CHAPTER 29

Disruption, Disassembling and Unthinking
21st Century Youth Work in England and some Lessons for Critical Youth Studies

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Introduction

Facilitating young people’s self-formation and awareness of the self has been identified as a central feature of youth work’s project (Sercombe 2010). The purpose here is to support vulnerable young people to become aware of their capabilities and sense of personal agency with the intention that they will “develop” rather than “survive” (Davies 1979). This chapter explores the critical possibilities of youth work via a Foucauldian understanding of subject-formation as outlined by Foucault in his work on the ethics of the self. I argue that the orientation of youth work towards encouraging young people to become aware of their own subjectivities opens up space for a more critical consideration of youth as subject. Drawing links between Foucault’s thinking and the practice of working with young people, I propose that youth work represents the embodiment of criticality. It illustrates how the project of unsettling the discourse and subjectivities relating to young people can be enacted. At the same time, I note that the same discursive criticality does not extend to youth workers’ reflections on themselves. This, I suggest, is a reflection of the pressure on youth work practitioners to market their organisations as demonstrable models of ‘best practice’. A future question for critical youth studies and youth work, then, is how to extend the ‘disassembling’ that youth work facilitates in relation to young people (I explain this below) to youth work practitioners.

Central to this discussion is an exploration of what the praxis of youth work – specifically “patch-based” (Williamson 1997) or “generic” (Coburn 2011) – can ‘tell’ critical youth studies. This discussion emerges from analysis of fieldwork at a youth club (Urban Youth) as part of a doctoral study of the discourse of youth work. With some notable exceptions (the work of Judith Bessant, John Ord and Howard Sercombe to name a few) youth work as a discourse has been relatively under-theorised. Discussions of the practice have focused principally on issues of engagement, the professionalization of the service, and the tensions between its educative project and the ‘voluntary principle’. Youth work has been conceptualised as a vehicle for informal education (Smith 1980; Jeffs and Smith 2010[1987]), for developing young people’s political agency.
(O’Donoghue, Kirshner and McLaughlin 2002; Coburn 2011), and for preventing the marginalisation and social exclusion of vulnerable young people (Williamson, in MacDonald 1997; Davies 2005). However, the opportunities that youth work presents in terms of advancing conceptual debates relating to the subject of youth and young people’s position in discourse have not, to date, been fully explored.

The potential youth work offers for extending such conceptual discussions came to my attention during one particular event in my doctoral fieldwork. As in other research methods, knowledge constructed through ethnographic research – particularly during fieldwork stages – evolves through encounters and experiences. Such encounters and experiences can be the fleeting, unanticipated and unsought thoughts, interactions and ‘findings’ that pop up as the researcher tries to embody their research interest (Coffey 1999); as they move from the position of interested intellectual to someone who “stands in [a culture’s way]” as it “bodies forth and enmeshes [them]” (Geertz 1973, 5). These moments are highly personal and can be best described as being between revelation and accident. Dauphinée (2007), for example, became aware of the mixed identities of supposed ‘war criminals’ when the young, Nike-wearing Serbian soldiers standing at rainy check-points politely offered to hold her camera. Wolcott’s (2002) primary ethnographic experience occurred when, while walking around his land one summer’s evening, he found Brad, a self-professed “sneaky kid,” camped out and enjoying the sun. Behar (1996) was made alert to the lived experience of death narratives amongst older people in Santa Maria following the death of her grandfather mid-way through her fieldwork.

My own ethnographic ‘epiphany’ (which will frame this discussion) was as personal and unexpected as those of the above theorists. However, while different to the experience of Dauphinée, Wolcott and Behar, like each of their experiences, it provided the basis for a critical analysis. Using this event as a guide I was able to explore the possibilities for critical youth studies offered by youth work. Through this experience, I became more attuned to the fact that, despite the seeming simplicity of the exchanges, the youth workers were facilitating a much more complex series of critical reflections and enhancing the disruptive possibilities that their conversations with the young people presented. Sercombe (1997; 2010) has already identified disrupting discourse as a central feature of youth work’s project. However there is very little evidence, to date, on what such disruption looks like in reality. This has lead to youth work being discussed as a non-specific “art” (Young 1999) and youth workers being portrayed as pedlars of “fuzzy logic” (Coussé et al. 2010). To bolster youth work