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Abstract

This paper makes an important contribution to debate about the values underpinning radical approaches to Youth and Community Work. It explores the extent to which 'love' as an element of professional practice in community development and youth work can be liberating, healing and catalytic for both practitioners and service users. Drawing on lessons from community development and youth work theory and practice, as well as other traditions, it proposes an approach to work with young people featuring 'professional love' at its core, which it claims can be transformative and liberating.

Attention is paid to identifying the challenges faced by young people living in the postmodern era, and to understanding how this potentially contributes to a heightened need for love in their lives. The ways in which 'love' features in professional practice is also explored, particularly in a youth work context.

Informed by the preparation for a piece of ongoing collaborative research investigating this phenomenon, the paper builds on the work of Jools Page, who has developed the concept of 'professional love' in her work in early years contexts. The paper identifies a range of professionals whose work with children and young people would benefit from adopting a professionally loving form of practice, modified to reflect the unique characteristics and values base of youth and community work.

Key Words

Love, 'professional love', youth work, young people.

Contextualising 'Love' as a Component of Professional Practice

Along with my colleagues in the profession, my practice as an informal educator (employed over the past 25 years in various community development and youth work roles throughout the UK) has been shaped by my commitment to and understanding of a set of core values and principles (e.g. PAULO, 1997; NYA, 2004; LLUK, 2007; IYW, 2013). Underpinning all these has been my instinctual attraction to Freire's notion that education should be practiced as an 'act of love', in which we strive as educators for the 'creation of a world in which it will be easier to love' (1970: 35, 24). For much of my career, however, I have found it difficult to articulate precisely what this means in practice: what does 'love' mean in this context; how might other people (including service users and colleagues) experience my 'love'; how does the enactment of 'love' in my practice impact on its recipients? Nevertheless, and consistent with Alinsky's (1948) assertion, I contend that I am only able to engage in this work because of the love I hold for humanity; furthermore, that 'loving' practice is essential if the people I work with are to experience my concern about their wellbeing and development as genuine (Fromm, 1957; Rogers, 1951).

Consequently, in the research informing this paper, I address the challenge faced by community development and youth work practitioners in articulating and framing this aspect of our practice. I propose a framework that clarifies what that is, what the impact should be and suggests how to 'do' it; and discuss some of the challenges presented by this way of working. I have sought in this research to better understand my own motivations, to enhance my understanding of the contribution that this aspect of my work can make, and to inform my future practice. I have also engaged more deeply with Freire's writing, and drawn from the work of others whose contributions have informed community education practice (specifically Alinsky, Rogers and hooks), as well as the philosophical contributions of Bauman, Fromm, Lacan and Zizek. The specific contribution of my approach is the connections I make between these 'traditional' sources, and work on other 'people-centred' professions: specifically, Page (e.g. 2011, 2014), whose research into 'professional love' in early years care has been most influential in shaping my thinking.

This paper draws together some of the central ideas of these writers, making sense of 'love' in my practice, and identifying ways in which other practitioners might reflect on and develop their own work. I present details of current research soliciting the views of practitioners working with children and young people, identifying how collaboration between different professions might inform and shape our practice in community development and youth work. The focus on this age group reflects the view that the mental health of young people in advanced economies is 'in crisis' (Young Minds, 2014): increasing numbers of young people have mental health or emotional problems, and governments are allocating substantial budgets to deliver mental health services to tackle this growing problem (HM Government, 2017; May, 2017). I contend in this paper that these trends designate 'love' as a critical element of professional practice, as they reflect a deeper societal malaise, requiring appropriate, sensitive interaction with children and young people who come into contact with a wide range of services. This is not to say that these problems are unique to our younger generation. It is hoped that the insights gained by exploring how practice can better address the needs of young people will be transferable to work with adults and the wider community.

Focus on Young People

There is ample evidence to support the assertion that young people are struggling with life in 21st century Britain, and further afield. Data from countries in the 'global north' (cited in Barr & Malik, 2016) demonstrate a crisis in the lives of young people coming to terms with the challenges of living in a post-modern society. Young people's experience is characterised by increasing isolation and individualisation, where decisions that impact on one's life are taken more remotely than ever before (Standing, 2016). Trends indicating a deterioration in the circumstances and wellbeing of the 'millennials' include increased poverty, along with increases in suicide, self-harm, referrals to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) / wellbeing services and other categories of mental malaise (low self-esteem, negative body image, impaired development of emotional intelligence) (HM Government, 2017; JRF, 2016).

Recent reports on the lived experience and emotional wellbeing of young people provide more granular understanding of some of these trends. One describes a generation that feels 'out of control', detailing how young people feel that they are trapped by their circumstances and have limited control over their lives, and experience self-doubt and anxiety around the current political climate and how it might affect their future (Prince's Trust, 2017). Ranking countries according to the prospects of young people in employment, education, health, civic and political spheres, the Youth Development Index highlights youth unemployment and the decline in participation in formal politics as causing / being due to young people's frustration at not having their needs and aspirations met (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2016).

The experience of young people living in the global north, as detailed in these reports, reflects the characteristics of post-modernity (Bauman, 1998); of particular concern to humanists and professionals with a concern for their wellbeing, they:

- Experience inordinate amounts of pressure to participate and perform, in education, employment and extra-curricular activities.
- Live a precarious existence.
- Have an uncertain future.
- Are increasingly isolated – physically and psychologically – from their peers, families and wider community, something which access to social media both masks and exacerbates.
- Exercise limited agency, with decisions about their lives taken by increasingly remote players.
- Are pilloried in the popular press, where they are demonised and scapegoated for society's ills and by politicians, who do not value them as much as older groups who participate more in the formal democratic process that sustains their careers.

'Love' in Community Development & Youth Work Theory

Asserting that education should be practised as an 'act of love', Freire (1970) provides inspiration to practitioners working with marginalised groups and individuals, encouraging us to behave in a 'humanising' manner with all those we work with. I would extend this invocation to all professionals working in the service of others, reflecting the fundamental connectivity between all parts of humanity (Fromm, 1957), and recognising that we are

privileged by the opportunity our practice affords us to contribute to their development and sustain their humanity (Rogers, 1951). While it may not always be the mission of other professionals to challenge oppression in the way in which Freire advocates, this aspect of his practice can at least be perceived as the basis on which to develop their work with others.

As practitioners, we make a conscious decision to intervene in the lives of others. It is therefore beholden on us to be able to justify our intervention with a clear rationale. Here, I present four inter-connected elements of the rationale for my work: transformation, criticality, dialogue and love, each of which is intrinsically connected to the other. Firstly, a central tenet of Freire's view of work with others was his commitment to the transformational focus of the intervention. In relation to work with young people in particular, he asserts that it:

> '… either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to *participate in the transformation of their world*' (Freire, 2000: 34; emphasis added).

Building on Freire's work, Darder (1991) emphasises that – in order to bring about this transformation – it is the educator's role to develop the participant's criticality, describing the educator's primary function as being '*emancipatory*' and their primary purpose as: '… a commitment to creating conditions for students to learn skills, knowledge, and modes of inquiry that will *allow them to examine critically the role that society has played in their self-formation'* (Darder, 1991: xvii; emphasis added).

The practice of criticality can be developed through a process of dialogue in which a form of co-operative learning[1] (i.e. from others and from oneself) is promoted (Habermas, 1984); this should be based on:

> '… mutual deliberation and argumentation, characterised by the absence of coercive force, the mutual search for understanding and the compelling power of the better argument … by reflecting on their premises and thematizing aspects of their cultural background knowledge to critique accepted norms' (Habermas, 1984: XX).

Freire locates dialogue at the centre of his approach to transformational practice, claiming that dialogue can only exist when the practitioner has a 'profound love', both for the world and for people (1993:89). In dialogue, he claims that people can name and re-name the world in which they live, and claims that this process cannot be achieved '… if it is not infused with love. *Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself*' (*op cit*; emphasis added). These observations build on his early assertion that, in relation to work with the oppressed, love is 'an act of courage ... a commitment to others ... [and] to the cause of liberation', clarifying that 'this commitment, because it is loving, is dialogical' (Freire, 1970: 78). He further asserts that it is 'impossible to teach without a forged, invented, and well-thought-out capacity to love' (*op cit*).

Community development and youth work practice follows the transformational, critical and dialogical approaches invoked by Freire (Ord, 2014; Ledwith, 2011; Nicholls, 2012). It seeks

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[1] I return to this notion when detailing the research design.

to bring about transformation through practice that is based on a set of values and principles, not least of which is the empowerment of people to take control over their lives and to challenge structural roots of oppression and exclusion (IYW, 2013; LLUK, 2009). Effective practice requires the practitioner to understand the needs and interests of the community and individuals with whom they are working; to understand the wider social, economic and political context that contributes to these; to facilitate participants' critical reflection on their experiences, in order to transform their levels of consciousness about the wider world and the impact it has on their lives; and to support collective action by participants to achieve social and personal transformation (Beck & Purcell, 2004: 79). The relationship between the individual and the practitioner is an 'essential element' in the transformation in that individual's perception of and control over their circumstances (*op cit*: 84). Along with these ambitions, the transformative outcomes ascribed to relationship-based youth work include 'genuinely building confidence, encouraging aspiration, or facilitating changes in young people's beliefs about themselves and the world around them' (Ord, 2014: 67).

While the values stated in the professional codes feature in all current debates about our practice, inadequate attention has been paid to the way in which 'love' can be incorporated into community development and youth work practice. Much has, however, been written about the transformational potential of 'love', and I contend that there is much that we can learn from these sources. For instance, Fromm (1956) offers a view of transforming the capitalist society such that:

> '**man's social, loving nature is not separated from his social existence, but becomes one with it. If it is true … that love is the only sane and satisfactory answer to the problem of human existence, then any society which excludes, relatively, the development of love, must in the long run perish of its own contradiction with the basic necessities of human nature' (Fromm, 1956: 111-112).

Likewise, hooks asserts that 'love is an active force that should lead us into greater communion with the world', and that 'when practiced with the community, love is the primary way we end domination and oppression' (hooks, 2000: 76). This is not to suggest we promote a narcissistic form of hedonism; rather that we nurture one another's spiritual growth and self-love, based on self-regard and assertiveness (i.e. reclaiming our humanity as a form of resistance to all forms of subjugation and oppression by the powerful). Love in this conceptualisation cannot simply be of oneself, but must be considered in relation to our connectedness with others: 'the choice to love is a choice to connect – to find ourselves in the other' (*op cit*: 93).

What is 'Professional Love'?

Much has been written about the subject of 'love': it is a subject which captures the imagination of the masses, and features as a central element of much culture, although this focusses primarily (and erroneously) on the pursuit of romantic love (Zizek, 1989). I am interested in the conceptualisation of love that recognises humans are social beings, whose individual and collective actions impact on the wellbeing of us all. I am concerned about the wellbeing of all humanity, not because I am concerned about myself, but because I recognise the value in all people and value all members of my community. This

fundamental humanist principle informs my world-view as an individual and as a community educator / youth worker, reflecting the invocations of Alinsky, Rogers, Fromm, Freire and hooks. Implicit in consideration of this form of communal love is a sense of how individuals feel about themselves, particularly the extent to which they recognise their own value and whether or not they feel loved and worthy of love. My own experience – personally and professionally – tells me that this is crucial.

As the foregoing suggests, 'love' – as an emotion, and a state of being, as the basis of people's interactions with one another – is an ever-present factor in the lives of all human beings. I believe that this is just as much the case when those interactions are initiated as part of an individual's professional practice (e.g. when a social worker is alerted to concerns about a young person's safety or wellbeing), as in our personal, everyday lives. The response to our own need for 'love', or to respond to another individual's needs cannot be switched off; indeed, it can be damaging to one's own wellbeing to even try to do so (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Lacan, 1991/2015). Furthermore, research into this form of practice in other professions suggests that 'professional love' has an important role to play in supporting the development of those we serve.

My thoughts on how to employ 'love' as a transformative element of pedagogical practice in youth and community work have been shaped by the contribution of Page (e.g. 2011; 2014), who argues that the work of early childhood professionals 'not only requires *care* and *education*, but also *love*' (Page, 2014: 119). Page's writing clarifies what shape this form of 'professional love' should take in work with young children; my intention here is to explore the applicability of her ideas in the context of youth and community work.

Page draws on theory and research in the 'ethic of care' (most notably Noddings; Goldstein; and Lynch *et al*) and introduces consideration about love, asserting that practitioners should develop 'deep, sustaining, respectful and reciprocal relationships' (Page, 2011: 313) with children in their care. She suggests that practitioners can achieve this through developing 'motivational displacement' – i.e. stepping out of their own personal frame of reference and into that of their charge (Noddings, 2013: 16, 24). Here, the caregiver is able to become engrossed in the care receiver, to the extent that they are sufficiently interested in them to know and understand their needs, and able to interpret their mental and emotional state, or being 'mind-minded' (Fonagy *et al*, 2004). A loving relationship in this context also requires a degree of reciprocity of interest and concern between the giver and receiver of care. Recognising that these are subjective concepts, Page suggests further that for this process to be loving, the caregiver needs to be able to intellectualise the encounter, and to draw from their own experiences of being loved. She also emphasises that 'professional love' can only emerge when 'highly attuned, experienced, well supported and resilient caregivers' are able to not only switch the lens through which they see the world to one that is responsive to the needs of the care receiver, but that they can also 'shift their thinking' to focus wholly on the needs of their child (*op cit*: 123).

There are challenges in demonstrating 'professional love', particularly in the context of early years provision. Page argues that – if not 'managed' appropriately – such a relationship might result in children becoming overly reliant on their caregiver, thereby thwarting their independence and relational skills with their peers and other adults. Similarly, she cautions caregivers to manage their emotional labour, recognising the potential deleterious impact on themselves of becoming too attached to their charges. This raises the need for

practitioners to be provided with appropriate developmental supervision, that affords them the space and opportunity to discuss 'love' as a valid element of their practice, recognising that 'the personal domain has a *rightful* place in … education alongside the professional domain' (*op cit*: 124). Additionally, practitioners need to be able to ensure that their charges 'feel that they are loved (worthy of being loved), deeply thought about and held in mind with attunement and reciprocity *even if the caregiver's natural feelings are not instinctively warm and loving toward that child*' (*op cit*: 125, emphasis added).

Page acknowledges the ongoing 'moral panic' about safeguarding, which has resulted in the imposition of a legal requirement for early years practitioners to report colleagues whose practice with individual children they deem to be 'inappropriate' (e.g. giving excessive one-to-one attention to a child). This is likely to inhibit even the most committed and loving practitioner from interacting with their charges in ways that might be open to misinterpretation / prosecution. This single factor highlights to me the need for an open dialogue about the need for 'professional love' to be encouraged and allowed to flourish in opposition to societal pressures which seem to mitigate against this most human element of what I would consider to be 'good' practice.

'Love' in Youth Work Practice

Page's work reinforces the value of integrating loving practice – as articulated by Freire, hooks, *et al* – into our interactions with people in all aspects of professional practice. The natural starting place for this has to be in the conversations we have with individuals, something which has always been a central part of community development and youth work practice (Jeffs, 2015). By focussing their attention on groups and individual young people, developing genuine relationships with them, Youth Workers have been able to respond to the concerns of groups and individuals with whom they work, as and when individual young people feel ready to raise them (Davies, 2015). As appropriate, they have referred young people on to other specialist services that have been in a better place to address these issues with the young people concerned. The extent to which their practice has been shaped by Freire's invocation to 'love' these young people has not been subject to extensive research, but I have observed practice which I believe featured 'love' as a central component of the professional relationships sustained by Youth Workers in their everyday practice.

Rather than addressing the root cause of issues faced by young people, youth policy across the global north further individualises them, problematizing young people rather than acknowledging that their problems arise as a symptom of the ailing society in which we live (France *et al*, 2012; Kelly, 2003; Jones, 2011; Tucker, 1999; Fromm, 1955). Interventions typically seek to modify the behaviour and attitudes of young people, once they are deemed to have transgressed 'acceptable' forms of behaviour. For example, the British government has

 (i) Decimated open-access youth work, replacing it with a centralised, short term 'offer' (the NCS).
 (ii) Ratcheted up the pressure to attain academic qualifications and to participate in education, employment and training.
 (iii) Targetted resources at offending behaviour.

In the model of service delivery that prevails currently in the UK and across much of the global north, the role of professional Youth Workers has diminished (UNISON, 2014); instead, young people are increasingly coming into contact with / through referrals to a wide range of professionals working in the kinds of areas identified in Table 1, below. This distinguishes between those professionals who work generically with children and young people, and those whose practice is intended to provide support to children and young people once some kind of 'problem' has been identified. The focus of the work of these practitioners is dictated by the policy framework within which they are employed, and their practice reflects the priorities of the specific services which they are employed to provide.

Non Professionals	
Parents / Guardians	
Extended Family	
Family Friends	
Professionals	
Providing Generic Services	**Providing Targetted Services**
Early Caregiver (e.g. Childminder, Nursery Nurse)	Family Support Worker
Health Professional	Child & Family Social Worker
Early Years Educator	Residential Social Worker
Primary School Teacher / Pastoral Care Worker	Foster Carer
Secondary School Teacher / Pastoral Care Worker	Care Leaver Support Worker
Youth Worker	CAMHS Worker (e.g. Emotional
Tertiary Education Teacher / Pastoral Care Worker	Wellbeing Support Worker;
Higher Education Tutor / Pastoral Care Worker	Counsellor; Child Psychiatrist)
Community Education / Development Worker	Drugs & Alcohol Worker
Cleric	Youth Justice / Offending Worker
Volunteers	

Table 1: Practitioners who may embed 'Professional Love' in Work with Young People

Challenges in Demonstrating 'Professional Love'

As this range of roles suggests, it seems likely that the extent to which we are able as practitioners to embed 'professional love' in our practice will be mediated by a number of factors, not least of which is the age of our charges. While it may be acceptable for early years practitioners to discuss openly their love for a child in their care, given the moral panics mentioned above this may not sit so easily for a youth worker supporting 'troubled' teenagers. Likewise, and particularly as we consider work with adolescents, my sense is that practitioners are likely to be inhibited in their expression of 'professional love' in work with young people of the opposite gender to them (especially male workers and female charges). It also seems probable that it will be easier for some of the practitioners identified above to express 'professional love' in their work with young people than for others (e.g. practitioners might be more circumspect where their work is based on their ability to sustain a one-to-one relationship with a young person, 'behind closed doors').

Having trained and been employed to intervene in the lives of young people, practitioners need to be sure that their practice is ethical, inasmuch as we should seek at least to 'do no harm' (Rhule, 2005); and should seek to bring about positive outcomes from our interventions (Pittman et al, 2003). In many professions, workers are encouraged – and in

some cases required – to maintain a professional 'distance' in their relationship with their young clients (e.g. Green et al, 2006). There are sound rationales for this guidance, of which the following would continue to prevail if practitioners sought to embrace the form of professionally loving practice I am advocating here.

Work with people can be emotionally demanding without the likely additional burdens of this approach to practice. The strains faced by practitioners working with young people are considerable, and the demonstration of love for their clients is likely to add to this for practitioners. The research seeks to identify the potential costs to practitioners of over-committing themselves emotionally to their work.

Practitioners are often encouraged to protect their emotional wellbeing by not becoming too involved in their cases or clients. For instance, Child & Family Social Workers are not allowed to sustain a relationship with their former clients once they reach the age of majority. Most of the practitioners identified above will – through their professional training – have been made aware of the need to 'maintain professional boundaries' (e.g. O'Leary *et al*, 2013). This area of practice is contested, meaning that there is scope for practitioners to maintain and manage their boundaries in a more flexible and fluid manner, to allow for emotions to infuse across the boundary, allowing for more authentic and impactful practise (Hart, 2016).

For many, the drive to maintain these kinds of barriers between practitioners and young people has emerged from concerns about safeguarding, articulated vociferously in the popular press and tackled through government policy (Adler, 2014). A culture of fear of censure or prosecution has been inculcated in the caring professions, inhibiting the expression by practitioners of genuine human emotions and impeding their responses to the physical and emotional needs of their clients (Phoenix, 2010).

Proposed Research Process

These concerns potentially raise specific questions for practitioners engaged in services identified in Table 1, above. As the proposed research will explore, it seems likely that some will be more significant than others for different practitioners, depending on the exact professional context within which 'loving' practice is being implemented. For example:

- At what age does this form of practice become more (or less) appropriate / acceptable; or, how are the demands of young people likely to differ as they become older? While Page's work focusses on pre-school-age children, where 'love' may be deemed an 'acceptable' part of practice, how might children's needs differ when they are of primary school or secondary school age or older yet, and how ought the practitioner to react to these differing needs?
- How much more difficult is it to implement professionally loving practice across genders, especially when the client approaches and passes through physical and sexual maturity, given the public's heightened concerns about sexual exploitation and other safeguarding issues? Is this likely to be more of an issue when the professional role requires one-to-one interactions?
- How are practitioners to navigate their relationships with young people in an increasingly diverse society, with cultural variations in understanding about what

constitutes about appropriate behaviour between individuals (whether in professional or personal relationships)?

Collaboration in Researching 'Professional Love'

The ideas I have discussed so far – particularly in relation to young people's need to have positive experiences of 'love' in their lives – are open to challenge, not least from young people themselves. My own experience suggests to me that there is merit in exploring this subject further; however, I am aware that the ideas – or the way I have framed them – may not resonate with young people whose experience is so firmly rooted in the post-modern age. Likewise, my limited experience in professional practice in the range of occupations presented above (Table 1) lays me open to challenge from people delivering these services about the assumptions I have made.

At the same time, assuming that these ideas gain some traction, they are clearly at an early stage of development, and need supporting and refining through the application of robust empirical evidence. I feel the benefit of working collaboratively with practitioners and young people in generating primary data offers the potential to help shape this work into something of benefit to young people and other professionals working with them. Hence, as well as engaging practitioners and young people as research subjects against whom the ideas and assumptions presented here can be tested, I hope to involve a group of these people in helping to shape the future direction this research takes.

I am proposing that this work proceeds as an action research project (McAteer, 2013). This approach will help shape the framework of 'professional love' as it applies a range of contexts, as well as helping participants to better understand and ultimately refine their values and – as applicable – professional practices. Through their participation in the pilot phase, a group of professionals will be invited to form a steering group, to reflect on / revise the theoretical underpinnings of my proposed approach and to bring their judgement to bear in developing and interpreting data from different approaches applied during this research. I also hope to establish a reference group comprised of young people from a range of backgrounds. As with the practitioners, I will seek to ensure their meaningful engagement in the process by facilitating their involvement in the design and interpretation of the research. To ensure this work's validity and in order for me to demonstrate congruent practice, it is important that the research process reflects the professional values underpinning my practice as a community educator / youth worker (LLUK, 2007; IYW, 2013).

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