to be provided. However, it is important to recall those basically known principles and adapt them to the current needs. Even though it is essential to resolutely contradict the mass media's dramatisation of radicalisation and to put things into perspective, it is also not to be ignored that some polarising pejorative behaviours among youngsters are increasing. The amount of sympathy for Daesh, Salafist movements and their right-wing "counter-movements" (which share the same attitudes at the end of the day) does not give ground for hope that these phenomena will disappear soon.

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English information on the Web:

Association of Viennese Youth Centres (Verein Wiener Jugendzentren): <http://typo.jugendzentren.at/vjz/index.php?188>

BOJA – Federal Network for Open Youth Work: <http://www.boja.at/english/>

POYWE – Professional Open Youth Work in Europe: <http://poywe.org>

## 4. The high-tech society, youth work and popular education

*Professor Ivar Frønes, University of Oslo*

### **Abstract**

*The present historical phase of rapid changes, sometimes referred to as the fourth industrial revolution, produces a high demand for competence and innovation; in what is termed the high-threshold society, social inclusion requires competence. Young people's position at the forefront of technological innovation open for the development of competencies and capacities for innovation through youth work such as the organisation of voluntary peer-driven activities. The perspective of youth work underlines bottom-up organisational structures, the principle of voluntary participation, and not least, the principle of learning by doing. Youth work as a form of peer-based learning and development is complementary to the competence acquired by education and training. The article argues that modern youth work requires a revitalising of its roots in popular education, to function as popular education of the future.*

**Keywords:** technology, participation, high-threshold society, youth work.



# Introduction

In spite of the national variations in activities and ideologies that can be found under the term “youth work”, most descriptions have a common core. Youth work is understood as a “tool for personal development, social integration and active citizenship” to provide opportunities for young people to shape their future life course<sup>1</sup>. A keyword in the description of youth work is participation: “The main aim of this participation is to ensure that they are free to involve themselves in the social and developmental process and that self-involvement is voluntary, active and informed” (World Assembly of Youth)<sup>2</sup>. The concept of meaningful participation covers numerous purposes, ranging from activities understood as meaningful by the users to keeping kids off the streets<sup>3</sup>. In spite of cultural differences, youth work in various countries has in common the basic idea of supporting young people in the structuring of their future, as underlined by the Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 29a: “the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential”. The realisation of these purposes requires identification and understanding of the present societal formation, and a positioning of youth work within this social and historical framework.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.coe.int/en/web/youth-portfolio/youth-work-essentials>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.way.org.my/youth-issues/youth-participation-in-decision-making>

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, [http://ec.europa.eu/youth/library/study/youth-work-report\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/youth/library/study/youth-work-report_en.pdf)

## The high-competence, high-threshold society

Concepts like the *knowledge society* or the *skilled society* illustrate the core characteristics of what is also termed the *post-industrial society*: the requirement of skills and competencies, and what some have called the collapse of the need for unskilled labour (Nickell & Bell, 1995). It is no longer the case that the majority of young men are trained for work on industrial shop floors while most young women become housewives, as was the case in the fifties and sixties, the heyday of the industrial society. Young people today face a knowledge society in which necessary competence is the gateway to professional life and to future social inclusion. Modern society is a *high-threshold society*; as regards socialisation, this amounts to a new societal formation – a society in which an increasing number of young people face the risk of exclusion. The mechanisms of social exclusion are rooted in the interplay between individual and social factors and the increased demands for skills and competencies. Not reaching the threshold level may relegate one to the position of NEET (not in education, employment or training), where the chances of a good future are getting slim. NEET was not a category in the industrial society simply because of the low level of competence required for integration into working life.

The affluent industrial society of the fifties produced the teen years – the period of turmoil between the role of child and the role of adult and the correspondent adolescent society – as a mass phenomenon, and the rough young working-class

hero, epitomized by Brando and Presley (see, for example, Coleman, 1961). In the sixties and seventies, young people were depicted as subcultures and political and cultural rebels; the punks of the eighties perhaps represented the peak of the subcultural scenes (see, for example, Hebdige, 1979). With the coming of the post-industrial high-threshold society, the problems of young people were no longer primarily about hanging out on street corners or being members of flagrant subcultures, but their vulnerability and risk of dropping out not only from schooling but from a decent future.

The transition to the knowledge society enhances the position of the family; parents' competence and their integration in the workforce are an important bridge to adult society for children, and the cultivation of children's competencies has been increasingly understood as an important aspect of parenthood (Lareau, 2003). Social class factors influence school achievements; the fact that the term "school dropout" returns millions of hits on the Internet shows that recent years have brought an awareness of the marginalisation processes encountered in all knowledge/competence societies. Slogans like "no child left behind" (US), "sure start" (UK) and a "fair go" (AU) illustrate the dynamics of the high-threshold society; the goal is to provide every child with the competence required to get a fair start.

The societal opportunities and the correspondent demands for competencies imply the challenge of the possible marginalisation of groups of young people; opportunities

produce risks. The fourth industrial revolution is likely to increase the often-observed mismatch between the formal competencies facilitated by the educational systems and the factual competencies required by the demands for skills, innovation and entrepreneurship. The demand for lifelong learning illustrates the need for the continuous development of new skills; the Learning Analytics Community Exchange (LACE) emphasises that formal and informal learning experiences “will become crucial for the European Industrial Renaissance”<sup>1</sup>. The social competence required for mastering complex social and multicultural landscapes also underlines learning by experience; the high-threshold societies require arenas that promote entrepreneurial learning as well as social competence and the capacity for civic participation.

## **Competence or knowledge; the choice of metaphors**

When asked about where they acquired the competence they need at work, most people answer “on the job”; that is, they develop their competence in the workplace (Cross, 2006)<sup>2</sup>. This is not limited to people with little formal education: scientists, artists, surgeons and technological innovators all emphasise the importance of learning by doing, such as when teachers primarily learn to be teachers in the classroom, not from books. This may produce a gap between

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1 See, for example, <http://www.laceproject.eu/publications/LACE-LAW-manifesto.pdf>

2 <http://www.tulser.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Tulser-interview-Jay-Cross.pdf>

factual competence, often called “real competence”<sup>1</sup>, and formal competence. A poor bachelor’s degree with a vague grouping of courses for a major will always be classified as “higher education”, while vocational training, as in the case of an electronics technician, is often defined only as upper secondary education, despite the continuous strong upgrading of this type of competence throughout a vocational career. The fact that we develop our competence in the workplace shows formal education not as elaborated competence, but as a base from which we enter into the world of theorising and learning by doing. In spite of this, statistics on the level of competence are in general based on the length of time spent at educational institutions. One reason for this may be the use of the metaphor “the knowledge society”. The answer to the question of how knowledge is gained seems obviously to be from schooling: schools provide books and knowledge. However, if we choose the metaphor “the skilled society” or “the competence society”, the answer will be another question: where do the relevant competencies and skills come from and how do they develop?

Behind the notion that a high level of competence has its roots in formal schooling lies a misconception about the relationship between theory and practice. When a school requires its students to do history homework and read literature, it does not imply that the schooling is “theoretical”. While general

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.daea.dk/themes/prior-learning/what-are-real-competencies/>

“Real competencies include everything you can do, whether or not you have a certificate and regardless of where you learned it, be it in the formal educational system, the informal one or in any other setting.”

subjects at the upper secondary level are described as “theoretical”, vocational subjects are termed “practically oriented”, and are particularly suited to students who are “weak on theory”. But vocational subjects often contain more theory than general subjects. The education sector’s categories of “theory” and “practice” not only denigrate vocational subjects, but also represent a basic misconception of the relationship between theory and practice. Theorising points towards and builds on practice. Learning and understanding are built on experience; theory and practice are not mutually exclusive but mutually constitutive.

## **Learning by doing in the high-tech environment**

The perspective of learning by doing or constructionist learning underlines the position of experience and the active subject. From this perspective, knowledge is understood primarily not as a commodity to be accumulated through instruction, but as the knowledge structures produced by the learner. Theorising refers to the construction by the learner of mental models of how things are put together based on experience and practice, not to a curriculum of theories. The challenge of changing societies is the development of tools for theorising, not the rote learning of “theories”.

Project-based activities not only provide practical and social learning, but also the competence needed for theorising and innovation. The dividing line between leisure and work is not only being eroded because one may bring a laptop

everywhere, but also because of the need for innovation and creative thinking: leisure activities may provide the development of competence for elaborated innovation as well as for the basic competence needed not to end up among the NEETS. The panorama of leisure activities is expanding; the most visible ongoing – but often unrecognised – revolution is the revolution in tools. The smartphone is an excellent illustration: it revolutionises photography even more than phone use, works as an active encyclopaedia and provides new channels for communication. The revolutionary potential of 3D printing is not only in the printing of industrial modules but in the merging of technology and art, and the potential for private designing of 3D prints. Three-dimensional printing may provide a new version of the home workshop and reverse the fragmentation of the production processes of the industrial revolution. The advanced 3D technology that will be located at future community centres represents not only a potential blending of the position of consumer and producer, but an essential new factor in community work. The 3D printers<sup>1</sup> do not make crafts obsolete; they underline the old unity of art and craft and revitalise learning by doing, while the Internet opens up new communities of young entrepreneurs. The fact that the maker movement, with its merging of DIY culture and high tech, may boost the GDP by about US\$ 29 billion a year according to an article in *USA Today* in 2013<sup>2</sup> illustrates

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1 <http://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/ca/Documents/insights-and-issues/ca-en-insights-issues-disruptive-manufacturing.pdf>

2 <http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/business/2013/10/14/martha-stewart-column-meet-the-makers/2980701/>

the relationship between making as popular education and innovation and high tech.

## Youth work as popular education

In the industrial society of the fifties, sixties and seventies, the dominating idea of youth work was to provide attractive and meaningful leisure activities that would combat the risk factors facing modern youth and most often focused on keeping working-class youngsters out of trouble until they reached adulthood. The post-industrial society can no longer be understood as a societal formation in which the service sector dominates, as in Bell's classic work (Bell, 1973); the fourth industrial revolution represents new qualitative leaps in technological development. The most recent of these leaps, from the flat screen to three dimensions, has reached everyday life. In his book *From the Campfire to the Holodeck*<sup>1</sup>, David Thornburg expresses the need for new arenas of learning: "The dot-com world has morphed into the world of fabrication, and our students need to be as comfortable working with the new tools as previous generations were with the old ones." The underlining of tools points to learning by doing; this is contrary to an often implicit idea in modern education, that in high-tech societies, knowledge and competence will be transferred as abstract commodities. Thornburg does not represent a new way of thinking about education; learning through experience is not new, it is, as

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<sup>1</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holodeck>: "A holodeck is a fictional virtual reality facility featured in the Star Trek universe."



underlined by Cross (2006) as well as Dewey (1998), the natural pathway for the development of competence. Neither is the idea that the challenges of the future are the elaboration of competencies. What is new is the perspective that the ongoing technological revolution requires learning by doing – in real or simulated environments. There are basics, and advanced basics, that can be efficiently transmitted as batches of information, but innovation, theorising and development are based on learning from experience. The capacity for confronting new realities and innovations is like the capacity for empathy: it has to be developed through the experience of the active subjects. The fourth industrial revolution produces new demands for areas for informal learning, catering to the need for creativity and innovation by providing elaborated areas of learning by doing. New tools open up opportunities for new activities that merge art, technology and theory and bridge activities and learning. Youth work represents a peer-related answer to the need for such areas, providing young people with learning opportunities through a range of possible activities.

Providing young people with a voice has always been part of the basic ideology of youth work. Communication requires both channels and competence in communication. The Internet has provided most young people with channels; the old statement that “freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one”<sup>1</sup> may still hold true, but the Internet has made us all potential owners. The challenge is how to voice

1 Liebling, A J (1960) The New Yorker, May 14

our voice, our competence of expression; high tech produces new opportunities and new challenges.

Learning in the context of leisure is innovative and non-formal, but complementary to formal education and training. Specific job training programmes as well as comprehensive programmes targeting youth at risk may operate as integrated parts of community youth work. Youth work may be inspired by the “maker culture”<sup>1</sup> both practically – as with TechShops providing people with tools, equipment and arenas for social interaction – and ideologically, as a mindset that emphasizes playfulness, experimentation, peers and collaboration.

The virtual holodeck in *Star Trek* adapts to personal needs, wants and ideas; youth work at an educational centre – as an educational holodeck – caters to personalised activities and ideas as well as to the social functions of public space. The community youth centre as an arena for activities – related to computers as well as to woodwork, knitting, painting, guitar playing and new forms of expressions based on new materials and technologies, and not least socialising – represents the holodeck of modern youth work, reaching out to all individuals, groups and interests. The community holodeck is, perhaps paradoxically, bringing people together by adapting to personal interests and profiles, facilitating learning through collaboration. Educational gatherings are popping up as new versions of popular education; Maker Faires are one of many examples. The only event of importance for the national future

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maker\\_culture](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maker_culture)

taking place in a sports stadium in Norway, and receiving little media attention, is The Gathering: an annual party of about 6,000 young people and their computers held in an arena built for speed skating every Easter. Events like The Gathering illustrate youth work as the merging of socialising, innovation, voluntary activities and learning by doing.

The fourth industrial revolution is likely to represent a rediscovering of the natural pathways to learning. As a community of doing and being, youth work as the “community holodeck” represents a revitalisation of popular education, with the capacity to engage disaffected learners as well as youngsters involved in forms of deliberative practice. As popular education, youth work faces the challenge of the blurring of borders between formal, non-formal and informal learning, a challenge that the traditions of youth work have the capacity to confront. The practice and elaboration of non-formal learning open up opportunities for the elaboration of systems of validation, but based on the principles of youth work.<sup>1</sup>

High-tech societies require arenas for learning by doing outside the formal educational system. As we are being morphed into a new societal formation, in which young people face disruptive technologies, new opportunities, and new risks and high thresholds, it may be fruitful to look for inspiration in the history of youth work as popular education, such as clubs,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning>

ragged schools and educational activities; the challenge is to develop youth work as the popular education of tomorrow.

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## 5. Can youth work be described as a therapeutic process?

*Luke Blackham and Pauline Grace*

### **Abstract**

*Can youth work be seen as a therapeutic process? This is a contested and significant issue for the authors, especially set within the context of diminishing support and resources for youth work in England.*

*In this paper we explore the tensions, conflicts and contradictions between therapeutic processes and youth work practice. The purpose of this article is to start a debate with youth work professionals about the potential contribution that a therapeutic approach might offer in youth work practice. It is axiomatic that youth work is a form of informal education; we are inviting youth workers to consider the role and function of therapeutic educational dialogue (TED) in their practice.*

*The article draws on findings from a small-scale research project that used case studies and questioned practice in order to explore the relevance and application of the Palu (2015) Framework, which seeks to demonstrate that there are similarities and crossovers between counselling and youth work.*

*We argue that youth work practice is either accidentally or purposely therapeutic by its very nature and notions of person-centred approaches form the heart of good youth work practice. We conclude by suggesting that this is only the start of the debate about the potential for youth workers to claim therapeutic educational dialogue as an intrinsic part of their practice.*

**Keywords:** youth work, youth work process, therapeutic educational dialogue, therapeutic relationship.

## Introduction

In writing this paper, Luke and Pauline are conscious of challenging the false dichotomy between “academic” and “practitioner”. Certainly, in disciplines with long histories in higher education, including writing practices, the distance between doer and thinker might be more significant.

However, within the UK academic field of youth work these terminologies and boundaries are far more blurred. This may be because of the relatively recent incorporation of such fields and schools into the university sector.

The co-writing of this paper has required both authors to co-create academic writing practices that are at once consistent with existing academic models and additionally are able to justify their distinctive disciplinary practices. This writing

process deliberately seeks to privilege the voice of the youth worker and at the same time find a collaborative approach that is influential upon theory and/or practice. Much has been written about the distinctiveness of practice-based and reflective writing models. How much this co-writing process has gained acceptance in the higher education sector, where scientific empirical research is a strong tradition, is yet to be seen. Our hope is that this co-writing process becomes useful to youth work practitioners as well as academics.

Luke has worked with children and young people for over 10 years as a counsellor and youth worker. Over that time he has been lucky enough to use both aspects of his education and training in different ways. However, he has often found himself struggling with his professional identity and the inevitable questions: “Am I a youth worker or a counsellor?”, “Do I engage therapeutically or as an informal educator?” and “Is counselling more effective or is informal education the best way to support children and young people and improve their well-being?” A clear answer has never been forthcoming. It is true, however, that he has always felt more at home identifying with being a youth worker with a counselling background rather than a young person’s counsellor. Recently, through a joint research project, and an interrogation of his practice, he has begun to consider whether there are alternative perspectives. He has been fortunate to have an excellent supervisor with knowledge from both spectrums of his practice and who was willing to engage in his philosophical debates. Because of this, and his active reflection on practice,

Luke is rethinking the debate alongside Pauline; both are speculating whether it is possible to fuse informal education practice with counselling as shown in Fig.1 below and if there is an argument for youth work to be classed as a therapeutic engagement?

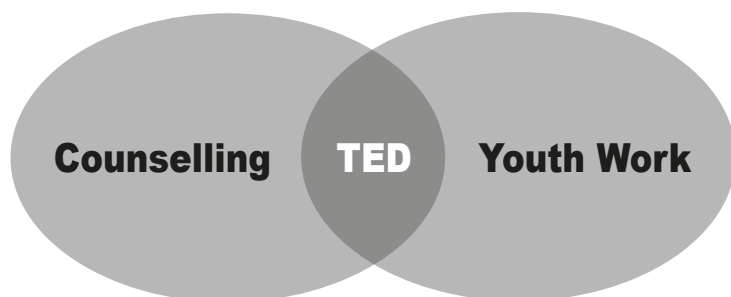
## **What is therapeutic? Can youth work be considered so?**

The term “therapeutic” covers a broad range of topics and what can be considered therapeutic depends on the individual. Therapeutic could mean a massage, shopping, meditation, conversing with friends, going for a walk in the woods, or seeing a counsellor or psychotherapist. Within this broad context, we argue that youth work itself can be seen as a therapeutic process. The youth work profession offers a variety of methods to engage young people and provide therapeutic interaction. These interactions can include group work, one-to-one mentoring/support, residential activities or providing a safe space (youth centres) for young people to learn together and develop with access to trained professionals to work with them. Batsleer (2008) discusses the concept of “being there” and how just being present for a young person can have psychological benefits for him or her. Being with the client is also a part of the therapeutic process (Gelso & Hayes, 1998) but is not something that needs any specific training, rather an attentiveness to those we are working alongside. Luke’s own experience has taught



him that more often than not the young people he works with are not interested in what his degree is in or what his professional membership represents. The young people he engages with simply come because they enjoy the process of the work they do, and once the formalities are out of the way that is when the real work can begin. The idea of being there was important and the effectiveness of this was evident in Luke's initial research (Blackham, 2011), as the young people interviewed stated that having a youth worker present, with the understanding they could "go to him or her" when they needed, was a very comforting thought. The knowledge of having access to a trusted person also increased engagement and outcome when the support was needed. These outcomes centre on the development of a relationship between youth worker and young person; it is this relationship that truly brings about change and emotional well-being and will be explored further in this article.

Wampold (2001) describes two models of therapy. The first is "the medical model", which defines a form of therapy in terms of specific methods and/or techniques. The second is "the contextual model", according to which, in psychotherapy specifically, it is viewed as taking place in "a healing context" (Frank & Frank, 1991). We argue that this healing context is the very same dialogical context that we refer to above within the youth work relationship.



**Fig. 1 Palu Framework (Blackham & Grace, 2015)**

The Palu Framework (2015) demonstrates that there are similarities and crossovers between counselling/psychotherapy and youth work. For the purpose of this article, the terms “counselling” and “psychotherapy” will be used interchangeably. Although there is currently an ongoing debate as to what the differences are (if any) between counselling and psychotherapy, there is no universal agreement (BACP, 2016). The framework takes its name from combining the authors’ names. It is a framework that takes humanistic counselling and elements of cognitive therapies and applies them to a youth work process. At the centre of this framework is therapeutic educational dialogue (TED). TED is used when youth workers are engaged in dialogue that is both educative and therapeutic. It is when TED is taking place that young people are able to explore themselves and their world whilst increasing their emotional well-being in a therapeutic manner. In this article the authors will demonstrate the relevance of this method to modern-day youth and community work practice and begin to explore its implications for future practice.

### **The similarities between counselling and youth work theory**

Based on the Palu Framework, we propose that youth workers engage in a therapeutic manner when working with children and young people and that there are many similarities and crossovers between youth work and counselling. Both of these approaches, for example, identify that it is the relationship between the child/young person and practitioner that creates change. Young (2006) states that the relationship between youth worker and young person is at the heart of youth work, and therapists also hold that central to the counselling process is the therapeutic alliance/relationship (Geldard & Geldard, 2010). This is true when working with children and young people (and adults) in any professional capacity: if you are unable to develop a good relationship then it is unlikely that you will be able to effect change. In addition to this key concept, it is argued that the theories used in counselling and youth work are not worlds apart either, but as counselling is such a wide field with a variety of different approaches, for the purpose of this article we will focus on humanistic counselling, drawing on cognitive behavioural techniques.

We believe that the humanistic approach (particularly person-centred and existential), as described by Rowan (1983), parallels with youth work practice as it is essentially non-directive, correlating well with voluntary participation, one of the major components of youth work (Batsleer, 2008). Existentialist counselling supports clients' search for

meaning through the use of philosophical existentialism and looking at the issues concerning the client in the present rather than the past (Cooper, 2015), an area with which youth workers also concern themselves; this is because young people are constantly working and reworking their identities and questioning their place in society or even the world. From an existentialist perspective, clients often come to counselling as they have lost or are looking for meaning in their lives (Cooper, 2015). Youth workers are often well placed during this time for young people and the exploration of their identities underlies much of what youth workers are working with through dialogue. What gives youth workers the edge in this scenario, however, is that they do not need to have a young person referred to them, nor do they require a treatment room in which to explore these issues but are able to engage through dialogue with the young person in a variety of settings and even spontaneously. The benefit of this spontaneity is that the exploration can come naturally without the prerequisites of needing a counselling room or forming a contract before the work. This is not to say there is no value to a contract or having a space to work one to one. We believe the value of working in the moment presents an opportunity to really engage with fresh ideas, and being there to support and contribute to those developing ideas almost immediately can be very effective. Existentialism itself asks life's big questions: Who am I? What is my life's purpose? What is ethical? Are there higher beings or deities? What are my beliefs? An existentialist counsellor would support his or her client in

answering such questions. In the existentialist approach, the emphasis is put less on the skills used in therapy and more on the quality of the relationship. Geldard and Geldard (2010) point out that the relationship is much more like a student and mentor rather than client-counsellor. This is the same relationship that the youth worker attempts to cultivate when working with children and young people, often with an emphasis on utilising a Freirean approach.

If youth workers began to use this knowledge of existentialism purposefully, and further developed the skills needed to have a more in-depth relationship with a young person, they could assimilate a more therapeutic structure to their existing practice. The counselling profession calls this “the therapeutic relationship”; youth workers refer to it simply as “the relationship”. We argue that it could be known as therapeutic educational dialogue (TED) between youth worker and young person, because these existential questions are often a significant part of a youth worker’s dialogue with young people, in some form or another. From this we conclude that youth workers should be working with this consciously and with purpose.

As with existentialist approaches, person-centred therapy also has much in common with informal education. For example, the three core conditions of empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard of Rogers (1951) have much in common with the art of youth work.

We would argue that empathy is not a skill but a human trait and that those in the helping professions (such as youth work and counselling) need a higher awareness of empathic understanding rather than seeing it as a preserve and condition of counselling interventions. This is because it is very hard to be in the moment with a person if you are trying to ensure you meet a theoretical requirement. Young (2006) describes empathy when working with young people beautifully.

The relationship is essentially empathetic. It is about seeing young people and young people feeling they have been seen. They have been recognised in some way, which is a kind of spiritual thing that's about self and a very fundamental recognition of one human to another in a very focused way (Young, 2006, p. 73).

Empathy is an important part of the youth work process. As youth workers seek to understand the young people they work with, and in order to support them effectively, they need to empathise with young people and their concerns. By experiencing empathy, young people are more likely to feel heard, understood and cared for.

The word "congruence" means to be "real", and from Luke's personal experience, interactions and previous research (Blackham, 2011), and interviews with young people, youth workers are often considered by young people to be more congruent than therapists. It is argued that this is due to the

difference in approach when working with this specific group. Geldard and Geldard (2010) write that counselling young people needs a specific type of intervention that is relevant to their stage in life, an approach they call the “proactive approach” to counselling adolescents. Youth workers fit this role perfectly, since because of their training and empathy they are proactive and bring informal education processes into their relationships with young people. The way in which youth workers engage puts them in a strong position to be empathetic when working with young people. This is because they are able to see and experience young people in a variety of settings and can see the broader context of their lives as opposed to working solely in one room, one hour every week, more often than not for a set number of sessions. Whilst it can be argued that youth work is time limited (typically youth workers in the UK engage with young people from the age of 11 to 19), the way in which it is carried out does not put “time limits” on young people in the way in which a counselling intervention would (counselling sessions typically last 50 minutes, thereby limiting opportunities for spontaneity and freedom of exploration). This youth work way of working allows the idea of being congruent or real to become a more solid concept. The youth work set-up is also beneficial for authentic engagement as the notion of professional is truly stripped bare. Whilst counsellors aim to be as non-judgemental and impartial as possible, their congruence is challenged due to this as this way of being can restrict the counsellors’ own humanity. It also adds to the

weight that the counsellor is the professional creating a power imbalance affecting the young person's ability to perceive such congruence. Illich (2005) explored the idea of "disabling professions" and how perceptions of professionals impacted on their own decision-making and led to people being unable to heal themselves and make their own decisions. Illich was discussing how power had been given to professionals, thereby disabling people in making their own choices. The counselling regime often finds itself in this predicament when working with children and young people, whereas youth workers can thrive by being seen as the professional friend and have truly authentic relationships with young people.

Finally, unconditional positive regard (UPR). The concept of UPR is considered a noble one but not truly possible. Evidence suggests that we make judgements about people not long after we meet them (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000). But what Rogers (1951) was saying was that it was possible to go beyond our judgements and experience the person unconditionally. The issue here is that authenticity is limited as it would be difficult to be truly congruent with another person if, as a worker, you were striving to hide your judgements even from yourself. However, youth workers again do attempt to meet young people and put aside their judgements in order to support them as best they can.

With regard to cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), this is a therapy that is more directive than its humanistic counterparts and is aimed at teaching clients to modify their thinking to



manage their behaviour (Trower et al., 2005). CBT focuses on thought patterns and on how our beliefs impact on our thinking and our thinking can then affect how we feel, thereby determining our behaviour. Youth workers seek to educate young people and this form of psychoeducation would fit well in the approach and philosophy of youth and community work. Ord (2007) argued that youth work would benefit from developing a curriculum to work towards in order to defend its essential position in working with young people. CBT through TED could easily form part of this process as young people will often ask for direct guidance regarding their current situation and by utilising CBT and TED in a curriculum there could be a clear way of working with young people regarding anxiety, depression and negative thought patterns. CBT also finds itself drawing on philosophical positions such as Stoicism (Robertson, 2010) and Buddhism (Tirch et al., 2016; youth workers also draw from philosophy in their approaches using work by Aristotle and Socrates, the latter of whom we could argue is the father of informal education based on the Socratic method. To summarise, just as CBT seeks to educate regarding learning to control the mind and draws from a plethora of knowledge, so too does youth work. We would suggest that the reclaiming and development of the curriculum as discussed by Ord (2007) could successfully engage young people and support them in achieving mental well-being through a guided process using the Palu Framework.

We suggest that youth work seeks to be “transformative” and is based on “democratic education” rather than upholding

notions of “expertise”. Youth work is busy with the idea of a shared journey with young people, one that is “dialogical” in its nature and methods. It is not easy, straightforward or simple. It is complex, messy and involves a whole set of thoughts, behaviours, relationships, conversations and challenges as well as a lot of time. But by maintaining an empathic approach to working with young people, youth workers can effectively work within the complexity and chaos of the ever-changing worlds of young people.

## **What is therapeutic educational dialogue (TED)?**

TED is an informal educational approach with a therapeutic outcome attached. When engaged in TED, youth workers are not just educating when in dialogue with young people but as part of the process are bringing about therapeutic change also. These changes can include increasing resilience, developing a positive self-concept and reframing thinking patterns. When youth workers use TED they support young people in finding solutions to their problems educationally and practically in a way that is psychologically satisfying, thereby increasing overall well-being. What makes TED different from counselling? In this approach, counselling is not the centre of the focus. It is an approach that can be used anywhere at any time, fitting well with youth work that is centre-based, detached, outreach, specialised, in schools and in residential settings. TED is versatile as it can be used

in crisis intervention or planned interaction. It is a skill that youth workers can adopt in order to adapt to meet the needs of children, young people, families and communities. TED is something that many youth workers may identify with and may see that this is something they use to some degree in their work already. This paper aims to begin to solidify this as a recognised approach to working with children and young people.

In Blackham's research (2011), the overall consensus was that youth work interventions were more beneficial than counselling sessions due to the environment in which the work took place and the perceived power balance. However, that did not mean that counselling was ineffective, rather that the environment was key to successful intervention. TED is not limited to the environment in which it takes place and is also able to broaden the scope of conversation due to its educational element. This educational context is also key to increasing resilience and well-being (Department of Health, 2014). Increasingly, counselling literature is placing an emphasis on creating a discrete attitude to counselling young people (West, 2016) rather than just applying the same theory and practice as used with adults. Geldard and Geldard, as already stated, explore this way of working very well and use the term "proactive approach" when counselling adolescents (Geldard & Geldard, 2015). This approach and attitude can already be found in youth work, and by adopting the TED method, a more concrete approach with direction can be revealed.

Dialogue is an important principle of the informal educational relationship just as it is within the wider context of youth work practice. Dialogue, described as conversation or a series of conversations based upon respect, trust and co-operation, is a two-way process. Although beyond the scope of this article, we believe that it would be useful to explore the impact of the work of Rogers upon “traditional supervision”. Thorne (1992) argues that it is not too simplistic to affirm that the whole conceptual framework of Carl Rogers rests on his profound experience that human beings become increasingly trustworthy once they feel at a deep level that their subjective experience is both respected and progressively understood (Thorne, 1992, p. 26).

However, dialogue is fraught with tensions and issues of power. Dialogue within a TED relationship has to be purposive. There needs to be an acknowledgement that it takes effort to listen to another with the acceptance that one’s own understanding and position may change as a direct result of the exchange.

## **TED and pedagogy**

The neo-liberal agenda and the resulting managerialism has significantly impacted on the management of youth work in the UK. In part, this is characterised by a shift of power from practising professionals to auditors and policymakers (Davies, 2003). Managerialism has brought about conditions where youth workers find themselves practising in pressured

environments in which they are then required to meet targets (Seden & McCormick, 2011).

We argue that TED is essentially Socratic in essence and founded upon the interpersonal dialogic relationship; however, power as a dynamic is fundamental to the process and needs to be considered in all of its aspects. Thompson (1997) suggests that power exists on a number of levels – personal, cultural and structural – and it is within the personal that TED can be viewed as the most effective but necessarily solely within this sphere.

Youth work is, we believe, a pedagogic practice allied to “critical pedagogy”, a foremost proponent of which, for many youth workers, is Paulo Freire. He introduced ideas such as “conscientisation”, favouring “transformative and democratic education” via “dialogical” methods over traditional “banking” forms of education. Giroux describes critical pedagogy as:

“educational movement, guided by passion and principle, to help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action” (Giroux, 2010, p. 23).

If youth workers are to be considered agents of social change, then they seek to promote these Freirean tenets of practice as being central to their primary aim of not simply re-engaging young people in the mainstream (social control) but as the means by which they enable young people to gain an insight

into their limited circumstances and challenge how they are marginalised within society too (social action). Accordingly, youth workers are not just interested in doing something to solve social “problems” but are also keen to problematise social issues, i.e. to ask whose interests solving the problem serves. And what has produced the “problem” in the first place? The use of “generative themes” (Freire, 1972) that emerge from young people’s own reality, and are raised by them, is therefore both practically and ideologically embedded in a youth worker’s professional identity.

## **Examples of youth work as a therapeutic process – TED in action**

Here are two case study examples of how Luke’s practice as a youth worker has been therapeutic. The names have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

### **Fiona – TED as an effective approach in diverse environments**

Fiona is a 17-year-old female who is experiencing high anxiety levels. She has accessed counselling in the past but has not been able to resolve her issues. She engaged with Luke as she felt a new approach may help. Initial sessions focused on developing a positive relationship through dialogue as recommended by Jeffs and Smith (2005). The development of the relationship was an informal process as Fiona was more comfortable with this method as counselling felt more clinical.

Luke was still able to make an assessment of her needs and from there both agreed on what the focus of the work would be and what Fiona would want from this.

The counselling environment is more often than not in a room set out for one-to-one work as this is a “safe space”. In his research, Blackham (2011) argued that the safe space is more for the professional counsellor rather than the client/ young person and is not always conducive to a therapeutic intervention (something reflected by the young people interviewed during the research). In the case of Fiona this held true, despite her feeling anxious around people, they often held the sessions in the centre where Luke worked. They walked and talked, and this process was referred to by the co-author, Pauline, as “kicking the leaves”, meaning that the work took place outside an office or room. The opportunity for TED here was abundant as they were in an environment where Fiona could really connect with her anxiety and Luke was able to support her by doing this in a safe way. Whilst outside, Fiona explored how crowds made her feel and her thought process; as she was doing this, Luke was able to draw on his knowledge of cognitive behavioural therapy, maintain his person-centred approach, but then use TED to challenge Fiona’s perceptions. Their conversation looked at anxiety as an abstract concept, leading into how it affected her on a daily basis, and then looked at lessening this impact. This was also in line with Freire (1972) and his philosophy on education. Freire believed that for education to be effective, there needed to be a balanced relationship between student

and teacher. This balanced relationship was both therapeutic and educative as Fiona was able to discuss her thoughts and feelings congruently but also begin to find her own solutions to her concerns with the knowledge gained through our TED. In conclusion, by applying the Palu Framework and utilising the TED method, Luke was able to establish a credible rapport with Fiona: together they were able to explore her issues in depth in an environment suitable to her, and it empowered Fiona to find solutions to her concerns and educated her in applying those solutions.

### **Bal** – an exploration of TED in crisis

Bal is an 11-year-old male who has a crisis of conscience. Bal's friends have been involved in bringing an electronic cigarette (known as a "vapor") to school and this has been discovered. However, Bal knows that another vapor is available and who is bringing this in. Bal came to see Luke to explore the situation. He was torn between loyalty to his friends and not being a "snitch", and taking what he feels is the honest and right course of action, telling the school staff. Luke had previously developed a good relationship with Bal through informal education and dialogue and he felt that he could be open about the issues. Due to the immediacy of the issue, a referral to counselling was considered to be unnecessary and would not resolve the issue in time. However, that did not mean that a therapeutic intervention was impossible. As a youth worker, Luke was in a position to provide therapeutic support and practical intervention, and



seize an opportunity for education using TED. Together they began a conversation exploring how Bal was feeling about the situation and how he felt incongruent in allowing the situation to go on. It was clear that his friendship group had in some way influenced him into not telling, but this was incongruent with his nature and he was torn between peer pressure and his own authenticity. They explored what he thought was the right thing to do and why; how he felt about the vapor itself and how it broke the rules and increased risk to him and his friends. The crux of the situation was that Bal wanted guidance, something that counselling does not often offer, and needed an adult to support him in his decision-making. After some thought together, Bal came to his own conclusion that he needed to be true to himself and agreed to inform another member of staff with Luke's support. When asked how he felt, he responded that he felt better, lighter and happy that he had talked the issues through. This response would not have been out of place after a counselling session and it would be possible to conclude that the experience had been cathartic and thus therapeutic for Bal. In conclusion, Bal presented in crisis, he explored how he felt and was able to uncover his self-concept to a degree and how congruent he was being. With this solution and discussion Bal felt better in himself and was able to manage the situation with more resilience. TED can be an effective method when engaging young people in a crisis situation and demonstrates that youth workers are in a prime position to support young people therapeutically.

## **What TED can do for practising youth workers**

In light of the above examples, we argue that youth workers often find themselves in the role of a counsellor, albeit less formally, and, by using the Palu Framework as a guidance, taking into account the crossovers in the theory and practice of counsellors and youth workers, effect change. By applying TED to their conversations with young people, youth workers can begin to undertake a more conscious and therapeutic approach to their work. Youth work is a complex and ever-changing relationship with young people. The heart of this relationship is based on mutual trust and understanding. It is not always clear in what direction the relationship will go or what path the young person will take outside of this relationship. However, by being engaged by his or her youth worker in TED, a young person may be able to formulate their own ideas, create their own life philosophy and forge their own path. We are not stating that counselling and/or psychotherapy has no place. We are saying that there is a therapeutic element to youth work that is already happening in youth centres, in detached youth work, group work and one-to-one mentoring sessions. The dialogue and conversation that youth workers undertake can have a powerful and lasting impact on young people; it can evoke emotional responses and critical reflection. In essence, this is what counselling offers, but it is also a central tenet of youth work; and as professional youth workers there is an opportunity to explore this therapeutic aspect further. In conversations with young people there is opportunity for education (Jeffs & Smith,

2005) but there is also the opportunity to increase well-being and develop emotional intelligence. By applying TED, youth workers can begin to develop new ways of supporting young people in exploring and enhancing their emotional intelligence.

## Conclusion

We believe that if youth workers worked with the Palu Framework in mind, and engaged in TED consciously, then youth work/informal education could legitimately be seen as a therapeutic approach. The theories used in counselling, particularly humanistic, and youth work, are comparable and both professions aim for similar if not the same outcomes (the well-being of those with whom they work). TED can be used to enhance the informal education process of youth work as it will help develop a rapport with young people, and by supporting them emotionally TED will also enable better educational opportunities. The approach we have put forward would also enable youth workers to work more effectively alongside schools as the Palu Framework links education and therapeutic support together; much as Jeffs and Smith (2005) mapped the place of informal education, we seek to identify the zone where youth work becomes therapeutic. Instilling TED as part of youth work practice would support it significantly by increasing its therapeutic aspect and potentially enable a new way of working. Recent research conducted by the Public Policy Institute for Wales (2016) identified the need for integrated school systems to

support well-being in schools, demonstrating the need for a concentrated approach to supporting pupils in developing resilience and well-being. This provides the youth work profession with a chance to lead the way, to be innovative and provide such a support system for children and young people in schools; and the Palu Framework could form part of the foundation for that alongside more traditional approaches to youth and community work. The counter argument is that it could just prop up an authoritarian school regime that is not pupil-centred. The term “resilience” is a contested concept; it has become the “go to” phrase, which its critics claim puts the onus upon the individual to be resilient within their situation without ever questioning the societal structural inequalities that may have been placed there in the first place. As youth workers, we often consider our place in supporting young people and wonder whether we are agents of social change or social control, questioning and considering youth work values, whilst battling with the attacks for outcome-driven agendas (Taylor, 2009). We argue that TED can be an opportunity for social change as it can be used as part of the youth work process more consciously and it is not about outcomes, but rather a new way of considering our engagement with young people from a therapeutic aspect. Resilience is a buzz word currently used in academic and practitioner circles. However, we would argue that the term when used in this context means that when youth workers work with TED, young people have the opportunity to explore the world around them through dialogue, come to their own

conclusions, and feel better about themselves and their situation. TED is not about robotically going through a scheme to ensure they fit the mould of society, rather it is about enabling them to discover their power and assisting them to navigate their world successfully on their terms.

Work is still required to develop the Palu Framework and the utilisation of TED by youth worker practitioners. More research needs to be done regarding the effects of this framework and how young people and youth workers will respond to this way of working.

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## 6. Open youth work in a closed environment – The case of the youth club Liquid

*Lars Lagergren and Emma Gustava Nilsson*

### **Abstract**

*The aims of the article are (1) to present a thick description of open youth work targeted at a marginalised group (LBGTQ youth) and (2) to deepen the understanding of the practice and consequences of open youth work in a closed targeted setting among individuals who are considered to be marginalised. The theoretical concepts of stigma, stigma resistance and double consciousness are used to analyse the youth club Liquid. The results show that open youth work in this safe sheltered environment can be functional since the visitors get the opportunity to process their stigma by building up a double consciousness. The article is also an example of how a practitioner and an academic can co-write.*

**Keywords:** LBGTQ youth, social stigma, closed groups, methods.

# Introduction

This article is the result of a joint venture between a manager of a youth club and a scholar. It is not written for academic readers in the first instance but for curious practitioners and stakeholders. The main part of this article is the manager's narrative regarding the youth club and the work that is done there and the thoughts behind these activities. The scholar's role is to add in some theoretical understanding of what is happening, why it's happening and what the consequences might be of these activities from a combined sociological and pedagogical perspective. Since this article is not a purely academic one the theoretical argumentation and the number of references are kept to a minimum. The main feature of this article is the manager's narrative.

The aims of the article are (1) to present a thick description of open youth work targeted at a marginalised group (LGBTQ youth) and (2) to deepen the understanding of the practice and consequences of youth work among young individuals who are considered to be marginalised since they belong to minority groups. In this case it's not the targeted youth group that is the problem in the eyes of the constituency, but the ignorance or even hostility that the marginalised group must be prepared to face in their everyday life.

In this article we will focus on young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ people) and the specific case of Liquid, a youth club open only to

LGBTQ youth in the 12–19 age group. We highlight and discuss the strategies and activities used with the purpose of strengthening young people in their identity work and thereby also strengthening them in coping with their everyday life. The case study was carried out in Sweden.

## **Perspective and concepts used by the scholar**

The theoretical perspective used in this article will proceed from the concept of *stigma*. One definition of stigma is “the situation that strikes a person who for some reason or another is not able to win full social recognition” (Goffman, 1963/2011). An important part of the everyday life of a person from any minority group is meeting and tackling reactions from others. In Goffman’s words, a stigmatised person creates tactics to avoid hostile reactions from others. Another way for stigmatised people to avoid hostile reactions is to withdraw from public life and only seek company among fellow stigmatised others or do quite the opposite, i.e. try to hide the stigma just to fit in among the “normals” (Orne, 2013).

Today we believe ourselves to be more accepting of others, but still we get groups of people who in their everyday life have to be prepared to meet hostility and the concept of not being fully “normal”. This insight, more or less significant in every young person visiting Liquid, is one among many factors youth workers have to deal with. How to deal with it is, in our understanding, a delicate matter and we will discuss this further by using the concepts of *double consciousness* and

*stigma resistance.*

In his article “Queers in the line of fire: Goffman’s stigma revisited” (2013), Jason Orne argues that what he defines as queer people even today meet what he calls a middle group of others, between the sympathetic and the hostile others, who are “ambiguously hostile, uncertain, ‘tolerant’, socially awkward or invasively questioning of them upon learning of their sexuality” (p. 230). Orne is interested in how “queer” people respond when they, as he metaphorically puts it, find themselves “in the line of fire” from these “in between” others:

“...despite knowing that they are stigmatized and that others view them as discreditable, they remain “stigma resistant” (Siegel, Lune and Meyer, 1998), aware but yet unaffected. They have their own alternative worldview (Orne, 2013, p. 230).

By using the concept of “stigma resistance” we may explore the conditions under which certain individuals are able to resist devaluation and discrimination by others (Bonfire, 2013). Research on other stigmatised groups reveals that stigma resistance is connected to the stigmatised person’s self-esteem and mastery and that community activism has a positive impact on both self-esteem and mastery.

To become stigma resistant, a marginalised person needs to develop a *double consciousness*, which in W. E. B. Du Bois (1903, 1999) original definition was a key factor in a suppressed black person’s understanding of his/her lifeworld.

Orne has a radical definition and understanding of Du Bois' concept:

... a social psychological lens through which people in marginalized positions view themselves and others. Double consciousness is like a pair of bifocals, allowing the wearer to simultaneously look through the top – seeing the situation as the powerful likely see it – or through the bottom – seeing the situation through the eyes of the marginalized (Orne, 2013, p. 235).

According to Orne, double consciousness created “a lens that helps insulate the young people (...) from a negative self-image, allowing them to remain stigma resistant and engage in the strategies” (p. 231). We, the authors of this article, agree with Jason Orne on the importance of building a “stigma resistance” amongst young people in general and amongst young victims of prejudice and hate in particular. To develop and maintain a stigma resistance one needs a double consciousness, namely to be able to at the same time see oneself from the perspective of those who see themselves as normal and from the perspective of one's own community. This means that identifying, accepting and feeling that one belongs to a community is crucial.

In this article the concepts will be used to analyse what is actually happening in the work at Liquid and to create a deeper understanding of the consequences of that work.

From this point onwards the two writers are separated from

the narrative from the manager. Her writing will be presented in the standard font, *while the analysis from the scholar will be presented in cursive.*

## **To create an understanding and a sense of belonging to a community**

*In this part we will see how Liquid creates the foundation for the youth to enter a community – a feeling of safety, sharing and belonging. This is done through the structure of both the room and the activities. Here is Emma’s narrative, which contains the “whys”, the “whats” and the “hows” from her perspective as manager.*

In Sweden, the law against discrimination protects people with different sexual orientations and transgender identities or expression. The law also allows same-sex marriage and same-sex adoption. However, the hetero norm is still very strong in society, which means that LGBTQ people are stigmatised.

LGBTQ youth are considered to be a risk group, not only due to their exposure to bullying, threats and abuse, but also, as research shows, because mental illness and the use of alcohol and drugs are problems among LGBTQ youths. The latter is not due to the fact that you are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer, which is the cause of these problems, but the confined norms of society, exposure to bullying, threats and abuse are. Safe and welcoming places for LGBTQ

youths are believed to be a preventive factor of these kinds of problems. In our work at Liquid we follow the methods of Egalia, an LGBTQ youth centre in Stockholm, Sweden. These methods emphasise *safety*, *continuity* and *representation*:

*Safety*: It's crucial for Liquid to create a safe space for our visitors. Every visitor can be anonymous. We don't collect names for registration and are bound to secrecy concerning the participants, except when there are concerns for a visitor's safety or health. In those cases we are obligated to contact social services.

The doors are always locked and you can't see from outside who's in the room. We also use an alternative entrance in the backyard, so the visitors have the opportunity to sneak in. For some of our visitors the anonymity is not a big deal, for others it is of utmost importance, since they take a great risk by visiting Liquid. Perhaps they are living in an honour-based family situation or have other reasons not to be open about their sexuality and/or gender identity.

Liquid should be a safe space regardless of your gender identity, sexual orientation, physical or mental functionality, religion or ethnicity. To achieve that it is essential for us to be aware of how we and the visitors use language. Racist, sexist or other disparaging words are not acceptable. Not being questioned about who you are contributes to a safe environment. We also need to be aware that there is a fine line between maintaining a safe atmosphere and at the same

time not limiting visitors' right to speak their mind.

*Continuity:* We believe that continuity is one way to achieve safety. Visitors know which youth workers they will meet every week and we also have a clear opening hours structure. For example, a gathering and the activities are always held at a certain time during the evening.

*Representation:* Liquid wants to give its visitors a chance to find role models and identify with others who have had similar experiences. To do so we try to have a wide representation of different kinds of people on the staff. One part of the representation is in the physical environment, which is shown in magazines, movies, books and paintings. We avoid artefacts in the physical environment that reinforce society's norms regarding gender and sexual orientation.

Liquid is located in a youth centre called Arbis. Arbis has activities six days a week, and two of these are targeted; one day for girls only and one for Liquid. The youth leaders work in both the targeted and the open activities and since Liquid started in 2012 the staff have worked towards a more inclusive environment. One aim for our targeted activities is to make visitors feel safe at Liquid and with the staff, so they also want to visit other activities at Arbis or any other youth centre. Many of Liquid's regular visitors also join other activities at Arbis after a while.

At Liquid the visitors can meet new friends, participate in workshops, play music, watch movies and enjoy other



activities. There are 20–30 visitors every time and they come from all over the region and some even from further away. On average there is at least one new visitor every week.

The staff are certified youth workers and also have specialised education in relevant topics linked to the occupation. The staff consists of two tenured youth workers who run the club. They are complemented by more loosely attached youth workers and volunteers, usually adults with personal experience of living as LGBTQ people. Every open night there are three youth workers and, in general, one to three volunteer working at Liquid.

Our policy regarding anonymity is strict. It should be the youth's choice as to whether, and with whom, they are open about their sexuality and/or gender identity. This means we are restrictive with visits from other adults and we always announce on our website when we have external workshop leaders. If we need approval and signatures from a visitor's guardian, for summer camps or study trips, we always present ourselves as youth workers at Arbis, not Liquid. We have the same routine if we have to talk to social services or other agencies. We cannot know for sure who's "open" and who's not.

*When reading the manager's narrative, we understand that the "whys" emanate from the statement that LGBTQ youth constitutes a risk group, which means extra care and consideration from the youth workers. This extra care and*

*consideration in turn demands a matching setting (“what”) for the work to be successful. This setting is both material and immaterial. In the next part of the manager’s narrative she will reveal what is done and how the work is done.*

## **An evening at Liquid**

Before Liquid opens we have preparations to carry out. We put up maps on a pinboard, where the visitors can anonymously mark where they live. Hopefully this shows the youths that they are not alone. The visitors are often pleasantly surprised to see marks in their own city, neighbourhood, or even on their own street. The maps are also a way for us to draw conclusions about which youths we are reaching and whom we miss.

Responsibilities are delegated before opening. One of us is responsible for the gathering, one for the preparation of snacks and one is responsible for welcoming new visitors. The rest of the responsibilities are more flexible, such as preparing the activities or providing different kinds of material. We want a circulation of leaders in the house, so that every visitor will be seen and talked to. It’s also a way for us to make sure no one is exposed to bullying and that our rules of conduct are respected.

When a visitor comes for the first time, we have a certain routine for welcoming them. One of the staff shows the new visitor around the house, telling them about the activities and

conduct. They also receive an envelope with documents about conduct, a description of the activities and a short word list of terms linked to the LGBTQ community. It also contains a questionnaire with questions about gender identity, sexual orientation, place of residence, country of birth, religion, how they found out about Liquid and whether there is any specific activity they want to be a part of. The questionnaire is anonymous and voluntary. The answers help us to know which groups of youths we reach and which we miss.

Our evaluation questionnaires show that some visitors feel insecure when they first come to Liquid and experience problems joining the group. Here Liquid's sponsors – more experienced visitors volunteering to help out – play an important role. Being a sponsor is optional. The "job" of a sponsor is to welcome new visitors according to the routine, and also take the extra responsibility of involving the newcomers in the ongoing activities. In contrast to other youth clubs, many of our visitors at Liquid arrive alone, without knowing anybody, and therefore it is an extra high priority for us to make them comfortable and include them in the group as soon as possible.

During opening hours the visitors and leaders mostly have conversations, play cards or whatever the visitors want to do – "ordinary" youth club activities. The visitors come and go as they like, and they don't have to sign up for any of the activities. At 4.30 there is a gathering with a light snack or sandwiches. As many of our visitors come directly to the

club after school and may have travelled a long way, we offer something to eat without charging. We think that the economic resources of the visitors should not affect their ability to participate in any of our activities. At the gathering all the visitors and leaders sit in a circle and talk about what conduct applies at Liquid, what LGTBQ stands for and what activities will be offered that evening. Everybody will also have the opportunity to say their name, age, personal pronoun and how many times they've been at Liquid. Your personal pronoun is connected to your gender identity and in Sweden we also have a gender-neutral pronoun, *hen*, for those who have a non-binary gender identity. For many of the visitors it feels good to have the chance to give a presentation while having everybody's attention. For some of the visitors this is a bit harder – they don't want to speak in front of everybody and that, of course, is also okay. Some of the visitors don't like the gathering at all – they feel restless and bored, and sometimes they even go out for a walk during it.

When we have new visitors it is important to give them all the information at the gathering. If we don't have any new visitors, we try to make the gathering shorter by excluding some of the information that everybody is already aware of. However, the presentation recurs every time. For some visitors the importance of having the gathering is not obvious at the time, but they realise it later on in life.

After the gathering there is one planned activity, with some connection to the LGBTQ community, either the activity in

itself or the person leading the activity. The workshops could be about safe sex, movie-making, anti-racist strategies, gender reassignment treatment, drama, LGBTQ and religion or music production, just to mention a few. These activities are optional and those visitors who don't want to join in will just hang out with friends, play music or have conversations with the leaders. The visitors have the opportunity to state their wishes for specific activities and most of the wishes have been fulfilled so far. The aim of the activities is educational but also to increase self-confidence by trying new things, without pressure.

After closing time the staff take an hour for reflection and evaluation together. This process is very important for the development of Liquid and for us on the staff to discuss current issues but also the general feeling and the experiences of the evening. Did anyone find themselves in a difficult situation during the evening that needs to be shared with the rest of the staff? Has anyone noticed that a particular youth feels sad or angry? Is there something we need to follow up and proceed with next week? Is there anything we need to change? Positive factors are also shared and discussed. What worked out really well this evening? What personal development can we see among our visitors? We will also fill in the statistical material.

*When reading the manager's narrative over an evening at Liquid it becomes apparent that everything is carefully planned and executed – the gathering, the planned workshops*

*and the free activities, and the time for reflection afterwards. Safety first, then sharing and belonging, and lastly safety again. From the way new visitors are introduced they soon become aware of the existence of an LGBTQ community and that they can be a member of that community. Both the structure and the activities offered every open night are there to encourage them to be a functioning member of that community. The choice for each youth is whether to join or not. The structure and the activities don't offer the visitor any other option, because there isn't any alternative way really for a fragile enterprise like this. Either you are in or you are out – but of course, you are always welcome to come back to join at a later stage.*

*The concern for the visitors characterises Liquid in every detail. After a while something seems to happen to the visitors – they become more independent and start to explore the possibilities Liquid offers. They have then become functioning members of an LGBTQ community. One former visitor expresses the process like this:*

*“When I started going to Liquid I had just accepted that I was bisexual, and really had no understanding (or acceptance) of how different people can be. I was pretty narrow and simply could not understand how it could be so important to define who you are all the time. If you like both sexes you are bisexual, if you like the same sex you are gay. As simple as that. I was simply ignorant and quite insensitive. For me it was incomprehensible that we would sit in the gathering*

and say which pronoun we wanted to be called. Over time, however, I started to understand why, and it has broadened my horizons. I find it very meaningful and the gatherings have clearly played a major role. Because it made me think about my opinions and valuations” (former visitor, 23 years old).

*So, let's see what Emma has to tell us about the more individually focused work at Liquid.*

## **The visitors – a narrative over the diversity**

Some of the visitors come every week, others more occasionally. There is also a flow of new visitors discovering the youth club and older visitors leaving. Some visitors leave Liquid before they are 20 years old, they have “grown out” of it and found new social arenas. For others it is a bit harder, but I would say that every visitor leaving Liquid has found a new social network to rely on. Because of the activities at Arbis it has a target age group of up to 25, so the visitors growing out of Liquid can still do other activities.

The visitors to Liquid have different needs. Some of them are “doers”, they like to do a lot of activities and enjoy both theoretical and practical workshops. On the other hand, there are some visitors who “just want to hang out”. They appreciate conversations and discussions, permissiveness, and are happy to sit in the same spot and talk for hours.

Early in 2015 we saw a special need among transgender youths, which we saw as important for us to face up to.

Although lesbians, gays, bisexuals and queer youths are all exposed in society, the living conditions for transgender youths are even harder. The request came from youths that had thoughts and questions on their gender identity, but also from other professionals such as school curators and staff at the city's youth clinic. We decided to start a group, led by two of Liquid's volunteers with personal experiences of living as transgender people. The group meet every other Thursday for a couple of hours for activities and conversations. At first, the aim was to have a group for counselling, which seemed to be the most urgent thing, but because of the costs and the lack of competence this was and is what Liquid can offer. During the autumn of 2015 the number of new visitors with a transgender identity increased; not all of them are in the transgender group, but perhaps the visibility of transgender issues has made Liquid more open and inclusive for transgender youths than it was before.

For us it's important to create safe spaces for LGBTQ youths and strengthen them so that they can have some confidence out in "the real world". Many of our visitors have experienced that Liquid has affected them positively in terms of their well-being. But having these targeted activities also requires outreach work, in my opinion. We need to try to make an impact on society, in our case by giving lectures about LGBTQ, the health situation, norms and including attitudes of school students, teachers and other professionals. This doesn't mean that we accept the situation for young LGBTQ people in society; in fact we condemn it. The targeted group



is not the problem, it's the society that stigmatises them. What we have to accept, whether we like it or not, is that there are still young LGBTQ people in need of support in their identity work.

The relationship between me as a youth worker and the visitors is somehow the core of the activity. As all youth workers know, we have different relationships with different visitors. This depends on personal chemistry and probably how often we meet and how well we know each other. This is another reason why continuity is so important: it helps to build good relations. As professional youth workers we have to treat and respond to different kinds of visitors, and we either have a good or a less good relationship with that specific visitor. Mostly, the visitors choose which leader they want to speak freely with and I think they carefully choose the leader according to the relationship they have with different leaders. Our visitors often want to talk about conflicts with friends, the situation at school, love and sex or just catch up since last week. Sometimes the subjects are more serious and could be about having bad mental health, concerns over their gender identity or worrying about a friend's situation. We have some strategies for helping each other as leaders when the conversations get too heavy. Our aim is to be good listeners, but we are not therapists. We strive to always have two leaders in that kind of conversation so that we can support each other, although that isn't always possible. When a leader has a serious conversation alone with a visitor, the other leaders follow the situation and are ready to give a helping

hand.

There are different needs for these individual conversations and for some it's more urgent than for others. For some visitors the serious conversations seem to be an unconscious attention-seeking strategy and the chance for "alone time" with a leader, which can be destructive and the start of a downward spiral. If a visitor seems to have that kind of need, we will try to understand why but also try to find positive activities and subjects to discuss that will help the visitor change their thought pattern. In these cases, the responsibility for the specific leader sometimes becomes a burden, and the strategies and cooperation between the leaders become even more important.

For me as a youth worker the most important task in the conversations is to listen and care. I will also try to ask questions to help the visitor find the best solution for the situation, instead of giving correct answers. I will confirm the visitor's feelings, but at the same time focus on solutions and positive characteristics that the visitor has. In some cases the conversations lead to contacting another authority, if that is what is best for the visitor.

Some of the visitors are not at all comfortable in individual conversations with the leaders. They won't ask for it, and if a serious conversation is necessary, they will feel insecure and maybe even scared. It happens from time to time that I need to have conversations like this, when I am worried about a

visitor's well-being or if someone repeatedly breaks our rules of conduct. In a situation like that I will try to be caring but clear with my message, and of course, try to make the visitor more comfortable.

One difficult aspect is finding the time to give every visitor as much attention as they need; I think a lot of youth workers are dealing with that. Having volunteer workers makes a big difference to us. Some visitors have the best relationship with one of the volunteers and will be confirmed and seen by them. I can also be confident that the ordinary activities will work out well, even though I am having an individual conversation in the office, because most of the time there are enough leaders. Sometimes visitors complain about not getting the time with a specific leader that they want. That is, of course, not desirable, but I know that we all do our best to meet all visitors' needs.

During the time for reflection we discuss issues that have come up in the conversations. It's important for us as leaders to have the time and opportunity to share information, problems and solutions. It's also a chance to share feelings; sometimes you just feel irritable and tired of a situation or a visitor. To be able to be a professional and good youth leader for the visitors, I think you have to talk to your co-workers about all feelings, good and bad, that may arise when you work with young people.

*In the manager's narrative the concern for each and every one of the youths is apparent. "Of course, it's the core of all*

*youth work,” the reader would rightly respond. For the youth worker it boils down to the concern for the individual and the limited opportunities to meet each young person’s needs, troubles, interests and dreams, and all focus will be on doing the “what” and “how” at the very moment the opportunity appears. The matriculate job done at Liquid emanates from the understanding of the visitors as members of a risk group. Two of the three foundation pillars, safety and continuity, are connected to this. The third foundation pillar, representation, is equally important, but differs from the other two since it has to do with identity and not safety. Let’s listen to the manager again:*

When I ask the visitors why they choose to come to Liquid, most of them answer that it feels good to be around people like themselves, with similar experiences. They feel accepted for who they are, and they feel comfortable. They also come to Liquid because of the social network with both friends and leaders.

*The safety and the strict rules on how to behave seem to be taken for granted and the youths can really enjoy the evenings at Liquid.*

## **Back to the theories and concepts – conclusions**

*From my academic perspective, the question “why” is most important. To “understand” in an academic sense is to be*

*able to describe, explain and see the consequences of a phenomenon. The concepts of stigma, stigma resistance and double consciousness and what constitutes these concepts give me an opportunity to look beyond the actual doing. The concept of “stigma” gives me an understanding of the visitors as young LGBTQ people who have problems gaining full social recognition. It’s their actual situation that needs to be measured until the day comes when full social recognition can be won. A way to handle the situation is for the LGBTQ youth to establish a “stigma resistance”. This can’t be achieved without a “double consciousness”, e.g. to, at the same time, be able to view oneself and one’s life from both the perspective of maybe hostile others who won’t give you full social recognition and the community you are a member of. The approach used by Liquid in helping the young people to become functional members of an LGBTQ community is in fact plain ordinary youth work, but performed in an extremely well-structured safe environment where each and every one of the youths visiting the club are seen and confirmed by the staff (safety and continuity). But the youths must also fit in. The role models and the chances to identify themselves to others just like them are important, but also the demands on discipline in terms of behaviour and language will “help” the visitors to become functional members of the community at Liquid and, as a next step, the wider LGBTQ community existing in the surrounding society (representation).*

*To set sail on this personal endeavour Liquid uses the tools of open youth work. But they are used in a closed environment*

*and with extreme care and precision. I consider Liquid a certain kind of targeted youth work. In one very limited way, a sort of pre-open youth work for a vulnerable group to get full access to open youth work and any other open social or cultural activity society can offer. The victory, of course, lies in the fact that Liquid, despite being open only for the targeted group and no others, offers its visitors vital support in their identity work, thereby strengthening their self-conception and as one effect of this giving them an opportunity to develop a stigma resistance that makes coping with their everyday life easier.*

*A sense of belonging is implemented in the visitors through the feeling of safety and equality and personal importance. The realisation that one belongs to a community. A community that welcomes you as you are or rather because you are what you are. As a frequent visitor one gets a deeper understanding of being who you are and how others understand their identities. A double consciousness emerges and with this the possibility of developing a stigma resistance increases, which implies that the consequences of the work at Liquid go far beyond the club and out into the everyday life of the visitor*

## **Epilogue**

The importance of youth work like that at Liquid can't easily be measured but that doesn't mean that it's not worth studying or highlighting. For me as a scholar and the co-author of this article, the importance of an approximation between scholars

and practitioners becomes more and more urgent. Together and only together we can create a useful language through which one can describe, explain, highlight and discuss the consequences of youth work, and show both its power and its weaknesses. This journal has the capacity to be a stepping stone for that voyage.

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## 7. Group work as a method in open youth work in Icelandic youth centres

Árni Guðmundsson

### Abstract

*This paper will discuss group work as an important part of the work being carried out in Icelandic youth clubs. I will look at this work in a historical context and examine the creation and the history of youth clubs.*

*Ever since youth clubs in Iceland started operating in the year 1957, group work has been an integral part of the work. At the beginning the aim of the group work was to provide practical knowledge and prepare young people for work. The year 1971 marked the beginning of a new era with new ways of working and a theoretical approach started to be used in the field. This was due to the introduction of a specialised curriculum for youth workers that was based, amongst other things, on the theories of Danish social psychologist Sjölund. Although Sjölund is not as widely used today, his influences can be seen in today's youth work. Today group work is based on a different foundation and is more in line with the approach developed by the pedagogue Laxvik and covered in his book *Supportive Relationships (Bärande relationer)* from the year 2001.*



*However, it must be noted that in a short paper like this there is only scope to cover firstly the beginning of the use of group work in youth work in Iceland and secondly the theoretical influences of Sjölund on the group work of that time period. When covering Sjölund a case sample will be given. Thirdly Laxvik's approach and the theoretical basis of modern group work in Iceland will be covered.*

**Keywords:** youth work, group work, theoretical framework, historical context.

## Introduction

### Youth clubs and group work in Iceland, a short historical exposé

The idea of youth clubs first emerged in 1942 in Iceland. However, the first actual youth clubs were not established until 15 years later, in 1957 (Árni Guðmundsson, 2007). It wasn't until Iceland was occupied in the Second World War that the matters of youth came to the forefront of public discussions. This was mainly because of concerns around perceived negative effects of the occupation on children and young people. The two teachers Aðalsteinn Sigmundsson – who was also an influential person in the Icelandic Youth Movement – and Ágúst Sigurðsson both expressed their view that young people needed a youth hall in the ever-expanding city of

Reykjavík. They stated that the youth were neglected in terms of venues and positive attention and that these conditions would only create settings in which negative behaviour would increase. This, the two teachers believed, would lead to harmful risk-taking behaviour among young people (Árni Guðmundsson, 2007).

Sigmundsson and Sigurðsson were both teachers but they did not represent the view of the educated society. They were first and foremost humanists that worked with the welfare of the youth in mind. The education society and head teachers in general were negative towards these ideas on entertaining the youth and felt that youth centres encouraged negative attitudes and that young people should rather focus on homework in their free time (Árni Guðmundsson, 2007). It was in this climate that the ideas around the first youth clubs were heard and subsequently it was agreed by Reykjavík city council that a youth hall should be built in the year 1942. That same year, Sigurðsson presented, on request from the city council, a fully formed plan on how to meet the specific and wide-ranging needs of the youth. This, he proposed, should be done by building a youth hall in Reykjavík. A report written by him covers a diversity of topics such as what kind of facilities are needed for the youth hall, what kind of youth work should take place as well as professional ways of working with young people. In this report Sigurðsson cites the most up-to-date knowledge at that point in time in terms of what constitutes good youth work (Ágúst Á Sigurðsson, 1943). Regardless of the high quality of the report, it took over 15 years to execute

these ideas and when the time came the execution was different and simpler than the ideas first presented in the report. The youth hall at Lindargata, which was the first youth club in Iceland, started operating in 1957.

There was a shortage of schools in this era. Sports venues were also of poor quality up until the year 1960. In addition to this, there were no cultural venues for young people until the youth club Tómsundarheimilið að Lindargötu was created in 1957. After this there was a rapid development in terms of youth venues; the first increase in the number of youth venues was after 1960 but the largest increase was after 1970. The Association of Youth Clubs in Iceland was founded in 1985. Today there are 130 youth clubs in Iceland and 95% of these youth clubs fall under this association (Árni Guðmundsson, 2007).

When analysing the data (interviews with youth workers) for my book *The History of Youth Clubs in Reykjavík 1942-1992* it became evident how prominently group work featured in the thoughts of participants. This especially applied to professionals working with young people in and after 1970. At the time of my interviews, most of the pioneers were still working in the field, but in their view their role had changed rapidly over the years. At the beginning the youth clubs were open to all young people and they were free to take part in everything that was on the agenda. Group work was initially the most important and most relied-upon method of working with the youth. In the first youth club, Tómsuheimilið, there

was a great emphasis on practical and work-related group work, i.e. that the group work prepared the participants for different roles within the workforce. An example of this was the group work around making fishing nets and other tasks related to working on a fishing boat: crafts, sewing etc. Seamen were role models for young men in these years and this was evident when it comes to themes that were present in the group work. Different themes for men and women were also present, mirroring different gender roles in the society.

Youth work continued to mirror societal changes and after the year 1968 further changes also emerged. Western countries in general were undergoing significant changes in regard to acknowledging the concept of youth. This led to more freedom and the youth of this time also had more power than before. For the first time in Icelandic history there was also a focus on the youth. This shift in emphasis was mirrored in the work carried out in youth clubs. The focus shifted from activities being determined by the youth workers to being determined by the clients or users of the youth club in collaboration with the workers. The agenda for the group work changed from being practical to discussions around self-image, e.g. what shapes self-image, along with a focus on other interpersonal topics (Árni Guðmundsson, 2007). Later, in and after 1985 the methods would change further and a new way of working was introduced, i.e. the implementation of “Youth Decision Making” (Böhler, 1983) in which teenagers had the opportunity to exert significant power over important decisions related to the youth club. Throughout this development there were two important

factors present. Firstly the group and the group work, which was a constant factor in the work, and secondly group work mirroring, what was occurring in the society at that point in time.

## **Group work becomes an important method**

My main focus in this paper is on discussing the origins of group work in youth clubs and what method of working was used. Before this is discussed, it should be noted that formal higher education in this field in Iceland did not start until the end of the last decade. The first generation of youth workers (those that started after 1957) therefore did not have any specialised education. Around 1980, specialised youth workers, educated first in Sweden and then later in Denmark, started working in youth clubs. With increased and more diverse education, the work in youth clubs in Iceland has become more professional in recent decades.

My interviews revealed a common theme. The majority of the pioneers in the youth work field in Iceland had considerable knowledge about groups, group work and the importance of group work in youth work. However, they were not able to give thorough definitions of previously mentioned phenomena, nor were they able to cite research or theories. Interestingly, the pioneers used similar definitions even though they had not necessarily worked together (Bragi Friðriksson og Haukur Sigtryggsson, 2002; Guðmundur Þ.B. Ólafsson, 2003;

Haukur Sigtryggsson, 2002; Hermann Sigtryggsson, 2003; Hinrik Bjarnason, 2003; Kolbeinn Pálsson, 2003). They had all undergone various short courses on topics related to their work throughout their years in employment and initially it was my theory that their way of approaching and defining group work was built on the knowledge gained from these different courses in combination with their extensive work-based experience and tacit knowledge (knowledge passed on between colleagues). This, however, appeared to be only partially correct.

During my interview with Reynir Karlsson, who had been the director of the Youth Council of Reykjavík for a number of years and later department manager for the Youth and Sport Department at the Ministry of Education, the picture became clearer (Reynir G Karlsson, 2003). Karlsson stated, when he was appointed director of the Youth Council in Reykjavík in 1964, that there was a need for more youth work-based knowledge and professionalism in the field. In his view, this especially applied to workers in youth clubs. After familiarising himself with education material in this field in Scandinavia he came across a 100-page book dedicated to the subject. This book was used by the Danish Youth Councils (Dansk Ungdoms Fællesråd, DUF) and by the Danish Youth Movement to educate their workforce. This short book could also be used to base 20–40-hour long short courses on. Karlsson applied for and was given permission by the Danish Youth Movement to translate the book and the Ministry of Education allowed him to publish the book and organise

courses as part of his work (Æskulýðsráð Ríkisins, 1975). In the next few years the Youth Council held several courses throughout the country with 6,000 participants in total. In addition to these courses there were courses at the Teachers' University for teaching students as part of their education. Sjölund himself came to Iceland on several occasions to hold lectures at the Teachers' University (Reynir G Karlsson, 2003).

## **Sjölund's theories**

Sjölund's theories and methods are pragmatic. His theories are a child of their era. In his book *Gruppepsykology* or *Group Psychology* (Sjölund, 1965) Sjölund theorises on group formation, group types, group action or collective action, influences of groups on individuals within the group as well as on other groups, leaders, effects of leaders, social norms and social environment, among other things. In the education material from the Youth Council they mainly focus on the different roles of leaders, communication within the group, roles within groups and peer pressure. In addition to this there are numerous exercises aimed at group building and gaining insight into the nature of groups.

He bases his work on the theory of symbolic interaction, a theory that came to the forefront in 1900. He also uses and builds on Moreno's sociogram theory (Moreno, 1932). A sociogram is considered a very effective analytical tool. When using the tool, confidentiality and respect towards

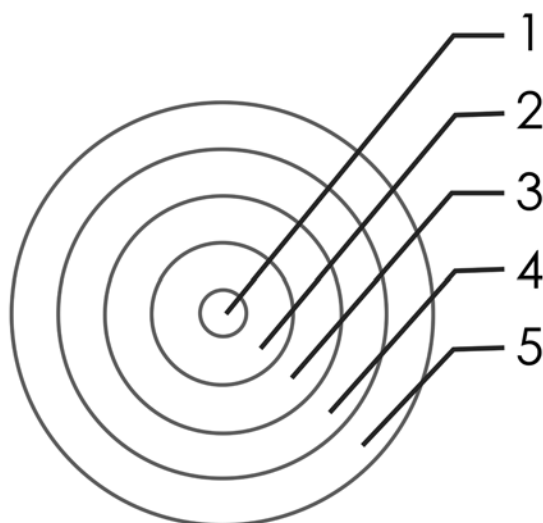
group members are at the heart of the process. The questions and approach need to match the age and maturity of the group members. In my view, the popularity of Sjölund stems from how accessible and easily understood the model is. This has both positives and negatives. The positives are that background and education do not have as big a role as they do in more complex theories. The basics can be taught in short courses for youth leaders, both non-professionals and professionals in the field. Using this model deepens understanding of group processes and how to work with groups and improve the quality of this work. The negatives are that when the models are taught in short courses they are not covered in depth, leaving students with superficial knowledge of the model. Sjölund is covered in depth in the leisure studies at the University of Iceland and more complex ways of interpreting the results are taught as opposed to what is covered in short courses for non-professionals.

The short courses come with downsides as the method is not covered in detail. This often leads to non-professionals making errors, e.g. not having adequate skills to interpret the group structure and poor understanding of inter-group conflicts and subgroups. Poor analysis and understanding can lead to an inappropriate intervention being recommended. The short courses that were held in Iceland by the Government Youth Council from 1975 to 1985 were aimed first and foremost at equipping participants with understanding of groups and different roles within groups as opposed to performing complex analysis (Reynir G Karlsson, 2003; Sjölund, 1965).



One of the basic ideas in Sjölund's theories is group analysis and analysing the roles group members play. The status of individuals within groups can be determined by many different factors. Sjölund uses two factors in his analysis, i.e. power and popularity, which can show different standings or statuses within a group. It is also possible to analyse groups using appropriate questions based on other factors such as trust, reliability, compassion and empathy. Sjölund emphasises the importance of focusing on roles within groups (Sjölund, 1965).

### **Roles within groups – Sjölund**



**Power**

1. Leaders
2. Assistants (helpers)
3. Followers
4. Those that are inactive
5. The outsiders
  - a. The sinner
  - b. The black sheep
  - c. The clown
  - d. The unintelligent one

**Popularity**

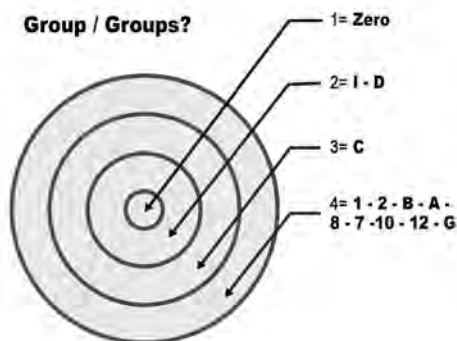
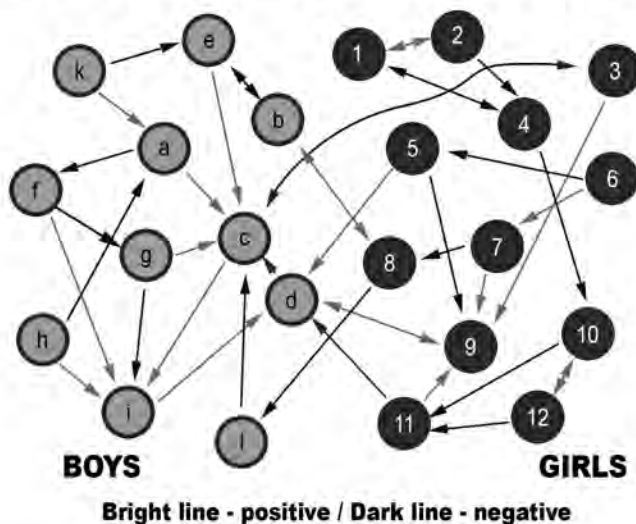
1. The popular people – The stars
2. Those that everyone likes
3. The respected – popular with most
4. The respected
5. Those that no one likes
  - a. Those that are trying to make themselves bigger in the eyes of others
  - b. Those that are rejected
  - c. Stubborn – not adaptable
  - d. Those that are isolated (Sjölund, 1965)

In my own youth work I have used this model. To cast more light on how this can be used I will use an anonymous case sample from around 2000 when I was asked to deliver an intervention for the student council in a school in Iceland. The aim of the intervention was to work with a group that was not cohesive and not functioning well. Without going into detail as to what the work conducted was, I will present a rudimentary analysis of the group based on Sjölund's theories. I want to emphasise the importance of not placing children and young people in difficult situations as a result of this kind of analysis. The sociogram's foundation is the trust between the

researcher and the participants and that anonymity is secured by coding the results and never showing these to group members. The research questions that are implemented can never be extremely positively or negatively value laden. The graph can only be created from indirect research questions aimed at participants such as positive statements like “if you had tickets to see your favourite band, who in the group would you invite with you?” You could say that there are more than two tickets and the order in which a person offers the tickets indicates the order of significance of the people in the group to that person. All personal identifiable characteristics have been taken out of the analysis.

The student council consisted of two members from each class. In this analysis, trust is the factor being examined, while Sjölund also states that power and popularity factors make for good research. There were two questions, the first a positive statement and the second a negative statement. “If I was having difficulties, which person in the group would I be likely to go to?” and “If I was having difficulties, which one in the group would I be least likely to go to?” The figure below shows the results, which indicate that there is a lack of trust within the group and those that should be considered the leaders of the group, i.e. the chairman (E), the secretary (5) and the treasurer (K), are all named as untrustworthy individuals.

**Student board - School X - 23 students / 2 from each class**  
**Roles - (E) is chairman / (5) is secretary / (K) is treasurer**



This analysis indicates that there are difficulties within this group. The first results show that the chairman, secretary and treasurer are considered the least trustworthy. This evoked questions around why these individuals were in these positions. A bit more research indicated that a school professional who was responsible for working with the student council on behalf of the school had handpicked these

individuals as opposed to democratic election. He had picked them in the belief that having a responsibility like this would strengthen their social standing, which unfortunately did not happen. This sociogram was created two months into the work of the student council and gives a clear picture of what was going on. This will not be covered in more depth other than to point out that although the model has its flaws, this type of analysis can give a lot of information and inform how to work with the group. Other information gained can be, for example, on bullying, social isolation and other factors that need to be worked on in order to create a cohesive group. This example of an analysis using Sjölund's theories shows the practical knowledge gained and how powerful this knowledge can be. It also needs to be highlighted that work of this kind needs to be carried out in accordance with high scientific and ethical standards and with the informed consent of those taking part or of their parents or guardians.

## **Sjölund's theories today**

Group work in youth clubs has evolved over the years. Sjölund's theory on groups is still in use but the input or analysis that is needed and the nature of the work have changed because society has evolved and so have its needs. In 1960, the nature of the job was mainly working at venues when there were events and making sure everything went well and that the young people were safe. In 1974, youth workers worked on a peer-to-peer basis, giving guidance, and in 1995,

youth workers focused on introducing youth participation in decision-making in youth clubs in Iceland (Árni Guðmundsson, 2007). The development of group work was shaped by this and if we look at modern times, group work is built on more diverse foundations and theories than Sjölund's methods and theories. As mentioned previously, Sjölund's theories are a child of their era. The methods and theories have become classical and respected but today other approaches are more widely used. In typical group work youth workers would not categorise young people such as Sjölund recommended doing using a sociogram (and definitions such as the unintelligent one would not be used).

Other methods are currently more widely used and when groups need to be analysed other methods are used such as observations, field studies, general interviews etc. The Swedish scholar Torstein Laxvik, who wrote, among other things, the book *Bärande relationer* or *Constructive Relationships*, created methods aimed at ensuring constructive interactions between youth workers and their clients and sets the tone for what constitutes good practice in the field. Laxvik emphasises that the foundation for interaction between youth workers and their clients is a process that gradually develops and is influenced by time. He stresses that the relationship and the communication between a worker and a client is resilient in the face of adversity, that clients are met on equal grounds, that the relationship holds an equal value for both participants and that there is reciprocity within the relationship and that it is based on respect and mutual trust

(Laxvik, 2001).

The job files for youth clubs in Reykjavík and beyond in Iceland have adopted Laxvik's theories although Laxvik is not specifically mentioned as influencing this. Another widely used theory is Gladding's theory on groups, and their nature and goals are kept in mind when working with groups, i.e. what the goal of the group work is and the nature of the group one is working with that is used as a benchmark (Gladding, 2003). When modern theories are reviewed it becomes evident that Sjölund's approach, which uses sociograms to categorise individuals, does not fit as well into modern times and practices as it did when it was created. Sjölund, however, is an important contributor to the field and was very influential at one point in the Icelandic history of youth work and is important for the development of professional practices in youth work in Iceland.

Regardless of these changes in roles, the main theme remains, i.e. the tools that the worker has in his toolbox. What has remained static is first how the worker serves as a role model, secondly his knowledge of working with groups and the group processes and thirdly the subject that is the focus of the work or projects that the worker takes on with the group at any given point in time (Árni Guðmundsson, 2007).

## **Discussion and conclusions**

A common thread throughout the history of youth work in

Iceland is group work – first as practical and applied activities well suited as a preparation for actual work roles and later as an important tool used to educate and contribute to the personal development of participants. Youth clubs have therefore been educational centres, in the widest sense of that word, whose aim is not to quantify success and categorise students based on achievement but to improve their life skills, show them how to work with others in a democratic way and help them to become equipped to deal with life itself and the various challenges it brings.

Taking part in activities in youth clubs can, on people's own terms and based on their skill set, have the potential to increase social skills, personal maturity and growth and improve self-image. Being a youth club client offers opportunities to deepen one's understanding of oneself through unique eye-opening experiences. It offers deeper social understanding because the experience of working with others makes one understand other people better and the rationale for their actions. And it offers deeper knowledge of the environment because the experience creates understanding that enables new ways of deducing, interpreting and assimilating with the society as a whole. This creates real value, the opportunity to become a better person via interpersonal education. Lastly, empowerment can be gained by involving oneself in youth participation in the decision-making process. In addition, this can deepen understanding of the democratic society and what it means to be a citizen or a valuable member of a society.



My research indicated a clear theme around specialised youth worker education. This applies to both formal and informal education. In the beginning, knowledge went from one man to another as some sort of tacit knowledge and there is actually still evidence of this taking place today in some educational settings. The first generation of youth workers, i.e. after 1957, did not have specialised youth worker education, but in my interviews with this generation it transpired that many of these workers were familiar with theories around youth and self-image etc. (Mead, 1913). In and after 1970 it became more common for workers to have at least minimal knowledge and to have undergone a short course based on Sjölund's theories that was run by the Youth Committee at the Ministry. Formal youth work education was not established in Iceland until the end of the last century. Around 1980, youth workers that were educated in Sweden and later on in Denmark arrived on the scene. With increased and more diverse university education, the youth work in Iceland has evolved significantly. In 2001, at the Teachers' University of Iceland (which later merged with the University of Iceland), an undergraduate course in leisure studies was founded. This strengthened youth work and increased professionalism in the field. This course was created to meet a need, but before its creation sport and youth councils had been offering short courses on youth work for their youth workers to increase the knowledge of workers (Þorsteinsson, 2014).

To summarise the results, it should be noted that increased education of professionals working in the field had an

important effect on group work – from the will to teach the youth methods used in different professions of this time to multifaceted group work that aimed to meet the needs of different groups of the more diverse society; group work that used the most influential theories of that time. Sjölund's theories significantly shaped this development in Iceland and his method served the role of a predecessor as well as being a very influential force in shaping how group work in youth work in Iceland was structured and analysed at the beginning and for a number of years thereafter.

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## 8. What can youth workers learn from the ethnographic approaches used by Paul Willis and Howard S. Becker?

Willy Aagre

### Abstract

*One challenge in youth work is that the practical work seldom gets influenced by widely recognised theoretical concepts. This may be for different reasons. One of them is that some theories have little interface with the daily work situation. Mostly, they have been developed from “above”. Even if they may be interesting in themselves, they do not get wider recognition through use. They do not contribute to better metacognition in the youth work field. They maintain an image of theory as remote. Maybe, the scepticism that theories of this kind are met with says more about the theories than their critics. To shed light on this, the theoretical concepts of Paul Willis and Howard S. Becker are discussed. Because of their more bottom-up origin, through good and long-lasting fieldwork, they have qualities in common with the ways that solid youth work is built.*

*Beside the possible usefulness of the concepts in themselves, youth workers may be inspired by the fieldwork methodology that the theories build on. Another quality of the concepts of symbolic creativity (Willis) and labelling (Becker) is that*

*they contribute to countering the stigmatisation that some subcultures are met with by mainstream society.*

**Keywords:** symbolic creativity, labelling, youth work, ethnography.

## Introduction

Today, European youth work is facing various forms of challenges and problems. One of these is the lack of relevant higher education for youth workers. In particular, it is problematic that few educational institutions in Europe offer relevant practice-oriented bachelor programmes in which students learn about particular pedagogical dynamics that are at stake in professional open youth work, for example youth clubs, targeted youth projects and outreach youth work. In many countries, this means that youth workers aiming at a bachelor degree must content themselves with education programmes originally designed for teachers or social workers. Other possibilities are pure theory disciplines, for example in psychology, sociology or anthropology. Usually, the content here is a long way from covering issues that youth workers encounter in daily work situations.

Challenges like those mentioned above must be resolved politically or through changes within the higher education institutions. In practice, initiatives from national NGOs will be important in order to pace the speed of progressive change,

based on their analyses on regional, national or international grounds. However, the aim of this article is not to discuss these kinds of macro issues. What will be focused on now is the significance of theory as a tool for strengthening youth work professionalism. But what kinds of theories are we going to search for? In order to function, theoretical concepts have to be recognisable within the youth work community. Probably, the practice field will need concepts that illustrate how they can carry out their work more successfully. To reach that level, the youth workers have to perceive the theories as useful road maps to alternative ways of performing their duties in the practice field.

The question might be posed in another way: what kinds of theories are the most constructive for the self-understanding of youth workers? For both practitioners and theorists, this is a difficult question to answer. Therefore, the first step must be to establish a better dialogue between these two parts than there usually is. Without mutual respect between a practitioner who is curious about theory and a theorist who wants to learn more about practice, this will be difficult to obtain. If there is a lack of contact and mutual respect, anti-theoretical subcultures may be conserved in parts of the youth work sector. Then, even the more educated youth workers will have problems explaining to their more “street-smart” and purely experience-educated colleagues the validity and usability of the theoretical perspectives they may believe in. Two different dead ends may arise from this. One is that the theory-friendly workers become moralistic and critical towards

their theory-resistant colleagues, and the latter will defend themselves. Another possibility is that youth workers develop mythological opinions, for example that youth work basically cannot be taught, that the ability to interact in good ways with kids is something you have, or do not have, inside you. Following this way of thinking, the only way that practical skills can be trained is through trial and error, based on years of experience.

To be more concrete in this discussion, I want to highlight some concepts rooted in ethnography and humanistic disciplines. As representatives of these traditions, I will pick out Paul Willis (born 1945) and Howard S. Becker (born 1928). I will try to bring forward a couple of their concepts in order to reflect on how they may be fruitful for practical youth work. I will describe the different ways of thinking underpinning these concepts and argue for their usefulness today, several decades after Willis and Becker published them in the 50s, 60s and 70s. Neither Willis nor Becker are theorists that are impressed by “theory” in and by itself. For them, theory is not something that only academics can discuss. Theory has to be closely connected to reality. Their attitude to theory is much more critical, much less subservient. Both of them are hard-core empiricists, preferring bottom-up research approaches. They seldom start with theory. More often, they begin with questions like this: “What’s happening out there?” When they have initially registered what a group of people do together, they will try to find out how the acts and events that this group participate in are going on in these particular ways. Step



by step, through the ways in which researchers like Willis and Becker build up their empery, genuine insights into the everyday life of a group of people may evolve.

Willis and Becker also share another view of social life: even the most underprivileged and suppressed groups of people have some freedom. They see them as meaning-making agents, not as helpless victims of “structures” that trap them in certain ways for pattern or all future. They may change. They may leave the place where they spend their time at this moment. They may drop out from the activities that they are involved with right now. They are not stuck. And finally, they have the potential to be creative, to find other solutions.

### **A short summary of Willis’s and Becker’s backgrounds and ideas**

The work of the British social scientist Paul Willis is linked to disciplines like sociology, ethnography and cultural studies. Willis was part of the well-known *Centre for Contemporary Culture Studies* (CCCS) at Birmingham University from 1968 to the early 80s, first as an ordinary student, then as a research fellow. His interest focus is on how different forms of informal cultural production evolve among young people, especially among those who take an opposing or resistant position towards the mainstream societal institutions and conventions. Among his most famous works are his study about working-class boys in school and leisure settings, *Learning to Labour* (1977), his work on a hippie counter-

culture, *Profane Culture* (1978), the more theory-driven book *Common Culture* (1990) and *The Ethnographic Imagination* (2000). Willis wrote the latter book in order to develop an improved awareness of ethnographic craftsmanship. One of his main points is that a large part of young people's meaning-making is connected to the popular culture (movies, music, play with slang and language, dance forms and humour). This broad media-driven culture forms a base for collective creative symbolic identity work, crucial for the kids themselves and significant to recognise among others. Both researchers and youth workers are obliged to spend time with the subcultures and connect authentically to them in order to grasp what is going on. For Willis, as an ethnography-oriented social scientist, this attitude also calls for a certain methodological approach. In order to be able to perform a *close reading* of how a group of youngsters behave and relate to each other, the researcher must be able to interact with the group in respectful ways. From his background studying literature, Willis was trained to dig deeply into texts, and he wanted to transform this methodology to the youth cultures he tried to understand. The following sentence may be seen to represent the ethnographic creed of Paul Willis, his emphasis on being "out there", tapping the stories of groups and individuals, but at the same time being aware of structures, contexts and constraints (Willis, 2004, p. 215).

“ My work has been about trying to grasp in an ethnographic way what it means to live and act out structurally given conditions of existence and changed

structural positions.

”

One common trait that unites Willis and Becker is their self-description. Willis (in Dolby & Dimitriadis, 2004, p. 198) regards himself as an “intellectual vandal”, whereas Becker in an interview said that he was essentially a “research bum” (hopping from project to project) through the 1950s and into the mid 60s.

Becker’s discipline is sociology, and he was part of the influential Chicago school with roots back to urban ethnography from the 20s. While he was studying at Chicago University in the late 40s, he took part in the Chicago jazz scene, playing piano in jazz bars together with different fellow musicians. One quotation from an interview with him shows that for some years he identified himself more as a musician than as an academic (Mollotch, 2012).

“ I got my PhD at 23, in 1951. And I probably looked like a kid. And dressed like a musician. ”

Becker used his knowledge gleaned from the jazz culture as a resource to understand the self-image in these circles as being different to that of other people, and how marihuana smoking served as a symbol of their distance from ordinary people, the “squares”. He wrote sociological articles with empery from different subfields such as criminology and research areas connected to and the mental health sector and drug prevention. In 1963, his publisher collected his articles in the book *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*

(Becker, 1963). Within a few years, this book had gained status as a classical text and central part of the so-called symbolic interactionist school, together with works from his colleague and friend Erving Goffman.

Becker's early works can be categorised as a major contribution to *labelling theory*. According to this way of thinking, "deviant" behaviour must be understood as a process where conforming and well-established members of the mainstream society interpret certain kinds of behaviours as deviant. This labelling, or stigma, results in a gradual segregation of those regarded as deviant, and sometimes leads to a confirmation of the initial label, due to changed behaviour. An important part of his interaction model is that even obedient behaviours may be falsely accused of being deviant, due to the power of labelling groups, which is interpreted as "the other".

Another reason for Becker's success is that the dominant thinking regarding deviance at that time, as a kind of social or personal pathology, was so influential. People broke rules because they were unable to follow them. Becker turned this picture upside down, seeing the acts performed from the perspective of the rule breakers. His point of view was as simple as this: out-groups are not made up of people that cannot keep the rules, they are made up of people who keep *other* kinds of rules (Gopnik, 2015). This turning of perspectives is highly relevant for practitioners too.

Here we see that Willis and Becker are basically in line with each other. Willis opposed the widespread labelling tradition within the school system. The main explanation at that point in time was that kids who broke rules at school did it because they did not master the curriculum or the discipline lessons. To Willis, “the lads” did it because they wanted to raise their own anti-school agenda, to have more fun. They knew that they would easily get jobs within the manual labour market, and they saw no point in adjusting to the headmaster’s rules.

### **The importance of discovering symbolic creativity and labelling processes in youth work**

In my opinion, there may be something to learn from this in two ways. Firstly, we have to look closely at the concepts themselves, and how they are recognisable in day-to-day youth work, for example in youth clubs, youth projects and outreach youth work. Secondly, we have to look more closely into the implications of how they work methodologically, in order to look for transferable aspects of their practice and thinking styles. In discussing the theoretical concepts, I will start with Willis, continue with Becker and then try to make practice-relevant bridges between them. After that, I will go on to discuss the ethnographic practices of the two social scientists, to look for similarities and differences with youth workers’ ways of doing their special kind of fieldwork.

## Symbolic creativity

Willis's ambition has never been to deliver a waterproof and hierarchical organised theory system. All his concepts are based on what he has registered "out there", during the fieldwork. Throughout his work over decades, there has been a strong continuity of ideas around creativity, sometimes coined as *sensuous creativity*, in other contexts as *symbolic creativity* (SC). His discussion of the SC concept is especially elaborated in the book *Common Culture* (Willis, 1990). There, he describes it as consisting of three elements or modes of expressions: body, language and drama. This means that he sees kids as expressing their collective identity through bodily gestures, decorations and clothing styles, through how they establish in-group language and/or slang codes, and how they perform practical jokes, do caricatures of teachers, mark distance to other youth groups and so on (Aagre, 2014, p. 61 ff).

In an interview Willis says that the leader of CCCS, Stuart Hall, opposed him in a group discussion by saying: "What Paul calls creativity I call survival" (2004:, p. 209). Against this notion, Willis sees sparks of creativity or aspiration or aesthetic motivation within everyday common experience. *Common Culture* (1990) may be interpreted as a book knocking down the attitude that creativity is something magical that only the privileged or the well-educated groups have access to. It is possible to discover creativity everywhere, but prejudice and labelling toward "the other" contribute to the

partial invisibility of it.

## Labelling

One of the most important contributions that Becker's work led to is that absolute normative "truths" are harder to jump to. The distinction between "us" and "them" has become more difficult to draw. In his text "Becoming a marihuana user" (1963, p. 41 ff, originally published as an article in 1953), he tries to track the steps, starting with the first joint, to the stage where one has become a daily user. As part of the jazz subculture in Chicago, he knew the slang, the gestures and the dynamics between experienced users and novices. To get "high", the techniques have to be learned, and this learning is sequential (Becker, 1963, p. 41).

“ The first step in the sequence of events that must occur if the person is to become a user is that he must learn to use the proper smoking technique so that his use of the drug will produce in terms of which his conceptions of it can change. ”

Another part of the labelling may be a product of the subculture itself. For example, Becker describes how dance musicians develop their own conception of who the *outsider* is. To illustrate this, I pick out a quote from a musician Becker interviewed (1963, p. 86):

“ I'm telling you, musicians are different than other people. They talk different, they act different, they look different.

They're just not like other people, that's all.

”

The condescending label for this other kind of people was “square”. Becker talks about some musicians being afraid of scarifying “their artistic standards to the squares” (1963, p. 95). Becker also used the concept of *self-segregation* to picture this phenomenon, showing that labelling may be an interactive process.

## Youth work relevance

It is easy to give examples if we “translate” these concepts into youth work. For example, some of the youth work described as *targeted* has some special dilemmas built in it, as Scanlon et al. have described with examples from Ireland (Scanlon et al., 2011). The more targeted a social work is, and the more this work is ordered and predefined by the social authorities, the more often the perspectives on a given group are loaded with a package of characterisations of what their lifestyle is like, and what kind of problems they are involved in locally.

With such prescribed packages as a point of departure, it is difficult to find a more neutral point for interpretation and action. In addition, the force of labelling may make creativity and meaning-making harder to discover. Following this argument, it is important to be aware of the dynamics between labelling and the youth workers’ ability to see the group as it is. This is even more problematic if the target group responds



to the clichés by living up to them and partly confirming them. Then the path to resources and creative possibilities may be harder to find.

Of course, challenges of this kind may also occur in more traditionally organised open youth work. There, youth workers sometimes define some subgroups, unconsciously or not, as more interesting and fascinating than other groups. The time spent with such appealing groups may be at the expense of other groups defined as more anonymous and peripheral, even if the latter groups need support and help to the same, or even to a larger degree than the group initially given higher priority.

## **What can Willis and Becker teach us about fieldwork?**

The fieldwork that ethnography-oriented researchers and youth workers do has both similarities and differences. As a rule, youth workers have a kind of more or less defined societal mission to carry through. Primarily, researchers are driven by their curiosity. They are not supposed to “educate”, “change” or “be important supportive persons for” the people they interact with. Researchers will use theoretical lenses to a greater extent than practitioners. But good ethnographic fieldworkers like Willis and Becker also sometimes want to throw these lenses away, because they sense that established theories may be obstacles that make it even more difficult to see what is really going on. They realise that they have to start

from point zero, be more “grounded” in their way of working, more humble. And their medicine to help them arrive at this stage is *time*.

In his work with “the lads”, Willis spent *much* time. His fieldwork went on for a year and a half, and it covered both a detailed picture of the boys’ life in school and impressions of how the staff regarded them. Time also gave Willis a good overview of their leisure time in the local community and their experiences in different workplaces. In addition, Willis learned about their musical tastes and got to know some of their parents. This holistic approach made it necessary for Willis to develop concepts like symbolic creativity and sensuous creativity to get to the core of things that knitted this group of 14–16-year-olds together. Another aspect of time is that Willis has grown up in a similar working-class district. He knew the cultural codes from his childhood and his teenage experiences. His PhD work on a hippie biker subculture involved a group he was less familiar with, but also this was a time-consuming endeavour, with a 10-year time span between his first contact with the group and the publishing year of *Profane Culture* (Willis, 1978).

The same goes for Becker. He was himself part of some of the cultures he studied, but as an academic, he had another kind of distance that helped him to capture what was going on there. He was partly an outsider, partly an insider, and

that equipped him with a double view on himself and on the communication inside the jazz musician subculture.

## Conclusions

Maybe Willis and Becker's emphasis on slow and deep work contains some of the secrets that can inspire youth workers and increase the curiosity in their theories. In open youth work, the employees have to insist on the significance of using time, both during preparation and interaction phases. They must also be aware of the significance of how the adolescents they work with are marked by how they are labelled.

One important question arises from this: how can practitioners develop the double view that can lift their reflections above the practical everyday work? Here, theory, in some way or other, must be better integrated in the practice narratives and self-images of the youth workers. To a certain extent it is possible to see parts of the scepticism among some practitioners against theory as a good place to start. The next step may be to listen more closely to theories in the spirit of Willis and Becker's works. Why is this relevant? Because they are founded on bottom-up research practices. The relations with the groups that they want to support are built up over time through communication and mutual trust, very similarly to successful youth work. The theories of Willis and Becker are deeply connected to everyday life conditions, to everyday meaning-making. These ideas may be a good point of

departure for enhancing the quality of youth work in Europe.

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