

From outsider to insider status: Constructing an authentic social self

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This article explores community based modes of engagement employed by a variety of support workers providing, amongst other things, employment advice and guidance to marginalised youth living within a small rural community setting. The paper sets out to demonstrate that such key workers are better able to promote understanding, transmit social norms and act as a positive role model, when they set-aside their applied disciplinary knowledge and objectives. However, since social inclusion is essentially *performed*, I will argue that role modelling and strong relationships with key workers, though important pre-cursors for change, are insufficient to sustain transitions to independent living, employment or training for marginalised youth. As such, key workers need to use their relationships with young people to help build social and cultural capital and, moreover, identify activities that make a meaningful contribution to identifiable social group objectives, since this leads to peer recognition and the development of an authentic social self.



Introduction

Drawing upon a number of semi-structured interviews (n = 15), this article is concerned with exploring the range of advice and guidance provided by a variety of key workers – representing social care, youth services, and the education sector – to support young people aged 16-24 and NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training). Interaction with these key workers typically occurs on a small group or 1:1 basis, away from large institutional settings. The intimacy of the

settings, and the bespoke support provided, tends to facilitate the development of strong interpersonal relationships, which are considered by the key workers to be of critical importance when promoting social integration. I will suggest however that establishing these relationships, though important, is insufficient to sustain transitions to independent living.

The fieldwork was conducted in a small rural community setting within the UK. The local economy, which is dominated by financial services, and an array of associated corporate services (representing approximately 34% of the total local economy), is growing at approximately 3% - 4% annually despite the global economic crisis. Unemployment currently stands at 2.5%, but most job vacancies are currently concentrated in catering, tourism and hospitality, sectors which collectively represent approximately 2% of the local economy (Economic-Affairs, 2011).

We can surmise from this data that the local economy is buoyant, unemployment is low, and the community is relatively affluent, having a per capita income which is higher than the UK and EU average (Ernst & Young, 2012). But there are pockets of socio-economic disadvantage and, moreover, a recognition that some young people need additional support to make a transition into employment and independent living:

I'm too young to have my own flat. I wouldn't be able to live on my own. I don't like being on my own...I'm too young

(Young person)

We are meeting the needs of this age group and that entails a great deal of nurturing and a great deal of care and personal involvement

(Key worker)

Local policy makers are also sensitive to the plight of the long-term unemployed, particularly the NEET group. At the time of writing, a significant initiative to establish new training and employment pathways for marginalised youth had been announced and concerted efforts were being made to connect young people to these opportunities.

This paper will explore the nature of the support provided and argue that there are a number of barriers, some of which are closely associated with the local community within which the participants are located, and others related to broader societal issues, which need to be overcome in order to facilitate inclusion. This article returns to basic questions posed by classical social theory: How is social integration possible? How do individuals and society stand in relation to one another? (Habermas, 1987; p. 54).

From outsider to insider status

Given that inequality has widened, and social mobility has declined over recent years in the UK (Watt, 2008; Milburn, 2009; OECD, 2011), concerted efforts are required to promote social inclusion. Those who remain socially excluded are likely to have a relatively poor quality of life (Vojak, 2009), finding themselves potentially 'scarred by poverty and lack of opportunity' (Pawson et al., 2004; p. 5). Furthermore, there is a broad consensus that transitions to adulthood are becoming increasingly hazardous and complex (Philip & Spratt, 2007; Kay & Hinds, 2009; Munson & McMillen, 2009) because contemporary living 'is a life without clear options' and strategies (Ritzer, 2003; p. 245) and there has been a general 'deterioration of the human condition in the midst of materialist improvement' (Heron, 2008; p. 86):

You know, when life gets a bit tough, sometimes just little problems, like the littlest of problems can grow...I wasn't a full blown alcoholic, but I was drinking every day and taking vallium everyday...it's like my way, what I turn to when I'm stressed out, but I always take it too far
(Young person)

I went to rehab, and then went to [city] and

lived in a halfway house for 3 months...and I was ringing my friends all the time, who were having a good time, and I thought I was missing out. I came back and went back on the drink and the drugs again

(Young person)

These issues persist as problematic aspects of modern life, despite the UK ranking second in an international league table profiling basic human needs, foundations of wellbeing and opportunity (Social-Progress-Index, 2013). In response to these problematic issues, there has been a surge in the prevalence of mentoring for young people deemed to be at risk of social exclusion (Rose & Jones, 2007; McGowan et al., 2009; Milburn, 2009) across the UK, and indeed other modern industrialised countries. Mentoring is considered to be a self-evident good as it promotes personal development and compensates where there is a lack of an appropriate role model (Rogers & Taylor, 1997; Goldner & Mayseless, 2008a). While mentoring is often associated with volunteers matched with particular young people, it also forms an integral part of key worker support:

Most of the young people I work with are disadvantaged, cut out of society, often with very little understanding of what we perceive to be traditional norms and values. So I see mentoring as playing quite a key role in helping them become more integrated and proactive members of society

(Key worker)

Furthermore, the importance of mentoring marginalised youth has received greater recognition locally within the past 12 months through the creation of a formal project entitled 'future you', which is designed to provide support with the transition to independent living.

Although the range of advice and guidance provided by key workers, within the context of mentoring, covers a diverse range of issues, it is often career related in order to facilitate the 'transformation of their personal attitudes, values and beliefs' to ensure their commitment to becoming employable' (Colley, 2003; p. 22). Indeed, the local mentoring project mentioned above is principally aimed at those who are NEET, by providing an individual training and work placement support package.

Given that such key worker support is typically focussed on improving employability, I have adopted a broad definition of career guidance, to encompass a 'wide range of information, advice, counselling and learning interventions...focused on the individual's management of their lifelong relationship with the worlds of learning and work' (Hooley et al., 2012; p. i).

Engaging with the labour market

Facilitating the transformation of personal attitudes is however difficult where worklessness amongst marginalised youth is concerned. Indeed, Mead, cited by Marston (2008), struggles to apprehend the cause of employment related ambivalence: 'Whatever outward causes one cites, a mystery in the heart of no work... [is] the passivity of the seriously poor in seizing the opportunities that apparently exist for them' (p. 361). The following comments from research participants illustrates the situation:

I didn't really have any direction if you know what I mean? I didn't know what I wanted to do when I was older...So I didn't really have much motivation to do anything because it was kind of like well...I couldn't see the point at the time. Of course, I completely regret that now...I wish I could go back and...slap some sense into myself when I was 14.

(Young person)

I was just lazy. I didn't like being told what to do. And a lot of my friends didn't go to school either. Like where I lived, no one went to school... everyone was known for not going to school. We'd all rather sit and mess about

(Young person)

I'd say 9 times out of 10 they [support workers] are trying to change me into a better person than I am at the moment with like getting a job...they'd like see me get off my backside and be getting out there meeting new people, new friends, and enjoy life a lot more than I am now. But at the end of the day I am enjoying my life right now and I'm happy the way I am

(Young person)

It is perhaps tempting to concede that in some cases little can be done to motivate marginalised youth since:

'the task of altering habitus is simply unfeasible in many cases, and certainly not to a set timetable' (Colley cited by Pawson et al., 2004; p. 19). That said, we should not be unduly pessimistic about marginalised youth improving their prospects since they are not 'apathetic prisoners of their habitus' (Jeffrey, 2008; p. 749) and can consequently use their agency to improve the socio-economic conditions of everyday life. Indeed, many marginalised young people are actively looking to secure employment, and sometimes seek community resources to help achieve this aim.

I'm going to get a job because I want a job. I'm not one of these people who just doesn't want a job. I want to work with young people... some of them will be getting into trouble and I'll understand them cos I've done it...I've talked to [key worker] and she can be one of the references for me and she's one of the big people as well...but it's not up to her she says, you've got to go through a whole board or something stupid

(Young person)

In the above example, the young person has community situated access to relevant career guidance that builds social capital in the form of 'instrumentally valuable social bonds' (Jeffrey, 2008; p. 747). In this case, the young person recognises the key worker's enhanced social status as one of 'the big people' and wants to use the relationship, we might surmise from the comment regarding recruitment processes, to further their employment prospects. As such, the key worker is uniquely placed to realise this aspiration and help the young person develop the resilience needed to engage with 'stupid' corporate processes. The key worker's support therefore enables the young person to escape from the marginal activities of outsider groups to develop skills, knowledge and patterns of association commensurate with the economic mainstream (Pawson et al., 2004). Similarly, key workers also play an important role keeping youth engaged with their employment, as the following example suggests:

This week we've had a young person who has said he's bored in his job. He's the only one in his peer group who has a job. He's 17, he's bored at it, and he's been doing it 18 months and he doesn't feel he's making any progress at it and

feels like giving it up. So we explained to him the concept of failure, and that he would be failing if he gave up something he originally engaged in... it [the conversation] certainly sowed a seed in his thinking process...

(Key worker)

It is clear that the key worker equates unemployment in such circumstances as personal failure. Indeed, all the young people interviewed all experience the normative force of a moral obligation to secure and maintain employment, even when they are 'enjoying life right now'. To accept such an obligation, to find and maintain employment in these circumstance, involves a degree of sacrifice of one's subjectivity and individuality: 'a subject acting morally has to submit to an authority and do violence to his nature in a certain sense, but he does this in such a way that he takes on the obligation himself and makes the moral requirements his own' (Habermas, 1987; p. 48). We could argue that the key worker is perpetrating an act of oppression by impressing this moral code onto a young person to ensure they 'take on' the obligation to sustain their employment. This interaction between key worker and young person is, of course, fully aligned with the spirit of capitalism and the moral imperatives of the Protestant ethic (cf. Weber, 1992), and represents an example where the 'mode of production [shapes] all other dimensions of society' (Bell, 1976; p. 36). That said, the key workers are undoubtedly acting out of a personal conviction that remaining employed is in the young person's best interests, and are consequently concerned with facilitating a long-term shift in the young person's life trajectory.

But where unemployment is equated with personal failure, it is no surprise that 'the absence of work often powerfully shapes people's subjectivities' (Jeffrey, 2008; p. 740). Furthermore, since Colley (2003) argues that the 'realization of individual potential is equated with the maximization of productivity' (p. 26), it suggests, conversely, that we are unable to realise our potential when economically inactive. Our value to society arguably collapses when unemployed since there is no potential to be realised, and we are therefore rendered near worthless within a social order that broadly equates status with economic productivity and consumption. As the young person cited earlier recognises: getting a job makes you a better person.

An understanding of how this value-laden moral code shapes our subjectivity should enable key workers, who provide career related advice and guidance to marginalised youth, to appreciate how the principle of economic participation fundamentally shapes social relations and profoundly affects our levels of self-esteem. Furthermore, since people will not develop in a positive direction if they get caught up in battles of will (Wormer, 2007), and attempts to (re)engage youth with the labour market are something of a contemporary obsession (Marston, 2008), key workers need to address the issue of worklessness sensitively so as not to further alienate marginalised youth.

The authentic social self... performed

The provision of career related guidance for marginalised youth is not just a question of working to alleviate here-and-now issues arising from poverty through the vehicle of employment. The successful transition to adulthood in the late-modern age involves the 'development of 'agency' and becoming a knowledgeable and reflective subject who is able to take part in social development' (Mørch, 2006; p. 3). However, participation in social development entails social interaction with others; a problematic issue raised by both key workers and young people.

It could be that they want to fit in and feel understood...because they do all seem to be loners as well, even though they're in this group.
(Key worker)

I'm not a confident person when it comes to being in groups. I don't like talking to people... and I wouldn't walk into a shop or anything on my own.
(Young person)

I'm getting a bit more respect than I used to... people talk to me like I'm a proper person. When I was younger I used to dress like a proper chav...like socks over my trousers and hat on and people like wouldn't talk to me when I was walking through town. And like old people did look at you funny.
(Young person)

Guidance from support workers could therefore facilitate this kind of social interaction as it helps the young person overcome oppressive social non-

recognition or misrecognition and thereby enable integration into the local community like 'a proper person'. As such, key workers could work to link marginalised youth through communicative action to significant others who are capable of conferring recognition onto the young person (cf. Taylor, 1994). It is an important aspect of social integration, as McQueen (2011) points out: 'to be recognised negatively, or misrecognised, is to be thwarted in our desire for authenticity and self-esteem' (no page nos.). Interaction therefore constructs social capital, including; 'people's 'sense of belonging' to the community, and norms of co-operation, reciprocity and trust of others within the community' (Morrow, 2001; p. 38).

There is an underpinning assumption, which is particularly relevant to the young person cited above, that the modern world is characterised by self-determination, where the individual can cast away old roots and remake oneself anew (Bell, 1976). However, although the young person above may no longer wish to be identified as a 'chav', it might be difficult to achieve a change of identity within a close-knit community. The following key worker, while discussing a range of social issues affecting the marginalised youth they work with, makes the following point:

...stigma, and an inability to escape a reputation, and the people who are a negative influence, that's the biggest hurdle...the stigma comes from [issues that] every buggie knows about...and they'll not be able to break away completely

(Key worker)

As such, there is little space in this particular community setting to cast away one's roots and start afresh. Making amends for past transgressions, or wishing to project an alternative identity, thus becomes more difficult. It therefore appears that the 'capacity for change is intimately bound up with 'social identity' (rather than with individual character) because this 'social self' is defined in terms of group loyalties' (Pawson et al., 2004; p. 5). In the case of the young person discussed above, her group loyalties were made visible by a particular dress code; a code which communicated her cultural otherness to the mainstream community. By understanding the importance of recognition in promoting social integration, key workers can provide advice and

guidance that seeks to shape a new social self through interaction with new groups. For example, the following young person was supported by a key worker to resume playing rugby again, and he clearly attributes a boost to his confidence with participation.

I lost all my confidence as well, but rugby is bringing it back up again...I'm in a team and you've got to be confident with the ball.

(Young person)

Confidence is not arguably boosted simply by a desire to perform his rugby skills well, but is intrinsically linked to the membership of a group and the associated performance of a recognised role. The effective performance of this role is driven by an expectation from his team mates that he will make a purposeful contribution to the team and, ultimately, to the winning of games. It would appear that this young person, who is otherwise socially marginalised, has integrated into the team identity by sharing overlapping ideas which 'condense into unproblematic background convictions' (Habermas, 1987; p. 136). As suggested, the key unproblematic background conviction in this example is the collective desire to play rugby. This shared conviction provides, in turn, an authentic motivation for the young person to act within the context of this particular social setting. It is an interactive process that Rogoff, cited by Fog (2003), describes as appropriation, which 'occurs in the context of engagement (often with others) in a sociocultural activity, but focuses on the personal processes of transformation that are part of an individual's participation' (p. 34).

In this particular context, the authentic self is realised since recognition is conferred, and social solidarity strengthened, by and throughout group members, via the shared sociocultural activity. The role of the key worker in this process has been twofold; to facilitate the interaction and to provide reassurance that the risks involved with establishing trusting social relationships will be rewarded by appropriate responsiveness (cf. Welch, 2013) and due recognition. Moreover, such an improvement in this young person's social and cultural capital is a successful 'outcome', which improves both the quality of the young person's life and the fabric of society. But this outcome does not readily reduce down into a quantifiable wellbeing measure that reflects the real value of participation,

and there is certainly no direct economic value at this stage.

While this particular example involves participation in a recreational activity, the same principles arguably apply where engagement with other social fields occurs including: education/training provision, work experience placements, voluntary work and, indeed, paid employment. As a point of interest, the young person discussed above did successfully make the transition from marginalised outsider to employed insider.

Conclusions

While career guidance in its broadest sense does prompt young people to critically reflect upon their assumptions and values (cf. Broadbent & Papadopoulos, 2009), their current social position, and the effectiveness of their cultural stock of knowledge (cf. Habermas, 1987), through communicative interaction, it is merely pre-cursor priming for social action. As Sayer (1997) points out, 'the freedom to redescribe ourselves is worthless, unless the discourse is performative' (p. 475). This, in turn, has important implications for the provision of guidance and the notion of role modelling, especially where there is no intrinsic and meaningful performative dimension for the young person to action.

The theme of place and community in this edition of the NICEC journal has therefore highlighted, firstly, that despite the relative affluence of the community, a range of key workers provide community situated career guidance to marginalised youth within a sympathetic local social policy context. Furthermore, these support workers sometimes go beyond signposting to employment and training opportunities, to proactively induct marginalised youth into the sociocultural frame of reference for our time. In essence, this is achieved by creating opportunities to promote social solidarity and develop cultural knowledge, which thereby helps marginalised youth realise an authentic social self.

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