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# 'It's Why Young People Choose to Come Here': *Professional Love* and the Ethic of Care in UK Youth Work Practice

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## ABSTRACT

This paper extends the discourse on the importance of the relationship between practitioner and young person as a defining tenet of effective youth work practice, recognising the privileged position occupied by Youth Workers in the social ecology of the young people with whom they work. Reflecting the ethical obligations inherent in this relationship, particularly its focus on enhancing young people's agency and developmental outcomes, the paper outlines how youth work practice infused with *professional love* aligns with conceptualizations of an ethic of care. Reporting on interviews conducted with Youth Workers practicing in different settings across one local authority area in the UK, the paper articulates how practitioners' ethic of care shapes their work with young people, and the extent to which love features as an element of their professional practice. Practitioners describe their motivation to express care that extends beyond legalistic interpretations of their 'duty of care' towards young people, using the language of care, love and nurture almost interchangeably. The paper demonstrates the importance of inclusion and reciprocity as fundamental elements of ethical practice, as well as the need to infuse practice with hope, suggesting the value of an affirmative ethic to complement a focus on love and care.

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## Introduction

Youth Workers occupy a privileged position in the social ecology of the young people with whom they work, which affords them the opportunity to negotiate interventions with those young people to contribute towards their wellbeing and to build their capacity to exercise agency over their own life stories (McLaughlin 2020). Agency is central to the ethical obligation associated with embedding social justice at the heart of youth work practice, particularly as young people are morally and culturally marginalised, structurally and collectively, merely on account of their age (Blackman and Rogers 2017). Furthermore, their individual capacity to exercise agency over their own lives can be limited

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by poverty, family difference, psychological factors and other social circumstances (Sercombe 2018).

The need to build young people's capacity and agency is particularly important at a time when young people are faced by a unique combination of circumstances, acting collectively to impact negatively on their individual and collective wellbeing, characterised variously as a 'polycrisis' (UNICEF 2023) and 'colic' (Purcell, Page, and Reid 2022). Through the interplay of complex, global economic and environmental factors, young people are impacted by poverty at increased rates; food and housing insecurity; global upheaval (including mass migration caused by wars, climate change and economic inequality); threats to democratic rights; and under-investment in meeting their needs. The increased complexity, uncertainty and precarity associated with 'becoming' adult (Arnett 2014) is reflected in heightened pressures on young people to conform to a neo-liberal framing of them as ideal citizen-workers, internalising individualised responsibility to be self-reliant, flexible and resilient in the face of these global challenges (Arnett 2014; Pimlott-Wilson 2017). Having been 'hollowed out' by these pressures, the humanity of young people is diminished, their values distorted, and their moral and spiritual curiosity undermined (Adams 2022, 39). These challenges have been magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic (including the impact of lockdowns and social distancing on young people's socialisation), compounding the sense of alienation and depression experienced uniquely by the current generation (Adams 2022). When these pressures are considered together, it is easy to understand why many young people might succumb to a de-politicised and passive form of learned helplessness (Giroux 2017).

In the face of this assault on young people's sense of self and their ability to thrive, it is incumbent on those in a position to do so (including Youth Workers) to nurture and attend to the needs of young people, if only to adhere to article 6 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which requires governments to 'do all they can to ensure that children survive and develop to their full potential' (UNICEF 1989). These circumstances demand a re-positioning of youth work practice as part of the response to the challenges young people face. Unlike other professionals (teachers, youth justice officials, social workers, etc.), a Youth Workers' primary obligation – framed as a conscious ethical commitment – is to the young people with whom they work, who have a right to know that someone is unambiguously acting for them (Sercombe 2018). Indeed, youth work's fundamental purpose is to engage young people in relational enquiry regarding their own humanity and being in the world, requiring Youth Workers to facilitate learning that enables young people to develop their own values, voice and sense of self, while they navigate their way in the world (Young 2006, 96–97).

In this paper, I reflect on the role of the professional relationship in youth work practice, conducted in this time of 'polycrisis' and 'colic', and enacted with young people in their own social context, – where love and care feature as part of the solution to the 'crisis of mattering' amongst children and young people (Billingham and Irwin-Rogers 2022). Identifying relational practice as central to effective youth work, I present data from interviews with Youth Workers in one area in the North of the UK that demonstrate how relational ethics underpinning this work might be informed by wider consideration of an ethic of care, reflecting our commitment to hopeful pedagogy and professional frameworks foregrounding young people's wellbeing (Freire 2021; NYA 2004). While acknowledging that these notions may be seen as sites for contestation, I approach them as sites for growth

and development of practice, and foreground the potential for love – enacted as radical and transformational form of practice – to enrich these relationships so that they are experienced by young people as ethically caring and affirmative (Purcell, Page, and Reid 2022; Kaur 2020).

Consideration of ethics in youth work texts (e.g. Banks 2009; Sercombe 2010) tends to focus on ethical challenges, illustrating practical considerations around the need for ethical practice. Drawing on professional frameworks with only limited discussion of ethical traditions (particularly virtue ethics), these texts make no explicit reference to an ethic of care. Reflecting the ‘critical’ context outlined above, and the challenges this presents practitioners in reconceptualising our practice as requiring an element of care for the young people with whom we work, this paper frames care ethics as central to relational youth work practice. Furthermore, it seeks to better understand the role of love as a radical element of our practice in the enactment of a care ethic.

### Youth work practice

Embracing a broad range of *purposive* interactions, youth work engages with young people in informal group settings to provide them with ‘access to social, cultural, educational or political activities to facilitate self-formation and their transition to adulthood<sup>1</sup>’ (Council of Europe 2018). Ordinarily initiated by state or voluntary sector actors, youth work is a ‘voluntary, youth-centric, self-reflective and critical, value-driven and relational practice’ (Council of Europe 2018), starting ‘where young people are’ and seeking to ‘connect with the person, with what they know, how they feel, what they want from the encounter’ (Davies 2015, 100; 106). Focussing on personal and social development, youth work is an educational process promoting an informal, co-constructed curriculum that enables young people to ‘better understand themselves, their community and the world in which they live and supports them to proactively bring about positive changes’ by providing opportunities to ‘acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes for civic engagement and social action’ (Council of Europe 2017, 2). This *functionalist* interpretation of the role prioritises the integration of young people in pre-determined value systems and norms (Morciano and Merico 2017, 53). A more radical take on the purpose and nature of practice addresses the material conditions of social inequality and challenges the (neo-liberal) structures and systems that perpetuate these inequalities (Morciano and Merico 2017).

In addressing the holistic development of young people, youth work is essentially an educational process shaped by a set of professional values and principles, promoting social justice, equity, participation, association and empowerment (Belton 2014; Cooper 2018). This educational experience enables young people to ‘critically analyze their social position, develop a critical consciousness regarding the mechanisms of cultural domination and social inequality to which they are subjected, and devise effective strategies in order to counter them’ (Morciano and Merico 2017, 54). With such broad educational aims, youth work adopts a distinct, dialogically-based and transformative pedagogical approach promoting freedom, independence and personal initiative and opportunities for experimentation (Metz 2017; Ord 2016). Hence, the diversity of settings in which youth work is delivered and in the young people who engage means that Youth Workers work reactively, shaping practice and responding to issues as they emerge

through an ongoing conversation with the young people, providing appropriate interventions to ensure the wellbeing of young people in their care, as well as prompting reflection or/and challenging (mis)conceptions (Jefferies and Smith 2010).

### **UK youth work in the twenty-first century**

The UK youth work context has changed significantly over the past three decades, as neo-liberal policies and austerity have resulted in severe cutbacks in statutory sector provision and an increased focus on monitoring and evaluation of youth work outcomes<sup>2</sup>, reinforcing negative stereotypes and framing interactions with young people in a deficit model (de St Croix 2018). At the same time, there has been a shift from universal, open-access provision to a more targeted form of youth work providing interventions to young people whose behaviour is deemed as deviating from the accepted social norms in relation to specific policy agendas, including crime and anti-social behaviour, risky behaviours and disengagement from formal education (Youdell and McGimpsey 2015). This has resulted in youth work practice becoming dominated by a risk-averse culture, promoting individualised and contract-based interventions over collective processes and interactions with young people characterised as ‘technical, rational [and] devoid of any moral purpose and meaning’ (Monteux and Monteux 2020, 3).

These developments potentially undermine one of the underpinning tenets of youth work, which should balance the need for the practitioner to contribute towards individual young people’s psycho-social development and wellbeing, at the same time as developing collective critical consciousness and promoting social justice (Lavie-Ajayi and Krumer-Nevo 2013). This foregrounds the need for Youth Workers to work collectively with young people to devise mutually supportive and transformational responses to address their collective experience of marginalisation and alienation, even though these are experienced as an individualised and individualising phenomenon. This collective aspect of youth work also offers the potential for practitioners to address the debilitating impact on young people who have been disadvantaged by the crises outlined above, requiring Youth Workers to infuse their practice with hope (te Riele 2010). This is not to say that youth work should be about promoting naïve utopias (te Riele 2010). Instead, it should offer radical but realistic alternatives that enable young people to remain engaged in the world around them, and for that engagement to be informed by a critical understanding of the injustices they face and to frame alternatives for action (Freire 2004). This form of youth work – informed by political and moral values, including opposition to neo-liberalism, belief in equality and respect for the environment – facilitates young people’s political (self-)education, enabling them to take authority for themselves to ‘care for others and the planet as well as themselves’ (de St Croix 2010, 67–69).

Relationships are at the heart of effective youth work practice, enabling young people to grow and flourish (Blacker 2010; Fullerton, Bamber, and Redmond 2021). Supportive youth work relationships<sup>3</sup> are the basis upon which young people grow, learn and develop, aiding identity-development and socialisation and promoting positive academic, behavioural and psychological outcomes (Chu, Saucier, and Hafner 2010). The relationship between Youth Worker and young person is one part of a complex, multi-layered ecology within which the young person is embedded as an active agent, continually shaping and being influenced by their relationships with multiple different people within diverse institutions (including

school, work, social services) and the broader environment (community, family, peers, etc.) (Varga and Zaff 2017). Practitioners enjoy privileged access to the young people with whom they work, and must ensure that they infuse their relationships with informality, intimacy and warmth to encourage and facilitate reflection, growth and flourishing on the part of the young person (Hart 2017). The focus of the Youth Worker's attention, then, should be on contributing towards a supportive system in which the young person's needs and strengths are aligned with a range of assets and supports in the practitioner's sphere of influence (Hart 2017).

The development of a trusting relationship between Youth Workers and young people is key to facilitating improved outcomes, including improved mental health and well-being, enhanced sense of self and strengthened characteristics protecting young people from poor social outcomes (Jefferies and Smith 2010). Relationships based on authenticity, reciprocity, attunement, and collaboration will ensure young people thrive; central to this is the practitioner's capacity for empathy:

to be able to connect with the emotional state of the young person ... to understand the emotional space and to work with a young person in it. (Sercombe 2010, 120)

Creating and sustaining relationships in a professional context can come at some personal cost to the practitioner, as it requires one to 'induce or suppress feeling ... to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others [by] draw[ing] on a source of self that we honour as deep and integral to our individuality' (Hochschild 2012, 7). Nevertheless, unlike other professions, this 'emotional labour' draws on authentic emotions from Youth Workers, who 'genuinely care for young people', to create relationships with 'genuine solidity and (which) exist over time' (Murphy and Ord 2013, 329). An element of this process is the extent to which practitioners are prepared to blur the boundaries of the professional relationship, using self-disclosure as a means of strengthening the relationship to reassure the young person about their feelings or emotions. This raises ethical challenges, inasmuch as any disclosure made by the practitioner should *not* be made for personal gain; to centre the practitioner in the conversation; to meet their own needs; or for any reason other than the benefit of the young person (Murphy and Ord 2013).

### **Ethical considerations in youth work practice**

Youth Workers help young people to examine their values, reflect on the principles of their moral judgements, and make informed and rational choices to inform committed action towards pro-social goals (Young 2006). This locates ethics at the core of youth work practice, requiring practitioners to constantly make appropriate and justifiable ethical decisions (Davies 2021), particularly considering the power dynamic within the relationship and the vulnerabilities inherent in young people trusting professionals (Bagattini 2019). Transformational youth work practice – collaborating with young people to shape socially just outcomes that challenge and overcome structures of injustice or inequity – highlights the importance of the relationship between young people and Youth Workers, who they value as trusted adults with whom they are *relationally close*, in pursuing collaborative acts to address issues of concern to them (Davies 2016, 193; *emphasis added*). Practice informed by an emancipatory care ethic offers the potential to subvert the neoliberal 'ethic' of self-preservation, which privileges competition,

property rights and individual freedom and choice over the rights of the collective, while helping young people challenge the deleterious impacts of neoliberal policies and austerity that have contributed to the crises outlined above (Hughes et al. 2014; Sewpaul 2016).

The importance of the relationship in achieving youth work's individual and collective goals highlights the need for relational – or *care* – ethics, which characterise care as a moral act addressing fundamental needs and as an essential component of inter-personal connections in the social professions (Held 2006; Noddings 1984). Giving equal consideration to the needs of the care-giver and the cared-for, this ethic of care should be founded on human love (Noddings 1984, 29), and take account of culture, morality and *genuine* relationships while acting ethically on behalf of others as a matter of justice, not just compassion (Mullin 2011).

Consideration of different ethical approaches to care in youth work literature is limited primarily to contexts where 'care' features significantly in the role descriptor (such as the provision of residential care) or where ethical dilemmas arise from clashes in personal and organisational values (e.g. Zigan, Héliot, and Le Gry 2022; Phelan 2014). Nevertheless, an ethic of care is an appropriate lens through which to frame effective practice as it acknowledges the centrality of the relationship, based on reciprocity, equality and justice (Tronto 2013; Urban 2015). Furthermore, an ethic of care foregrounds the interdependence of humans, emphasising relationality and reciprocity as central tenets of human life, acknowledging diverse vulnerabilities, and recognising the multi-directional nature of the care-giving process and mutuality in the relationship (Lynch, Kalaitzake, and Crean 2021). Specifically, as with youth work's commitment to promoting social justice, practice informed by an ethic of care acknowledges power relations and seeks to challenge structures that perpetuate gendered, classed and racialised inequalities within society (Kittay 2020). Furthermore, an ethic of care requires practitioners to be responsive in their relationships with young people, facilitating dialogue to foster active participation by young people in discussions about their experiences and aspirations, attending to them on their own terms and responding respectfully (Visse, Abma, and Widdershoven 2015). In this way, the practitioner fosters relationships with and between young people, giving attention and responding to any emerging need for care, demonstrating sympathetic understanding and recognition of young people's right to be heard with respect (Bagattini 2019).

Conceived as a form of 'love labour' (Honneth 1995), the relational element of youth work practice draws on emotional solidity to 'boost confidence, inspire strength (and) give people ... a sense of being wanted and needed and being free' (Lynch 2007, 566). The professional relationship between practitioners and young people, albeit ordinarily established for something other than 'care', can nevertheless become more valuable and impactful if practitioners apply the 'love labour' model to sustain people as 'emotionally and relationally engaged social beings' (Lynch 2007, 553).

Practitioners can mobilise love to nurture 'critical optimism' in young people, through the embodiment of a love of humanity, and foster radical hope for an ethical, more humane future in which oppressive and dehumanising structures are overcome by the all-encompassing power of loving practice (Robinson-Morris 2019). Such *professional love* – embodying humility, hope and empathy – is required to sustain young people's belief in their own worth and agency to shape alternative futures for themselves; in particular enabling them to strengthen their affective responses and build relationships to



address mutual challenges with others (Purcell 2022). *Professional love* in youth work practice encapsulates a ‘pedagogy of love’, challenging widely held ambivalence of/antipathy towards loving across society (Freire 2021; hooks 2020). It ensures that young people experience relationships which reinforce their sense of being worthy of love, meeting their requirement for ‘sensitive, skilled, loving, special adults with whom they have formed a deep and sustaining relationship’ (Page 2018, 134). This requires practitioners to exhibit motivational displacement and attunement towards the young person, and to develop deep, sustaining, respectful and reciprocal relationships with them, strengthened by professional emotional intimacy so that the young person’s experience is similar to the ‘compelling urge of care’ derived from pre-established (e.g. familial and friendship) relationships (Page 2018).

## Materials & methods

The study sought to stimulate conversations with Youth Workers to capture their accounts of practice, in particular their interpretations of the role of (an ethic of) care in everyday youth work. In so doing, I sought to determine the extent to which people’s experience of relational youth work practice reflects the foregoing discussion, seeking illustrative narratives that might inform further deliberation on the potential for infusing relations of care, love and solidarity within youth work practice.

For the study, conducted in early 2023, I used a convenience sampling strategy<sup>4</sup> to recruit nine practitioners employed by voluntary sector organisations in settings across a primarily rural district in northern UK, funded by statutory and charitable sources. Practitioners took part in an online group discussion, and semi-structured individual interviews within their settings.

While the discussions were deliberately relaxed, so as not to bring undue influence to bear on the participants’ contributions, prompts were used to ensure that the broad parameters of the study (relationships, care and love) were addressed. I afforded practitioners the space to share their stories about their motivations and experiences of engagement with youth work. As the conversations evolved, I was able to delve more deeply into their experiences, particularly if their narratives touched on aspects around love and care within their youth work relationships.

## Ethical considerations

Throughout all interactions with research participants, I sought to foster ethical, respectful and meaningful relationships, however ephemeral, modelling the elements of relational practice that I was investigating, while respecting people and ensuring their wellbeing (Hammersley 2015). Drawing on my own experience as a Youth Worker, and having worked in the study areas at one point in my career, I was able to develop a rapport with participants by demonstrating my commitment to the principles of connectivity, humanity and empathy (Brown and Danaher 2019). Having practiced in youth work for many years, my commitment to the enactment of values in practice is profound. Likewise, having previously advocated for *professional love* to underpin youth work practice (e.g. Purcell 2018; 2022), I openly acknowledged my own positionality and remained conscious of the potential for bias to shape my interpretation of participants’ responses (Gormally

and Coburn 2014). Nevertheless, I endeavoured to facilitate conversations in such a way as to afford participants space to tell their own stories.

Procedural ethics were also enacted, with all participants provided with information about the research in advance, to enable them to make an informed decision about whether or not to participate (BERA 2018; UoD 2020). In securing their consent to participate, I emphasised to participants that they were not obliged to engage with the research, that there would be no detriment to declining my invitation to participate and that they could withdraw at any time, taking their data with them. Host organisations were also made aware of the way in which the findings would be used, and consent secured.

## Results & discussion: love & care in practice

Interviews with practitioners covered a range of aspects, including approaches to engaging young people and the impact of participation in youth work provision on their development. The importance of relationships as the core of effective youth work practice – and the centrality of care and love within these relationships – was evident throughout all these discussions, with one respondent typically stating that they take ‘every opportunity to spend time and build those relationships’ (AL).

Relationships were characterised as a means of ‘getting to know and *get alongside* young people ... responding to their interests rather than trying to force them into things’ (LG, emphasis added). This ‘meeting them where they’re at’ means that young people ‘come to us ... they want to engage with us ... once we’ve got to that point it’s about building a relationship, *getting alongside*, supporting and encouraging them ...’ (AL). In this way, care seems to have been conceived as inclusion by practitioners, with one suggesting that ‘every young person has to feel welcome here whatever their identity, sexuality, beliefs, creed, whatever’ (KY). One respondent went further than this, suggesting that ‘for many of our young people, their families don’t respond to their excitements and challenges ... many are lacking love ... this is something we have to somehow redress’ (YM). This was exemplified in one example where one young person in danger of being sent to prison told their youth worker ‘you’re the only person that’s still there for me’ (LG).

## Practitioners’ perspectives

These discussions foregrounded practitioners’ intrinsic motivation for care to feature at the heart of these relationships, with one asserting that ‘I think you don’t open your doors if you don’t care ... we have a will to make a positive difference in other people’s lives in the community’ (KY). Reciprocity featured in some of the discussions, too, with the same respondent acknowledging that the motivation deepened as the positive difference also impacts in their own life: ‘maybe some of the reason we do it because it makes us feel good’ (KY). There was evidence of care for others growing within groups, with one respondent suggesting that the young people in their group have come together after initially struggling with in-person interaction post-covid: ‘there is a lot of patience in there as well ... the kids were able to accommodate one young person’s challenging behaviour by demonstrating patience, kindness and friendship’ (LG).

Several respondents used the term 'nurture' unprompted in their discussions, one typically characterising nurture as 'encouragement ... consistency ... they know we're there when they need us, whether they attend or not' (LG). Another suggested that the fact that they feel nurtured and valued is 'one of the main reasons young people choose to come here', clarifying how 'they then choose how much of their lives they want to share with you' (KY). Another respondent clarified how nurture is not all uncritical in its application:

I would say we are very nurturing. Lots of our young people have been here for years during which time they've had lots of ups and downs. We will still challenge them if we think their decisions are risky ... we might nudge them to make better decisions, but give them the freedom to make their own decisions, and help them identify next steps if they get it wrong. (YM)

There were many stories of young people returning to visit settings long after leaving ... 'just to keep you up to date on what's happening in their lives, to let us know how "things" that we supported them with have turned out for them in the long run' (LG). This kind of process reiterates the reciprocal nature of the relationship, demonstrating that young people want their youth workers to see their completed story. One respondent acknowledged that nurture-in-practice can present challenges, acknowledging that 'professional lines need to be considered and boundaries managed ... we're not *loco parentis*, and it's the parent's job to nurture' (KY).

These formulations of youth work practice suggest that practitioners go beyond their legalistic 'duty of care' in their relational practice. One respondent conceptualised caring for young people as part of their organisation's 'ethical platform', asserting that 'all of the stuff we do has to come from a place of care, particularly because the young people are so varied', adding 'it would be naïve to suggest there would not be some negative influences in our provision, so we need to be able to look out for them all in a caring way' (YM). This position was exemplified in the case of an evolving relationship between two attendees, where staff had concerns about whether or not it was age appropriate (there was a seven year age gap between them). Taking into account the additional needs of the older young person, these concerns were allayed, but arrangements were put in place to ensure the safety of the younger person with external partners where staff knew the young people met.

The language of love and care infused these discussions, with respondents highlighting their willingness to use this kind of language in their interactions with the young people. Put simply, one respondent noted 'We love them. I have said that word a lot, so they know we care. Sometimes that's the only word to be used' (LG). Another expanded:

We always use that kind of language. It comes from the idea that for some of these young people, we are a second family, and these are elements of family life, with professional boundaries of course. It is important for us that they know and feel that we like them and value them and like spending time with them ... that they know we care for them and want to keep them safe. (AL)

There was acknowledgement in these discussions that these words can be interpreted in different ways, as they have different meanings, and that it is sometimes necessary to be clear about the intent behind their use. One respondent was concerned that 'We use words like care and love and nurture, but not everyone knows what they mean',

adding 'with love, people make the presumption too often that love is sex, that intimate eros in a sexualised society is the first thing that people think of ... so we sometimes need to define meanings for love and nurture' (KY). Another recognised that 'love can mean a variety of different things in different situations, but fundamentally young people wouldn't feel as nurtured if love wasn't somewhere in the background' (YM). The reciprocal benefit of the articulation of love was flagged up here, in that this respondent detailed how (not untypically) 'we are a fast-paced workplace, with potential for burnout' suggesting that 'love is required to sustain our very low staff turnover'.

These contributions foreground different aspects of the ethic of care being enacted in and infusing all areas of youth work practice. It is evident that practitioners see care as exceeding the honouring of a duty and being much more about inclusion, reciprocity, nurture and love. It is encouraging to see practitioners being comfortable talking openly about their motivations and enactment of the ethic of care, and that they articulate these concepts in their relationships with young people. As one respondent (KY) observed, youth workers do not have 'the monopoly on care, nurture and love', but their embodiment strengthens their informal and non-formal relationships with young people, contributing towards the outcomes associated with their field.

## Discussion & conclusions

In exploring the nature of Youth Workers' relationships in work with young people in the UK, this study has demonstrated the centrality of love and care as elements of relational practice with young people, whose vulnerabilities to deleterious social, economic and environmental factors have been heightened in recent times. Although this study drew on data from the UK, the conclusions may be applicable in other contexts internationally.

The loving enactment of an ethic of care in youth work foregrounds the political, liberatory, and revolutionary capacities of youth work for the young people with whom we work. In a world in which young people are faced with existential threats unlike those faced by previous generations – a unique combination of wars, disease, a climate emergency, massive displacement of human populations and more besides – it would be all too easy for our youth to despair and to feel the lack of love in the world. Accepting the challenges of the profession to which we are called brings with it a responsibility to demonstrate that we care for and about those with whom we work, to foster hope in the face of the evident challenges we face collectively.

As the data presented here attests, professionally loving practice is the radical enactment of our ethic of care, offering young people a glimpse of the positive aspects of our mutually-dependent humanity. The stories emerging from discussions with Youth Workers demonstrate that this form of practice is generative, in that the mutuality and reciprocity of affect within the practitioner's relationship with young people has the potential to multiply, enabling love and care to infuse relationships *between* young people. *Professional love*, embedded in practice, allows young people to experience laughter, joy, fondness, empathy and indulgence, thereby transforming their perception of what it is to be human and to thrive, and of what can be achieved against otherwise overwhelmingly negative odds of survival and 'success'.

Using professional relationships in this way, Youth Workers can help young people to develop and draw on personal resources, based on feelings of closeness, trust and

empathy, demonstrating to them that they deserve their place in their community, and helping them to shape collective goals. Indeed, the enactment of our care ethic through the embodiment of radical, active loving practice is potentially the strongest tool Youth Workers possess in attempting to overcome the paradox of working relationally with young people who have either never experienced loving relationships with the adults in their lives, or who have been marginalised by the authorities because of their inability to be in relationship with others.

Although this analysis has characterised professionally loving practice as intrinsically virtuous, in contexts where Youth Workers and young people exhibit broadly similar 'Western' cultural characteristics and practices, it is important to acknowledge that not everyone shares the same kind of virtues or possesses the same emotional intelligence. Likewise, practitioners acknowledged a tension between love's public social dimension and romantic-sexualized notions of love. Hence, it would be inappropriate to *require* Youth Workers to embed love in their practice; though it seems reasonable to expect a degree of care to feature in their work with young people. Nevertheless, the study foregrounds the potential for practitioners to genuinely embed what have become increasingly 'routinized' professional values in their practice, thereby transforming their relationships with young people to revitalise youth work and its impacts. Hence, conceiving of love as a concrete manifestation of actions enacted through the professional relationship enables practitioners to reclaim their practice from the transactional process focussed on pre-determined outcomes, and reimagine it as a form of purposive nurture and care to help young people respond to the challenges of the 'polycrisis'.

Questions requiring further exploration include determining Youth Workers' responsibility for ensuring that young people in their care feel loved or/and worthy of being loved. This is something I argue should be conceived of as a social right, and therefore reflected in all relationships between young people and professionals with an input into their care and development. Furthermore, it could be argued that by focusing too much on individual relationships, practitioners may be distracted from working collectively with young people in their care, undermining youth work's ability to achieve collective goals and tackle systemic injustices; it would be helpful to better understand this tension, and to identify ways in which practitioners can achieve both outcomes.

## Notes

1. I acknowledge that this is a contested term, as 'adolescence' and 'adulthood' are socially-constructed terms carrying normative assumptions that are culturally imbued (Corcoran 2017).
2. While youth work outcomes are often unpredictable, emerging from the informal, relational approach that characterises practice (Doherty and de St Croix 2019), outcomes frameworks cover a broad range of aspects, including building confidence, developing life skills, creating friendships, enhancing safety and wellbeing, strengthening the ability to lead and help others, and nurturing social and relational skills (e.g. McNeil and Stuart 2021).
3. Unlike relationships with other practitioners, with whom young people are required to engage, youth work operates on the voluntary principle, offering young people access to relationships with practitioners into which young people enter freely and which they are free to end when they wish (Davies 2021).
4. My initial contact was through work I was undertaking with the district's youth work delivery partnership.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Geolocation information

In order to safeguard the anonymity of respondents, the precise details of the area where the research on which this paper is based cannot be revealed. However, I am able to disclose that the initiative was based in a local authority area in Scotland.

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