Habitus as Topic and Tool in Youth Work

by Dr Dean Farquhar

Introduction

There is a vast body of literature offering youth workers guidance on how they ought to structure their practice. However, this guidance tends to coalesce around contested normative principles that can be differentially applied. Whilst this elaboration of principles usefully establishes the boundaries of a practitioners' ethos, its precise relevance to the realm of practice is more ambiguous than is often implied. This paper contends that deploying habitus as a pedagogical tool can help youth workers come to a more sophisticated understanding of the interplay between normative concerns and the exigencies of practice. The paper begins by setting out the limits to youth work principles in guiding youth work practice. It then introduces the concept of habitus and explains its merits as a pedagogical tool in youth work.

The Limits to Youth Work Principles

Attempts to define the constitutive principles of youth work are often tied to a wider project of delineating youth work as a distinctive social process that makes a particular contribution to the lives of young people (Harland et al., 2005). This has meant that the principles of youth work have tended to have a dual function as forms of guidance for practitioners and weapons they may call upon to legitimate their practice. In fulfilling this dual function, the principles of youth work have become the means through which some have sought to distinguish 'authentic' youth work practice (see Jeffs & Smith, 2008). Supposed breaches of youth work principles can therefore leave practitioners vulnerable to

charges that their practice is inauthentic or simply does not qualify as youth work. However, how youth work principles should be applied is not universally agreed. The elaboration of such principles may usefully establish the boundaries of a practitioners' ethos, but how that ethos should guide youth work interventions remains an open question to be addressed through practice.

Cooper (2018) provides a useful account of some of the practical limits to youth work principles. They identify consensus around the following principles:

1. A focus on young people's lives and their concerns;
2. Attending to the social connection and the context of young people's lives;
3. Positive regard and processes for working through supportive friendly relationships;
4. A holistic approach to working with young people that includes;
    a. informal education;
    b. an ethic of care and concern for the flourishing of young people;
    c. facilitation of youth participation, rights and social justice;
    d. acting with integrity

Warning against tendencies to rigidly define the voluntary and youth mandated engagement principles of youth work, Cooper points to the limitations of these principles in practice and urges workers to:

1. Maximise the possibility of voluntary participation, but be aware of how a lack of alternatives may limit young people's real choice;
2. Respond to a mandate from the young person, but be explicit with young people about any limitations to their mandate imposed by particular youth work contexts.

As Cooper readily acknowledges, owing to disagreements within the field concerning the nature of practice, the framing of these two principles may prove contentious amongst some youth workers.

Although some might find it necessary to question Cooper's framing of youth work, this paper seeks to broaden the terms of their argument. It holds that Cooper's pragmatic assessment of the limits to youth work principles opens up space for a fruitful discussion on the interdependence of the prefigurative and spontaneous within youth work practice. The prefigurative alludes to the worker's attempts to model and encourage beliefs and practices that purport to exert a positive social impact, whereas the spontaneous arises when they take a step back and relinquish control over aspects of the process to give young people autonomy. Given that workers can never entirely relinquish control over the youth work process and guarantee the safety and well-being of the young people in their care, nor can they establish a balance between the prefigurative and spontaneous without regard for prevailing group dynamics, their practice always involves a certain balancing act between the prefigurative and spontaneous that cannot be fixed a priori.

It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that tensions between the prefigurative and the spontaneous have recurred within the scholarship on youth work. Researchers often contend that youth workers are agents of social change and have a capacity to address important issues with young people that they may not raise unprompted or be afforded opportunities to discuss in other settings (Corrigan, 1982; Morgan & McArdle, 2018; Walsh & Schubotz, 2020). Yet, there is a strong countervailing tendency within this body of research that cautions against exploitative forms of youth participation, in which the aims of the worker take precedence over affording autonomy to young people (Jeffs & Smith, 1989;

Barber, 2007; McCready and Dilworth, 2014). The reality is that good youth work is an iterative process that traverses between the prefigurative and spontaneous as context demands and seeks to maximize both elements by synergizing the aims of the worker with the needs and aspirations of youth (Batsleer, 2013). This requires negotiating dynamic sets of relationships with and between young people, which demands flexibility and reflexivity on the part of the worker (Davies, 2011). When deployed as a pedagogical tool, habitus can help youth workers develop a sophisticated understanding of this complex process and greater self-awareness of how their practice relates to youth work principles.

Habitus as Topic

A key concept in the work of Bourdieu (1977; 1984; 1989; 1990), habitus refers to a structure of dispositions that agents develop through socialisation. This dispositional structure informs agents' everyday social practices by furnishing them with a certain *sense* of the potential meanings inscribed within given social situations. A defining feature of habitus is its capacity to operate below the level of deliberation. Although habitus does not rule out deliberation informing social practices, by generating the schemes of perception that inform the non-deliberative and taken-for-granted aspects of social practices, it sets the contextual limits to deliberation. Habitus may therefore be thought of as an embodied accumulation of social history that weighs heavily on social interactions in the present.

As an accumulation of social history, the dispositional structure of habitus is never static. Acquired knowledge, mediated through habitus, alters its dispositional structure (Bourdieu, 2000). However, misunderstandings regarding the mechanisms that govern knowledge acquisition through habitus has led to some strong criticism of the concept. For example,

Burawoy (2012, p.204; 2019) charges that habitus is "a black box", both "unknowable and unverifiable", which encourages tautological explanations of social practice: an individual pursues a particular social practice in a given way because they have the habitus of someone that does so. Such perspectives overlook the importance placed on practical activity to the formation and redefinition of habitus. Bourdieu (2000) contends that knowledge is acquired bodily through the repetition of social practices and multiplication of social encounters. Consequently, the fabrication of habitus can be explained by examining the sequential and situatedness of lived experience.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) permit a multi-layered habitus, distinguishing between primary and secondary habitus. Primary habitus is acquired through early socialisation and furnishes agents with the dispositions through which later experiences are mediated. However, subsequent pedagogic work can lead to the development of secondary forms of habitus that act upon and modify primary habitus. As Wacquant (2022, pp.297-298) elaborates:

> Habitus is *not necessarily coherent and unified*. Rather, it displays varying degrees of integration and tension, depending on the character and compatibility of the social situations that fashioned it over time.

Habitus is never fixed in perpetuity but is a temporally bounded social construct that alters according to the ordering of lived experience.

To help explain the ordering of lived experience, Bourdieu likens social encounters to games. Each game is played out in a field in which players are situated in various positions depending on the volume and composition of their resources. Bourdieu (1986) refers to these

resources as forms of capital and distinguishes three core forms: economic, social and cultural. Discerning the existence of multiple fields, Bourdieu argues that each field is organised according to its own specific logic and no field is reducible to another, but all fields are connected by the overarching logic of the field of power. For Bourdieu, the field of power represents the total structure of power relations where agents confront each other in strategies aimed at maintaining or transforming the principles of division that order social space (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.76). Far from being an inexplicable 'black box', habitus can be explained by analysing how agents' social practices relate to their past, present and anticipated positions within and across multiple sites of struggle (fields).

However, as Wacquant (2011) outlines in his radicalisation of Bourdieu, habitus need not simply be a topic of analysis, but may also be utilised as a pedagogical tool. Here, Wacquant is speaking directly to sociologists. Twisting the stick in the opposite direction to sociological orthodoxy, Wacquant (2015, p.7) urges that sociologist conducting fieldwork "go native, but go native armed, and return". Wacquant contends that by diving deeply into the stream of social action at the greatest possible depth and actively acquiring dispositions of a particular craft or occupation, sociologists are better able to parse social phenomena and understand the social production and assembly of habitus. Wacquant (2014, p.9) summarises:

> The sociologist can use initiatory immersion and practical entanglement in the world under study, *in conjunction with the classical tools of the social scientific method,* to convert her intelligent organism into a fleet vehicle for social detection and analysis.

Through 'observant participation' sociologists can cultivate a more sophisticated understanding of the social world.

This paper proposes twisting the stick in a different direction to Wacquant. It proposes that an understanding of habitus can better arm the so called natives or practitioners. The paper does not seek to turn youth workers into sociologists, although a great deal of scholarship on youth work is written by those that can lay claim to both titles. Rather, it seeks to convey how ideas concerning habitus can extend existing youth work practices and help youth workers develop a more nuanced understanding of the importance of normative principles to their practice.

Habitus as Youth Work Tool

If classificatory struggle over the principles of youth work can only set the boundaries of a practitioners' ethos, it becomes crucial that youth workers develop an awareness of how their practice relates to that ethos. By locating their practice within a body of legitimating principles, youth workers can explain how their efforts to balance the prefigurative and spontaneous are guided by a strategic engagement with normative beliefs and the exigencies of practice. This requires a certain level of reflexivity on the part of the youth worker. Habitus can help youth workers develop reflexive practice.

Habitus directs attention to the importance of positionality within social space in the making of a youth worker. Youth workers are not a homogenous group. Rather, they are a diverse group with varying experiences of class, gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality. Youth workers arrive at their practice with differentially developed dispositions and schemes of perception through which they apprehend the social world. Pedagogic work undertaken prior to their work with young people influences how they conceive of youth work principles and relate to the often diverse needs and aspirations of youth. The extent to which

these preconceptions change depends on the nature of the practice pursued by the youth worker.

Youth workers committed to striking an appropriate balance between the prefigurative and spontaneous will invariably have to contend with shifting dynamics within and across groups of young people over time. In contending with these dynamics, they will tend to develop a certain *sense* of how different young people relate to their offering and will come to instinctively deploy a range of relational learning techniques to further their aims. Through their practical activity they will develop a youth work habitus, whose distinctive shape depends on how it is integrated with primary and other secondary forms of habitus, as well as the ways it adapts to contextual changes in the worker's practice. Habitus can therefore serve as a useful pedagogical tool in youth work by opening the medium through which workers develop an exploratory s*ense* of their practice to scrutiny and reflection.

Reflexive practice is certainly not a novel idea in youth work (see Trelfa, 2016; 2018). The novelty proposed here lies in the overarching conceptual framework that using habitus to structure reflexive record-keeping provides. Thinking in terms of the cultivation of youth work habitus turns attention to the considerable role that taken-for-granted assumptions play in informing workers' approach to practice. Not only do workers arrive at their practice with a tendency to view the social world in a particular way, but they also arrive with a tendency not to recognise how many of the assumptions they make about the ways of the world reflect their experiences of unequal power relations. This raises a rather basic question concerning youth work practice: how can a youth worker be sure that their reading of youth work principles and practice correspond with a justifiable conception of the social good and do not reproduce attitudes that sustain inequalities? In response to this question, many

youth workers will be able to recount a body of anecdotal evidence derived from their practice that explains the merits of 'a youth work approach'. This paper seeks to provide some exercises that can be used to present this evidence in a more systematic way that allows workers to flag the relevance of youth work principles to their practice and illustrate that they have sufficiently scrutinised the impact of habitus and role played by taken-for-granted assumptions in their work.

Exercise 1: Topic Tracker

Can you remember any topics that were discussed during the discussion?			
Have you had any personal experiences that are relevant to the topic?			

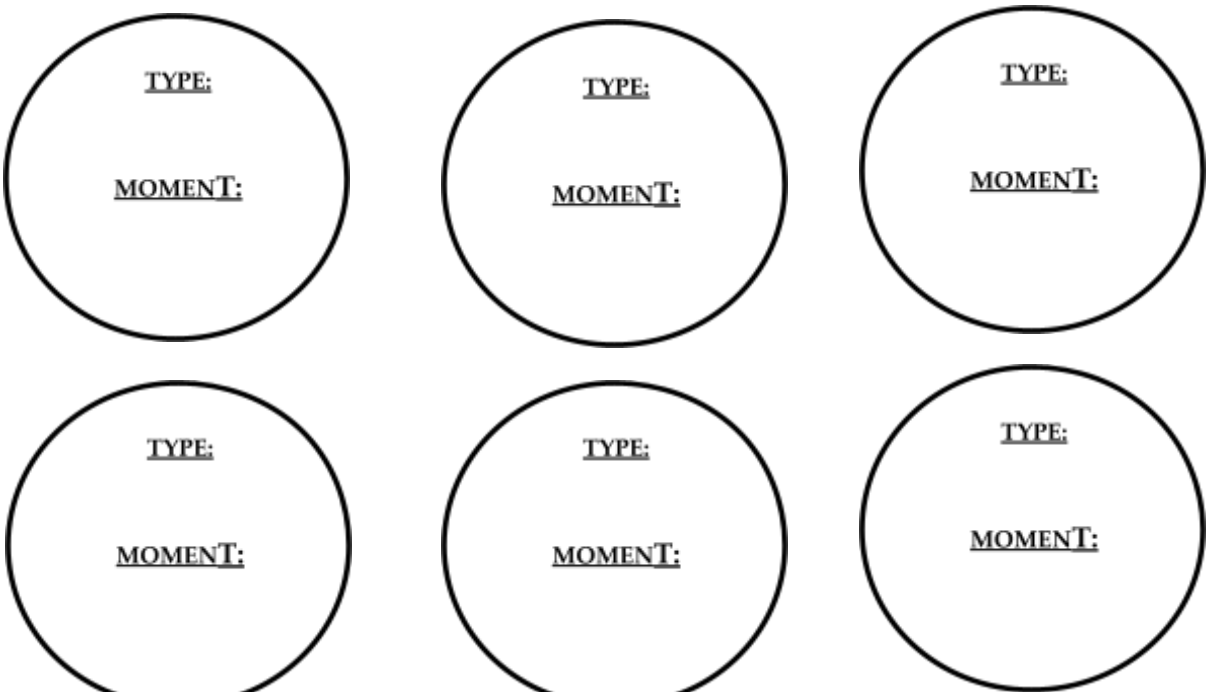
Could you have any biases in relation to the topics?

How did you manage any biases?

Guidance: Take some time to reflect on all the things that were said during the session. Write these in the first grid. Reflect on how your past experiences relate to the topics in grid two. Then take some time to consider whether these experiences might make you biased in relation to the topic and complete grid three. If you believe you might have some biases, explain how these were managed in grid four.

Purpose: If completed regularly, this exercise should provide workers with a detailed record of the range of issues addressed through their practice that they can call upon to demonstrate their commitment to working with young people and addressing their concerns, as well as enabling them to show how they have acknowledged and responded to the potential biases arising out of their dispositions and beliefs.

Exercise 2: Moment Minders



Can you tick any youth work principles you think have relate to these moments?	
1. A focus on young people's lives and their concerns. 2. Working through supportive friendly relationships. 3. A commitment to informal education. 4. Concern for the flourishing of young people. 5. Facilitation of youth participation, rights and social justice. 6. Acting with integrity. 7. The voluntary participation of young people 8. Respect for the mandate of young people	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

What do these moments tell you about your beliefs about your practice?
☐

Guidance: Each circle represents a Moment Minder. Each Moment Minder must be filled with a prefigurative or spontaneous moment. As noted above, prefigurative moments refer to those where the worker has attempted to model a set of beliefs or behaviours that purports to have a positive social impact, whereas spontaneous moments refer to those where the worker has taken a step back and relinquished some control over the process to allow young people to take initiative and shape the session. Both moments are learning opportunities and can be interconnected. A spontaneous moment might lead to a prefigurative moment and vice versa. If this is the case, workers might want to draw a connecting line between the Moment Minders to signify their connection. Once the worker has completed as many Moment Minders as they see fit, they are then invited to note down

how they believe the moments relate to youth work principles and reflect on what they think this tells them about the beliefs informing their practice.

Purpose: The Moment Minders aim to structure workers practical knowledge and give them a range of examples regarding positive practice that they can communicate to interested parties. Encouraging workers to draw lines between related moments should also give them a greater appreciation of youth work as a developmental process. The first grid is included to ensure the youth work ethos is kept in view through the reflection by asking workers to relate to the moments they have identified to youth work principles. The second grid is intended to draw attention to how the interactions constitutive of the moments are underpinned by a deeper set of beliefs and dispositions. This should help workers explain the reasons for their practice and the rationale of youth work habitus more fully.

Integrating each of these exercises into the youth work toolkit should enhance workers self-awareness of the dispositions that inform their taken-for-granted assumptions and leave them better placed to communicate the rationale of their practice and how it fits with the youth work ethos. However, the integration of these exercises into practice requires some consideration of logistics and strategies of implementation. Whilst these exercises do not require an excessive amount of time to complete, they will arguably require more time than standard sessional reflections. In this respect, workers may find it appealing to pilot the exercises with certain groups to uncover whether the time invested is economical in terms of the insights yelided. At the very least, the provision of the exercises should open up some avenues that can help account for the practical implications of the workings of youth work habitus.

Conclusion

This paper set out to explain the merits of deploying habitus as a pedagogical tool in youth work. It contends that the elaboration of youth work principles can only establish the boundaries of a practitioners' ethos and that a balance between the prefigurative and spontaneous aspects of youth work practice cannot be struck a priori. Striking an appropriate balance between the prefigurative and spontaneous requires negotiating dynamic sets of relationships with and between young people, which demands flexibility and reflexivity on the part of the worker. The paper locates the relevance of habitus in its capacity to strengthen reflexive practice. Incorporating habitus into the youth work toolkit provides a robust conceptual architecture that extends existing approaches to reflexive record-keeping by providing frames of reference that spotlight the need to consider the dispositions and beliefs that inform the taken-for-granted assumptions that underpin much practice. By providing reflexive exercises, the paper conveys some ways that workers might better understand and communicate the impact of habitus and the taken-for-granted on their readings of youth work principles and practice. It is hoped that these exercises and the wider arguments made in the paper provide some food for thought to practitioners.

Postscript

This article uses complex sociological concepts to express many common-sense ideas that are implicit in how youth workers understand and communicate their practice. Some will undoubtedly question the need for such complexity. The answer to such concerns is rather

simple, if not entirely satisfactory for all. Bringing this level of complexity to the youth work vocabulary adds robustness to how youth workers are able to convey their specialism to colleagues and the uninitiated, whether they be funders, academics or other partners.

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