

## After Youth Work: the problem of defining the youth worker's role in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

**‘new: transforming youth work?** Government plans for the English Youth Services redefine what they do. But is it youth work? **Join** the discussion on the **bulletin board**.’

Infed.org (13/02/03)

### Introduction

---

There appears to be a question over the definition of youth work, as indicted by the above quote from the infed web site, and the discussion on the bulletin board. The discussion originated by Mark Smith's critique of present government policy in regard to the youth service, and was given a little nudge by Tom Wylie's short reply on the bulletin board itself.

Tom Wylie claims that the government in 'Transforming Youth Work' is not defining youth work, for that is a matter for academics or better still practitioners. Let us take up the challenge and consider the definition of the term, an essentially philosophical task. A task with several practical implications, for example it is difficult to set a research agenda in youth work if we are unclear as to the subject of the research (i.e. youth work). It is equally difficult to establish a core curriculum for Initial Youth Work education courses if we do not know what youth work is (does this mean ETS is redundant?). Most significantly the lack of agreement over the term has the potential to undermine attempts to meet the needs of youth people. In debates over youth work the focus is on the confusion of the term, rather than the purpose of the activity.

In this paper I wish to address the purpose of youth work, and to argue that clarity will only be achieved through a review of the social structure, institutions, and activities through which a community makes resources available to young people. In doing so I reject the dichotomy between descriptive and normative definitions of youth work,

drawing on the theoretical work of Alasdair MacIntyre, primarily his seminal text 'After Virtue'.

### Defining youth work

---

The difficulty with normative definitions of youth work, whether they be contained in present day policy documents (e.g. Transforming Youth Work), policies of a golden age (e.g. Albermarle), or key principles (e.g. free association) is that they are neither theoretically or practically satisfactory. Theoretically they do not provide an arguments for their perspective, but a plethora of incommensurable claims. Each competing voice 'protests' their own superiority, but with insufficient foundations for that claim. Practically, there is the difficulty that normative accounts of youth work do not necessarily map onto the work of practitioners. Thus, even if we did have agreement on a normative account at the theoretical level, it has little practical importance. Practically youth workers ought to be more interested in meeting the needs of young people, than worrying if it is youth work. Similarly at the policy level the concern ought to be with provision for young people rather than debates about whether a good intervention is youth work or not.

Descriptive accounts of youth work however are also insufficient. What goes on under the heading of youth work in a particular community does not necessarily mean it is youth work. If we started to talk about schooling as 'youth work', in the sense that qualified youth workers, employed as youth workers, are conducting formal lessons, then we believe it to be odd to talk of it as youth work.

In MacIntyre's (1985) terms one can only define youth work as a present day activity by a consideration of its trajectory through time, its tradition. He defines a living tradition as:

'... a historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition' (MacIntyre, 1985:222)

Thus it is not surprising that youth work is a contested concept. It is the argument about 'what it is that frames the tradition of which it is a part'. It is therefore essential that we can say something about this tradition, and about the structural context in which this tradition is worked out in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is these two questions I will seek to address.

### The *tradition* of youth work

---

What can be said of youth work on which we can agree? Firstly, that youth work is part of a wider community response to the perceived needs of young people. In part these might be educational needs, in part emotional and social needs, and in part welfare needs. However, secondly, youth work operates alongside formal education, work, local community activities, and the activities of family. Youth work, as we understand it, is shaped by the social context in which it evolved, and in recent times this has been in the context of state involvement. Thirdly, youth work is not of itself ‘a good’, whatever its purpose it is not concerned with its own perpetuation.

In Aristotelian terms, the primary good of the individual, their purpose, is to ‘live the good life’. Thus the primary perceived need of young people is for them to be enabled to live that good life. Youth work can be seen as part of the response to this moral obligation, alongside the school, the family, and other local community endeavours. The question remains what specific role does youth work play in enabling young people to live the good life, and it is this question I wish to address in a moment. However, it is worth reviewing present youth work activity in the light of this claim. There seem to be at least three requirements for an individual to live the good life:

- (a) the development of personal qualities, that is appropriate education;
- (b) the freedom from resource constraints, that is welfare support;
- (c) the freedom to live the good life, that is the development of a society in which the good life is possible (i.e. being politically involved).

More needs to be said of these areas in a moment, but if these are the categories that follow from a moral obligation to enable young people to live the good life, we can begin to see the role of youth work to fulfil this obligation. Further, it becomes clear that to label ‘youth work’ as informal education (or any other narrow definition) is too quick a move, there is the possibility that it ought to also involve, at least, welfare and politically activist aspects.

It is impossible to move forward without a brief theoretical sojourn into MacIntyre’s thesis in ‘After Virtue’. In doing so I seek to develop a more nuanced account of what it

means to live the good life, and hence what young people need to acquire in order to live the good life.

#### After Virtue and the good life

---

‘After Virtue’ is an attempt by MacIntyre to reconceptualise virtue ethics for the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In doing so he seeks to develop an account of the good life, and a means of identifying those dispositions, skills, knowledge and attitude that are required in order for an individual to lead the good life. In MacIntyre’s terminology these are:

- (i) Young people need to be able to act well, and seek excellence within, the social practices in which they engage;
- (ii) Young people need to be able to make reasonable choices about the social practices they engage in, and the roles they take up within those social practices;
- (iii) Such choices ought to enable them to develop a consistent character (showing the virtues of integrity and constancy), and have a clear sense of self in these different activities and over time (that is have a unity to their life);
- (iv) Such choices ought to relate to their personal conception of the good life, a conception that will be achievable within our type of society, either at the present time, or through the development of our society.

#### *A broad review of ‘After Virtue’*

The opening chapters of ‘After Virtue’ are an account of the demise of moral discourse, both in public conversation, and in the more specialist realms of academia. For MacIntyre the history of western moral thought since at least the enlightenment has been a move towards unintelligibility. He argues that there are two *rational* moral traditions: that grounded in virtues ethics (and a particular form of virtues ethics), and that grounded in Nietzsche. He argues that either we live in a social world in which morality is an intelligible concept and thus embrace virtue ethics; or we live in a world where morality is unintelligible and we embrace Nietzsche. MacIntyre argues that we do in fact live in social world in which morality is intelligible, and thus we must therefore accept a virtues account of morality. What is more such a virtues account will imply a

particular account of human action. The remaining chapters of 'After Virtue' seek to develop such an account of human action.

MacIntyre's account of human action is, unsurprisingly, complex. In this paper I can do no more than draw out the features that are of importance to my own argument, if this makes MacIntyre's account somewhat naive then the fault is mine and the limitations of a paper, rather than his.

At the heart of MacIntyre's thesis are three concepts: 'social practices'; 'the unity of a human life'; and 'moral tradition'. MacIntyre argues that an understanding of these three concepts is necessary for both making human actions intelligible, and justifying such actions. Both the understanding of human action, and its justification are necessarily linked for as MacIntyre states:

A moral philosophy...characteristically presupposes a sociology. For every moral philosophy offers explicitly or implicitly at least a partial conceptual analysis of the relationship of the relationship of an agent to his or her reasons, motives, intentions and actions, and in doing so generally presupposes some claim that these concepts are embodied or at least can be in the real world.' (MacIntyre, 1985:23)

These three concepts follow the historic development of the virtues ethics tradition which, according to MacIntyre, been formalised in three stages, each of these stages have occurred at times of moral uncertainty, when there was a need to consider the foundations of moral discourse.

The first, and basic, stage in the development of the virtues ethics tradition occurs in 'traditional societies', ones in which what is required of the individual is dictated by the social roles into which one is born. Thus what is required of a son, of a king, of a subject, etc. is constrained by the expectations of that society. Thus to live the good life the individual simply has to fulfil what is expected of them in these various social roles, that is, live the life of virtue. This first stage MacIntyre describes in terms of the concept 'social practice' which is the basis of his development of the virtue ethics tradition.

The second stage of the tradition reflects the changing freedom of the individual. This freedom develops in two distinct ways. The first is that one has a choice of social roles that one could fulfil within a social practice. No longer are all one's social roles dictated by one's birth. The second is that there occurs an increase in the variety of social practices in which one can participate. All of which leads to two difficulties. The first is

to establish a personal *telos*, that is what the good life is for me (the answer to which will be part of the answer to the question, what is the good life for a human person)? The second is a potential for the fragmentation of the self, which is the failure to maintain a coherent personal identity (or character) in all the social practices of which one is part. Thus there is a need to establish the 'unity of a human life'. This is a unity which avoids fragmentation, and which 'quests' towards some particular appropriate conception of the good life.

The third stage is underpinned by the concept of a moral tradition. In this MacIntyre marks a limitation on the freedom of the individual. He notes that we are born with a moral starting point:

'As such, I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations. These constitute the given of my life, my moral starting point. This is in part what gives my life its own moral particularity' (MacIntyre, 1985:220)

Significantly the concept of a moral tradition links together the action of the individual and the society in which they act. The tradition dictates what kind of the answers to the question 'what is the good life' are acceptable. It is not so much that individual choice is restricted by the tradition, but rather that only certain types of lives can be lived well in that society. There are, MacIntyre contends, certain types of life that, in our society, are impossible to live well. For example, if we lived in a country where arranged marriages were necessary, then it would be impossible to live a good life in which a 'free' choice of marriage partner was a central aspect. By society here I refer to both the tangible features e.g. institutions, and those intangible features such as values. Certain social structures therefore affirm, and are affirmed by, certain moral traditions. This is not to claim that MacIntyre wishes to maintain the status quo. The concept of a tradition is, as I quoted earlier in this paper, an argument about the goods inherent in that tradition. Thus certain conceptions of the good life become possible, and others become impossible, as the argument about what the good life is develops over time.

These are the three concepts that MacIntyre argues underpin the concept of 'virtue'. However, for the purposes of this paper I am concerned primarily with the concept of a social practice.

***MacIntyre and the concept 'social practice'***

'I am going to suggest that this notion of a particular type of practice as providing the arena in which the virtues are exhibited and in terms of which they are to receive their primary, if incomplete, definition is crucial to the whole enterprise of identifying a core concept of the virtues.' (MacIntyre, 1985:187)

MacIntyre follows this with two caveats. The first is that practices are not the only place within which the virtues can be exhibited. Secondly, he gives notice that he will be using the word 'practice' in a specific way.

MacIntyre defines this 'specific way' in highly convoluted terms:

'By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established co-operative human activity through which the goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended' (MacIntyre, 1985:187)

This definition is complex, and has practical difficulties. Critics (see for example, Miller 1994) have argued that MacIntyre's definition does not clearly differentiate social practices from other activities. I believe these criticisms can be met, but with more time that is possible here (another opportunity for a future paper). I will at this point attempt a short exegesis of this sentence. For ease of access let us consider the definition of a practice in four parts:

- Type of activity;
- The goods of such an activity;
- Means of achieving those goods;
- Outcome of the activity.

The type of activity, according to MacIntyre, is 'coherent', 'complex', 'socially established' and 'co-operative'. A complex activity must imply that it consists of a series of individual actions, which are linked in some way and which we perceive as being of the same kind, they are coherent. If I were to see someone run along a line, dive onto the ground, kick my legs in the air and shout 'fun' this would be complex, I would find it difficult to see it as coherent. Coherence seems to be a necessary condition for it to be 'socially established'. A socially established activity is one in which a number of people have jointly decided to participate. A lack of coherence would make such participation

impossible. Within a social practice individual participants act co-operatively by taking up particular roles, for example, in football there are the roles of the player, and the spectator, the commentator, and perhaps in modern professional football, the players' wives. The type of practice dictates the roles available, and performing well within that practice involves fulfilling that role. This will require particular skills, knowledge, virtues and other dispositions.

The purpose of the activity is to realise (make real) the goods internal to that form of activity. MacIntyre differentiates between 'internal goods' and 'external goods'. Internal goods, e.g. 'goals' and perhaps the exhibition of skill in football, can only be achieved by participating in this particular social practice. External goods e.g. money, wealth and power, can be achieved through a wide range of social practices. Further, internal goods can only be achieved through skilful activity within the social practice, whereas external goods may well be achieved in a variety of ways. Whilst external goods may come to the agent they ought to be achieved through pursuing the internal goods of appropriate practices. The property developer may make money, but ought also to produce property of an appropriately high standard, that is pursue the goods internal to the social practice of architecture/property development.

The goods are to be achieved not by aiming specifically at the goods, but by a high degree of mastery in the practice itself. As an excellent performer in a particular practice one will achieve the goods internal to the practice. This could be problematic in that those who achieve the goods internal to some practices are those who act in inappropriate ways. For example consider Maradona and the 'hand of God' incident a number of years ago (Argentina vs. England, World Cup 1986). Here a use of the hand pushed the ball into the net to achieve one of the goods - a goal, but at the expense of achieving *excellence* in that it was a breach of the rules of the game.

Finally, the outcome of the activity is the systematic extension of both the individual standards of excellence, and the ends and goods involved in the practice. If a person performs a practice well, then he or she not only improves, but the whole practice is improved with them. As Jack Nicholas or Sebastian Coe, for example, pushes not only himself, but the sport into a new level of skill - excellence is re-defined as he himself improves. It is worth noting that such improvement is systematic, not just a random move to improve a small bit of the practice, or one's skill in one area, but an attempt to

improve the core skills, goods and ends of the practice such that this influences all aspects of the game.

Thus having given us this sentence of definition, MacIntyre intends that we could in principle, be able to identify social practices. He offers two examples: football; and architecture.

### **Example 1 - Football**

MacIntyre contends that sports and games are the clearest examples of social practices. An individual's actions of running or kicking the ball only makes sense in the context of the actions of others, and the purpose of their corporate activity. Although it is obvious to see 'football' as a clear form of rule based activity, this is not the focus of the social practices definition. The rules, particularly in a sport or game, are a mechanism for developing specific forms of excellence and enabling the pursuit of those forms of excellence. For example, the limitation of the use of hands in football forces players to pursue particular forms of excellence in the pursuit of the goals of the game. Thus one can answer a question such as 'why don't they just pick up the ball?' in a number of ways. One might simply state that it is against the rules. However, it seems reasonable that such a questioner, not familiar with football, would fail to see the point of the rule. Referring to the rule in this case does not explain why they act in this way. An explanation requires reference to the standards of excellence of football, those standards of excellence, in the use of the foot and head, which are partially definitive of football as a social practice. An experienced footballer that seeks to pursue the practice of football has little use for the rules; he or she has been inducted into the standards of excellence and pursues them. As a result of such a pursuit they do not break the rules of the game. The rules are rather either for the novice, the one who is yet to see and understand the standards of excellence, or the Referee whose judgements require public and explicit justification. The rule provide the novice with direction as they are habituated into the practice, allowing them to develop the understanding required to see the point of acting in particular ways in the light of the standards of excellence of that activity.

### **Example 2 - Architecture**

In 'After Virtue', MacIntyre makes the claim that *architecture* is a social practice whereas *bricklaying* is not. This, at first sight, looks rather arbitrary, and imbued with certain class prejudice. However, much rides on the way one interprets the practice of architecture. If by architecture MacIntyre means the activity of the professional architect, who draws up the plans for a building, ensuring that it is functional, and stable, then I cannot see how he can claim that it is a social practice. Rather, one has to see architecture as a term that includes the work of the architect, the builder, bricklayer, and interior designer (to mention just some of the roles within the practice). The practice is concerned with the provision of functional, and pleasant places internal environments in which people live and work. The work of the architect, or bricklayer is made intelligible in relation to the other actions that take place within the practice.

Architecture then has clear internal goods, to perform well in this social practice each of the various agents needs to act in order to produce a functional and pleasant building. There is a history to this type of activity which give rise to particular ways of achieving this purpose. Further it is an activity that is coherent, complex, socially established and co-operative, all characteristics that MacIntyre requires of a social practice. It is through the practice of architecture that there has been a development of our ability to build the buildings in which we live.

### ***Society and social practices***

What kinds of social practice might there be in our social. It is worth noting that whereas the discussion so far has been essentially philosophical, and applies to all societies, the mapping of a society in terms of social practices is in part an empirical enquiry, and will vary from society to society. For the sake of illustration I suggest the following categories of social practices:

- Political practices
- Legal practices
- Public welfare practices e.g. medicine, fire service
- Family and friendship practices
- Academic practices e.g. psychology, physics

- Productive practices e.g. farming, watch making
- Games and sports e.g. chess, football
- Performative practices e.g. drama, music
- Religious practices

There may in fact be other categories of practices, but precision is not necessary at the moment. The empirical task would be to map out the activities in which we engage in terms of these categories of practices. The practical tools required in order to do this will require a more detailed analysis (and is forthcoming, hopefully later in 2003). It is possible to begin to talk of a variety of social practice which cover all aspects of our social life, games, marriage, gardening, work, religious activity, etc.. The details will vary from society to society, and further analysis is unnecessary for the purposes of this paper.

### ***Returning to enabling young people to live the good life***

Let us return again to the four aspects with which this section began. The pursuit of the good life requires:

- (i) Young people need to be able to act well, and seek excellence within the social practices in which they engage;
- (ii) Young people need to be able to make reasonable choices about the social practices they engage in, and the roles they take up within those social practices;
- (iii) Such choices ought to enable them to develop a consistent character (showing the virtues of integrity and constancy), and have a clear sense of self in these different activities and over time (that is have a unity to their life);
- (iv) Such choices ought to relate to their personal conception of the good life, a conception that will be achievable within our type of society, either at the present time, or through the development of our society.

Thus we need to establish the kinds of social practices that young people want and need to engage, and prepare them to make reasonable choices between social practices. In making such choices they need to have a developing sense of their own life projects,

how these can be pursued in particular social practices, and what life projects are incompatible (e.g. being a monk, and a Gigolo). They also need to develop an understanding of what life projects, and conception of the good life are possible in our society, or what needs to be done to enable such a concept to be pursued.

### The role of youth work in enabling young people to live the good life

---

Let us consider this matter in relation to a couple of questions:

#### **Question 1**

Is youth work best conceived of as a particular social practice, or is the youth worker best conceived of as a role in a number of social practices?

#### **Question 2**

Is youth work as a 'stop gap' measure when all other forms of adult intervention have failed, or does it provide a unique opportunity for young people to be enabled to live the good life?

#### *Answering Question 1*

It is difficult to see how youth work can be conceived of as a particular social practice. There are no goods internal to the practice, and there is no sense of it being a coherent activity per se. Youth work is in terms of MacIntyre's analysis best seen in terms of the role of the youth worker in different social practices e.g. in judicial practices, political practices, leisure practices, etc.. However, one needs to ask what kind of role is it, and it why is the role given the same name in all these different social practices?

The answer is that these roles are concerned with enabling the young person to pursue excellence in the social practice in which both youth worker and young person are engaged. Thus in a judicial social practice the young person either in the role of victim, or offender engages with the youth worker whose role is to explore ways of enabling that young person to act well. In terms of political practices, the youth worker enables the young person to pursue that practice well, that is to be a 'good citizen' (and good citizen here is not necessarily the same as that contained in citizenship education).

There is of course the question why call this person a youth worker, rather than a Judicial Education Officer (or similar)? I think the implication here is that the youth worker is concerned with the young person's development within the practice rather than the development of the practice per se, and that enabling is concerned with a holistic response to the young person rather than a narrower concern with 'education'. Enabling the young person might also entail welfare provision, personal education, and political support. Further, the role of the worker may well be to develop the young person's understanding of how this social practice (in which they are engaged) fits into that young person's conception of the good life, and the other social practices they wish to pursue.

### *Addressing question 2*

In certain respects youth workers are involved in providing a 'stop gap' measure for young people involved in 'antisocial' behaviour, or who are socially excluded, or who have complex, and 'difficult' backgrounds. In this case the youth worker may take the role and activity of peers, family, teachers, etc. in enabling the young person to pursue the good life. In many a school inclusion programme the youth worker finds themselves as a surrogate teacher where a young person has rejected institutionalised education, and the inclusion centre becomes a 'liquid school' (to use Bauman's phrase). In all these cases however one can talk of the role of the worker as one that enables the young person to pursue a particular practice well, or to reflect upon the practices that are available to them. The youth worker here operates as the fifth emergency service, in 'rescue' mode.

However, is there an area of modern life in which the youth worker can provide a unique contribution to the development of the young person? I believe there is such an area, a questing with, rather than provision for, a spending time with in order that young people can develop their own conception of the good life. It is not that the youth worker is unique, but that constraints on other agents (e.g. teachers, and parents) make unconditional acceptance difficult to attain, and maintain. It is through the development and maintenance of relationship that the worker is able to accompany the young person in a reflective dialogue towards an emerging conception of the good life. Emerging for both the worker and the young person, the young person providing an understanding of

their own hopes and aspirations, and the worker providing a greater maturity as to how the young person can pursue such goals.

## Conclusion

---

This paper has been an attempt to explore and understand youth work as the outworking of a particular tradition of care for young people. A care centred on enabling young people to live the good life. Living the good life involves enabling young people to pursue excellence in social practices, develop a coherent, personal account of the good life, and be enabled to act on that conception of the good life.

Through developing MacIntyre's account of virtue I have attempted to develop an interpretation of the present activity of youth workers. I have attempted to show that divergence in terms of the institutional arrangements for such workers is unproblematic. It is not the institution, or indeed the practice that gives direction to their role, but the tradition of enabling young people to pursue the good life.

## Bibliography

---

- |                      |                                                                                                          |
|----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Bauman, Z. (2000)    | Liquid Modernity [Cambridge; Polity Press]                                                               |
| MacIntyre, A. (1985) | After Virtue (2 <sup>nd</sup> Edition) [London; Duckworth]                                               |
| Miller, D. (1994)    | 'Virtues, Practices and Justice' in Horton and Mendus<br>(eds) After MacIntyre [Cambridge, Polity Press] |
| Sacks, J. (1997)     | The Politics of Hope [London; Jonathan Cape]                                                             |