

## Practice Section: Working with Young People

### Introduction

Rachael Fox & Nina Browne

The four short practice papers in this section all describe and reflect on work with young people in the UK and Australia. They are written by a young person, two community clinical psychologists, a researcher and a practitioner. The first three highlight the challenges and barriers which stem from systems and institutions set up to support young people. In the writers' experiences young people tend to be positioned as the problem when they in fact hold many of the solutions. The fourth paper touches on different possibilities and ways of working – both in the way it was constructed and in the practices it describes.

Dominant ideologies and narratives position young people as incapable, vulnerable, selfish and self-centred (Lansdown, 2001). When young people don't comply with systems and institutions and don't fit these positionings they can find themselves characterised as being a danger to themselves and others (Goldson, 2001). Young people are too easily dismissed as 'hard to reach', when we need to take help to where they are at (Durcan, Zlotowitz, & Stubbs, 2017).

A questioning and resisting from young people, the adults who work with them and the systems which should be designed to work for them, is present in these practice papers and is hugely important. As well as describing opportunities for change, the tensions of working in new ways, engage adult powers, but aiming to work collaboratively and respectfully with young people are discussed in the papers. Frustrations felt by both the practitioners and young people are communicated. However, by giving young people a voice and looking to them for the solutions, they can draw on their lived experiences to help change things (Zlotowitz, Barker, Moloney, & Howard, 2016).

We hope you read and find value in the papers for your day to day work and that the

ideas are light touch enough to be accessible in a time when we need creativity and innovation. In writing and sharing practice, we support the role of psychologists in influencing macro-level conversations, including joining with young people and their communities to change policy (Browne, Zlotowitz, Alcock, & Barker, 2020; Maton, 2016). We would like to encourage other writers to submit short papers such as these. As this tumultuous year ends, we would very much like to hear about how your work has had to adapt and change in the challenging contexts of the Global Pandemic and Black Lives Matter, and other matters which have dominated our lives this year.

### References

- Browne, N., Zlotowitz, S., Alcock, K., & Barker, C. (2020). Practice to policy: Clinical psychologists' experiences of macrolevel work. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 51(4), 371–382.
- Durcan, G., Zlotowitz, S., & Stubbs, J. (2017) Meeting us where we're at: Learning from INTEGRATE's work with excluded young people. London: Centre for Mental Health. <https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/publications/meeting-us-where-were>
- Goldson, B. (2001). The demonization of children: From the symbolic to the institutional. In P. Foley, J. Roche, & S. Tucker (Eds.), *Children in society* (pp. 34-41). London: Open University Press.
- Lansdown, G. (2001). Children's welfare and children's rights. In P. Foley, J. Roche, & S. Tucker (Eds.), *Children in society* (pp. 87-97). London: Open University Press.
- Maton, K. I. (2016). *Influencing social policy: Applied psychology serving the public interest*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zlotowitz, S., Barker, C., Moloney, O., & Howard, C. (2016). Service users as the key to service change? The development of an innovative intervention for excluded young people. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, 21(2), 102-108.

**Walking in the Shoes of Young People**  
**Dr Nina Browne**  
**Clinical and Community Psychologist,**  
**Owls. London, UK**

It was six weeks until he spent any of his fund. He said he wanted to keep hold of it, as where he comes from money doesn't come easy. He wanted more time to think about his idea. It was a serious thing. He wasn't to be rushed.

In those six weeks, I was asked at least that many times what I would do if a young person spent their fund on trainers. I think they probably wanted to ask me about drugs too, but were too polite. There are so many responses I have to this question. A simple enquiry on the surface maybe, but experience and research tells me it's loaded and complex.

I'm a community psychologist trying to tackle one of the structural barriers to community-led innovation. I'm co-developing a new trust-based funding model that gives young people a small amount of money on debit cards, to spend on tackling social issues. They come together in groups to make decisions. Small, instant, direct to them not via an organisation. We believe that young people facing life's biggest challenges also are key to their solutions.

My first response to that question. I wouldn't be doing anything about the trainers if they bought them, because it's not my decision. I'm not the guardian of the money, young people are. The first youth bank has a board of five young people on. They are accountable for who gets the money and verifying the spending. If I was making these judgement calls, we wouldn't be truly sharing power or doing anything new.

My second response is to think to myself — is this what it's like to be a young man growing up in London? Does anyone listen long enough to hear his ideas? Does anyone ever trust him enough to actually find out? It's easy to buy into the story that young people are untrustworthy, dangerous or hopeless. If you work in this space you're used to it. These are seemingly harmless enquiries underpinned by discrimination,

racism and disempowerment. But what if we all leaned in, we'd hear stories of lived expertise, entrepreneurialism and humanity. People who want to change society, despite how it has treated them, despite the experiences of people not trusting them.

Thirdly, I would tell you that in terms of the ethics, young people are way tougher than we are. One young man told us our vision was Utopian and we should 'get real'. But it's they who are the arbiters of what's ethical and they have a clear set of guidelines, one of which is "check up but don't judge". They will tell you whether buying a pair of trainers is right or wrong. In fact, they told me it's neither, it's much more complex than that. A pair of trainers could be a matter of whether you're safe on the roads or not.

Finally, if the person was still listening at this point I'd share the hard data. No one has yet bought trainers or hoodies. There has been a lot spent on food though, especially from supermarkets. This interests me much more, because if we truly entrust money to young people to spend it on what matters to them, we might learn a whole lot about what they need.

Please get in touch at [nina@owls.org.uk](mailto:nina@owls.org.uk)  
[www.owls.org.uk](http://www.owls.org.uk)

## **The Dehumanising of Human Services**

**Mary Malak, CEO with Humanity Matters, a community based street youth service.**

I have worked in community youth services for 30 years. Over the last 20 years there has been a shift in the funding of community based services and this has had a huge impact for the community I work with. Decades back, competition was almost non-existent, with community organisations aware of and respectful of what each organisation was responsible for. The support provided to communities was holistic and grounded in community development and empowerment. There was genuine collaboration between agencies with a strong commitment towards supporting the sustainability and growth of local partner agencies. Government funding was distributed from department representatives working in collaboration with the community in managing and allocating funding.

This has now moved to a hands off contracting relationship. Additionally, the introduction of competitive tendering has decimated the trust and authentic collaboration between agencies. Large, external agencies, with their designated grant writing teams and strong lobbying influence, are in a much stronger position to win tenders against small, local organisations. Significant amounts of funding previously allocated to local community groups has been reallocated to these large agencies.

This wouldn't be any big deal if it meant things improved for the communities we serve, but unfortunately this has not been the case. Communities have lost control over, and ownership of, the services delivered to them, and services have become fragmented and partial. Agencies are now funded to deliver specific services. The meeting of needs outside of these is at the discretion of agencies and often not covered by funding. For external agencies, with head offices far removed from the communities they have won tenders for, this results in "spot servicing" – the servicing of only a

specific need rather than holistic support and definitely not authentic community empowerment.

The repercussions of these changes have been particularly detrimental to youth streetwork. Streetwork is a specific form of community work that is centred on taking services to the community, rather than the traditional centre based or outreach based models that are dependent upon people coming to a centre or designated outreach location. Described as "on their turf, on their terms", streetwork involves going into community spaces and relies upon each unique community informing the approach and service provision. For young people who experience exclusion and marginalisation and are often negatively termed 'hard to reach', the aim is to alter systems and ways of working, ways of providing a service, that are 'better at reaching'.

Due to the pressure on agencies to deliver specific outcomes, rather than holistic support or whole of community development, the number of agencies providing streetwork services reaching highly marginalised young people has dramatically declined, with only a handful of agencies left across Sydney. The result of this has been the increased invisibility of young people who have slipped through the mainstream. This increases the risks and vulnerabilities these "invisible" young people are exposed to. Biker gang recruitment, drug running, recruitment into violent extremist groups, prostitution, to name a few, all benefit from highly marginalised young people slipping below the radar and being invisible to the mainstream.

Further exacerbating this decline in streetwork is the increasing move by funding departments to fund only 'evidence based' practices. With the invisibility and difficulty to reach highly marginalised young people there is a substantial lack of 'research evidence' regarding this population. It is assumed that this 'evidence base' will come from mainstream, dominant methods – it is no coincidence that mainstream dominant methodology is problematic for highly

marginalised young people in the same way that mainstream dominant services and mainstream dominant culture are excluding, discriminatory and labelling. Evidence based upon experimental or randomised control trial findings, are held up as the gold standard for validating the effectiveness of practice methods. Marginalised young people that can only be reached in highly unstructured settings and with flexible approaches, responsive to individual communities, results in a lack of evidence for streetwork both within Australia and internationally. Knowledge based on people's lived experiences is too often dismissed by funding departments as subjective and unreliable. Without recognition of the lived experiences of highly marginalised young people they remain invisible. The continued reduction of streetwork services further ensures this invisibility is maintained.

More marginalised young people than ever are slipping through the mainstream infrastructure and supports as a result of services scrambling to secure their future viability within this environment. Very few services reach out and provide responsive services to street frequenting young people, making young people even more vulnerable to the exploitative criminal and antisocial elements on the street. More efforts need to be made by researchers to capture the lived experiences of highly marginalised street frequenting young people, along with a shift by funding bodies to recognise the value of grass roots knowledge that cannot be found with the existing research.

### **Why are we silencing the voices of marginalised and disadvantaged young people?**

Lester Watson

*Charles Sturt University, NSW*

I work as a researcher in Australia and my passion is to work with marginalised and disadvantaged young people. In this piece I refer to my work with young people who are primary carers for members of their family, and young people deemed at risk of entering the juvenile justice system. I am constantly confronted by the ways in which these young people are silenced and excluded from conversations about their own lives and experiences.

In my work with young carers I have come across many young people who are angry, not because they are carers, but because they are silenced. A 16-year-old girl I worked with expressed bewilderment, frustration and anger to me. She was the carer for a mother with mental health issues and a sibling with profound autism, but that was not the source of her feelings. Agencies and authorities responsible for supporting young people in such situations had not once talked to her. As she was a 'child', they dealt exclusively with her mother and she felt more frustrated and marginalised by this than any caring responsibilities. This scenario was repeated in other similar family situations and I along with the young people found the paradox jarring.

I met a 15-year-old boy caring for his two parents who have disabilities; a very complex and demanding role. He also expressed lots of frustration with systems, but the research systems we had to engage in to work together were also marginalising: institutional ethics regimes required that I obtain his parents' permission to talk to him about his experiences. This positioned him as vulnerable over and above his parents. This institutional process serves to marginalise the profound experiences and views of young people like him.

At another time, I sat in on a meeting with a group of adults deciding what 'fun trip' they would organise as respite for young

people in difficult caring roles. A decision was reached by the adults – the 'kids will love it' they agreed. Yet, the trip was cancelled because none of the young people wanted to go: most young people I spoke to did not want to, or could not, leave the families they were caring for, for a three day trip away from home. At no point did it occur to any of the adults to ask young people what they wanted to do. I have experienced scenarios like this many times. The exclusion is deeply felt by most young people I have worked with: "they do not listen to kids ... kids don't have a say ... we don't get taken seriously ... those organisations have no idea what it is like for us ... I'm sick of their shit ... adults always just ask my Mum ... they are not asking the right person ... and they don't even realise!".

It goes beyond dismissal of the young people's views. There is an unstated assumption that young people are not capable of 'properly' understanding their own experiences and needs, much less able to adequately articulate their insights. Government agencies, service providers, schools, and parents largely operate within the construct of young people as fragile, vulnerable and partially competent. I have recently been engaging in work with young people deemed at risk of entering the juvenile justice system. Many, if not most, are very eager to tell the story of their experiences and difficult situations to those who will listen, and they and I feel the juvenile justice system could learn a lot from these young people. But to engage in so called 'evidence' producing research, which might go some way towards promoting these young people's perspectives, there are insurmountable barriers. Institutional ethics approval must be obtained for very risky research with juveniles who may be presently offending. Parental consent would be required for those under 16 years of age: many young people are not in positive relationships with their parents or carers.

Additionally, for these young people, who are mostly disengaged from school, confronting the formalities and language of official ethics information and consent

documents is also a deal breaker. The effective marginalisation of these young people from telling their stories based on the notion of 'protecting' them, sits oddly against the age of criminal responsibility in all Australian jurisdictions being 10 years and the 600 young people under 14 years of age that are imprisoned each year across Australia.

In addition to the erosion of justice that these young people experience in a number of ways, we are inflicting an injustice on marginalised and disadvantaged young people by constraining their opportunities to be heard, understood, and have input in matters directly affecting their lives. Instead, for the most part, the narrative on these young people's experiences is as told by adults and based on adult perspectives and assumptions. This allows adults, governments and systems to control the narrative, and position young people as either weak, vulnerable and incompetent, or as dangerous and deviant. Research, with its processes that complement the dominant system, do not do enough to challenge this.

**Lester Watson** is an Adjunct Research Fellow and Sessional Academic in the School of Psychology at Charles Sturt University, Australia. His research is mainly centered on critical psychology with a specific interest in young people who are disadvantaged, marginalised, or experience social exclusion.

lwatson@csu.edu.au

## **Telling a different story – A conversation between a community clinical Psychologist and a young person**

### **Hannah Alghali & Young Person from Project Future**

Many young people in London, especially those from ethnic minority backgrounds, often find that their stories are told for them. Stories of crime, school exclusion and poverty. In North London there is a service call Project Future, drawing on community psychology principles, which is supporting young people to tell their own stories. Stories of success, strength, resistance and friendship. These young people are often excluded from traditional mental health services which may be in areas where they feel unsafe or staffed by professionals who don't understand the complexities of their lives. Project Future, though therapeutic in nature, steps away from traditional models of therapeutic practice to meet the complex needs young people face. Instead, the service, which is a partnership between the NHS, local authority and charity partner\*, provides holistic support, helping young people with housing and employment needs, access to physical health services and engaging in social action work. Project Future aims to empower young people to lead on the development and delivery of the service and young people work alongside clinical psychologists and youth workers to facilitate better emotional wellbeing for other members of the community.

Below is a conversation between a young person who accesses and works at Project Future and Hannah, a clinical psychologist currently working at Project Future. They talk about the values of the service, what makes it different from other services and ideas for what other services could learn from this one.

Hannah: How did you get involved with Project Future?

Young person: A friend told me about it. The

service uses peer-to-peer referral which means you can only get invited if your friend tells you about it. The peer referral is really important because it means the service stays safe for young people. I started seeing my friend getting help so then I asked for help too, they helped me get a stewarding job which I did alongside uni.

H: What did you think of the service when you first went there?

YP: I thought it was going to close down soon, other services often do. So I thought let me just get some support while I can. But then it became more than that, I've got good relationships with staff.

H: What do you think the main values of the service are?

YP: I think the main value is that they offer all-round support and are non-judgemental. Staff don't give their negative opinions about young people. Other people might be scared to work with people like us before they get to know us, but Project Future is different because the staff don't give opinions at all. I think this helps to build relationships.

H: What makes this service different from other services you know of?

YP: The team try to understand young people and don't look at the young people as problems. They see that we need support to change our surroundings. They understand the issues that affect us like household up bringing, household income and lack of opportunities. They help us to handle our underlying issues to make our lives better. They take a supportive psychological approach, and the confidentiality is really important.

H: How do young people shape the project?

YP: The service is co-produced which means we have the power to make decisions on the structure and ideas of the service. For example, the type of trips we want to go on



and the type of work we want to do to promote social action. Having power like this gives young people purpose. This is really unique, I'd never seen it like that before.

H: What has your work with the service enabled in your life?

YP: My thought process. It's helped me to understand myself more and allowed me to be more open within my career. Young people who come to the service notice change in each other. For example, they have more to do and have more support.

H: What role does social action play?

YP: It gives young people a sense of purpose to create change for young people like themselves and their peer group. I'm part of an art collective which tells young people's stories about social inequalities and promotes change. We put on an exhibition in central London a few years ago.

H: What do you think other services could learn from Project Future?

YP: Other services should be young person led because we commonly know how to help ourselves, we just don't have the resources or networks. When people are younger, they might need a bit of a push to help themselves. Also the service prioritises our safety, for example the peer referral. Not just anyone can come to the service. Other services should focus on creating good working relationship with young people. If they were more open minded and non-judgemental young people would have more trust.

H: What should the future of support for communities look like?

YP: Communities should be given resources and they should be supported to make change. Young people should be empowered, they are aware of their problems and have ideas for solutions. We need more unity in the community.

Why as a psychologist have you decide to work in a community psychology way?

H: I guess for me I noticed in my other roles that lots of young people weren't able to access mainstream mental health services. The services often expected young people to come and sit down in a room and talk about their problems. And for lots of young people that just wasn't going to work. I'm interested in how psychologists can adapt and work differently, rather than expecting young people to be the ones who have to adapt.

YP: What values do you have to hold when working with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds?

H: I think an important value to hold is equality. For me that means that everyone has the right to access mental health and wellbeing services, and that services should work in ways that make that possible. I think we demonstrate this value by being flexible to young people's needs and letting them take in a lead in when they're ready to access the service. Another important value is that psychologists don't have all the answers! Lots of the best ideas come from young people and working with, rather than for, young people leads to the best outcomes.

YP: What do you think are the challenges of working in this way?

H: I think a main challenge is building relationships with young people so that they can trust you. Lots of young people have been let down by services in the past and might have a negative idea about professionals, particularly those from a mental health background. I've learnt that you've got to be patient. Let young people get to know your face a bit. I think a good way to build trust is to follow up on the things you say you are going to do. For example, if you say you will help a young person do a housing application, do it! Let the young people know you stick to your word.

YP: What are the advantages of using this methodology?

H: I think the main advantage is that the team works with lots of young people who otherwise might not get to access services. At Project Future young people can come and hangout. They can play FIFA or cook some food in the kitchen and staff can get to know them at their own pace. This feels so different from other services when young people might be discharged if they don't engage with the service quickly. The flexibility of the service, and going at a young person's pace, is really important.

YP: What advice would you give to new psychologists coming in to the role?

H: I think patience! It takes time to build therapeutic relationships with young people who access the service but putting the time in means the relationships will be richer in the long run.

\* Project Future is a community based holistic and youth-led, mental health and wellbeing service situated in Haringey, North London, UK. The project is a partnership between Mind in Haringey, Barnet, Enfield and Haringey NHS Mental Health Trust, and Haringey Council. The project has been co-produced by the young people who access the project.

By a young person from Project Future and  
Dr Hannah Alghali

Please direct any questions or comments to  
the Project Lead, Dr Hannah Stringer  
([Hannah.stringer@mih.org.uk](mailto:Hannah.stringer@mih.org.uk))

Telling a different story – A conversation between a  
community clinical

Psychologist and a young person

Hannah Alghali & Young Person from Project Future