Child & Youth Services

Is Youth Work Being Courted by the Appropriate Suitor?

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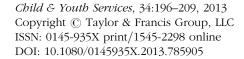York College , Jamaica , New York , USA
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Is Youth Work Being Courted by the Appropriate Suitor?

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It is fair to say that youth work is being courted. The question is by whom and is it an appropriate suitor? Here I begin with a brief sociological analysis of profession in order to more closely examine the narratives upon which professional identities rest. These understandings of "professional" are examined alongside accompanying assumptions and implications for professional education. Specifically, the privileging of science and epistemic culture as the foundation for profession is questioned as the best suitor for a practice of working with young people that values meaning over truth, dialogue over evidence, and reflexivity over certainty.

KEYWORDS professional capabilities, professional identity, professionalization

In its search for identity and its yearning to become a profession, there are several suitors willing to assist youth work's transition into "professional" culture. In fact, it is fair to say, that youth work is being courted. The question is, by whom and is it an appropriate suitor for the development of the profession/al? Here I begin with a brief sociolinguistic analysis of profession in order to more closely examine the narratives upon which professional identities in the human service fields rest. Four narratives for being a human service professional are discussed. In this article, these understandings are examined alongside accompanying assumptions and implications for professional education in general, and the professional education of youth workers in particular. Specifically, the privileging of science and epistemic culture as the foundation for a youth work profession is questioned as the

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best suitor for a practice of working with young people that values meaning over truth, dialogue over evidence, and reflexivity over certainty.

WHAT IS A PROFESSIONAL?

Society bestows upon professionals the expectation that they hold the knowledge, skills and character to carry out their duties in accordance with the standards of the profession and have achieved the credentials the profession has deemed appropriate in the call of that duty. To be a professional means acting within the epistemological, linguistic, empirical, societal and/or ethical bounds of that profession (Abbott & Meerabeau, 1998; Bessant, 2011; Guskey, 1995; Kinsella & Pitman, 2012; Sercombe, 2010). Different discourses of "professional" place different value and meaning(s) on the social and moral responsibilities of the profession/al (Jensen, Lahn, & Nerland, 2012; Krueger, 2002; Sercombe, 2012); the "technical competence" of the professional (Krueger & Stuart, 1999); and/or the need for holistic knowledge (Morgaine, 1999). In the human services field(s), there are at least four constructions of "professional," each having different implications for professional education:

- To take care of, care for
- To be competent
- To act in accordance with one's professional ethics
- To act prudently, with "good" judgment.

These conceptions are in no way mutually exclusive; in fact, a thorough historical analysis might uncover a common beginning (e.g., Aristotelian ethics), and in some cases categories may be redundant (e.g., the proposed

TABLE 1 Professional Narratives

	Competence	Care	Ethics	Judgment
Responsibility of the professional	To know and be able to do	To take care of, to care for	To act ethically	To act prudently, with "good" judgment
Foundation	Applied science; episteme and techne	Soft skills (e.g., listening, empathy)	Ethics law	Hermeneutics; phronesis; ethics as moral philosophy
Grounding	Empiricism, epistemology, education	Psychology, psychoanalysis, psychotherapeutics	Sociolegal	Philosophical, philosophy of practice, ontology
Political realm	Neoliberal policies	Welfare societies	Sociolegal concerns	Moral commitment to the broader social good and justice

notion of "ethics of care"; Peterson, Young, & Tillman, 1990). That said, such conceptions often appear separately in the literature relying on different disciplinary perspective and arguments (see Table 1). My goal here is not to review each perspective in depth but to postulate that these four ways of thinking when viewed dialectically provide a richer understanding of the privileging of positivist empiricism driving current efforts of professionalization in youth work. Such privileging has significant ramifications for youth work as a practice and the socialization into youth work as a practice; namely, the potential demise of a practice that maintains its responsiveness to young people (that is caring) with youth workers able make decisions (enact ethical and wise judgments) that are responsive to local contexts (i.e., to the needs, concerns, desires, and goals of the young people, their families and communities).

FROM CARE TO COMPETENCE: THE INFLUENCE OF SCIENCE IN PROFESSIONAL DISCOURSE

Historically, caring (for the sick, the elderly, and children) was women's work, not because caring didn't involve professional judgments but because it was not based on science. Science encompassed a knowledge base and a way of knowing the world that could be accessed only through higher education and, to some extent, apprenticeship, and was therefore not afforded to women (Kinsella & Pitman, 2012; Rafferty, 1996). The gendering of profession meant that a discourse of "semi-professions" emerged, defined by what they were not (i.e., not professions, not scientific, not requiring as much education, not male). Women in the business of caring now had to prove themselves professionally. Counternarratives emerged that removed care and relationship from the narratives of professional practice. In nursing, for instance, nurse reformers distanced themselves from the "anti-intellectualism" of character training and relational skills used to justify the exclusion of women from professional work, and adopted the technical/ scientific discourse from medicine for legitimacy (Rafferty, 1996). The dilemma for nurses has been to care in a society that refuses to value caring (Reverby, 1987). Caring didn't count as expert knowledge and skill compared to medicine, for instance. For years, (semi)professions, most notably those associated with women, have attempted to situate themselves alongside the "rigor" of male-dominated professions such as law and medicine, using science as the bedrock for professional knowledge. They have aimed for legitimacy through understandings that are predictive, quantitative, and male, in contrast to understandings and ways of knowing that are "softer," "symbolically feminine with an emphasis on language, meaning, qualitative studies and the democratization of understanding and meaning" (Michael Baizerman, personal communication, November 10, 2012).

Viewing professional practice as resting upon and requiring scientific knowledge is problematic when the only paradigm of "science" deemed valid is that relying on positivist methodologies—methodologies that require control, reduction of complexities, separation of parts from wholes, and prediction of outcomes based on standardized treatments and interventions; all of which, as will be seen, have been discounted as valid or useful for human service practices. Such privileging of scientific knowledge also discounts as credible the role of caring, ethics, and wisdom in the decision making of practitioners—a rather narrow view given that the times in which we live are complex, diverse, and uncertain and thus require the full capacities of human beings. Feminist scholars have for years argued that "women's work" requires legitimate ways of knowing and being in the world (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997). Further considerations of such privileging include who gets to participate in the making of scientific knowledge (e.g., researchers, practitioners, young people); and where and how knowledge is shared, all of which matter in what gets included and excluded in the education and socialization of those entering the profession and how practice then gets carried out. For instance, decades of failed educational reforms and continued achievement gaps in the K–16 system can be partially blamed on a system of teacher education that has relied on "scientific knowledge" and reified theories, to the exclusion of other ways of knowing, thinking, and being (Hill-Jackson & Lewis, 2010). Professional educators are calling for the development of their own philosophies of practice: in nursing (e.g., Bishop & Scudder, 1990; Rafferty, 1996), occupational therapy (e.g., Williams & Paterson, 2009), education (e.g., Anderson & Herr, 2011; Britzman, 1991), and social work (e.g., Cooper, 2011; Freedberg, 2009), noting that much of what has emerged as "scientific knowledge" is removed from the practice context (and therefore removed from the voices of practitioners, clients and communities).

IS SCIENCE THE RIGHT SUITOR FOR YOUTH WORK?

In one formulation a professional is one who is acting within an occupational space as an expert or knowledgeable person; professional education provides the training for developing that knowledge and expertise. In this formulation, professional knowledge is seen as an applied science, one learns evidence-based knowledge and then applies it with some measure of certainty to practice. Perhaps this conception is helpful in instances when technical knowledge can be applied systematically across cases (e.g., when dissecting a frog or conducting MRI research on the frontal cortex) but it is not sufficient for describing what human services professionals do (e.g., for becoming a youth worker). Becoming a professional when one's discipline is people/young people requires more than technical knowledge; it

requires a way of being that is relational, emergent, flexible, dialogic, participatory, and contextualized. Even on positivist terms, the variations of "technical knowledge" that would sufficiently cover such a human, dynamic system would be impossible to match in any educational arrangement. That is, one would need to account for a mathematically incoherent set of factors in order to have expertise with young people using this framework: Age × Gender × Socioeconomic Status × Ethnicity × Lived Experience × Family × Schooling × Strengths × Interests × Academic/intellectual Abilities × Health × Unknown = Professional Understanding of Young Person A. Then consider that Young Person A is in a group with Young Persons B–K, with a youth worker who is of a certain age, gender, SES, and so on; within an organization that is situated within a certain neighborhood, and the like. While youth workers have the technical knowledge to understand similarities, expertise is better described as reading the differences held within contexts and responding fluidly as such.

It is not surprising then, that relying upon the tools and methodologies of the natural sciences for use in the social sciences has been rejected by many postmodern thinkers and scholars (see Flyvbjerg, Landman, & Schram, 2012). This is not to say that the results of scientific findings are not valuable. However, relying on the product of science as the sole or even primary basis of knowledge and the method of science as the primary and legitimate way to gain knowledge about youth work practice will not, in my opinion, help us to advance the field in a way that will shape better futures for young people. In fact, if it were so, it would already have happened.

PRACTICE WORLDS ARE DIVERSE, FLUID, AND DYNAMIC

Science gives the illusion that there is order in the world (Barrett, 1978). It simplifies the complex, making it understandable, controllable, and treatable. While having a valuable place in the world (e.g., for advancing medicine and technology), as a basis for practitioner knowledge it seduces one into certainty. In the context of human service fields, certainty, while reducing complexity, may not be the best position from which to ground. Practice worlds are diverse, complex, and dynamic. They require ways of understanding and being that are better suited to those same characteristics. As Britzman (1991) describes in the context of teacher education:

> When it comes to learning to teach, there is no single-minded conception of success, of competence, of conduct, or of survival. There are no common agreements as to the desirable teacher's stance, the constitution of good pedagogy, or the relationship between theory and practice. This instability is not the problem. It becomes so only when multiplicity is denied and the pretense is that it does not exist. . . . if student teaching is characterized by multiplicity, then the professional's discourse of

certainty will not be able to assist the student teacher's potential to respond creatively to such difference. (p. 213)

Social workers, too, have recognized the insufficiency of certainty for the human professions. "The people involved, workers as well as service users, each have different perspectives upon situations and a consensus about what the problem is, or even whether there is a problem at all, has to be explored and negotiated to reach agreement" (Cooper, 2011, p. 20). Of interest, in the last 20 or so years, even those professions that rely most on the natural sciences, such as nursing, medicine, and psychoanalysis, have rejected episteme (knowledge derived from science) as the basis of clinical judgments (Bishop & Scudder, 1990; Groopman, 2007; Hafferty & Castellani, 2010; Orange, 2011; Rafferty, 1996). As Hafferty and Castellani (2010) point out, "the uncertainties of knowledge and its application to patient care, and the tremendous variabilities that exist with the patient population continue to demand some measure of individual expertise and discretionary decision making" (p. 299).

Multiplicity challenges certainty as a necessary requirement of being a professional. It necessitates a view of professional as someone comfortable with nuance and uncertainty (Anderson-Nathe, 2010). Stressed is that the work is in the relationship, in generative discourse, which is emergent and dynamic, not fixed and predictable. Social workers are now calling for "a stance of creative ambiguity" (Cooper, 2011, p. 23). In teaching, one needs "moral intuitiveness, self-critical openness, thoughtful maturity, tactful sensitivity toward the child's subjectivity, an interpretive intelligence, a pedagogical understanding of the child's needs, improvisational resoluteness in dealing with young people, a passion for knowing and learning the mysteries of the world, the moral fiber to stand up for something, a certain understanding of the world, active hope in the face of prevailing crises, and, not the least, humor and vitality" (Van Manen, 1991).

Might it not be possible then to think of a set of skills and ways of being that position one to be responsive to young people in professional and respectful ways that does not reduce the complexity of human life and interaction into "variables" of study with the assumption that doing so yields "true" and generalizable understanding? Is it possible to acknowledge that the development of "professional" is an ongoing search for understanding, a search that requires different ways of seeing and being in the world than traditional science allows, one continuously informed by and through the voices of the people with whom it works and responsive to context? Are there not ways toward professional learning that, like youth work's practice worlds, are diverse, fluid, and dynamic?

WHAT TYPE OF EDUCATION AND TOWARD WHAT END?

Research unequivocally supports that formal training and education play a significant role in the professional development of child and youth workers

(Arnett, 1989; Collins, 2010; Collins, Hill & Miranda, 2008; Deen & Bailey, 2004; Fusco, 2009; Ghazvini & Mullis, 2002; Hartje, Evans, Killian, & Brown, 2008; Huebner, Walker, & McFarland, 2003; Jones & Downing, 2006; McCabe & Cochran, 2006; Ross, Buglione, & Safford-Farquharson, 2011; Shek & Wai, 2008; Stein et al., 2005; Vile, Russell, Miller, & Reisner, 2008). While we no longer need to ask, is training effective, we do need descriptions of youth work education that account for what we consider knowledge/worth knowing, how to come by it, our understandings of teaching and learning, and how we envision youth work and the moral and social imperatives of youth workers.

Traditionally, curricula stem from the knowledge base of the discipline which, in the social sciences, emerges from "science." It is this "science" upon which practice should be applied (see Figure 1). Thus, the knowledge of the discipline, the knowledge meant to ultimately feed practice is that narrowly produced through assumptions of order, certainty, causality, and truth. Knowledge emerging from other, non-empirical, ways of knowing is discounted.

Learning knowledge as "truth" poses contradictions to a field that values meaning over truth, dialogue over evidence, and reflexivity over certainty. Titchen and Ersser (2001) highlight the importance of explicating practice knowledge (over scientific knowledge) so we "can justify the need for colleagues to act in a particular case, regulate their own practice through critical review of their whole professional knowledge base, and contribute to generating knowledge of the field by engaging in critique, debate, contestation and validation of professional craft knowledge with other practitioners, practitioner-researchers and researchers" (p. 48). Then socialization into the profession vis a vis professional education is not about reading the scientific evidence of the field's researchers (only), but emphasizes being in the discipline in ways that redefine what counts as knowledge, who can produce it and toward what end.

In my conception I would argue for three tenets of youth work education: (a) knowledge is less important than meaning, (b) teaching and learning are co-created in a reciprocally shared and negotiated space, and (c) professional education should be aligned to the practice context, in this case, to a diverse plethora of opportunities for young people. It is from this set of tenets that I will discuss the role of four professional learning processes: Dialogue, Participation, Imagination, and Reflexivity. These processes

FIGURE 1 Traditional conception of science and practice. (Color figure available online.)

are consistent with considerations about forming the discipline of youth work to include its philosophy of practice, a philosophy that stresses "being" as central to its understanding of practice.

Dialogue

As Groopman (2007) points out, even the grandfather profession of medicine fails in not understanding that "language is still the bedrock of clinical practice" (p. 8). Dialogue implies a stance about the meaning and role of knowledge and expertise in clinical practice. It serves not a "telling" purpose but one of generative discourse. A professional who sees him/herself as the expert or the holder of truth will likely evoke an authoritarian style of communication discounting the views of their clients. Conversely, a professional who believes that there is no definitive truth but only interpretations of social realities is likely to engage in dialogue to generate meaning. As a youth worker, it is through dialogue that young people can voice their needs, desires, goals, and concerns without cause for concern of their disenfranchisement.

Dialogue on the part of the youth worker with young people and youth work educators with their students requires humility and authenticity. One must own the limitations of their knowledge and be open to exposing them. Cast in a teaching relationship, teaching is not about serving up "truths" but about sharing ways of seeing the world and then opening those up to the views of others for new interpretations and meanings. The classroom is one of dialogue where all views are equally heard, equally meaningful. In a hermeneutic circle one learns to stay open to what is and what is not, to learn through the meaning of others. Truth is not what matters; only interpretations exist. Then knowing is a process of coming to meaning through interpretations, or a journey in dialectics (Belton, 2009; Hill & Belton, 2011) where teaching and learning are reciprocal processes.

Participation

Teaching has been too narrowly concerned with the sharing of knowledge from teacher to student. Since the translation of writings of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky in the United States, that paradigm has begun to shift. For instance, Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that learning results from "legitimate peripheral participation" in activities situated in cultural milieus. Knowing is grounded in authentic context and requires social interaction and participation. Seen in this light, professional education might be seen as providing opportunities for engagement and participation in the discipline and in the practice. Knowledge is not simply accepted as "truth"; it is enacted. This might take many forms. In a call for the "radical transformation" of nursing education, for instance, Benner and colleagues call for an apprenticeship model that makes visible competent performance, gives opportunities for

supervised practice and coaching, and supports reflection on practice (Benner, Sutphen, Leonard, & Day, 2010). Similarly, the self apprenticeship training model for child and youth care practitioners "encourages active, personal engagement during the learning process" in order to facilitate "creative, caring outcomes and equipping student practitioners to actually and successfully work with clients" (Peterson et al., 1990, p. 228).

While apprenticeship sets up learning as an experiential act, Barnett and Coate (2005) argue that knowing and doing do not replace being. They claim, "Being is the most significant of the three dimensions (of student engagement) in that without it the others cannot take off. A student cannot be expected to try to get on the inside of a discipline (with the arduousness that entails) and engage in challenging practical tasks unless the student has a firm self (a "self-confidence"); curricula, properly framed, can assist the development of a firm self" (p. 164). In this way, students "become" the result of their studies through not only knowing and acting within the discipline but being within it. Education is a transformation of self where self includes emotions, compassion, humility, acceptance, humor, what one knows (schooled knowledge and lived experience), what one thinks they know (metacognitive knowledge), what is not yet known but thinkable (creativity, resourcefulness, reflections), and what ones does (the actions one takes including "reaching out" through small gestures, communication, rapport, listening, picking up the phone to call a parent, drawing upon resources) (Fusco, 2012). Garfat (2003) notes that effective child and youth care workers are actively self-aware, distinguish self from other, and use aspects of self in their relationships with youth. "Youth work is a way of being, in which workers and youth create new moments that become part of their evolving narratives and view of self" (Krueger, 2007, p. 55). Feedback and guidance are critical components in this playing back of "self" (Fewster, 1990) needed for ongoing supervision. Being a youth worker means one is constantly constructing self, other, practice, and practice worlds.

Imagination

One can be a competent youth worker with knowledge of youth and youth work principles yet little imagination for what might be. Imagination frees us from the current conditions in front of us. Imagination allows us to consider, ponder, and wonder about potential and possibilities. Clinically, imagination might be a consideration of multiple routes and responses (Benner et al., 2010). Here there is no "correct" response; only many options where the chosen option is deemed "right for now." When imagination involves questioning the broader social and political systems, particularly those that are oppressive and anti-democratic, youth work takes on a moral and ethical imagination. Unfettered by social realities it might be a call to justice. Youth work is often the location of youth development for the simple fact that it is

centered on non-oppressive relationships. To the extent that youth work mimics the type of authoritarian relationships typical in institutionalized settings (e.g., those that reproduce the status quo), youth development will no longer be the outcome. As critical pedagogues insist, education should be a form of increased consciousness regarding oppressive social conditions. One must see what exists before one can imagine a more just world. As hooks (2003) describes, it is a "pedagogy of hope." Hope requires imagination; youth work requires both. How often do we ask youth workers to think about questions such as, what kind of world do you want for young people? What kind of world do young people want for themselves? How can we get there together?

Reflexivity

Schon's concept of the reflective practitioner (1983) emerged from the critique that practice knowledge cannot be described through prevailing positivist epistemologies. Technical rationality is inadequate for understanding how practitioners think (Abrandt Dahlgren, Richardson, & Kalman, 2004; Anderson & Herr, 2011; Kinsella & Pitman, 2012; Titchen & Ersser, 2001; Williams & Paterson, 2009). Needed was a way to articulate the type of thinking in action that practitioners engaged in, a thinking that can be described as part confidence in knowing what to do and part criticality. The professional capability to engage in practice situations that are fluid and complex means not only having knowledge but knowing what you know and knowing when it is not applicable. As Cooper (2011) concludes, "the only certainty entails being sure of your best judgment in particular situations at particular moments in time and with the fully considered evidence of incomplete knowledge so that you can defend and justify your assessments, plans and interventions" (p. 23). Using one's best judgment followed by reflection implies that science and evidence-based knowledge are not adopted wholly but are critically examined and deliberated upon in relation to the practice context. Such reflective practice as a basis for advanced training and education in youth work is not a new suggestion (Emslie, 2009; Stein et al., 2005). And, it remains a critical one for a set of practices that cuts across domains, populations, geographies, and cultures. Working in diverse settings, particularly when pluralism and democracy are valued, requires a constant regeneration of knowledge in the practice context that can only occur through reflexivity.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I examined and critiqued the current positivist stance that privileges science and epistemic culture in its conceptions of profession over concepts of care, ethics, and professional judgment. Should youth work

allow science to be its suitor given that the assumptions upon which science is based and how it is carried out are at odds with youth work as a practice? What are alternative ways of conceiving how to be an effective professional with young people? A starting point might be found within philosophical hermeneutics, which denies objective certainty in favor of meaning. Needed is an ontological approach to the understanding of being a youth worker. Understanding is not an epistemic state; it is one of co-constructed meaning in the context of lived experience. Becoming a practitioner with young people means being able to negotiate that space, not with certainties or answers or knowledge but with being, presence, and capacities for dialogue, participation, imagination and reflexivity. If we accept these professional capabilities as critical to being a youth work professional, then it is from this stance that youth work education can/should be designed. Then, drawing upon the dialogical method of Paulo Freire, the critical pedagogy of hooks, the cultural tool-and-result participation of Vygotsky, and the critical reflexivity of Schon, allows the classroom to be a site that is co-created by teachers and students alike in order to liberate one's mind, to imagine the unimaginable. Such are the professional capabilities that youth work requires and that youth work education can mirror and value.

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