



'Down with the kids'?

'ON-ROAD' YOUTH WORKER IDENTITIES AND PATHWAYS TO DESISTANCE

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'Down with the kids'

- ▶ A paradigmatic youth worker identity
- ▶ The 'mentor' and 'frontline' male youth worker in the 'street' field - 'on-road' identity
- ▶ Social similarity with local young men that engenders credibility and acceptance in 'no-go' areas
- ▶ Desistance promoting potential?
- ▶ A deliberately ambiguous euphemism?

Conceptual tools: a psychosocial analysis

- ▶ The 'street' as a 'field' that offers up discursive identities
- ▶ 'Street-social' and 'masculine' capital
- ▶ Limited 'positions' for young black men, especially those with an alternative 'habitus'
- ▶ Intersectionality and masculinities
- ▶ Identification, recognition, inter-subjectivity and the analytic third/'third space'

Darren

- ▶ 19 year old black man living with mum
- ▶ Alternative 'habitus' – tries to avoid trouble, but becomes a victim of violence
- ▶ “It was on the way home and I couldn't avoid it. It's not something you could avoid if you were wearing the uniform from your school. You get bullied by wearing the same uniform as other kids that are starting the fights, so you're either in it or you don't catch the bus”.

At the youth club....

- ▶ (I) was on the basketball court where I didn't want to let go of the ball, but a fifteen year-old tried to take the ball off me and I was like, you ain't getting it. So I put the ball through his legs, brought it back to me, then he decided to smack me across the face. So me **like a kid with no brains and all balls**, (I) ran up to him and punched him in his face. That didn't end well, but I learnt from that.
- ▶ PH: When you say it didn't end well?
- ▶ Well, he kept beating me to the point where everyone else stopped and was like, "we gotta stop this fight as this is so stupid; it's not even a fight 'cos he's just hitting him now 'cos he can".

Recognition and desistance

- ▶ Witnesses a stabbing
- ▶ Moment of recognition during a fight
- ▶ Appreciation of the other boy's reality, combined with a drive for self-preservation
- ▶ Desistance from violence
- ▶ “Shit, if we’re in this environment now, what if it’s the other way around, I’m the one getting beat? I don’t want this to happen to me”

Retreat into isolation

- ▶ “Every time I go outside there’s trouble. You tell me ‘Don’t get involved with certain people’. ‘What do you mean, don’t get involved? ‘I’m going outside, I’m going to see them. I can’t not see them’. So you know what, I’m just not going to go outside”.
- ▶ “I’m not in the right mental state to be talking about past events right now (I frankly just don’t want to) so it’s best if we don’t”

Chris

- ▶ Early 30's black male: tall, fit, and muscular
- ▶ 90 minute interviews – visibly upset at points
- ▶ Childhood – strong identification with father
- ▶ Saturday school to study black history
- ▶ Relationship with one black teacher – “coconut”
- ▶ Fights in school and the street over minor provocation
- ▶ Accosted at knifepoint – felt as humiliation
- ▶ Encounters with girls where consent was blurred

Youth work training

- ▶ Dismay at not being able to trace route to identity through name
- ▶ “The Black Perspective’s module, which was his module, that really radically changed who I was, who I perceived myself to be”.
- ▶ “Twin trajectory” in identity construction and ‘reversion’ to Islam

Youth work practice

- ▶ Placed in inner-city neighbourhood and uses 'on-road' identity to initiate project work
- ▶ Some success with maverick practices condoned by male line manager
- ▶ Financial crisis – redeployment - undermines replacement
- ▶ Breaks up fight in youth centre and reprimanded by female line manager
- ▶ “The reality is, you don't have the knowledge and skills to be able to engage in this community. And you don't have the knowledge and skills to manage someone like myself that has a wealth of knowledge in the particular area”.
- ▶ Leaves youth work

Psychosocial analysis - Darren

- ▶ Strong identification with mother
- ▶ Insufficient resources of social street and masculine capital
- ▶ Investment in alternative masculinity centred on intellect
- ▶ Struggling with vulnerability retreats into self-imposed shell
- ▶ Desistance, but a wholly positive outcome?

Chris

- ▶ Strong identification with father and other male figures
- ▶ Strong investment in essentialised notions of racial identity followed by ambivalence
- ▶ Blind spots in awareness of own heavily gendered identity
- ▶ Reversion to Islam to decontaminate biography?
- ▶ Desistance but wholly positive outcome?

Professional identity

- ▶ Heavily racialised and gendered - becomes 'complicit'?
- ▶ Reluctant to relinquish defensive strategies and concede vulnerability
- ▶ Disparaging appraisal of his female line manager
- ▶ Relationships with young people meeting his own needs?

Chris and Darren – inter-subjectivity

- ▶ Chris - “You’re small, you’re going to get bullied by them, because you’ll get bullied off the ball. It will happen; just give up the ball”
- ▶ Advice that was ignored by Darren
- ▶ A missed opportunity?

Recognition?

- ▶ Chris holding on to 'mentor' identity partly to protect his own sense of self
- ▶ His capacity to open up new ways for Darren to manage conflict and vulnerability impacted by defensiveness around his self-image
- ▶ Restricts some forms of reflexive awareness
- ▶ 'Silence' around masculinity
- ▶ Needs to fully **recognise** Darren's subjectivity

A 'third space'?

- ▶ Powerful sub-cultural notions of a 'real man' cutting off routes to emotional openness that might have benefitted them both.
- ▶ To help Darren change Chris needed to change too.
- ▶ Chris could have called on Darren's collaboration, creating a 'third space' between, but also outside, their dyadic relationship.

Down with the kids....?

- ▶ Heavily reliant on capital garnered from the street
- ▶ Comfortable in 'no-go' neighbourhood but 'no-go' areas within the self
- ▶ Can reach 'hard to reach' young people but becomes 'hard to reach' himself
- ▶ Investing substantial energy in refashioning identity
- ▶ Structural and organisational forces and specificity of psychological resources leading to 'burn out'
- ▶ A deliberately ambiguous euphemism?

Youth work relationships in focus – Assets?

- ▶ Shared inhabitation of a social field eases building of rapport
- ▶ Voluntary relationship facilitates advice on how to navigate the social field
- ▶ Could mitigate against identities centred on the competitive pursuit of street social/masculine capital.

Shortcomings

- ▶ Asymmetry in positions within the field
- ▶ Male workers like Chris as the embodiment of a masculinity from which young men like Darren are excluded
- ▶ Masculine capital not a fully shareable entity and remains a prize to be fought for competitively

Conclusions

- ▶ Study illuminates the assets of youth work relationships rooted in masculine and social street capital and processes of identification
- ▶ But also their shortcomings if not accompanied by sufficient reflexivity and recognition of the 'other'
- ▶ Thorough consideration of their personal and professional identity formation is integral to meaningful, effective youth work practice.
- ▶ Workers need adequate support to avoid being overwhelmed by the challenges they face, both in their internal and external worlds.