ADOLESCENT OR YOUTH? YOUTHWORK PRACTICE AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IDEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT: *Young people can be understood in multiple ways, and one choice faced by youthwork has to do with whether we interpret them as a problem to be solved or as an opportunity for exploration. The former perspective is associated with the scientific understanding of adolescence and adolescent. The latter is associated with human development anthropology. The choice between these influences what we believe are the relevant threats to young people and youthwork methods, aims, and outcomes.*

Key words: *youthwork, youth development, adolescence, youth, child and youth care work*

How young people are perceived, understood, explained, and interpreted is in part a choice of perspective and the consequences of that perspective. Since young people can be understood in multiple ways, and these influence our professional values, our attentiveness to these choices makes a difference. Once choice is between the words "youth" and "adolescent" and the two different perspectives on young people they represent. This is a long-standing question in youthwork, and concern or uncertainty about the idea of "adolescent" has long been an issue in the field of youthwork.

1. Authors of textbooks and guides to youthwork often include a chapter or section on developmental psychology, but this material is not usually well integrated into the thesis of the book, and the implications of these ideas are not always explored.

2. Some authors, relying on arguments in the sociology of childhood and the sociology of age, argue that adolescent psychology and youth development are inimical to ethical work with youth (for example, see Wyn & White, 1996).

3. Magnuson (1999) argues that scientific psychology is susceptible to using "effectiveness" in bringing about a predetermined outcome (the goal justifies the means) as the criterion of its legitimacy, so

    much so that the means and methods border on the manipulative
(see, for example, Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998).

4. It is also sometimes claimed that these definitions "objectify" or over-
   simplify young people by explaining complex experience with nar-
   rowly defined theories of traits, needs, or motives (see Morss, 1996).

5. Some youthworkers have long complained that scientific theories
   ignored aspects of being young that were more important than—or
   just as important as--biology, such as social class, culture, gender,
   and ethnicity. Wyn & White (1996) cogently argue that developmen-
   tal theories systematically "marginalize" young people, because they
   ignore crucial differences between and among youth.

6. Finally, some have noted that the science of adolescent psychology is
   often invoked as a solution to social anxiety about youth during
   times of uncertainty and social change. In many western societies,
   there is renewed concern about the effect of rapid social change, the
   effect of new technology, and the consequences of a "risk" society
   (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997), postmodernism (Epstein, 1998), and
   choice biographies (Gergen, 1991; Giddens, 1991).

    Yet Kett (1977) points out that our worries about young people are not
only a response to social conditions. The very ideas of adolescence and
adolescent are associated with, dependent on, and the cause of some of
these worries and on an assumption that growing up during the teenage
years is by definition a problem.

    The idea of adolescent suggests that the biosocial developmental
stage is most important, part of a sequence of biological and social stages
through the life span. This may be called a "critical period" in their devel-
opment, in which young people are perceived as a problem to be solved.
In comparison, the idea of youth is a social status, social role, generation,
cohort, and time of negotiating and reflecting on one's place in the social
order. Young people are conceived as an opportunity for exploration.

    These differences are the origin the sources of our concern about
youth and the goals and methods we choose in the work.

Origins of Adolescence

    The idea of adolescence makes sense in the context of social changes
originating in the 19th century, says Kett (1977), such as the transition
from an agricultural to an industrial economy, urbanization, and the cor-
responding decrease in rural occupational choices as well as an increase
in occupational choices that were available to young people. As a gener-
ation and as a cohort, young people were more visible than they had been.
Many of them stayed in school longer. There were more occupational
choices as well as a concentration of young people in urban areas. Their
problems became visible and threatening. Thus, it was more likely that
they could be identified as a group or class with identifiable characteris-
tics.

There had long been an interest in, and concern about, youth. At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, a scientific way of thinking about them became more prominent, (for example, in Adolescence, by G. Stanley Hall (1904). In the U.S., this kind of scientific interest was related to social concerns about youth because...

> After the middle of the 19th century, Americans shaped an image of the rural past as a time when young people were firmly in their place, subordinated to the wise exercise of authority, and bound tightly by affective relationships to family and community (Kett, 1977, p. 60).

Similarly, many perceived that the health and well-being of youth was threatened by "city living, overpressure, and overcivilization. . . . an expression of a mélange of nostalgia and anxiety. . ." (p. 143). In response, the promise of the idea of adolescence was that it would be a universal understanding of persons of a certain age and that, based on this universal understanding, we would learn the correct method for raising and protecting them.

This interest in young people has associated with it a characteristic set of concerns and worries—threats to development—having to do with keeping them safe, protecting their innocence, and navigating the dangers of the life-stage of adolescence.

Threats to Young People from the Point of View of "Adolescence"

Whether we think about young people as youth or as adolescents makes a difference in why we are concerned about them and in the aims of youthwork. As "adolescents," concerns about young people have to do with our hope that they successfully navigate the transitions to adulthood and prepare well for the future, that they avoid risks that can damage their future, that they have available to them the social supports, caring adults and assets they need, and that they learn the skills, competencies, and knowledge they need for a successful future. We worry about them because of the threats that modern life poses to their successful development. We want them to develop character that will allow them to resist temptation and to choose rightly.

In the United States, there are continued calls for studies of how to provide adolescents with what they need to be successful. We study their needs, resilience, assets, competencies, and so forth. Youth advocates propose the continued and increasing organization of the out-of-school time of young people as a way to prevent them from getting into trouble. We have worried in the past 100 years about crime, the development of juvenile super predators, drug and alcohol use, sexual activity, cigarettes, comic books, too much work, too little work, too much masculinity or femininity, too little masculinity or femininity, oversocialization, undersocialization, the decline in civility, and the damaging effects of the use of the internet.

From the point of view of the idea of young people as adolescents, the main difficulties are conceived as risks to successful individual development and personal health. These risks are perceived to be nearly universal:

1. Dangers associated with the adolescent stage of life, including risk behaviors, attitudes, and values.
2. Threats to the innocence of a child or adolescent.
3. Failure in an area of life thought to be a predictor of success or failure in any other area.
4. Precocious or, in contrast, underdeveloped attitudes, behaviors, or skills.

The role of adults from this perspective is to help adolescents "navigate the risky passage," resist temptation, and achieve success--often defined as avoiding trouble. Prescriptions for solving problems typically have to do with interventions intended to instill values, build assets, enhance competencies, and a long list of other intra-personal individual psychological variables. Should these not work, in the U.S., adult supervision is increasingly proposed as the solution to problem after problem.

The science of adolescence is more than an empirical framework: It is a symbolic battleground, says Kett (1977), and the way of thinking represented by these concerns is characteristic of "developing assets and competencies for risk reduction." Moreover, the risks are cast as uniquely problematic to adolescence.

Problems with the Concept of Adolescence

While we have learned much from the scientific study of development, assumptions about how this knowledge is used in youthwork practice with young people has some dangers and has led to harmful consequences for the lives of youth:

1. Kett (1977) pointed out that Hall's (1904) treatise on adolescence was a "conception of behavior imposed upon youth, rather than an empirical assessment of the way in which young people actually behaved" (p. 243). Kett says that these conceptions assumed the value of conformity, hostility to intellectuality, and passivity, values intended to suppress the "storm and stress" of adolescence and the uncivilized lower-class young person, especially boys; "...adolescent psychology became as much a method for controlling the behavior of young people as a tool of description and explanation" (p. 238). There may be reason to worry that many of the ways we think about young people today are similarly flawed.

2. Kett (1977), Elder (1980), and Wyn & White (1996) all say that adolescence is associated with a kind of nostalgia about the past, a mythical era when communities and families worked seamlessly to produce healthy, moral young persons. This utopian vision of how young people grew up interferes with clear thinking about their present possibilities and incites anxiety about any condition or practice that does not fit with our nostalgic vision.

3. Adult control over the spare time of young people has increased, including control of voluntary associations, which stands in contrast to the 19th century when programs were often run by young people. The consequences are fewer opportunities for young people to be independently mature and fewer opportunities to explore the world.

4. Segregation of youth from adult life and from real life has increased.

> By segregating young people into special institutions such as the school, Sunday school, and later into youth organizations such as Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts for a few hours each week, adults apparently hope that the adolescent will be spared the shock of learning the contradictions of the culture. At the same time, they believe that these institutions are building a mysterious something variously called "citizenship," "leadership," or "character," which will keep the boy or girl from being "tempted" by the "pleasures" of adult life . . .. By trying to keep the maturing child ignorant of this world of conflict and contradictions, adults think they are keeping him "pure." (Hollingshead, 1949).

In so doing, however, we remove young people from the very places where maturity is practiced and where meaningful experience is located.

5. There exits a subordination of demographic and cultural differences to biological maturation (Elder, 1980; Kett, 1977; Wyn & White, 1996). The use of adolescence directs attention to what all youth have in common, their within-group similarities, and obscures attention to their differences based on gender, race, ethnicity, religion, social class, and so forth, which may be far more powerful developmental influences than biology.

6. There is the idea that there is something "essential" and universal about being adolescent. Wyn & White (1996) say that thinking about adolescence in that way defines as abnormal and deviant (at-risk) those who do not possess these essential characteristics, and it "problematizes" the age group.

7. There exists the belief that the stage of adolescence can be understood in itself and by itself rather than in relation to the stages before and after it.

Kett (1977) said that at the beginning of the 20th century, there was a difference and a choice between (a) those who saw young people as a problem to be solved, " . . . a kind of hollow youth, devoid of inner mission . . . ", a consequence of how we think about young people, and (b) "those who look on youth as a time for grappling with growth, development, and life purpose . . ." (pp. 243-244). The choice between these is still relevant and important. The problems outlined here are a consequence of thinking about youth as problems to be solved.

Youth: Sources of Growth, Development, and Life Purpose

Youthworkers have long recognized that young persons can be understood coincidentally as a generation, cohort, social role, transitional status between childhood and adult, and as students, workers, dependents, or as a subculture. These interpretations are ways we explain youth as well as sources of youth self-identity and self-understanding.

Youth are a generation through the lens of their roughly common age, in contrast and comparison to those who went before and come after. Youth are a cohort "when common contemporary historical conditions and experiences lie behind it" (Mitterauer, 1986, p. 235). Those who lived through the World Wars are examples of a cohort being defined by a common experience. As students young persons prepare for adult roles and responsibilities.

As workers young persons provide services and produce products; the income they receive makes them a powerful consumer market. As a transitional status young persons are defined as what they are typically not: children or adults, married, economically and socially independent, fully educated. As a subculture young persons are defined as a collection of consumer tastes, attitudes, values, and lifestyles.

The idea of youth has been described as both a separate biosocial stage of life that succeeds adolescence but also as an alternative to adolescence. In both cases, it differs from narrower definitions of adolescence in that it is necessarily connected to "social time" issues: entry into employment, participation in secondary and higher education, increasing independence from parents and pending or actual departure from home, and entry into romantic relationships. It is connected to the "historical time" issues of cohorts (societal events and trends that affect almost everyone). Examples include the development of new technology--computers, birth control, the mass-production assembly line--and political events such as wars, economic depression and affluence, or cultural developments such as increasing secularization or religiosity.

Youth: A Reflexive and Dynamic Basis for Youthwork

The aim of scientific approaches is increasing certainty about persons in a developmental stage. It is hoped that this increasing certainty will lead to certainty about methods of work with them. But inherent in the meaning of being young, from the point of view of "youth," is a social status, life stage, and sense of emerging possibilities that is inherently and necessarily uncertain. Four ideas about the idea of youth illustrate this.

Keniston (1975), proposes that what defines persons who are youth is the need to manage the tension between the self and the social order, and the central developmental issue is managing the incongruence between self and society: "What characterizes a growing minority of post adolescents today is that they have not settled the question whose answers once defined adulthood: questions of relationship to the existing society; questions of vocation; questions of social role and lifestyle" (p. 7). The conse-

quences and meaning of this for youth are, according to Keniston, (a) a sense of estrangement from society and, simultaneously, omnipotentiality (the feeling that one is capable of anything), (b) the possibility of refusing socialization and acculturation, (c) youth specific identities and roles, (d) valuing change, transformation, movement, and (e) youthful counter-cultures.

Mitterauer (1986) and Lewin (1951) characterize youth as a marginal status whose capacities exceed their opportunities.   For example, Neidhardt (cited in Mitterauer, 1986), says,

As opposed to children and adults youths may be defined as those who with puberty have reached biological sexual maturity, without having gained possession, through marriage and employment, of the general rights and privileges which allow or require responsible participation in the significant fundamental processes of society" (p. 17).

Young people may experience a mismatch between their capacities and opportunities in many areas of their life. Similarly, Lewin (1951), said that because of their status in relationship to adults, youth are "marginal," meaning that as a group they exist on the outside of the social structures that bind the rest of society together. This marginality is part of what makes them "youth."

Wyn and White (1996), argue that youth is "most productively conceptualized as a social process in which the meaning and experience of becoming adult is socially mediated" (p. 4). "It is a relational concept, which refers to the social process whereby age is socially constructed, institutionalized, and controlled in historically and culturally specific ways (p. 11)." When the idea of youth (or adolescence, for that matter) is problematic, it is because the meaning of adulthood is problematic. According to them, youth is "socially constructed" through the institutions and processes by which communities and societies facilitate or inhibit movement into adulthood. Thus we cannot fully understand youth by peering into universal, age-related characteristics, but we can understand something about them by examining their possibilities and limitations as they are defined by adults and the wider world around them.

Finally, Goodman (1956), argues that the central task of growing up has to do with the question of "vocation," that is, the relationship between an individual and the community that helps one understand "the way a man sic recognizes himself as belonging, or appoints himself . . .. a solid means of finding opportunities, things worth while, useful, and honorable to do and be justified by" (p. 142). Goodman argues that the most important question has to do with how a person contributes to society, or not, and finds meaning and purpose within community and society. In all of these explanations intra-personal, individual characteristics are dependent on and in relationship to the available cultural, moral, and material resources.

In sum, as youth young persons:

1. Find themselves in a world where much of what they have experienced and know is a result of how the world has been previously organized or in which they find themselves, and where much of how the rest of the world understands them is not under their control.

2. Are concerned with the meaning of who they are, the meaning of their experience, and where they do or do not fit in.

3. Grapple with questions about their identity in relation to their marginality, their capacities, and their opportunities.

4. Are at an age and in a social context that is optimal for exploring the world, evaluating different alternatives for their lives, and developing good judgment about lifestyle, values, and life goals.

5. Look for purposeful, meaningful, honorable opportunities.

6. Can imagine alternatives to the existing way their world is organized and lived and can imagine alternatives for their future.

7. Are learning what and who the world around them is inviting or disinviting them to be, learning about and choosing the range and limits of their own responsibility, and learning what the world around and ahead of them values.

Just as "adolescence" suggests certain types of threats to development, so does "youth." In this case, the threats and opportunities have to do with the relationship between our understanding of "adult" and "youth" and the ways in which members of each lives in creative or productive tension with the other.

Threats to Successful "Youth Development"

Threats to young people from the point of view of "adolescence" result from the perceived characteristics of "adolescence," which some theorists describe as a "critical" life-stage and one in which they are often perceived to be increasingly "at-risk."

In contrast, as "youth," we are less likely to worry about them specifically because of their age. When there are difficulties, we look first not to characteristics of a biosocial life stage but to characteristics that have to do with their marginal status, social role, and with possible complications of their relationship to adulthood. Examples of these threats are:

1. The isolation and segregation of young persons from adults.

2. Denial of access to meaningful, real, concrete, objective, and purposeful opportunities and experiences.

3. Increasingly unstable and unreliable arenas of adult identity (see, for example, Baumeister, 1986), such as religion, geographic home, marriage, employment, family, age, bodily characteristics, moral goodness, and even gender.

4 Negative adult beliefs—and even fear--about the values, behaviors, traits, and characteristics of young people.

5. The absence of community moral consensus, commitment, and purpose.

6. Meaningless work and/or schooling.

7. Over control by adults in the arenas of experimentation, exploration, and play.

Conclusion: A Focus on the <u>Youth</u> in Youth Development

The intent of this discussion is to illustrate the ideological differences between the conceptions of youth and adolescence, not to explicate a theory of youthwork practice. Even so, these ideas do point to some values and goals of youthwork practice. The idea of a time for "grappling with growth, development, and life purpose" described by Kett (1977) focuses our attention on the relational qualities of youth to adults and on the consequences for each rather than on each life stage considered individually. Work with youth <u>as youth</u> is attentive to:

1. Access to and participation in activities and settings where youth in Western societies are typically segregated from adults: work, education, politics, religion, service, and so forth.

2. The meaning for youth of life experience and reflection on, and choice about, their responses and subsequent commitments.

3. Opportunities to explore the world through experiment, trial and error, and learning from success and failure.

4. Opportunities to contribute to the world not just by sustaining the existing social world but improving on it.

5. The availability of material, cultural, and moral resources for living a life with dignity and the right to be treated as an "end" and not a means.

6. Consideration of the impact and meaning of "social time" and "historical time" issues related to youth as a cohort or a generation.

7. Interest in the meaning of demographic variables on youth experience, including race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and social class, as well as an interest in the unique ways individual youth and subcultures of youth experiment with their identity.

8. Opportunities for independence and autonomy.

9. An interest in the contribution of youth to the world through their challenge to what we think we know and believe and through creative work.

10. Paying attention to the connections between how youth understand their experience and their place in the world.

11. Reflection on the meaning of being an adult, because conceptions of adult-hood and youth-hood cannot be understood apart from each other.

12. Acknowledgement of marginality as a challenge but also an opportunity for creativity.

These characterizations of youthwork practice and the meaning of being young are reflexive, in that youth and youthworkers interpret, define, and reinterpret each other as part of an on-going experiential conversation. The experience of being young and the ideology of youthhood lend themselves to multi-dimensional interpretation of self and other.

Kett (1977) believed that at the beginning of the 20th century, we made the wrong choice, i.e. ways of viewing young people based on adolescent rather than views based on youth. He argued in 1977 that there are possibilities again for choosing differently.

In a local school system near my home, 40 percent of the students drop out of school before graduation, including nearly 90 percent of the black males. The community and schools' response is to increase the punishments for dropping out, increase the number of rules governing daily life in the school, focus classroom time on preparation for national tests, and to organize schemes of after-school and weekend supervision, "asset" development, social skills training, and moral exhortation. Explicit in these schemes are justifications based on scientific views of adolescents: the study of teenage brains, an interpretation of teenage sexuality as a risk factor, a view of young people as unable to delay gratification, a focus on their incompetence, and interpreting expressions of independence and individuality as defiance.

These responses ignore the alienation from the schools of blue-collar and black families and the disappearance in the past 15 years of entry-level union jobs to which youth like these could once aspire. The schools and community cannot see or understand from their scientific and prescriptive point of view. Indeed, they cannot be seen without a view of youth as a social process, as the negotiation of self with the social order, and as marginal. Yet is here in the choice of work with youth rather than adolescents that purposeful, effective work must begin.

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