

‘Handing over our ethics?’ Youth work conversations in times of austerity

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This paper explores a sample of youth workers’ narratives in which ethical concerns over cuts to youth service funding was a prominent topic of conversation. It relies on data drawn from a qualitative inquiry into professional youth work practice that was contextualised by the austerity measures of the Conservative led Coalition Government in the United Kingdom (2010-2015). The youth workers shared concerns that young people were being ‘abandoned’, expressed frustration over managerial systems and identified dilemmas over prescribed funding that might be construed as ‘handing over our ethics’ and at odds with their professional values and practice. A discursive analysis afforded glimpses of engaging narrative techniques and social interaction underpinning these accounts, and illuminates professional beliefs and debates, contributing to an ‘accessible data archive’ (Have, P. ten. 2007. *Doing Conversation Analysis*. 2nd ed. London: Sage) of this community of practice.

Background

Youth work is an established professional occupation that uses social and informal education processes with young people. Youth workers become professionally qualified through successful completion of nationally endorsed JNC¹ youth and community work programmes. These courses integrate academic study with fieldwork practice, equipping students with the skills and knowledge to work effectively in diverse youth work settings. Effective youth work involves reflective practice and commitment to ongoing professional development. For these workers, professional youth work is more than just being in the same setting as young people:

“Sometimes people think because they’re working with young people, they must be youth workers and that’s not the case; just because they’re working with them it doesn’t mean they’re actually doing youth work” (youth worker, pilot study, 2012).

This comment draws attention to lingering public misconceptions over the nature of youth work. On the one hand, there are those who see work with young people as providing positive activities which appear to embody recreational and diversionary tactics, while on the other hand, others believe the profession of youth work is informed by the voluntary relationship with young people, underpinned by educational and emancipatory values (Banks, 2001; Davies, 2005). The differing interpretations are compounded by recent cutbacks in youth service funding. Political expediency appears to infuse managerial practices that simplify and standardise youth work (and other public services) as commodities with measureable outcomes. For the youth workers, this creates a state of flux, positioned amid funding uncertainties, service reorganisation and accountability agendas that put pressure on their ability to maintain responsive services to local needs of young people.

¹ JNC - Joint Negotiating Committee for Youth Leaders and Community Centre Wardens (LGA, 2012)

Public funding of services for young people in the United Kingdom (UK) of Great Britain has been significantly reduced since the global economic recession of 2008. Prior to 2008, the combination of public and private funding in the UK underpinned a range of services for children and young people. Some of these services were provided directly by the local authority, with funding derived from central and local government sources while a smaller second tier of organisations privately funded, operated for profit. A third tier was the well-developed 'third sector' that comprised voluntary and community work that was often grant-aided and operated as 'not for profit' organisations.

This mixed pattern of provision was severed in the late 2000s. In 2008, problems in financial institutions triggered economic uncertainty in Western economies and led to widespread recession. In Britain, political opinion differed on the way forward, evident in the debates that led up to the May 2010 General Election when the case for maintaining investment in services to rejuvenate the economy was countered by arguments for austerity measures to cut the national debt. The election of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat government for a five year term (2010-2015) produced a coalition agreement on 'deficit reduction' (HM Government Coalition, 2010, 5) and this heralded the onset of severe austerity measures across the public sector. Youth work with its weaker statutory base was an early casualty of the cuts.

Qualitative research into youth workers' narratives of practice

It was during this period I began to research youth workers' professional identities and discourses of practice. The research intention was to listen to youth workers' accounts of youth work, to explore their interpretations of everyday practice and bring those experiences into other domains. The research timing of the pilot coincided with these significant cuts in public spending that led to the closure of so many youth projects. This social context positioned the participants, and contributed to the 'youth service funding cuts' discourse becoming a recurring topic of conversation, particularly at this preliminary stage of the research project. The pilot study involved recruiting five suitably qualified and experienced youth work practitioners from three different youth work districts in the North West of the UK. It was a culturally diverse if small sample comprising both male and female workers of various ages who gave informed consent and participated voluntarily in the semi structured focus group and interviews. The discussion prompts included an invitation to share 'some of the realities of your everyday youth work practice' and to describe 'any policy that is having an impact on practice'. The discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed, producing a rich resource of data. A thematic analysis drew out the prominent 'youth service funding cuts' discourse. Subsequent scrutiny using a discursive lens produced evidence of the youth workers' narrative dexterity as they spoke with fluency and passion about their concerns and experiences. A synopsis of their views appears below, with the names of the informants changed to protect confidentiality.

Four examples of youth workers' narratives were selected to illustrate ways in which they made sense of this issue. The first three extracts set the context. They indicate, firstly, that the cuts were perceived as widespread, 'cuts - right left and centre'; secondly, that they were subsumed within ongoing reorganisation of public services, 'the first cut of your lawn'; and thirdly, that they percolated through to micro level management of everyday working practices, 'a business case for stamps'. The fourth and final extract, 'handing over our

ethics?’ leads into a broader discussion on the ethical implications that are coming to the fore in the wake of the severe cuts to usual sources of youth service funding.

‘Cuts- right, left and centre’

Extract 1	“Cuts - right, left and centre” (VN680051: 11.48-11.56)
Laura	“It’s like the situation now though, isn’t it in youth work, since youth services are being closed down, right, left and centre, aren’t they and kids are being abandoned, aren’t they?”

In the first extract, the speaker expresses her opinion of the extensive nature of cuts to youth service provision. Laura uses the colloquialism ‘left, right and centre’ to imply that the cuts are happening everywhere and follows this by her persistent use of the interrogative, ‘isn’t it’ and ‘aren’t they’, which appears to seek corroboration from the group over this construction of events. She chooses an evocative word ‘abandoned’ to describe the impact of the closure of youth service provision. This word ‘abandoned’ has emotional overtones and suggests there is ‘neglect’ and a lack of care. Paying attention to Laura’s emotional rhetoric enables the listener (and the reader) to apprehend some of the feelings infusing these events. The discourse may elicit emotional responses in the listener, creating moral awareness that leads to taking action, ‘because we care’. The ‘caring’ dimension has been long associated with the emergence of people professions such as social work, nursing and youth and community work, whose roots lie in philanthropic action in Victorian Britain providing relief for the poor and infirm. More recently, Gilligan (2011) depicts the need for an ‘ethic of care’ as “an ethic grounded in voice and relationships, in the importance of everyone having a voice, being listened to carefully (in their own right and on their own terms) and heard with respect”. This perspective encourages a listening stance that pays attention to both emotional and rational content in generating knowledge and understanding of situations.

There is substantive corroborating evidence that youth service provision was severely reduced at this time.

“Between 2010 and 2012, cuts to youth services averaged 27%. In 19 English councils, the reductions amounted to more than 50%. A handful of authorities axed their entire youth budget” (Butler, The Guardian, 30.4.2013).

In relative terms, these early cuts were unfair for they were inconsistently applied across public services and particularly disadvantaged one age group. This was acknowledged in the Education Select Committee Hearings into ‘Services for Young People’ in 2011, that reported on the “very significant, disproportionate cuts to local authority youth services” (House of Commons, 2011a, 3) showing that an undue burden had been borne by the youth sector. Young people clearly understood what has happening to their services and protested vigorously at the time and subsequently. (See, for example, Basildon Recorder, 8.10.2013; Bath Chronicle, 23.9.2010; Birmingham Mail, 14.2.2011; NUS, 2014; TUC 24.9.2012).The Education Select Committee also heard witness testimony that when young people objected to youth services cuts, their views were side-lined and lacked redress:

“One thing we find is that when young people speak against cuts in their services, local government is saying, ‘It’s not us. It is at national level that we are being told to make cuts.’ Then when young people are talking nationally, they are told that ‘the

decisions are made at local government level'. They are finding that they are up against a brick wall" (House of Commons, 2011b, Q46, LP).

The suggestion here is that in contrast to Gilligan's stance, young people are not being listened to with respect; their concerns are not being taken seriously. Since then, notwithstanding the Coalition Government's publication of its 'Positive for Youth' policy (HM Government, 2011) and the strategy of the 'National Citizen Service' for 16-17 year olds as part of its 'Big Society' initiative, generic funding of local youth services has continued to wane.

'The first cut of your lawn'

In the second extract below, the speaker positions these funding cuts in the wider context of substantial reorganisation of local authority public services. It is an animated account in which Luke reports on his attendance at a 'change champion' meeting where budget cuts to public services appear to be aligned with the management of change. The repeated emphasis on 'restructuring' and 'restructured' draws the listener's attention to this aspect of the story.

Extract 2	"The first cut of your lawn" (VN680053: 2.16-2.52)
Luke	"The restructuring bit I, I know, when they say restructuring, it's, it's almost like a live document type restructuring because they had these change champions; I went to some of the change champion meetings; certain people saying 'oh it's not fair; this department's already been restructured so all the jobs that were available, they've been redeployed; there'll be none left for my department' and one of the directors said, 'don't worry about it, this is just, it's almost like a continuum. Just because that department's been restructured doesn't mean that's the end of it; it'll go round and they'll, it'll come back to them again', so that's just- I suppose it's like the first cut of your lawn in the summer, isn't it? It's going to be revisited again, and you know, cut again."

Luke populates his story with other voices providing detailed conversation that contributes to a belief that the speaker was present and these exchanges really happened, thereby making a persuasive case for their authenticity. However, his position may be contradictory in some aspects for, given he was there, an insider, he has distanced himself by reporting their speech using their words.

Luke develops the lawnmower analogy by referring to 'first cut of your lawn' that will be 'cut again', thereby offering a vivid comparison of the nature of the departmental cuts under the restructure. It appears that the process of cutting back is relentless, that whatever is in the way will be 'mown down' as the lawn mower comes round to make another round of cuts. The dismay of the 'oh, it's not fair' viewpoint does not feature further in this reconstruction of events. The lone voice concerned about fairness was perhaps reacting here to loss of jobs rather than to the impact of cuts on 'grass root' services.

The literal content of the account is disquieting. Is this how the cuts to staff and services are being managed? Is this ethical? Rowson (2006) posits the concept of 'FAIR' to signal key attributes of an ethical disposition, that involve Fairness, respecting Autonomy, having Integrity and leading to the most beneficial (or least harmful) Results. Rowson argues that prioritising certain principles according to circumstances can be one way to deal with

dilemmas. In this extract, it appears that the perceived greater good of implementing financial cuts to departments to save money has taken precedence over other considerations. It has triggered an unpopular policy of staffing cuts to be implemented with little redress. It has used the management strategy of creating ‘change champions’ from representatives of different departments to disseminate the policy. The manager’s remark ‘don’t worry about it’ seems to be an attempt at appeasement to pacify those present: pragmatism and appeasement appear as the prevailing traits memorably revealed in this exchange.

‘A business case for stamps’

In the third example, the youth worker gives an example of how service cut backs have filtered through to supervision of the smallest items of spending:

Extract 3	“A business case for stamps” (VN680052: 13.27-13.38)
Luke	“You’re having to do like a business case for everything; any time they want money for anything, whether it’s even stamps, having to do a business case, you think, this is ridiculous you know, and you just haven’t got the time”.

It reveals that tighter budgetary control is leading to micro-management of communication with the public. Making out a business case for stamps appears to be a form of accounting and regulation that sits at odds with the usual exercise of professional judgment in minor fiscal matters. The worker’s frustration is evident in his remarks, ‘this is ridiculous’ and ‘you just haven’t got the time’. Luke’s method of building his narrative between ‘they’ and ‘you’ uses a discursive style that implies resistance to this time consuming ‘efficiency discourse’. Youth work’s ethos of informality and spontaneity in responding to young people’s needs appears particularly hamstrung by such measures.

‘Handing over our ethics?’

In the fourth extract, the focus group discussion turned to the difficult choices that youth organisations face in the wake of funding cuts:

Extract 4	‘Handing over our ethics?’ (VN680053: 12.17-13.26)
Charlotte	I think it’s a dilemma though that (<i>pause</i>) a lot, when you take on funding that you don’t lose your fundamental ethics of youth work
Laura	mm
Charlotte	and it is so easy to say, we’ll take that because there’s somebody’s job there
Group	Mm, yes
Charlotte	That’s at risk but actually if you then take it but you’re not actually doing youth work, then we have to be really careful that we’re not, we’re not handing over our [our ethics =
Luke	[= selling our souls]
Charlotte	Yes and that is, a really difficult decision to make because it could be that as a result of not accepting
Group	Mm, mm
Charlotte	somebody becomes redundant, but it’s that dilemma then, of well, but actually if we do that, that isn’t youth work
Luke	mm
Charlotte	And are we the best people to do that if it’s not youth work. So it is a real, it’s a dilemma

Laura	It's getting the balance right, isn't it? <i>(pause)</i>
Researcher	Well somebody else may end up doing it and then it's still perceived as youth work even though we don't think it is. Yea it's quite-
Charlotte	But I think that as long as we, it's about us isn't it, upholding those ethics of youth work I think as a service, I think that's important, but that's not youth work so therefore we shouldn't be doing that.

The initial pacing of this story suggests that Charlotte is cautious about choosing the right words to put forward a difficult point of view. In brief, the dilemma she poses is that taking an ethical stance over atypical work with young people may mean losing funding for youth workers' jobs. In youth work terms, atypical work might be characterised as the difference between delivering 'packaged' programmes to comply with funding body requirements, rather than the active tailoring of meaningful learning in response to needs that emerge through the voluntary relationship with the young person, (see Jeffs, 2002).

The pattern of hesitancy suggested by the repetition of Charlotte's phrases leads to overlapping speech (as indicated by the equals sign and bracket) for another group member interposes his phrase 'selling our souls' to fit into Charlotte's narrative of 'handing over our ethics'. The passion inherent in the phrase 'selling our souls' suggests that there is much at stake here, hinting at a degree of complexity that may not be initially apparent. Charlotte resumes her account, clarifying and re-asserting her opinion that the onus of responsibility lies with the workers, emphasising that 'it's about us, isn't it' in her concluding remarks.

Setting out the sequence of dialogue draws attention to group interaction and the various contributing responses that jointly construct meaning in this story. The minimal encouraging responses of 'mms' imply there was recognition that this is a live issue that may create tension in accepting prescribed funding that requires working in ways that may be at odds with youth work values. It poses the question, what is the right thing to do in these circumstances? It is a professional dilemma that many youth workers are struggling with elsewhere, as Gill Hughes and her co-authors reported following their discussions with youth and community practitioners in the North of England in 2013:

'Youth workers are caught in a bind – they want to do the best for the young people that they work with whilst, at the same time, wanting to retain the very employment that allows them to do this and maintain funding to the projects that underpin the provision. Yet the requirements of the funding may jar with the core of their value system, producing incongruence which troubles their processes of reflexivity' (Hughes et al., 2014, 7).

Furthermore, as well as being topical, it is an ethical issue of long standing as Jeffs and Smith argue in their reflections on 'Resourcing youth work, dirty hands and tainted money' (2010).

This discourse 'handing over our ethics' fits what Davis (2003) has defined as a 'moral dilemma'. It is a predicament of moral significance with two equally unattractive options that appear to confront the worker. Later reflection may suggest it was not so cut and dried but this does not offset the real difficulty that may be felt at the time. Indeed the dilemma may be heightened by a concern about what will happen to the young people with whom the worker is in relationship. Davis argues that working through these difficult moral decisions contributes to the formation of moral identity.

One view could be to consider the potentially positive outcomes that might arise from the youth worker's continued involvement in programmes that have prescribed funding. The worker may be able to create change from within, so that the 'youth work offer' reflects youth work principles and values. At its heart, such an offer derives from a belief that 'young people matter' (NYA, 2014, 5) and so consciously building in processes that facilitate voluntary participation, informal education and social justice could be beneficial to young people. Given the overwhelming impact of service cuts, retaining professional youth workers somewhere in the community may enable sufficient attention to be given to young people's needs and interests in the delivery of services. This form of pragmatic compromise implies that circumstances may modify our ethical position, and coupled with concern over youth worker unemployment and threats to economic well-being, 'taking the money' and accepting the change of role may well prevail.

Nevertheless there are strong counter arguments. It may become increasingly difficult for the youth worker to fulfil contractual obligations to work in an organisation that ascribes to such different values and practices, where certain young people are targeted and funding relies on achieving measurable outputs in a given time frame. The duty of the youth worker employed in this changed context is presumably to deliver the agreed programme and not subvert it to achieve other ends. Being caught between fraught managerial and professional concerns is likely to contribute to a state of professional unease.

There may be an interim position where workers may achieve some leeway through adopting an assertive stance in contract negotiation with funders and stakeholders. Such negotiations are likely to be informed by youth workers' professional expertise and contribute to wider discourses on young people. Such an approach suggests the possibility of revised contracts that enable contingency planning, flexibility and spontaneity in responding to emerging needs in the age group. It may also be that instigating such conversations about contractual changes provide opportunities to explain the nature of professional youth work practice, to challenge negative stereotyping and advocate on behalf of young people. Moreover, by doing so, youth workers show adherence to the guidelines on 'Ethical Conduct in Youth Work' and its professional principle to "foster and engage in ethical debate in youth work" (National Youth Agency, 2000, 5.2.4).

The present economic realities suggest that youth workers and their agencies will continue to face dilemmas over sources of funding for the foreseeable future. Given that youth workers are among those occupations informed by 'professional ethics', there may be little room for manoeuvre. Being truthful and reliable are among the character traits or virtue ethics depicted as "a good way to be" (Hursthouse, 1999, 13). They require congruence between private beliefs and public behaviour in terms of commitment, honesty and accountability to underpin any claims for professional integrity and credibility. If youth workers profess these virtues, then it may appear there is only one ethical option in the circumstances: if the youth workers take the funding and practise a diluted form of youth work, they may do harm to the professional relationship with young people and trust in the profession, thereby putting at risk the moral values they claim to hold.

Concluding remarks

The post-recession economic climate in Britain leading to the advent of the Coalition Government gave impetus to the perceived greater good of implementing financial cuts to public services and, in the short term, dispensed with blocks of service provision for young

people. It was widely recognised that this reduction in public funding of youth services was 'disproportionate' (House of Commons 2011a). Moreover, it suggested a lack of 'fairness' that Rowson (2006) envisaged as a key component of an ethical disposition. This inequality in the re-distribution of resources implied that young people's needs (and their own views about those needs) carried less weight than the voices and needs of other social groups. These disappearing forms of youth provision can be described as a 'social right' for they fit the definition provided by Rowson (2006) of being customarily available in the community. They were services that concurred with explanations of entitlement described as "a sufficient local offer to young people" (National Youth Agency, 2014). The National Youth Agency is among those continuing to make the case for shared local and central government investment in order to provide sufficient service provision for young people.

The study draws attention to the views of a small group of professional youth workers, thereby providing an insider perspective on some of the moral dilemmas facing youth workers. Their accounts shed light on the dominant 'funding cuts' discourse that appeared to impact on everyday working practices and contribute to a drift in professional identities. The selected extracts suggest that the youth workers felt strongly about the impact of the austerity measures on young people, who were being 'abandoned' and on themselves who were confronted with 'selling our souls'. These emotional words suggest the degree of ethical concern amongst these practitioners. The use of a narrative approach was helpful in bringing forward youth workers' stories of their experiences, showing ways in which informants actively use language to construct accounts representing those experiences. As such they contribute to an 'accessible data archive' (Have, 2007, 96) of the profession at this time.

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