

ALL THIS AND MORE: ANALYSIS AND PRACTICE IN YOUTH WORK

INTRODUCTION

The issues of youth homelessness, offending and 'anti-social' behaviour generally are increasingly depicted in the media as a social problem of escalating proportions. Consistent with this view, governments are injecting more funds into services designed to ameliorate this issue. The increasing preference of governments to fund programs that are easily quantifiable, and therefore more publicly accountable, impacts heavily on service provision in the youth field.

Thus far, community calls for social responses appear to be met with action inspired by a need to be seen as doing something, rather than with an informed approach that reflects a deeper understanding of the nature and causes of young people's behaviour. This is evidenced by the paucity of literature available which is capable of generating such decisions and by the realisation that most popular explanations or analyses of young people's situations result from a focus on either an individual or a structural perspective, rather than a position that recognises the intrinsic relationship between individual experiences and structural conditions.

In this paper it is suggested that the lack of documented analysis generally is compounded by a perceived absence in the youth work field of theoretical debate and dialogue to inform practice, thereby denying the theory - practice relationship.

Further, the specific lack of structural analysis for practice results in a popular practice view that considers individual experiences and structural conditions as separate entities.

The implication of this issues is that youth work interventions, be they at a direct practice, service delivery, or policy level, continue to concentrate on the individual manifestations of fundamentally structural problems. Social issues then become de-politicised and individualised as young people's issues, ensuring the maintenance of an oppressive social structure. The same is true of individual youth workers who are often blamed and often feel responsible for this absence of analysis, when in fact they are placed in positions that simply disallow the time or energy needed to process, analyse and challenge their work in its appropriate context.

In re-dressing this situation in a comprehensive rather than piecemeal manner, it becomes essential that we acknowledge the social construction of our existing ways of understanding and conceptualising, as based on the ideological context (patriarchal, racist, capitalist) in which we live. It is these understandings which in turn serve to maintain this social context when we assume that those things socially constructed are actually part of nature or inevitable, and therefore beyond our control. It is through challenging this process that the essence of this social system will be changed.

THEORY AND PRACTICE IN YOUTH WORK

The contention that effective actions and interventions arise from well developed understandings and analyses is a position taken throughout this paper. It is based on the assumption that there is an intrinsic and cyclic relationship between theory and practice where new understandings inform actions which in turn create new understandings, etc.

If we accept this relationship between theory and practice or analysis and intervention, then we must also accept that action without explicit analysis will be less likely to be effective.

There are inherent dangers for practice in a situation where actions become hit or miss, in that they have as much chance of being effective as not.

In the period where positivist assertions about ultimate truth are being challenged, it should be noted that there is no one correct or true analysis for practice - the process is one of developing skills to analyse and challenge, and being committed to the dynamic nature of the relationship between understanding and practice.

It appears fair to say that youth work is without well developed and articulated analyses for practice. The problem appears two-fold. Firstly there is a lack of theory in that the literature "reflects both a dominant anti-intellectualism within youth work and a reluctance to analyse, as opposed to record, practice". (Jefferies & Smith, 1987:5)

"The lack of adequate theory has led to a domination by fashions, fads 'flavours of the month'. Practitioners have been exhausted by the pressure to keep up with these, and disappointed by their inability to integrate them within their practice or to fulfil their promise. Without a core theory based upon real-life experiences of practitioners there has been no base to which these acquisitions could be fixed." (Jefferies & Smith, 1987:3)

What does appear in the literature however, is a considerable number of references about the existence of single issues that affect young people, such as homelessness, single parenthood, crime, unemployment, etc. and specific methods of intervention to address these issues with young people. Whilst this is clearly necessary and important to the practice of youth work, it would appear to often be piecemeal in that these issues or interventions are not located in a wider framework or theoretical context; that is, practice theories which provide a framework for analysis of these issues and that give rise to methods for intervention have not been either articulated or developed. Smith (1988) states

"Keeping things at the level of 'issues' can mean that priorities remain informed by surface debates rather than by deeper political principles and realities. As a result, there is a tendency to treat issues as unique and separate, rather than springing from living within a particular social, economic and political system. (Smith, 1988:80)

The other issue in this theory - practice debate relates to the applicability of theories available to inform the practice of youth work. The whole process of theory development often ensures that those theories to be used in practice are developed by 'experts' who in turn have separated their processes from those of the practitioner; hence, the valid concern that many times these theories simply do not meet the needs of those whom they were designed to assist.

Yet the reality for all but a few youth workers in practice is that limited resources and stressful, demanding working conditions do not easily give rise to the development and documentation of practice experiences and analyses.

Too often we are led to believe that those working with young people (or other groups in society) are at fault for the inability to develop and document theories for practice, yet this position ignores the reality of day-to-day work in a youth service. The natural conclusion to draw from both these points is that the social system has something very important invested in the practice of youth work continuing to be characterised by these features. The similarities between the individualising of social problems into young people's issues and those of youth workers is stark to say the least.

INDIVIDUAL - STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

What literature does exist in the youth work area appears fragmented by a focus on either individual or structural priorities. This is particularly true at the point of analysis where we tend to see causation in either individuals or social structures.

In relation to social theory generally, Craib (1984) states that there is a division between holistic (individual actions are determined by their society) and individualistic (society as a product of individual actions) theories.

White (1990) applies this to youth workers by looking at a political distinction between 'liberal' and 'radical' workers. He states that

"The former tend to engage in the more conservative 'softer practice', which bears some similarity to the 'child saver' movements that first emerged in the nineteenth century. The latter base their work on political objectives, objectives which are tied into wider class, gender, and ethnic struggles, rather than being defined in terms of 'young people' themselves." (White, 1990:175)

It is suggested that there are inherent dangers in focusing on an approach that does not acknowledge the intrinsic relationship between individuals and societies. Concerns with an individualist approach may already be obvious. Suffice to say that we have reached a stage in our society where few people believe the full emphasis for intervention should be directed at the individual, yet little effort is made to move the blame and responsibility for change away from individuals themselves.

An individualist, conservative practice such as this is characterised by youth workers being

"obliged to play a social control role, characterised by the fostering of certain ideas and practices: these obscure the structural nature of oppression and inequality; they diffuse potential political struggles against the powerful; and they mediate various forms of youth rebellion". (White, 1990:164)

A structural analysis locates the roots of individuals' problems within an oppressive social structure. Its history lies in a Marxist critique of capitalism and it now commonly regards the dimensions of race, gender and class as crucial aspects of any analysis. This perspective seeks change at the level at which the problem arises, that is within the social structure, and employs methods consistent with the eradication and de-individualisation of these social problems.

It is certainly true to say that there are dangers associated with a structural position that attempts change at this wider level with disregard to the individual. One of the primary criticisms of this approach in the past has been its inability to respond to individual issues.

Certainly in recent times a number of authors from the 'radical' social work area have responded to this criticism and highlighted the relationship between individual and structural concerns and stressed the importance of incorporating both these aspects into an analysis. (Galper, 1980; Langan & Lee, 1989; Leonard, 1984; Moreau, 1979; Simpkin, 1983; Thorpe & Petruchenia, 1990)

For example, Leonard (1984) states

"What is lacking is detailed attention to the dialectic between the individual and the social order, whereby the former is socially constructed, but within a context of struggle and resistance." (Leonard,1984:5)

Feminist theory also has provided a great deal of insight into the relationship between 'the personal and the political'. and in linking these aspects together in one analysis. (Dominelli & McLeod, 1989; Fook, 1986, 1990; Hanish, 1971; Hudson, 1989; McLeod & Dominelli,

1982) Obviously, the essence of feminism specifically lies in an understanding of the oppression of women. Feminist theory through this process, has made a significant contribution in challenging our understanding of the social structure and traditional (male) ways of understanding and explaining society.

The implication of this fragmentation between individual experiences and structural conditions for youth work is critical. An inability to recognise this link inevitably results in a direct practice which focuses primarily on presenting problems on the one hand and policy decisions which respond to political and economic agendas and priorities on the other.

It is suggested that the frustration and disillusionment often experienced by youth workers (and policy makers), not to mention the continuing issues for young people, is largely attributable to these fragmentary processes.

RE-CONCEPTUALISATIONS

It can be suggested that the preference to fragment and separate sections of our lives and our society may in fact historically stem from the preservation of the capitalist, patriarchal, racist social system.

This raises an interesting and central issue about the perceived incompatibility of individual and structural approaches when it comes to practice. The claim that "societies and agents are two different types of being requiring different types of explanation and understanding" is a popular practice position. (Craib, 1984:27)

However, the assertion that individual experiences and structural conditions are necessarily at opposite ends of a continuum, may merely be a construction of a capitalist, patriarchal, racist society that depends on the preservation of this assertion for its continued existence and survival.

If for example practitioners were to re-conceptualise their assumptions about the fundamentally inseparable nature of individual experiences and structural conditions and the relationship between theory and practice, one would question the longevity of the social context in which we live.

Whilst we are clearly getting closer to a position that recognises the importance of these links, the concern that these analyses are rarely operational in practice suggests that further and deeper exploration into the social construction of our most basic assumptions is warranted if we are to develop and implement effective analyses for practice.

CONCLUSION

The individualising of social problems into individual issues has effectively located the responsibility for the existence of these problems with these individuals and the potential for change with the welfare workforce. To actively seek to facilitate change in this regard requires acknowledgment of the importance of linking actions to well developed analysis and the notion that individual experiences and structural conditions are artificially separated for the purposes of maintaining this social context. Unless addressed, both these elements will continue to ensure the reduced effectiveness of practice and therefore the continuing oppression of both young people and youth workers.

The tragedy of course, is that until some change is achieved young people will continue to believe that the situations in which they live are their fault and youth workers will continue to take the responsibility for providing any means available in which to allow individual young people to cope better with this intolerable situation.

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