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Adopting an autobiographical approach to reflective practice: A journey from academic to youth work pracademic

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Introduction

When I began my master's degree in Youth Work and Community Development, I introduced myself to my peers as Catherine, who researches with children and young people. In an icebreaker 'draw a portrait of your neighbour' exercise, I told my neighbour that I have three children, including twins, and I am a twin myself, I have two dogs, I love coffee, and that my favourite food is lasagne. While this is true, there were aspects of my professional identity which, with good intentions, I chose not to disclose. However, I later revealed these during an assessed presentation on professional identity, ethics and values and began by re-introducing myself. I told my peers:

“My name is Dr Catherine Wilkinson, and I'm a Reader (sometimes referred to as an Associate Professor) in Childhood and Youth Studies at Liverpool John Moores University. My title 'Dr' indicates that I have previously completed a PhD. Whilst part of my role is undertaking research with children and young people, I will be the Programme Leader for a new Youth Work degree apprenticeship at Liverpool John Moores University. This master's degree is important for me to gain subject knowledge of Youth Work, practical experience, and the Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC) qualification required to lead this programme”.

I chose to downplay the academic aspect of my identity and lean into other aspects, not to deceive anyone, but because I wanted to gain new perspectives and experience how to *be* a youth work and community development student. I also wanted to give space to other people's ideas and to experience interactions without a possible power dynamic. This demonstrates my awareness of my “social positioning of self and others” (Bucholz and Hall, 2005, p.586). Herein, I adopt an autobiographical lens to review my professional development, recognising its value (Daskalaki, 2012) in 'getting up close and personal' to my positionality and journey. I consider my trajectory from a young person to my development as an academic, and then a professional youth worker-in-becoming. I achieve this by pinpointing key moments of my life

- cultural, political, educational, and personal, and considering the importance of my own biography to becoming a qualified youth worker and how I connect with the ethical and moral dimensions of practice. Although I discuss these key moments chronologically, many have been messy, non-linear and overlapping. By sharing these reflections, I hope to encourage readers to consider their own biographies and how their personal histories, experiences, and values influence their approach to youth work and community development. This reflective process, I argue, allows us to better understand the complexities of our professional identities and how they evolve over time. By acknowledging the messy and non-linear nature of our journeys, we can embrace the challenges and contradictions that shape our practice, enabling us to approach our work with young people with greater authenticity and self-awareness.

Going Back to the Beginning

I was born in 1990 and grew up in Sidmouth, a seaside town in Devon, UK, which is a popular retirement destination, with a dominant population of older adults. Growing up in Sidmouth, there was rhetoric amongst young people, myself included, that “there’s nothing for young people to do around here”. Whilst my childhood was idyllic, when I hit my teenage years I was most often found sitting on park benches drinking WKD. This enables me to connect with some young people demonised in the media for hanging out in parks today and provides a motivation to challenge the denigration of young people. There was a local youth club, which I saw in the way conceptualised by de St Croix and Doherty (2023), as a third space between home and school. It was a safe space, but not particularly exciting – there was a pool table, basket-ball court and three computers which young people used to argue over. I cannot recall my relationship with the youth workers and would not describe them as having a role in shaping my life or future direction, but the space of the youth club provided a sanctuary for me.

The Great Recession (2007-2009) and Austerity Britain (2010)

Fast-forward to 2007-2009, which overlapped with when I was undertaking my undergraduate degree, when Britain entered the Great Recession, followed by Austerity Britain in 2010. When I graduated in 2011, the job market presented fewer opportunities and higher competition. I was fortunate to be offered a scholarship to study a master’s degree, but many of my friends, armed with their new degrees, faced unemployment. This strengthened my belief in postgraduate study as a tool for social mobility. This period of economic hardship also inspired my research into the lives of young people Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET) (for more information about young people labelled as NEET, see Wrigley, 2017), where I used

the lenses of resilience, social inclusion, and social capital to explore young people's imagined futures.

The 2011 Liverpool Riots

Moving forward another year to 2011, and in some ways connected to the economic hardship felt in years previous, riots took place in many cities, including Liverpool. When I moved to Liverpool to undertake my PhD just one year later in 2012, I could feel the animosity and aftermath of the riots rippling around the city. Alongside my doctoral research into the experiences of NEET young people volunteering at a community radio station, I got involved in writing up a research project 'Young people and the stories of the riots: 1981 and 2011' in which researchers trained young people in interviewing skills and the young people identified people they considered pivotal to the riots to interview, including rioters, police officers, and local media reporters (Benwell et al., 2020). These projects shaped my sense of responsibility as an academic working directly *with* young people, motivating me to contribute to a fairer and more inclusive society.

My Research into 'Other' Childhoods

As I developed my career as an academic, I produced a body of research into 'other' childhoods, that is childhoods that can be considered to sit outside the mainstream. I researched with a range of young people, including those with health conditions and those living in areas of high deprivation. Through this work, I developed my understanding that young people are a discrete but heterogenous group. It highlighted to me the importance of intersectionality, which refers to the overlapping and intersecting axes of difference that can shape someone's identity (von Benzon and Wilkinson, 2019). This led me to ask the important question of young people, highlighted by Rodó-de-Zárate (2017) - who '*else*' are they? Further, through trying to shape the most accommodating research environments for young people, it informed my understanding of the importance of inclusive and affirming spaces where young people feel valued. Importantly, I became knowledgeable about research ethics, and there are many overlaps between ethical research practice and ethical youth work.

The Covid-19 Pandemic

Moving forward to 2019, another defining moment was the Covid-19 pandemic and specifically the lockdown in 2020. Due to health complications, I was identified by the government as being extremely clinically vulnerable and was instructed to shield. I worked

entirely from home and received food parcels delivered to my door. During this period, I developed personal resilience, which Shanahan et al (2022) note is also true of many young adults during the pandemic. I also developed skills in community engagement and community building, though mostly virtual, for instance the organising of virtual gatherings and games. I taught exclusively via Zoom and undertook pastoral care for my students online. While it was initially difficult to demonstrate care via a virtual platform, it was a necessary skill to develop as many students were exhibiting poor emotional wellbeing. Through the above, I also developed my digital literacy. This is important considering the future of online youth work (see Melvin, 2019) and the use of media and technology to support young people to navigate their online lives

Becoming ‘Mum’

Lastly, but I would argue most importantly, a defining moment has been becoming mum to my three young children. During my maternity leave and my return to work I felt a strong conflict between my maternal and professional identity, and it is something I am still grappling with. I have come to value highly and bestow on others a feminist ethics of care which, originating from the work of Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (1982), emphasises the importance of interpersonal relationships and care as a moral virtue. I developed an *even stronger* sense of justice for young people, recognising that my children will be young people growing up in this world. This sense of social justice is described by Wood, Westwood and Thompson (2014) as key to being a ‘good youth worker’. My experience of becoming a mum aligns with the Institute for Youth Work’s (2024) code of ethics ‘duty of care to young people’, where the interests of young people are prioritised.

Where am I now?

I am questioning, like Davies (2010), what do we mean by youth work? There have been times when I have even questioned – have I already been doing youth work (but under a different guise)? To explain, my role as a researcher with young people aligns with the four cornerstones of youth work, identified by the National Youth Agency (2024): Participation; equality; education; and empowerment. However, research with young people and youth work are not one and the same and I have found it helpful to identify some of the key differences. Research is arguably transactional – there is an emphasis on extracting information from young people in the form of data; the relationship is typically more formal, with young people serving as

participants / subjects; finally, except for an initial concern with building rapport, the emphasis generally is not on relationship-building.

I am currently juggling multiple hats – the youth worker-in-becoming, the academic, the mother, and the student. There is a need to recognise and examine these plural identities, as there can be both continuities and conflict between these (Wenger, 2008). As an example, I am a member of TAG – the Professional Association of Lecturers in Youth and Community Work Higher Education Institution network, and am also a member of the Youth Work Student Network. I own both a staff lanyard, and a student lanyard. Despite the possible disjuncture of some of this, I am excited by the prospect of what Gormally, Howard and Seal (2024) acknowledge as a meaningful career as a youth work pracademic.

Where do I need to be?

In considering my developing professional identity, I resonate with Harris' (2020) idea of going backwards before going forwards. Ongoing reflexivity will be important, what Trelfa (2018) refers to as 'gaze' and 'glance', emphasising the balance needed between looking forwards and backwards. One of my worries is my ability to connect with the everyday young person of 2025, in a youth club or other setting, in a non-researcher or lecturer capacity. Am I 'down with the kids?' (Harris, 2019), and does this really matter? I was drawn to a quotation from Ross (2016, p.109) in this regard:

Are some people just born for this work? Is time on the job what it takes to eventually "get it"? Is there a role for higher education to prepare youth workers to resolve complex dilemmas of practice?

I am hopeful that connecting theory with practice, through a combination of my Youth Work and Community Development master's degree and my upcoming practice placements, will shape me into a brilliant youth and community work practitioner.

Conclusions: An Ongoing Journey of Professional Development

In conclusion, my experience as an academic and researcher aligns with some of the core tenets (including values and ethics) of youth work, though there are notable differences that I have highlighted. My development as a youth work professional has been shaped by key cultural, political, educational, and personal moments in my life so far, and will continue to be shaped as such. Therefore, ongoing critical reflection is required to understand my professional identity more fully, particularly when I begin my practice placements. An autobiographical lens

has been useful here to unpack the personal experiences, values, and beliefs that influence my professional development. Moving forward, this will allow me to critically examine how my own life story may shape my interactions with young people, my understanding of their challenges, and my responses to their needs. By reflecting on my personal history, I can gain deeper insight into the biases and assumptions I may hold, and strengths I may bring to my practice, which in turn empowers me to engage with young people in a more self-aware manner. I would encourage other youth workers to explore the adoption of an autobiographical approach, facilitating them to go backwards before going forwards (Harris, 2020). This process encourages a continual dialogue between personal experiences and professional development, ultimately enriching the ability to create meaningful, empathetic, and ethically grounded relationships with the young people we engage with. An autobiographical approach, then, not only offers valuable insights for personal growth but also for fostering a more authentic approach to youth work. By revisiting and reflecting on our own life stories, we can better understand how our past experiences shape our perceptions and actions in the present. This self-awareness enables us to challenge preconceived notions and biases, improving the ways we interact with young people from diverse backgrounds.

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