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The Romantic Ethic in Outreach Work

L'éthique romantique du travail de rue

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La ética romántica en el trabajo social de acompañamiento

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Introduction¹

- 1 Outreach social work with youths was established as a municipal public service in Norway four decades ago, but in spite of a relatively long history of existence there are few explicit policies directed at this branch of social work and occupational skills and knowledge which are essential to the enactment of the youth worker role have only to a small degree been documented in writing. Encounters between youth workers and youths in public arenas like the street corner or the shopping mall often take on the character of subtle negotiations over premises of interaction. Successful conduct among youth workers is predicated on their ability to alternate between contradicting registers of roles and symbolic action, demonstrating their mastery of youthful codes of communication while avoiding conduct that signals a transgression of their role as responsible adults. Skills of this kind are an essential ingredient of outreach youth work which is acquired through prolonged practical experience. In line with this requirement, youth workers tend to place a strong emphasis on informality and moral commitment as the defining elements of their occupational role, sometimes to the detriment of distanced and theoretically informed perspectives on their practice. This “romantic ethic”, I argue, can lead to a suppression of important dilemmas and contradictions that are inherent in youth workers’ occupational role and make them blind to problematic aspects of their practices. To counter such tendencies, outreach youth work services should profit from institutionalising distanced and dispassionate reflection on the nature of social work into their practices.

- 2 The article is based on an evaluative study of municipal outreach youth work services in Norway I carried out in 2007 in collaboration with colleagues at the Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research, with funding from the Alcohol and Drug-addiction Service, City of Oslo (Henningsen, Gotaas and Feiring 2008). Empirical data for the study was generated through document reviews and interviews and participatory observation at four outreach youth work services. The objective of the research project was to analyse and assess working methods employed at the outreach youth work services, their cooperation with other organisations and their practices of documentation. The evaluative perspective employed in the study is process oriented, in the sense that specific research questions and themes are allowed to emerge in and through the dialogue with the actors under study (Baklien 2004), and critical, in the sense of aiming to promote critical reflection on its subject matter through the application of theoretical perspectives (Hammer 2004).² A large part of the study is devoted to descriptions and assessments of practices of street work, which is widely considered to be a work method which is unique to the outreach youth work services within the municipal welfare organisation. One reason for the reliance on participatory observation in the study is the informal nature of working methods at the outreach youth work services, and in particular those pertaining to street work. To conceptualise and analyse the forms of interaction that takes place between youth workers and youths in street settings, an ethnographic, and hence inductive, approach was called for.
- 3 As a part of the research project, I carried out ethnographic fieldworks at the municipal outreach youth work services in two towns in different parts of the country over a period of two weeks at both places. It is mainly this material I draw on in the pages that follow. The two organisations are large by Norwegian standards, with a total staff of twenty nine and nine employees respectively. There is an overweight of female employees in the organisations and most of the youth workers had higher educational background from studies in social work or the social sciences. Both organisations exemplify the “classical” form of outreach youth work in Norway, in the sense of being organised as autonomous organisational units within the social service sector and that a relatively large portion of their resources are channelled into street work with marginalised youths in an urban environment.³ During my stays at the outreach youth work services I followed the daily activities of the staff of youth workers: I participated in staff meetings and activities with youths at the offices of the outreach youth work services and accompanied youth workers on their street work patrols in the town centres. An important source of information in the studies was the ongoing discussions I had with youth workers about observations I made in these contexts, e.g. about the vocabulary they employed with regards to youths or their responses to various types of situations they are confronted with when engaged in street work.

On the side of youths

- 4 The first Norwegian public outreach youth work service unit was established in Oslo in 1969, and in the years that followed similar organisations were set up in the major cities in the country, and later, in many rural areas as well. A government white paper from 1980 provides detailed recommendations with regards to the objectives, work methods and organisation of outreach youth work services (NOU 1980: 37), stating among other things that youth workers should make contacts with marginalised youths on the youth's

own territory and that the service is of a voluntary nature. From the outset, outreach youth work in Norway came to be associated with the political radicalism which was prevalent at the time among the emerging educated middle class. Youth workers often posed as the advocates of marginalised youths, in direct opposition to local authorities and other public agencies like the police or the child welfare service (Foss 1989, Wiedenstrøm 1993) and a major concern of the community of outreach youth workers throughout the 1970s and 1980s was the struggle to gain recognition for youth workers plight of silence *vis a vis* other public agencies with regards to the individuals they come in contact with. As a result of the autonomous role the outreach services took on within the public welfare organisation and their activist stance “on the side of youths”, the organisations came to attract considerable local political turmoil in various parts of the country. In the wake of the termination of a programme of state funding for outreach youth work in the 1980s, several local governments opted to shut down the services. This trend was carried forward into the 1990s, to the extent that one commentator at this time speaks of the “rise and fall” of the outreach youth work (Sundby and Dalhaug 1991), but seems to be have been reversed after the turn of the century.⁴ A majority of the recently founded outreach youth work services are located in rural areas. In many cases these are organised under the municipal cultural sector, and the activities overlap with those of youth clubs.

- 5 The recent growth in the number of outreach youth work services coincides with efforts and initiatives to professionalise their conduct. Over the last decades the outreach youth work services have gradually entered into cooperative relations with other public agencies and civil society actors. In the towns where I carried out my research, the outreach youth work services are today widely considered to be integrated parts of the municipal social service sector. Increasingly too, outreach youth work services have come to document their activities and work-methods in writing. In 2006 a study programme in outreach social work with youths was founded at the university college of Oslo and along with this came the publication of a textbook on this subject matter (Erdal 2006). Prior to this there have been few if any opportunities for formal training in outreach youth work, nor has there been much to be found in the way of a body of academic literature on the subject. The main publications on outreach youth work in Norwegian date back to the 1970s and 1980s, and apart from the abovementioned white paper no other policy documents directed specifically at this branch of social work have been issued by the government. One may reasonably assume, therefore, that most of the skills and knowledge that defines outreach youth work as an occupational practice are transmitted and reproduced through the medium of oral communication and through processes of direct learning in practical situations.

From drug-addicts to youths at risk

- 6 Along with the changes described above, the outreach services where I conducted research have undergone a change of course in recent years with regards to the target population of their activities. The main focus of the activity has been shifted away from work to support drug-addicts in their twenties onto prevention and early intervention work with youths of a younger age considered to be at risk of developing problems like drug-addiction or unemployment. Most of the individuals the youth workers in Tromsø and Bergen make contacts with, on the streets and elsewhere, are school-aged. Often they

have trouble adapting to school and spend a greater part of their days, during and after school hours, hanging out at shopping malls and other public places where youths gather in the town centres. From what I was told at the outreach services, some of these youths are in the custody of the child welfare service or have a prior record of being under public care. While hanging out at these places, the youths cross paths with older injecting drug-addicts and the risk for recruitment into such milieus is a cause of concern in particular at the outreach services.

- 7 The emphasis on “youths at risk” at the outreach youth work services is in line with the general trend in this area of policy. As Carlsson (2002) shows, over the last two or three decades there has been a considerable growth in programmes and efforts intended to prevent the development of social problems at the local level of government in Norway. Partly, this can be seen as a reflection of the ambitiousness of the Norwegian welfare state with regards to combating social problems. The standard of living is generally high in the Norwegian population; the rate of unemployment is low and poverty, in the sense of serious deprivation of basic material needs, is rare. Marginalisation among youths is more a matter of failure to conform to middle class standards of consumption – often experienced as a shameful condition and as a form of isolation – school failure, drug abuse and parental neglect (Norman 2007, Sandbæk 2008). Partly, the thrust on preventive activity can be seen to reflect a tendency of depoliticisation in this area of policy. As Carlsson notes, many of the recent programmes of prevention focus on individual symptoms rather than on the structural causes which contribute to the production of social problems. In accordance with this trend, problems like drug-addiction, school failure and even poverty are increasingly seen as forms of individual pathology rather than as social problems, and resources are channelled into efforts to identify individuals who fall into various categories of risk, and motivational or therapeutic measures directed at these individuals.

The feel for the game

- 8 During my stays at the two outreach youth work services, I devoted much of my time to accompany youth workers as they trawled the town centres on their daily walking patrols. When engaged in street work, youth workers contribute to the fulfilment of several objectives that are deemed important by the professional community. For one thing, the routine presence of youth workers on public arenas frequented by marginalised youths provides the latter with opportunities for contacts with responsible adults and thus with a sense of security and comfort some of these youths may be in want of. Another aim of the street work is to make observations about developments in the various youth groupings that have the town centres as their habitat – the youth workers I accompanied on walking patrols were for instance constantly on the lookout for youths that were newcomers on the arenas. Thirdly, and most importantly, street work provides youth workers with an opportunity to form personal relations with troubled youths. I have noted the principle that outreach youth work should be of a voluntary nature. A derivative axiom which is often invoked by youth workers, is that they must strive to gain the trust of the individuals they make contacts with before proceeding to make assessments about their need for assistance or by taking actions on their behalf.
- 9 To build such relations of trust, youth workers usually take a patient approach to the youths they come into contact with, and spend time to allow both parties to get to know

each other and to assure the youths about their honest commitment to provide them with support. Encounters in street settings between youth workers and youths therefore sometimes appear to be rather directionless conversations, as the emphasis of the youth workers is more on nurturing relations with youths than to gather precise information about their situation. What this calls for on the part of youth worker is first and foremost a set of fine-tuned interactional skills or “feel for the game”. At the street corner or at the shopping mall, youth workers engage in activities which are by nature informal and un-bureaucratic. They operate on arenas that are far removed from orderly office settings and which sometimes can be experienced as disturbing to members of the adult population. Here, they are faced with a stream of minute decisions to be made and situations to respond to, situations that are familiar to them, but never precisely identical. The work usually involves a fair amount of subtle negotiation with youths over the premises for interaction : to avoid rejection, youth workers seek to avoid being seen as intrusive or patronising ; they try to adapt to the conversational styles, subversive humour and other idiosyncrasies of youths, but without moving too far in this direction, in order not to be seen to endorse drug-use or other types of subversive behaviour.

- 10 To navigate this complex terrain, youth workers must rely on a continual improvisation based on previous experience, a form of knowledge the anthropologist James Scott (1998) refers to by the concept of *metis*. As Scott points out, this type of intelligence or cunning is acquired from the ongoing trial-and-error experimentation actors engage in through their everyday pursuits. For the most part it is of an implicit nature, and therefore difficult to teach outside of practical situations, it is always contextual, shaped by locally situated actors and reflecting their particular interests and concerns. The test of validity in the case of *metis* is not so much whether the knowledge is true or logically consistent, in the abstract sense, but whether or not it can deliver the desired results. A testimony to the importance of this type of knowledge in outreach youth work was given to me by an experienced youth worker I interviewed. When starting out in the job in the 1990s, she told me, colleagues had informed her that it would probably take a year or two before it could even dawn on her what the work really amounted to. Another youth worker emphasised how the skills she applied when carrying out her work was mainly acquired from personal experiences she had gathered over the years as a youth worker, and from adopting certain features of the work-style of colleagues who had served as her mentors, fitting them into own unique personal style of work. Yet another interviewee, put great stress on her ability to come across to youths as an “authentic” person, and how her dedication to help youths with whom she made contacts was seen to reflect her “real me”. As these statements indicate, core competencies required for outreach youth work are sometimes seen by youth workers to be personalised and embedded in practice to the extent of being commensurable only to the experienced practitioner.
- 11 This is not to say however, that the skills and knowledge that are involved in outreach youth work are enclosed in silence. As I learned at the outreach youth work services, sharing of experience and practices of mutual criticism comes in abundance in the organisations. In their daily and weekly briefing sessions and in the ongoing conversation between team partners and other colleagues at the office, youth workers engage in a constant collective reflection upon their various work tasks: how best to approach an individual youth or a group of youths on the street, when and how to initiate follow-up action with regards to a youth, if there is sufficient causes for concern to report a youth to the child welfare service, and so on. To take one example: In one of the walking patrols

I participated in, the youth workers and I stumble upon a large group of youths who have gathered at the entrance of a shopping mall. The youth workers position themselves at the outskirts of the group to observe what is going on. They greet some members of the group with whom they are acquainted but without engaging any of the youths in conversations. After a while we move on to do a round of the shopping mall and when we return to the entrance most of the youths have left. Back at the office, one of the youth workers comments upon the episode and tells his partner that they were much too passive in the encounter with the youths at the entrance. The partner disagrees, and points to the fact that the shopping mall had been visited by two other patrols that same day and that the youths therefore might have been fed up with talking to youth workers. To preserve the goodwill of the youths, she said, they should avoid becoming too pushy. A lengthy discussion followed. Interchanges of this kind are a recurring occurrence at the outreach services. What is noticeable about these discussions is that for the most part they are concerned with the challenges of an immediate practical nature and couched in a language of “experience near concepts” (Geertz 1993), rather than in theoretical concepts or abstract principles. The processes of mutual criticism and learning which unfolds at the outreach youth work services tends accordingly to be contained within the particular universes of practice youth workers are familiarised to.

The romantic ethic

- 12 James Scott’s main concern in the book I have quoted from is to criticise the modernist planner’s dream of replacing practices based on local knowledge with universal schemes of human development. One objection which can be raised against this argument is that Scott tends to toward a romanticised view of *metis*, as a fragile possession of local actors which is everywhere threatened by forces of modernisation, yet somehow also a form of knowledge which is always superior to universalistic reason. In this he connects with a major current in Western intellectual life over the last decades, which is the combined rejection of universal concepts and theory and the celebration of difference, particularity and local experiences (Eagleton 2004). As my account of youth workers practice above indicates, this sentiment is familiar to the field of outreach youth work as well. It is not only that informal interactional skills is a practical necessity of outreach youth work, youth workers tend to make informality into a virtue of its own. This is evident in the stress youth workers place on the practical and personal nature of their professional knowledge, and in their belief in the power of such soft skills as a universal remedy for various kinds of problems that may afflict youths. It is evident too in other aspects of the organisational culture of the outreach youth work services, such as the modes of dressing, behaving and speaking that are typically manifested at the offices. To be a youth worker, it might seem, is to be unceremoniously laid back with regards to these matters, and to be relieved as well from many of the bureaucratic constraints that impede the movement of other employees of public organisations.
- 13 The emphasis on informality connects with other aspects of youth workers’ occupational identity. I have noted how outreach youth work in Norway historically is associated with radical political activism. Today it rarely happens that the outreach youth work services confront the local governments directly or in the media over issues of policy, and several youth workers I interviewed, spoke with irony about the 1970s-style leftist political orientation of their predecessors at the outreach services. But the notion of the youth

worker as rebellious agent within the welfare system, whose loyalty ultimately lies with the youth, remains important, if nothing else so for symbolic reasons and for reasons of identity. In interviews and other conversations I had with youth workers, it was striking how they seldom let go of opportunities to state their allegiance to marginalised youths, explaining for instance that even though they now had an unproblematic relation to the police and the child welfare service, their role was still at base to be "on the side of youths".

- 14 Such evocations of the activist role tie in with the demands for moral commitment and altruism with which the youth worker role is often associated. One youth worker I interviewed spoke with mild contempt about colleagues for whom being a youth worker was "merely a job", which in his opinion hardly deserved to call themselves by this name. What is required of youth workers instead, he made clear, is a total commitment to the marginalised youths they enter into relations with. Along with other youth workers I talked to, he spoke of his dedication to "give everything" to help youths get their life back on track. With regards to such attitudes, analysts of social work point to a tendency among social workers to construct their professional role as a response to a demand for personal sacrifice. Writing on youth workers specifically, the anthropologist Hans Christian Sørhaug (1984) described a syndrome he terms "professional martyrdom", whereby youth workers devote themselves completely to the task of helping youths, often without receiving a single word of gratitude from the recipients of their endeavours and without preventing them from moving further into the downward spiral they have been caught in. But as Sørhaug points out, in accordance with the psychological logic of martyrdom this lack of results might in fact constitute a positive value for youth workers: the fewer the returns on the martyr's gift, the higher its value, and the greater is the moral worth which is bestowed upon the martyr. A related form of heroism is discernible in youth workers attitude toward street work, as the true mission of the outreach youth work services. Warnings that outreach youth work must not degenerate into an indoor office service are commonly voiced in the professional community. Most obviously this relates to the principles that the services of the organisations should be as accessible as possible for youths and premised on the needs and preferences of the users. But from comments youth workers made about colleagues in other organisations thought to prefer the "cosy environment" of the office to the street it appears that there is an element of reproach for wimpish behaviour in the warnings as well. The hardship involved in street work might accordingly be seen as a morally qualifying ritual of passage among youth workers.
- 15 It should be emphasised that what I am describing here are *tendencies* which are prevalent among youth workers, not a uniform mode of thinking. As can be expected, there is considerable variation in the attitudes displayed by youth workers I came in contact with on these matters, but even so there are good reasons to pay serious attention to these tendencies. The common thread of the features of youth workers identity I have highlighted above is that of a positive affirmation of the outsider role and resentment toward rationalisation, and as such it can be termed a romantic ethic.⁵ This outlook may serve to endow the work youth workers engage in with a sense of moral purpose. Attempts of codification of their informal skills and knowledge may accordingly provoke a sense of disenchantment. The romantic ethic also serves to entrust youth workers with a sense of identity, which may be deemed critical by the exponents of an emerging profession. As Terence Johnson (1972) notes, mystification of occupational skills and

knowledge is a common way in which practitioners seek to bolster claims to professional autonomy.

- 16 To the extent that it is elevated into a life-orientation, the romantic ethic may also serve to restrict the vision of youth workers in important respects, and especially so if it leads to a glorification of informal practical knowledge as self-sufficient basis for professional practice. I have noted that *metis* is codified in experience near concepts and first and foremost concerned with practical efficacy. As such, it may inspire reflexivity, concerning for instance the quality of relations youth workers form with marginalised youths or how best to approach youths on the street, but it does not invite youth workers to engage in meta-reflections about their practices. It does not force actors to step outside of their immediate context of action and consider the structural conditions under which their practice is shaped or to question whether the objectives they are steering after and the means they apply for these ends are legitimate, but rather takes this for granted.
- 17 This may not be of great consequence in activities where the relationships between objectives and the means to achieve them are transparent and unproblematic, but when it comes to social work it is a serious limitation. Here, objectives are always complex and means should never be viewed as unproblematic. While the fundamental aim of social work is to help people improve their lives, these activities may potentially also contribute to an entrenchment of their problems. Activities intended to “empower” people may work to entrap them into relations of dependency, and activities which aim for the “inclusion” of people into society may instead lead to their stigmatisation and rob them of dignity. In a recent book the sociologist Richard Sennett (2003) grapples with the question of how social workers can provide clients of the welfare state not only with the services they are entitled to, but with the respect they deserve as human beings. To achieve this, Sennett argues, social workers must strive to grant autonomy to clients. What this suggests in turn is that social workers must resist the impulse to succumb to feelings of compassion and pity for the needy. Altruistically minded social workers present the recipients of their services with a gift for which they may have nothing to give in return. It is an act which affirms the inner goodness of social workers, but also the basic inequality of the relationship they form with clients. The widespread assumption that social workers should enter into “warm” personal relations with the recipients of their services can, in a related manner, serve to entrust them with a mandate to intrude in the lives of clients. In both cases, Sennett shows, the result may be that people who are dependant on public welfare are deprived of self-respect. The ideal model of the social worker as a person who is driven by a personal calling “to do good” might therefore turn out to be counterproductive. A more impersonal and analytically minded approach to social work – which separates care giving from compassion and cautions against the “error of believing that doing good necessarily entail self-sacrifice” (Sennett 2003: 202-203) – can be the most humane way of dealing with marginalised people.
- 18 In important respects Sennett’s thoughts echoes those of Hannah Arendt, and in particular the distinctions she makes between compassion, pity and solidarity. Solidarity, Arendt (1990) notes, partakes of reason, while compassion is one of the passions and pity is a sentiment which can be enjoyed for its own sake:
- 19 “It is out of pity that men are ‘attracted toward *les hommes faibles*’, but it is out of solidarity that they establish deliberately and, as it were, dispassionately a community of interest with the oppressed and exploited. (...) (S)olidarity, though it may be aroused by suffering, is not guided by it, and it comprehends the strong and the rich no less than the

weak and the poor; compared with the sentiment of pity it may appear cold and abstract, for it remains committed to ‘ideas’ – to greatness, or honour, or dignity – rather than to any ‘love’ of men (1990: 88-89).”

- 20 While painstakingly unsentimental, Arendt’s concept of solidarity as a “principle that can inspire and guide action” is far from cynical. In conjunction with Sennett’s notions of respect and autonomy, this principle deserves to be given serious consideration by social workers. What can emerge from such a discussion is an understanding of social workers occupational role which emphasise reasoned reflection over emotional engagement and the craft dimension of social work over concerns about the inner goodness of the social workers self.
- 21 For social workers to ground their practice on the principle of solidarity would, among other things, require that they come to terms with the structural ambiguity of their occupational role. While providing care and support to clients, social workers also participate in forms of state surveillance and disciplining of the same persons. This type of role-dilemmas is an inescapable aspect of social work, but as critical analysts point out (Margolin 1997), social workers tend to develop mechanisms which make them oblivious to the side of their activities that has to do with the exercise of power. The moral outlook I have termed the romantic ethic, it should be emphasised, is one such mechanism. Partly this is because it invites youth workers to adopt a professional perspective predominantly based on informal knowledge and experience near concepts, which prevent them from recognising relationships that can only be comprehended through theoretically informed considerations. Partly this is because the ideal model of youth workers as altruistic activists it fosters is difficult to reconcile with the fact that they are agents of the state and that there is potentially a repressive side to their activities. If youth workers invest their identities into romanticised notions of their occupational role, it may lead to a suspension of self-criticism with regards to problematic aspects of their activities. In what remains of the article, I will dwell on empirical examples which illustrate this point.

The gaze of concern

- 22 I have noted how in recent years the main focus of the activity at the outreach youth work services in Tromsø and Bergen has been shifted away from work to support drug-addicts in their twenties onto prevention and early intervention work with youths of a younger age. As one youth worker told me in an interview, this change of clientele posed quite a challenge to him. In the case of a twenty five year old drug-addict, he explained, the relationship is usually a straightforward matter of providing care and support to someone who has come to terms with the fact that he is in need of help, but with a sixteen year old school drop-out, on the other hand, things get more complicated. Often, this person will be unwilling to accept that she has problems and be reluctant to receive any kind of help from youth workers. This type of experiences can serve to heighten the tension between conflicting role-requirements of youth workers to the extent that emphatic involvement and surveillance emerge as separate moments in their activities.
- 23 One way in which this is made manifest in street settings, is in a tendency I observed at times among youth workers to project a frame of understanding onto youths which I have elsewhere described as a “gaze of concern” (Henningsen 2009). It is a tendency to invest the urban environment with a dramatic quality, as a place where danger is lurking everywhere and to apply a “hermeneutics of suspicion” when interpreting statements

and behaviour of youths. As a result of this, the mere sighting of youths on this arena comes to be viewed as a remarkable event and youth workers are led to attend to the task of collecting and recording of detailed information about youths in an overzealous manner. Observed actions and statements made by youths gets entrusted with depth and significance, which in some cases is not called for, as the pieces in a great puzzle to be solved. Street work takes on the feel of an ongoing investigation, and gets loaded with a kind of excitement one might associate with undercover surveillance work.

- 24 There are several reasons why this gaze of concern arises among youth workers. One of these is found in the practice of written reporting from street work. The report sheets youth workers fill out at the end of walking patrols invite them to construe observations they make on the street as a series of events and this may unwittingly entrust youth workers with an incentive to bring “interesting” observations back to the office. Another reason can be found in the rhetoric employed in the contemporary discourse on prevention and early intervention in youth work. Although preventive youth work in Norway has for long been an area of relative political neglect, it is generally recognised to command a “superior morality” (Askheim 1994). In light of the idea of prevention, almost any youth can emerge as a potential victim and the appeal to values of compassion and responsibility which often permeates the discourse of prevention serves to bring out a sense of urgency with regards to the task of protecting youths. The notion of “youth at risk”, which is central to the activities at the outreach youth work services, can be viewed as a classification-in-advance of individuals or groups as marginal subjects, and may therefore in itself foster a gaze of concern among youth workers. As the anthropologist Mary Douglas explain in her classic study *Purity and Danger* (2002), a universal feature of societies across time and space is the perception of marginal subjects as both vulnerable and dangerous beings, and with regards to such persons it seems that “all precaution against danger must come from others” (2002: 121). Once a person is formally classified as marginal, Douglas shows, behaviour which is otherwise seen as not noteworthy comes to take on alarming connotations for people in their social surroundings.

Target group youths

- 25 The shift to preventive activities also opens up a space of ambiguity with regards to the categories of youths that are to be considered the target populations of the outreach youth work services, formally and informally. In mission statements and other official documents the outreach services define their target population in a manner which includes all youths in a certain age group who exhibits a certain range of problems, or who are at risk of developing such problems. In practical situations on the street, however, a more narrow informal understanding of who belongs within this category, as youths with a certain type of outer appearance, is reigning among the youth workers. Most of the youth workers I came into contact with could tell at a glance if a person was a “target group youth” or not, judging from their style of clothing, hairstyle and other physical characteristics. Youth workers seldom try to make contacts with seemingly well adjusted youths on the street. Part of the reason why, is that these youths are generally reluctant to talk to youth workers. When approached by youth workers, they often respond by saying things like: “Why do you talk to us – we don’t have problems!”. The prototypical “target group youths”, on the other hand, were considered to be much more

“open” and willing to enter into conversations. I have noted how some of these youths have a history of encounters with the child welfare service and other welfare agencies. Studies of welfare clients underscore how they come to emphasise an identity as victims in encounters with representatives of the welfare state, in order to get access to the resources they are in need of (Pedersen and Sandberg 2006). The “openness” displayed by prototypical target group youths can thus be viewed as a *habitus* acquired through socialisation into confessional relations with various representatives of the welfare state.

- 26 The mutual attraction between youth workers and target group youths is understandable for several reasons. Apart from being more sociable with youth workers, many of the youths that conform to the stereotypical image of the “target group youth” does actually turn out to be problem-afflicted, with regards to for instance drug-use or school failure. But as youth workers pointed out to me, youths of a sound middle class background who are less visible and difficult to get in touch with in street settings may also be afflicted with similar problems. On several occasions, youth workers I talked to voiced a concern that they systematically overlooked trouble afflicted youths who lacked the typical outer characteristics of “target group youths”. As this indicates, the informal categorisation of the target group bears with it the risk that the efforts of the outreach services are channelled onto a narrow segment of the youth population. The result of such processes may in turn be that youths with a certain class identity comes to be seen as the “natural” clients of the outreach services. To this it should be added that outreach work may not be the only preventive effort directed at the youths. As Carlsson (2002) notes, many of the different programmes of prevention which have emerged within the Norwegian welfare state over the last decades are directed at the same individuals. The combined effect may be that some categories of youths are socialised into a role of dependency on the welfare state or that they become stigmatised. Given that the experience of marginalisation among youths in many cases is one of exclusion from the majority’s middle class lifestyle, rather than material deprivation, such relations may serve to aggravate their problems. Alternatively, as Carlsson suggests, they may come to seek refuge from the apparatus of prevention.

Conclusion

- 27 In the first part of this article, I pointed out how the practice of outreach youth work is heavily dependant upon informal interactional skills and forms of judgement. I have shown how youth workers reliance on informal knowledge tend to merge with a general emphasis on informality and moral commitment as the essential characteristics of their occupational role, and pointed to the limitations of this romantic ethic. The tasks which are assigned to youth workers are of a complex nature. Just as youth workers need to learn the craft of establishing contacts with and interacting with troubled youths, they should learn to be sensitive to the ways in which their activities might intrude on the lives of members of their target group and know how and when to place limits on their own involvement. This underscores the need for outreach youth work organisations to institutionalise routines of self-criticism with regards to the ways in which their core activities are carried out. Moral commitment by itself is an inadequate foundation for such self-criticism I have argued, it needs to be complemented and challenged by dispassionate and distanced perspectives on the nature of these activities. In the

continuation of this point I have highlighted Arendt's concept of solidarity and Sennet's thoughts on respect and autonomy as possible guidelines for ethical conduct.

- 28 In the examples, I described toward the end of the article we are dealing with frames of understanding among youth workers which are shaped, not only by their practical experiences, but also by political and ideological forces. The tendency among youth workers to adopt a gaze of concern and the informal categorisation of the target population that I have highlighted may seem incremental problems, but the potential ramifications are serious enough. If youth workers succumb to the impulse of being overprotective with regards to youths and incorporate this orientation into their professional gaze, it can undermine one of the critical functions of the outreach youth work services, namely to serve as a corrective to the various forms of "moral panic" youths at all times evoke in adult society. If youth workers are oblivious to correlations between class and lifestyle and unwittingly base their practices on forms of middle class morality, they may contribute to the automatic clientisation of youths of underclass background, and thus challenge the universalistic ambition which is often hailed as the foundational value of the Nordic welfare state.
- 29 It is worth pointing out that these observations are the results of the application of a perspective informed by social scientific theory on of the practice of outreach youth work. To make this type of discoveries, knowledge about the minute details of youth workers' activities must be combined with theoretical analysis and considerations of abstract principles. In my experience, youth workers often display awareness about issues such as the categorisation of "target group youths" as problematic aspects of their activity, yet find themselves in lack of a language in which to address them. One path to acquire such a language goes through a greater engagement with social scientific research and theory at the outreach services. Partly this could be achieved by encouraging youth workers to familiarise themselves with social scientific literature on the subjects of social work and youth culture. Partly this could be achieved by encouraging more research on various aspects of the activities of the outreach youth work services.

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NOTES

1. I am grateful to Nora Gotaas, Marte Feiring and participants to the CERTS seminar “Youth work in deprived neighbourhoods of Europe” in Amsterdam September 12-13 2008 for comments on earlier draft versions of this article.

2. In line with these aims, the report from the research project has been included in the curriculum of a study programme on outreach youth work at the university college in Oslo, and the research team has contributed to a large number of seminars with the outreach youth work community.
 3. As a part of the study research was conducted at two other outreach youth work service. One of these is organised as a part of the child welfare service in a town district in an urban location. The other is organised as a part of the municipal cultural service in a rural location. In accordance with the current use of the concept in Norway both organisations count as outreach youth work services, but neither of them qualifies to be described as “street-based youth work” (Crimmens et al 2004). In both organisations, street work is a marginal part of the activity.
 4. Surveys carried out in 1991 and 2004 indicates that the total number of outreach youth work services in Norway rose from 53 to 87 in this period (Sundby and Dalhaug 1991, Rusmiddeletatens kompetansesenter 2004).
 5. This concept is inspired by Charles Taylors (1989) account of “the culture of modernity” as a historical oscillation between, on the one hand, rationalistic visions of formal order and, on the other hand, varieties of the Romantic drive for authenticity and vitality.
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RÉSUMÉS

Cet article porte sur les travailleurs de rue norvégiens. En vue de relever les défis propres au travail de terrain et aux autres facettes de leur travail quotidien auprès des jeunes, les travailleurs de rue se reposent sur le savoir-faire acquis dans et par la pratique. Par conséquent, ils ont tendance à considérer que l’informalité et l’engagement moral sont des aspects fondamentaux de leur rôle professionnel. L’article critique l’éthique romantique qui découle de cette attitude, et attire l’attention sur la notion de la solidarité selon Hannah Arendt et sur les notions de respect et d’autonomie selon Richard Sennett qui pourraient contribuer utilement à la recherche d’alternatives en termes de professionnalisme dans le champ du travail de rue. Pour améliorer la compréhension de la complexité du travail de terrain, il est conseillé de faire appel aux théories et à la recherche en sciences sociales.

This article focuses on Norwegian outreach youth workers. To deal with the challenges involved in street work and other aspects of their daily work, youth workers rely on practical knowledge acquired in and through practice. As a corollary of this, youth workers tend to place a strong emphasis on informality and moral commitment as the critical features of their occupational role. The article criticises the “romantic ethic” which emanate from this attitude, and point to Hannah Arendt’s concept of solidarity and Richard Sennett’s concepts of respect and autonomy as alternative bases for professionalism in outreach youth work. A greater engagement with social scientific research and theory at the outreach youth work services is recommended, to improve the understanding of the complexities involved in their core activities.

Este artículo trata sobre los trabajadores sociales que trabajan con jóvenes en Noruega. Para enfrentar los desafíos del trabajo de calle y otros aspectos de su actividad diaria, los trabajadores juveniles se basan en el conocimiento práctico adquirido en su experiencia práctica. Como corolario, los trabajadores juveniles tienden a enfatizar la informalidad y el compromiso moral como las características críticas de su función laboral. El artículo critica la "ética romántica" que

se desprende de esta actitud, y destaca el concepto de solidaridad de Hannah Arendt y los conceptos de respeto y autonomía de Richard Sennett como las bases alternativas para el profesionalismo en el trabajo de acompañamiento a la juventud. Se recomienda un mayor compromiso con la teoría y la investigación científica social en los servicios de acompañamiento a la juventud, para mejorar la comprensión de las complejidades que implican sus actividades principales.

INDEX

Keywords : outreach youth work, informal knowledge, metis, solidarity, autonomy

Mots-clés : travail de rue, connaissance informelle, solidarité, autonomie

Palabras claves : trabajo de acompañamiento a la juventud, conocimiento informal, solidaridad, autonomía

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