The Function of History in the Debate on the Social Professions

The Case of Youth Work [1]

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Abstract

Measured by the standards of the traditional professions like medicine or law, professionalisation in the social field is at the very least incomplete. In contrast to these benchmark professions, those in the social area are invariably struggling to secure their profession's reputation in the eyes of the public; and they have no strict control over access to their profession, the curriculum content or designated fields of practice. Furthermore, they are experiencing the impact of a public crisis of confidence in professions in general, compounded by other, related challenges, such as greater emphasis on accountability, citizens' rights and 'consumer control', and the increasing prevalence of neo-liberal politics in Europe. This paper suggests that it may be fortunate that the general crisis in the professions is occurring just at the point where youth work is beginning to enter seriously the era of professionalisation. It argues that youth work, given its distinctive history, is characterised by inherent tensions and ambiguities. Is it primarily about autonomy and authenticity or assimilation and adjustment; about the reproduction of identities or their transformation; an organised element of public social policy or the spontaneous product of social movements? The author's view is that far from simply siding with one or the other, we should see the negotiation of such ambivalence as one of the core skills and competences of youth workers, and that such an approach is compatible with – and may draw inspiration from – the project of humanism.

Keywords

Social professions; youth work; professionalism; professionalisation

Professionalisation

Looking at the history of any of the social professions in Europe is a risky business because this history is complex, non-linear and fraught with moments when the profession developed in ways that today are not acceptable and probably embarrassing. In fact, in many of the social professions it is not even clear whether the aim was full professionalisation or whether the professional branch, like the voluntary sector, was just one strand among many others that together constitute the field.

Objectively, it can be said that professionalisation in the social field is at the very least incomplete, measured by the standards of the traditional professions like

medicine or law. In contrast to those benchmark professions, those in the social area are invariably struggling to secure their profession's reputation in the eyes of the public; and they have no strict control over access to their profession, the curriculum content or designated fields of practice.

Nevertheless, professionalisation has been part of their long-term aim to leave behind pre-professional forms of practice and embrace a rational, theory-based approach with certified training courses resulting in an approved form of practice. This emancipatory project was in line with the advance of rationality in modern societies alongside dreams of gaining control over social problems and rationalising the pedagogical transformation of society towards a better way of functioning.

For all professions, this process of rationalisation had the side effect of distancing them from their historical roots and giving them the appearance of a timeless activity, no longer contingent on incidentals such as language, traditional habits and customary narratives. Modern professions have a tendency to leave history behind, each new development turning a new page to emphasise the universality of the concepts they use, timeless and contextless.

A Crisis of Confidence

This distance has a price, because users of professional services may not fully identify themselves with these new practices. On the one hand, the public demand this universalism as part of their faith in rationality and the abstract laws of science, which offer reliable solutions to the problems of illness, social instability and ignorance. Rationality and science were the driving engines of the project of modernity and progress. But today this very project and its founding principles are in crisis, and with it the traditional professions. The promise on which they are founded cannot be redeemed, so they increasingly reveal their shortcomings in their own terms. Their reputation is dented by numerous cases of malpractice, which make the public doubt not just the reliability of the controls the professions exercise over their own practice but also the very principles of rationality and progress themselves.

Unpredictability haunts every professional practice area and undermines the universalism on which it was based. These challenges and the associated drop in public confidence are not incidental side issues, which could be overcome with more stringent quality controls and advances in research and knowledge, much as some social policies emphasise the need to modernise public services. Rather, they can be regarded as signs of a crisis of confidence, a failure to find common ground between the public and the experts.

This crisis corresponds to the growing importance that questions of identity have in all social contexts and in social policy. As globalisation advances and threatens to produce a universal sameness, belonging to an identifiable group acts as a counter-movement, and being understood by members of a group that share a common identity becomes all the more important. For instance, in the exercise of a profession, aspects like ethnicity, gender, age and life experiences start to count, side by side with formal qualifications and quality controls. This crisis therefore signals the return of historical dimensions and brings with it the necessity to redefine the parameters of professional conduct and professional identity.

A Time of Change

The crisis of confidence is compounded by other challenges to the self-image and autonomy of the professions. First among them is the emancipatory process of modernity itself, which has not confined itself to privileged groups but has become a defining characteristic of citizenship. Citizens demand increasingly that public services and expert systems become accountable to their users and to the general public, rather than just to politicians and administrators by a system of hierarchical control within each organisation. And consumer movements claim the same degree of control also over all private transactions, whether commercial or professional, so that the quality of a product or of a service can be monitored, not just through the balance of supply and demand but through watchdogs in the form of independent organisations which represent the interests of the public and consumers.

These consumer movements and the emphasis on citizens' rights resonate secondly in the principles of neo-liberal politics, which have swept across Europe. They impact not just on economic strategies but also on the organisation of public and professional services, particularly in the social field. Neo-liberalism seeks to extend market principles to services and transactions that were formerly organised with scant regard to choices made by non-expert users. These neo-liberal principles are hence perceived as (and largely intended as) an attack on privileges and autonomous organisations – mainly, but not exclusively, those of the state. The combined challenge of these factors requires a fresh look at the principles on which professions base their credibility and authority.

Youth work is directly affected by those developments and finds itself therefore in a state of transition. It can be argued that it is fortunate for the profession, now and in the future, that the general crisis in the professions (outlined above) is occurring just at the point where youth work is beginning to enter seriously the era of professionalisation. The crisis arrests any automatic assumption that sooner or later youth work will inevitably acquire full professional status and that all objections to this are expressions of backwardness.

An Opportunity

It will therefore be argued that controversies over the professional status of youth work and its reluctance to fully professionalise are not a sign of weakness, but offer an opportunity to examine not so much what professionalisation would mean theoretically for youth work but rather how the principles of youth work can be reconciled with principles of professionalisation. It is the right time to examine what kind of an agenda youth work has become (or would become) tied to as a result of professionalisation in the context of current social policies. To do this we need to trace the historical development of those principles in different cultural and national contexts, not as an abstract stream of development.

The challenge of this re-examination of professionalism in youth work is to combine cultural specificity with a concern for universality, which means a concern for equality, for a political commitment to transforming social processes and structures that disadvantage and exclude young people from fully participating in adult society and developing their abilities to the full, while fostering their individuality and cultural belonging.

It is probably not by accident that the surge in historical studies in the social professions coincides with a rupture in society's relationship with history. On the one hand, the post-1989 era has been characterised as 'the end of history', the dawn of a period when the struggle between the big ideologies has ceased (or has been won by one ideology, capitalism, which some would see not as a product of history but as a kind of law of nature whose truth will prevail sooner or later, the truth that no central political steering is possible, only that of the invisible hand of the market). This struggle for ideological supremacy, which drove history and politics for at least the past 150 years, is supposed now to have come to an end.

On the other hand, societies are being plunged into the depths of history, or rather of histories, especially their own national or ethnic histories. This has happened not just in post-colonial and post-Soviet trouble spots, with their struggle for autonomy and nationhood, but also within the seemingly settled boundaries of established nation states, where separatism and nationalism celebrate a dramatic resurgence. History suddenly seems all around us, instrumentalised as a legitimation of territorial claims and a defence against the uncertainties and fears of societies that become once more aware of their ethnic and cultural diversity.

Two Approaches to the Crisis

This is where the social transformation of professions (as outlined above) links with broader historical and political processes of transformation, which by the way also affect the identity of academic disciplines (and this has a double impact on youth work). Identities are not only being newly defined, but claims of identity and authority have to be legitimated in fundamentally new terms. In this process, two principal approaches are discernible in current debates, approaches that aim to re-establish the credibility of – and confidence in – services, but fail to engage critically with history and hence with identity.

The Functional Approach

One approach uses functionalism: in the prevailing ideology of market choice, services seek to position themselves with the argument of efficiency. A customer – the state, a community or an individual – demands a certain service for a particular purpose, and a service provider bids to deliver the service at the best price. This approach neglects (or even deliberately eliminates) all reference to established traditions of principles and methodologies, value systems and intellectual continuities. Instead, such approaches seek to apply the criterion 'What works?'. The more sophisticated term (stemming significantly from medicine) is evidence-based practice.

I consider this to be an ahistorical approach which will have negative consequences, not because it ignores historical lines of development *per se*, but because it suggests an engagement with cultural diversity that eliminates an important social dimension. This missing dimension, obscured by the use of the seemingly neutral criterion 'evidence', can only be grasped from the premise of a profound, critical and differentiated engagement with history. I would argue that – even though this approach ostensibly leads to custom-made services, such as culturally specific services in the form of clubs and projects for members of religious or ethnic communities – it has the effect of either essentialising cultural differences and thereby fragmenting lines of social solidarity, or of trivialising cultural characteristics and reducing them to lifestyle choices.

In any case, the central mandate of the social professions, the establishment of 'the social', is being eliminated from the agenda, because service users are seen as individuals or groups of individuals defined by their own characteristics, whereas the key task of establishing a social dimension is to create bonds between people who are essentially different. In this functional perspective, society becomes a collection of individuals or an archipelago of communities, ghettoised by ideological or physical walls.

The construction of social solidarity is not an engineering task – or, if it is turned into a piece of engineering, it has dire consequences. This has been demonstrated not only by the racist social engineering and industrialised killing camps of the Nazis, but also by ethnic cleansing, which remains formidably real in many social conflict zones, from ex-Yugoslavia to Northern Ireland and many parts of Africa.

The Iconoclastic Approach

The other approach is what I would call an iconoclastic use of history, which also has its parallels in current politics: here reference to history and continuity is indeed made, but history is over-emphasised as a means of legitimating or claiming a particular, privileged or dominant position now. 'We were here first' is the battle cry: this territory, this range of competences is ours by tradition, and no further questions need be asked about our ownership. We must ask whether the surge in historical studies mentioned above, and not only in social work circles, is partly motivated, perhaps tacitly and implicitly, by fears of losing a privileged position, since neo-liberal social policies distribute tasks and contracts for services with scant regard to professional boundaries or convention.

In this type of approach the self-interest of the profession prevails again over the concern for carrying out a social mandate responsibly. An abstract notion of history and identity serves to consolidate privileges. It prevents a real engagement with historical processes, which always imply an engagement with, if not contamination by, the processes of today's world from which professions seek to free themselves.

This is now the nub of any engagement with history, be that from a national-political or a professional perspective: it has an immediate impact on current political or professional practice, but it can be constructive only if the dialogue with history is based on critical, hermeneutic premises; it must have the intention of introducing a critical distance to that immediacy and relativising any fixed, linear notion of development. By that I mean that the engagement with history needs to be always a two-way process, an interrogation of the past that remains conscious of the subjectivity of the questioner, and an examination of the present in the light of historical precursors and parallels that break open the 'facticity' of the present, a process in which the veracity of the information and the legitimacy of the claims derived from it are constantly being questioned.

It is the weaving of those questions, the creation of shared, meaningful symbols, that ultimately makes the fabric of society. Society derives its cohesion not from a-historical facts (biology) but from a commitment to shared principles, values and aspirations. Nothing else can hold a society together but this continual development and reworking of an incomplete project, the search for understanding.

Youth Work Pulled Two Ways

Youth work plays a crucial role in all this. In no other field is the tension so visible between the two approaches to social integration, the challenge that modern societies have to confront. On the one hand, youth work has the mandate to leave real-life processes to take the course of their self-generated dynamic as a constant source of renewal for society. Youth work, seen from this perspective, stems from youth movements, from the search for autonomy, identity and authenticity as the constituting tasks of adolescence. This type of youth work cannot be organised or controlled or professionalised without turning it into an instrument of assimilation and adjustment. This carries the risk that youth work will always disturb the established social order and cause instability – but it is also thereby a source of renewal and creativity for society.

On the other hand, youth work represents the interests of the system, which regards integration as an organisational task requiring structures, rational plans and utilitarian goals. Youth needs to be led and educated; youth needs to be closely tended, just as a tree needs tending if it is to bear fruit. The history of youth policies and the development of youth services in every region of Europe shows the constant oscillation between these two poles, demonstrating the promises and dangers of each of those sets of approaches.

In terms of lifeworld processes, youth movements have played an important part in shaping youth policies, but also in the development of national policies generally. The nation-state project, in countries like Germany and Italy for instance, derived much of its energy from the romantic youth movement, with all the negative implications that came to the fore in Fascism and Nazism. The events of 1968 were also associated with youth rebelling against a system that in their view had failed to face up to the past and was continuing to operate by means of colonialism, oppression and authoritarianism. It is understandable therefore that some countries like the UK limited the influence of the state on youth services and deliberately did not professionalise them, because this would suppress and restrict the energies and creativity that youth generates as a source of cultural renewal.

It is equally understandable that most complex modern societies, faced with ever-increasing problems of governance and integration, sooner or later began to invest in and thus influence the development of youth services, utilising them as part of the system of social integration, for better and for worse. For better, because lifeworld processes, left to their own spontaneous dynamics, often reproduce social inequalities; and the state, if it is committed to greater equality, has a duty to compensate and even positively discriminate in favour of marginalised youth threatened with exclusion from mainstream society. This requires policies, training structures and methods. For worse, because totalitarian regimes picked up on the potential for early ideological manipulation vested in youth services and therefore targeted youth as the core component of a new society and as allies in political movements.

So why not leave this awkward ambivalence behind that is vested historically in youth work and rally round a rational, effective, fully professionalised approach to youth work? My answer is, because this tension cannot and must not be resolved simply by siding exclusively with one or the other model; rather, in every operational context, the parameters for the 'right' approach to youth work and youth service need to be negotiated against the background of a detailed examination of the past history of the interests, movements and resources that are manifest in these specific circumstances.

This reflection requires very particular skills, which are not additional to the skills of youth work itself, but rather constitute core elements of the required youth work competences. They are the core hermeneutic skills of 'making sense', making sense of the lives of young people not in an objectivising or in a psychologising perspective (although psychological and sociological reference points might well have their importance in this process of understanding), but by engaging in a joint project of sense-making that connects to traditions of previous hopes, life concepts and origins, and at the same time transcends them to form something new, something that has relevance now, that exposes itself to the multiple and contradictory pulls and pushes which characterise the lives of young people in particular.

I want to draw on just some of these controversial issues that have always been part of such an historical approach to youth work and which lead to practice-relevant discoveries and points of departure.

Identity

Historical change in all the social professions, and in youth work too, confronts us with multiple issues of identity, particularly in the three dimensions of gender, ethnicity and class. In each case, the underlying question is whether youth services are about the reproduction of identities or about their transformation.

Gender

Whereas the profession of social work has historically been clearly dominated by females, this is not the case in youth work, where males had greater influence or where associations were split on gender terms. This settlement has left gender identity under-conceptualised in youth work and it is only now being raised gradually as an issue worth examining. It needs to be asked why gender issues have not had a more contentious history in youth work and whether having such a debate would open up useful reference points for future development.

Ethnicity

This is often portrayed as a new issue, particularly in immigrant societies where youth services are meant to play a key role in the integration of young people from different ethnic backgrounds and where the question of separate, ethnicity-specific services has to be confronted. But, on closer examination, youth services always had a strong element of ethnicity in the interest of nation-building or in the treatment of cultural traditions, where for instance religion became a quasi-ethnic marker designed to form a particular identity orientation.

Culturally defined identities played a major part in the development of youth work. Many immigrant projects which are organised on ethnic lines only mimic a basic tenet of 'indigenous' youth work, namely that religious denominations and culturally defined groups can claim the right to give youth a cultural reference point in their specific traditions. Here we have not even begun to disentangle the awkward questions of the boundaries of a legitimate sense of belonging as against their exclusionary, discriminatory effects. It needs to be asked where offering reference points for identity formation around cultural traditions becomes an exercise in fostering exclusionary and even racist tendencies.

Class

Historically, youth work and youth movements show many complex fissures along class lines. There was always a clash between youth initiatives that emphasised being working class as a positive value in identity formation and those that tried to question that form of socialisation and impose an agenda of 'betterment' on disadvantaged youth. The latter usually sought to engender a class-neutral identity for youth and promote inclusion, but often this had (perhaps unintended) discriminatory effects.

Particularly in the area of sport, clear class divisions prevailed, besides nationalist sentiments. Success in sporting activities like boxing or football was often portrayed, and offered, as an escape route from class bonds, but it succeeded only on an individual basis and often in an ideological context that was designed to legitimate or even consolidate structural class divisions.

In many societies, belonging to privileged or elitist sporting associations paved the way for future career success and was a way of socialising young middle-class people into positions of privilege and superiority. Commercialisation of sports and leisure activities has often obscured the traces of these distinctions and produced an individualised approach to identity formation. However, in many neighbourhoods and increasingly among immigrant groups, youth clubs retain their identity-forming capacity and continue to bear signs, if not of class belonging, at least of protection against anonymity as a means of exclusion.

Inevitability of Politics

As the examples show, where youth work raises issues of identity – even where identity is constructed in a non-political sense – youth work inescapably meshes with political agendas.

Hence, historical reflections in this field must inevitably confront the degree to which in a given context these political implications were made explicit, or point out the implications of a version of youth work that presents itself in an apparently politically neutral sense. The inherent ambiguity of many forms of youth work, as an organised element in public social policy or as a spontaneous product of social movements or other initiatives in civil society, can easily be exploited for political purposes.

Here the uniformed youth movement merits particular attention as an example of a phenomenon that can be understood in opposite ways: it can either be read as a spontaneous response to young people's need to have clear reference points for the development of their identity, so the structure of activities, the rituals and the uniforms can be seen as an intrinsic characteristic of youth; or the identity-shaping element can be seen as an attempt by the system to control and channel the needs of young people in a direction that ultimately suits the need of the state for well-adjusted youth.

Totalitarian regimes in particular were always keen to exploit this ambiguity, yet an assessment of different forms of youth work and youth movements cannot focus on their presentation as such, but must place them in a precise historical and political context. This kind of detailed work on the complex underlying motives, strategies and agendas that drive youth work and youth policy, formally and informally, is not only of theoretical interest but has direct practical implications because it helps to sharpen those competences (essential in youth work) that recognise and deal with the social construction of needs and identities.

On the basis of such a differentiated analysis it might also be possible to bring together again the historical experiences of East and West in Europe. In youth work, even more than in the social professions generally, the potential benefits of using past experience in the East have been hampered by the verdict that all youth work under communism was ideologically premised and hence not comparable to approaches in the West, at least in non-totalitarian countries and times. This attitude is often tinged with neo-colonial interests that seek to install in post-communist countries wholly Western systems, including youth services, as if one could ever start from zero with such developments. Ideologically motivated youth services were never totally imposed but responded always to some extent to the needs, dreams of autonomy and even rebellion, and concerns for identity of young people, just as seemingly non-ideological forms of youth activities always resonate with political agendas. In such historical dialogues lies an enormous potential for practice innovation.

Questions of Guilt

These considerations finally touch on the most sensitive issue in approaches to youth (and hence to youth work in the broadest sense), a current sensitivity which is heightened by historical considerations and studies. Looking at how young people were treated in the past confronts us immediately with massive guilt. We become aware how much suffering adults inflicted on children, often under the pretext of good pedagogical intentions, 'for your own good', which at times amounted to regimes of systematic oppression and exploitation. The insidious and exploitative nature of some of those projects can lie hidden behind a façade that portrays them as a 'spontaneous outpouring of youthful zeal and enthusiasm'. Their history stretches from the grotesque (so-called) Children's Crusade of 1212 to the youth element in China's Cultural Revolution and the growing phenomenon of child soldiers.

But, even apart from these extremes, child care, education and youth work have changed considerably over the centuries; methods that at one time seemed acceptable or even enlightened now seem shameful. It is only in recent years that the stories of children and young people who suffered abuse – in children's homes, in sports associations, in activities associated with the churches and elsewhere – have been seriously listened to. Their stories are an important part of a historical perspective on the precariousness of all methods. For we must ask how today's approaches to youth work and child protection will be judged by future generations – methods such as computer games and leisure activities, freely available in youth clubs or pursued 'spontaneously' on the internet, or protective methods like constant supervision by social workers, curfews in inner cities or treatment methods for hyper-activity.

The balance between giving children and young people more responsibility for living their own lives or pursuing their interests and protecting them from damage is not a question that can be answered with reference to positivist scientific or abstract moral principles; rather, this balance has to be negotiated continually in each new generation and in each cultural and political context. But reflecting on history makes us aware of the relativity of all perspectives, which is a useful and probably necessary starting point if we are to face up to this enormous responsibility, in the full knowledge of the risks of facing up to historical guilt.

Conclusion

In all these areas, historical reflections seem to lead us into an abyss of uncertainty and relativity, so that any attempt at searching history for eternal, unequivocal answers seems doomed from the beginning. So why bother? The answer may lie in a fragile, historical, subjective reference to humanism. Because childhood and youth are, anthropologically speaking, not a biological given but a social construct that every epoch and every culture shapes differently, according to its prevailing values, as a result youth work becomes a necessary but delicate task that takes those values seriously but allows for a critical position to be taken towards them, a position which in itself feeds on awareness of its historical relativity.

The task evolves in a dialectical force field that on the one side pulls in the direction of greater control over youth, making young people adjust to what adults define as reality and its necessities, and on the other side maintains that spontaneity gives the chance of renewal, of innovation, of progress. The two aspects together define the project of humanism, a project fraught with misunderstandings but nevertheless a source of cultural inspiration and true scientific endeavour. Humanism is an incomplete project, a project without fixed reference points, a project that continually transcends boundaries and categories, a challenge which exceeds (and must exceed) technical competence if it is to remain true to its mandate of realising the human in a social context instead of dissolving it in a technical, ultimately dehumanising process. The confrontation with history suggests this humility, but that need not give rise to resignation.

Notes

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