



A discourse and practice gap in working with youth-at-disadvantage in the outreach social work service in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

In this study, the discourses of outreach youth workers reveal that the majority of them are quite conscious of how broader social, contextual and familial changes impact the problem behavior of young people in Hong Kong. Moreover, many of them prefer not to be strict social control agents who harshly regulate the behavior of young people, as expected by society. Ideally, these workers can be a force for social change when they are highly conscious of social impacts on the situations of young people and do not prefer to be strict social control agents. In their everyday practices, however, the ways by which they select and assemble their work are political and complicated. Their discourses are usually subjugated in the complex relations of power at work between the policy demands on the work focus and to the output standards of the service, on the one hand, and the orientations of the agencies, on the other. As a result, what they do remains at the personal and remedial level in regulating the problem behavior of young people. Although none among them has denied the importance of including both micro and macro levels of intervention in the service, a discourse and practice gap does exist in their everyday practices.

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1. Introduction

Under the wave of globalization and the various crises that occurred all over the world, such as the Asian economic crisis in the second half of 1997, the September 11 terrorist attack in 2001, the SARS outbreak in 2003, the financial tsunami of 2007 and 2008, and the recent European debt crisis, Hong Kong has been undergoing a prolonged period of hardship in its socioeconomic, political, cultural, and familial development. The crises of the past years have influenced not only the property market and the stability of Hong Kong society, but also the growth and development of its young people. Issues concerning young people, such as the traumatically high youth unemployment rates, the rise in the number of young drug abusers, the number of young people who are addicted to the Internet or who are socially withdrawn, and bullying in school, have placed young people in a more disadvantaged position in society. Similar to the situations in other countries (Hebdige, 1988; Wong & Chiu, 1998), when issues concerning young people emerge, discourses on the situations of young people proliferate and are propagated in the public and among government officials, social work professionals, and academics. However, with less critical and reflexive attention given to the ways by which they are constituted, young people are all too easily blamed as being negative, destructive, and problematic in nature (Chiu, 2005; Ho & Law, 2003). Moreover, far from being neutral and

objective descriptions of young people, the problematic discourses have further legitimized a range of policy initiatives and social control programmes intended to discipline and control young people regarding their problem behavior and to socialize them to develop proper values and attitudes as adopted by society (Tam, 2011).

Take, for example, the issue of psychotropic substance abuse among the youth. Since the arrival of the party culture in the mid-1990s, young people in Hong Kong have been described as a “gang of Ecstasy” (Apple Daily, 6.8.2000; Sing Pao, 16.11.2000, 2.3.2001; Oriental Daily, 14.8.2001). This description indicates a group of young people who indulge in the euphoric effect brought about by psychotropic drugs. With the proliferation of negative, destructive, and problematic discourses on young people in society, tightened controls and series of actions have been taken at different times to tackle the rising problems associated with drug abuse among the youth. The actions widely include the formation of a multidisciplinary task force led by the Secretary for Justice to advise on possible long-term, sustainable, and comprehensive strategies to combat the problem (Task Force on Youth Drug Abuse, 2008), enhanced law enforcement, and the establishment of Police School Liaison Teams in each district to liaise with secondary schools. In 2009, as the problem continued to get worse, a voluntary urine test, the Trial Scheme on School Drug Testing, was introduced in one of the Legislative Council districts (Policy 21, 2010). Moreover, from 2008 to 2010, six Counselling Centres for Psychotropic Substance Abusers were added to tackle the problem. Of course, it is not being argued here that all strategies aimed at reducing the range of dangers that might confront young people are bad. To paraphrase Foucault (1984), however, it may be

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dangerous if those discourses are made justifications for policies and interventions that attempt to regulate every behavior and practice of young people in terms of their potential risks (Tait, 1995) or individual deficits (Kelly, 2001).

Apart from homogenizing young people for the purpose of controlling and regulating them, the practice of categorizing young people as abnormal and problematic has also attracted the attention of numerous social scientific researches that seek to detect and explain the underlying causes of and solutions to the problem behavior of young people. Although it may not be possible to take such a large number of researches into full consideration, most of them, as the outgrowth of the modernist worldview, are done within broadly defined positivistic ways of thinking, with young people treated as problematic (Chuk, 1998; Shiu, 2001, 2003a, 2003b). Few of them have investigated the seemingly taken-for-granted widespread problematic constructions of young people and asked how and in what ways these problematic constructions get framed while others are excluded, or who defines young people as problematic and the politics of constitutions in webs of various social and political forces in society. It cannot be denied that in recent years an increasing number of studies on youth delinquency have been done using qualitative research methods in interpretive or social constructionist ways of thinking (Chuk, 1998; Har, 2002; Lau, 2002; Ng, 2000; Shiu, 2003b). Although it is already a good start to include the voices and the life experience of young people in local research on youth delinquency, most of the studies still tend to be interpretive in meaning making and seldom question the taken-for-granted problematic constructions of young people. Therefore, instead of taking the problematic representation of young people as part of the pre-given reality, and instead of looking at policy initiatives and social work practices as simply responding to the reality (Weiss, 1977), this study was specifically designed and conducted with Foucault's discourse analytic approach in the context of outreach social work service in Hong Kong, aimed at filling the research gap to reveal the taken-for-granted problematic discourses on 'youth-at-disadvantage' and the complex relations of power at work in constituting the practice orientations of outreach youth workers. It was hoped that the interrogation and excavation of this study would shed light on alternative understandings and practices with the 'youth-at-disadvantage' in the service.

2. Foucault's discourse analytic approach

In this study, Foucault's discourse analytic approach was used both as a framework of conceptualization and as a method of data analysis. The main critical force of Foucault's work was his permanent critique of modern forms of knowledge, rationality, social institutions, and subjectivity, which seem given and natural but in fact are contingent constructs of power, domination, and exclusion (Dickens & Fontana, 1994, p. 27). The modernist stance of knowledge, which puts faith in the presence of an objective reality and in the power of reason and science to arrive at the true nature of reality, is so pervasive in every area of contemporary life. However, Foucault problematized the modern assumptions of the presence of objective reality and language or of knowledge as neutral, only describing and corresponding to the reality. Foucault argued that language or the discourses we use to understand, instead of directly corresponding to the reality, are constitutive of the reality and the objects of which they speak (Foucault, 1972). Of course, this is not to say that language or knowledge produces all experiences, such as delinquency, violence, or poverty, but that the ways in which these experiences can be understood are socially determined within the language or knowledge we construct to understand them.

More than mere words or giving names to experiences or objects that pre-exist the language, discourse shapes and directs what we see as the truth, how we understand the world, and hence how we act on such understanding. The object can be different, multiple, or

even contradictory, depending on the knowledge or discourses we construct to understand and talk about it. Foucault was most critical of the pretension and domination of modern scientific knowledge, particularly for the human sciences, which are championed and taken for granted to be neutral, rational, and objective, and usually use in discourses to explain and define human life. In his excavation, however, these kinds of knowledge indeed work closely with modern institutions in constituting human subjects as targets of social control and administration (Foucault, 1982, p.208). Therefore, instead of going along with the demands of reason by taking modern scientific knowledge for granted as truth and human subjects as a pre-existing given with essential qualities that can be objectively discovered, Foucault took the forms of archaeological and genealogical investigation, unmasking the ways in which human subjects are made subjects through the practices of modern power/knowledge.

2.1. Disciplinary mode of control

In his archaeological form of excavation into the discursive formation of madness, medicine, discipline, and punishment, Foucault (1977, 1978) charted that, since the fledging of human sciences in the eighteenth century, individual subjects are not to be repressed by brutal or coercive power, but become objects of professional and scientific scrutiny in modern institutions, such as schools, hospitals, asylums, or prisons, and eventually at all levels of social life. Foucault (1977) termed this new mode of modern power as 'disciplinary power', a power not about sovereignty and the overt coercion of people, but one that concerns itself instead with the management, shaping, and regulation of people's conduct. According to Foucault (1977), these subtle forms of disciplinary control are possible in modern society because the human sciences form part of the regimes of truth or norms about the individuals. Foucault argued that human sciences, although purporting to offer universal scientific truths about human nature, serve a disciplinary and regulatory function to order and define individuals as the healthy and the sick, the sane and the insane, the normal and the pathological. It is the knowledge and norms generated by the human sciences that turn people into objects of scrutiny and enable the experts or professionals, based on these sciences, to exercise different practices, which Foucault termed as "technologies of domination" that regulate the everyday experience of individuals.

Once the standards of normalcy and deviancy are established, individuals who are considered unfit according to the prescribed norms and standards of behavior are institutionalized or made to undergo different practices until they conform. As a result, the individuality of human beings, particularly of those marginalized groups, such as homosexuals, the insane, or criminals, is stripped in the process. Although the final outcome is a series of actions that are normalizing and disciplinary in nature, governing individual behavior, the practices are not felt to be oppressive or repressive in supporting the regimes of truth developed by human sciences. At this point, Foucault's stance is clear. Even though those scientific and professional disciplines claim objectivity and see themselves as part of the moral and social progress of modern society, Foucault contends that in reality power/knowledge work together in the discipline and punishment of the populations.

2.2. Confessional mode of control

Later in his genealogy of the modern control of sexuality, Foucault (1978, 1980) further uncovers that modern control over individual subjects, being more than an externally operated disciplinary power, is also exercised internally by a governmental power, which extends from the religious domain to social life as a whole. This power works through the consciousness of individuals by recruiting their complicity to examine and police their thoughts and behaviors

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