

Boundary Management Practices In Youth Work Relationships Between Young People And Practitioners On Online Social Network Sites

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Abstract: A report published by the National Youth Agency (NYA) in England during 2008 found that the majority of social network site on-line interaction between youth work practitioners and young people took place 'under the radar'. 'Under the radar' or 'unsanctioned', in this context was defined as outside the relevant guidance and without the line manager's agreement. My research set out to find why and how this is taking place, and the meaning attached to this practice to the different role players. As part of my qualitative research I interviewed twenty-one youth work practitioners (paid and voluntary) from a variety of backgrounds and fourteen young people over the age of 16, who are accessing universal youth work. Youth work practitioners and young people differ in their reasons for wanting to 'friend' each other on social media and what this signifies; is it a professional or personal relationship or a hybrid of the two? Boundaries and expectations of the 'audience' become blurred and perforated. Combined with the ever-changing nature of the technology itself, maintaining or developing professional relationships through social network sites becomes challenging. This article explores the boundary management techniques used by young people and practitioners in online social network sites to maintain developed relationships. The study uncovered limited dissemination of existing policies which resulted in diverse practice. Most unsanctioned connections took place with the best intentions and in order to support rather than with malicious intent.

Keywords: boundaries, boundary management, England, practitioners, social network sites, young people, youth work

I. INTRODUCTION

By December 2008, 80% of young people over the age of 15 in the United Kingdom were users of social network sites (Peter et al, 2009). Davies and Cranston's (2008) study for the National Youth Agency (NYA) in England found that youth work has a role to play in young people's use of social network sites and that practitioners want to support young people in these spaces. The study identified that a great majority of these interactions were taking place 'under the radar'. The meaning of 'under the radar' in this context was, outside the agreed guidance and without the line manager's consent. The interactions and connections were therefore mostly unsanctioned and Melvin (2013) had similar findings in her later study.

My research focused on these unsanctioned connections and interactions. I explored why and how this was happening when youth workers had opportunities to interact with young people through social network sites in a sanctioned and regulated manner through, for example, additional social media platforms and organisation approved and monitored work profiles and pages.

The reason why participants considered connecting with each other related directly to the type of relationship was that they felt they developed with each other. Relationship was a precursor and indicator of the type of boundaries that young people and practitioners employed in deciding to connect or not. However, more subtle boundaries were also identified in how they managed these connections as part of their broader networked publics. This article focuses on the different variations of boundaries uncovered during this research study.

At the time of research, policy and guidance existed setting out where and how practitioners could connect with young people on social network sites. This included consultation, an extensive checklist and the final clearance to be granted by the most senior manager. However a significant finding of the study was that even though policy and guidance was available this was not effectively disseminated and only one participant knew that it existed and had an idea what it entailed. This led to an ideal environment for differential practice to develop across the rather large geographical research field. Practice, opinions and thoughts were less differentiated within individual youth work settings where practitioners had the same managers and more differentiated between different settings with different managers.

II. RESEARCH DESIGN

As very little is known about the unsanctioned connections between young people and youth workers I used a grounded theory approach to allow the data to lead my study rather than any preconceived ideas I held myself. My preconceived ideas were very limited and narrow as a result of my own background in youth work. During my training the adage 'you can be friendly but

never their friend' was a mantra of sorts oft repeated by managers and youth work trainers alike. For this reason I had very clear ideas about the importance of developing a professional relationship with young people and to maintain personal and professional boundaries.

Due to the unsanctioned nature of the interaction and because I wanted to gather the views and experiences of young people the research was considered sensitive in nature. Ethical clearance was obtained through the University of Bedfordshire and also from the relevant Local Authority. I interviewed all practitioners and young people willing to be interviewed as I was interested in all perspectives. Since Davies and Cranston's (2008) study the landscape of youth work has altered significantly in England due to changed government priority areas and resultant funding cuts. This led to a decrease in youth work provision open for all young people to access and a more exclusive focus on specialised provision for those considered to be the most vulnerable young people. This made accessing young people over the age of 16 attending youth work provision difficult. Participants did not have to be involved in unsanctioned connections in order to be involved in the research. Informed consent was gained from all participants.

As part of a qualitative methodology I used semi-structured interviews and managed to interview fourteen young people over the age of 16 and twenty-one youth work practitioners. All participant and place names have been changed to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. In this article practitioners refer to youth work practitioners.

Through thematic analysis three interlinked key themes were identified. The starting point for all three the key themes were relationship. The nature of the

relationship impacted on the online spaces where practitioners and young people wanted to connect, the necessity of trust and how connections impact on trust as well as the acknowledgement and use of boundaries. This article focuses on the strategies for boundary management that the participants used.

Roberts (2009) suggests that boundaries are dividing lines that demarcate what is acceptable and what is unacceptable within a professional youth work relationship.

As a profession, youth work expects practitioners to maintain professional ethics and standards (NYA, 1999). Part of this is to maintain personal and professional boundaries at all times. With the advent of social network sites maintaining these are becoming increasingly complex due to the networked nature of the technology.

According to Cooper (2012, p. 11):

"professional boundaries are a set of guidelines, expectations and rules which set the ethical and technical standards in the social care environment. They set limits for safe, acceptable and effective behaviour by workers."

However, if practitioners were crossing these boundaries through the use of social network sites could practice still be seen as acceptable, safe and effective? The study found that overwhelmingly participants were engaging in this practice perceiving that it was within their perception of personal and professional boundaries.

How boundaries were perceived and experienced by participants is explored within the next section.

III. FINDINGS

Young people and practitioners perceived the relationships that they developed with each other in

different ways. How they perceived the nature of their relationships with each other had a direct impact on their boundaries with each other online. Findings suggested that boundaries in relation to unsanctioned connections can be divided into four categories:

- Interact
- Interact with social norms
- Duplicity
- Avoidance

The findings section of this article addresses each of these in turn from young peoples' perspectives and then from practitioners' perspectives. How ethical these categories of connections are, is explored in the discussion section of the paper.

A. Interact

None of the young people interviewed wanted to connect with all their youth work practitioners on a social network site. Rather, young people only wanted to interact online with practitioners that they felt they had developed a relationship with that they described as 'like a friendship'.

'If I got to know the youth worker like quite well and I would, because in a way they are, they're like a friend. But, if I didn't really know them that well then it would be a bit weird. I don't think I'd add them' (Andy, young person interview).

For young people the type of relationship that they perceived they developed with a practitioner was key. When young people felt they developed a relationship akin to a friendship with a practitioner they tended to view them as they would any other friend. In these cases very few or no boundaries were constructed as young people felt they could treat the particular practitioner as they would any other friend on a social network site.

Young people who connected with practitioners because they viewed them as 'like a friend' therefore engaged in audience boundary management (Wilson, Gosling and Graham, 2012). People who use this approach manage who they add as friend rather than manage their content. Young people identified a number of trustworthy characteristics common to practitioners they wanted to connect to: this included someone who was supportive, listened to them and who was willing to help.

'Cos we can talk to them. You can get support' (Joyce, young person interview).

'Yeah, talk to you about and might see what's going on and sort it out, which would help' (Aiden, young person interview).

The minority of practitioners interviewed connected with young people through their personal profiles. Some of those that did, added all the young people that they practiced with and viewed themselves as a role model for young people. These practitioners experienced their youth work role as 'more than just a job' and aspired to be available to young people whenever they needed access to advice or support. This practice is more akin to hybrid boundary management as practitioners added all young people to their profiles. They also shared more youth work specific advice and support but few of them altered other content they shared or that was shared about them. Those that viewed themselves as role models in all aspects of their lives had no concerns about what their other friends might share that young people might see. Those that were not so sure about the example their own behaviour set acknowledged that what others shared about them might be a concern. However, until the interviews they did not realise the implications of the networked publics nature of social network sites.

This type of boundary management was more prevalent with practitioners that lived and worked in the same geographical location but also had a history within this particular area. History within the area increased the incidence of multiple relationships and bounded solidarity. Multiple relationships were prevalent where people worked and lived in the same areas, as they can be neighbours, family friends, friends of friends, family members, or parents of young people. A practitioner could have engaged with a young person in a professional capacity but then also had involvement with them in a further sphere. A young person could therefore have attended a youth club but could also have been the friend of the same practitioner's child. Bounded solidarity referred to the practice of community members supporting each other and through this also attempted to ensure that the expected social norms and behaviours were adhered to (Portes, 1998). This can also be perceived as a form of social control. Bounded solidarity was increased when living and working in the same area, as practitioners felt they had a vested interest in the young people in the area that superseded their youth work role.

B. Interact with social norms

The majority of young people who wanted to connect with practitioners thought about some rules of engagement to manage the social network site relationship. They desired to connect with practitioners to access advice and support when desired rather than waiting for the next youth work session. The findings suggested that these young people did not view friended practitioners as 'like a friend' but rather as a source of unrestricted support and advice. These young people did not want practitioners to interact with them in a manner that would have identified them to others

as a youth worker. They preferred practitioners to contact them through the private message function if they had any concerns about online or off-line behaviour. Likewise, the young people rather wanted to contact the practitioners through the practitioners' personal messaging function. These findings suggested a relationship of convenience on a 'need to access' basis.

Some practitioners considered social norms when contemplating connecting with young people. They viewed themselves as role models and took greater care when self-disclosing on their profiles. According to Zur (2008) people either self-enhance or self-verify online. Social network sites encourages self-verification as users are not the only person posting about their lives due to the networked publics nature of the medium. Social network sites were unique in their friending affordances that allows profile holders and friends to view others' profiles (depending on security settings) but also to create content and share about others, by, for example, including their name in a post or picture that they are in. This 'tagging' allows the friends of the tagged person to view the other person's content. Therefore, those who were friended become co-constructors of each others' profiles. Practitioners who added young people to their personal profiles therefore raised as concern the implications of their networked publics and they managed very carefully what others posted about them, but also what they shared about themselves. When practitioners had young people on their personal profiles they tended to self-enhance and focus on positive aspects about themselves and their lives to maintain the positive role model status. Most practitioners that employed this method of boundary management found it very difficult and in a number of cases young people and other practitioners who they friended expressed concern about the appropriateness

of some of the content on their profiles. These social norms were therefore open to interpretation and what some felt was acceptable to share was considered unacceptable by others.

A further method used to avoid what could be considered inappropriate information being shared by their networked publics was to create a perceived work profile. Initially, work profiles seemed to fall outside the remit of the research study. Practitioners considered creating a work profile for themselves by including the words 'youth worker' in their profile name, for example, 'Liesl youth worker'. By only adding young people and perhaps (in some cases) a practitioner or two they considered they created an allowed or sanctioned profile. However, my research revealed that what practitioners considered to be sanctioned work profiles were in fact still unsanctioned, even though they had the line managers' agreement. The unsanctioned status remained because relevant policy and guidance was still not followed due to lack of understanding of the technology and the policy.

These 'work profiles' enabled practitioners to connect with young people without young people having access to the practitioner's networked public. Practitioners were still able to view everything about the young people's personal lives. Practitioners that considered connecting this way did not view this as a concern but as a positive. They felt they managed their personal and professional boundaries *and* they had access to more information about young people they worked with.

Practitioners found these two categories of boundary management invaluable as they were able to engage with concerns or issues disclosed in these spaces. They addressed these, through the personal messaging function or they incorporated disclosed

topics into their youth work practice without acknowledging who it related to or even that they viewed it .

C. Duplicity

Findings suggested some practitioners created additional personal profiles friending only young people. Young people thought they were connecting to the practitioner's personal profile and that the practitioner viewed their relationship as 'more than' a work relationship. Similar to the work profile in the previous category practitioners maintained their access to young people's information that were not shared in a club setting. However, the difference here was the unintended deceit: practitioners were deceiving young people to gain access to information not readily available to them.

I could just say some of the youth workers, create a Facebook, make as if is their own personal one then add young people. And never actually use it, they don't put any of their own personal stuff on but use it to monitor what young people are doing (Youth work background practitioner 2).

A further boundary management tool used by some practitioners was, 'client searching'. When they wanted to find out more information concerning a young person or young people and their behaviour they would search for them on a social network site. Practitioners would then search through their personal profile looking for information.

Occasionally, if a situation has arisen between young people, we'll perhaps find them and log onto Facebook and just have a little look and see if we can access any of the Facebook sites, because they tend to share a lot on their Facebook sites. And I know that's also something

that social care does (Connexions background practitioner 1).

No young person used duplicity with practitioners. However, the study confirmed research from Boyd (2008) identifying duplicity with other authority figures within young people's lives, for example, parents. Young people under 16 years of age were more likely to create second profiles to add their parents to so that parents could not see everything about their children's personal lives. Further young people mentioned writing in code when they were younger. This was behaviour that they felt was necessary when they were younger and had less privacy and control over their own lives.

D. Avoidance

The great majority of practitioners used avoidance as a boundary management tool. By not connecting with young people online they avoided blurring their personal and professional boundaries. Findings suggested that these practitioners viewed their relationships with young people as a work relationship only. This practice is in line with youth work ethics and principles (NYA, 1999). To avoid damaging the relationship that young people perceived they developed with practitioners, practitioners will use the youth work ethics and principles as reason when ignoring an online friend request from a young person or in a face to face discussion within a youth work session.

And I've always just said, 'Oh, but I'm not allowed to do that, because you know I'm not allowed to uhm go past my role.' And that was fine. They just go like, 'oh yeah' (Connexions background practitioner 3).

A lack of awareness of the existence and need for boundaries for young people as clients of youth work

practitioners was evident within this research study. When referring to boundaries, practitioners only referred to their own and the need to maintain personal and professional boundaries. Practitioners were unaware or unwilling to acknowledge that young people also had boundaries that they might have wanted to adhere to.

A small minority of young people did not want to connect to any practitioners. They were very aware of the need for practitioners to maintain professional boundaries but also that practitioners had a duty to pass on information of concern. Therefore if practitioners were concerned that a young person was involved in any illegal activity or at risk of harm they had to pass the information on so that the situation could be dealt with. This position was held by young people who were involved in potentially risky behaviour.

It's basically fucked, simply. Because youth workers, it's their job. If they overhear something like it's against the law, they have to report it to the police, it's their job (John, young person interview).

Some young people who worked as youth volunteers practising with practitioners, who held clear personal and professional boundaries, also maintained this position. A cycle of practice was evident because young people that became young volunteers copied behaviours that were presented to them by youth workers when they were young people only.

IV. Discussion

These findings illustrated that the type of boundary management practitioners and young people utilized with each other on social network sites were directly related to the type of relationship that they perceived they developed.

Practitioners who perceived a 'more than' a work relationship with young people were more likely to connect with young people on social network sites. Practitioners who considered a professional relationship only were less likely to consider connecting with young people. All practitioners were aware of personal and professional boundaries but for some the professional were personal due to their need to be considered an always available role models. This was more the case with practitioners that lived and worked in the same area where they also had a personal history that led to multiple relationships and bounded solidarity.

From a practice and policy position this created difficulties as untangling the web of geographical social connections in a networked public space is impossible. This leads to differential approaches in boundary management not due to a lack of knowledge concerning the youth work ethics and principles but rather due to differential working practices.

Practitioners were unaware that for young people the relationship that developed was not a professional relationship but rather a very personal relationship. This necessitated a rethink of the term boundaries when considering young people's relationships with youth work practitioners. My research suggested that aspects that young people shared with practitioners in youth work settings were considered personal information because the youth work relationship was part of a young person's personal life rather than professional.

Young people, like others, were more likely to self-verify on social network sites as they tended to connect with those that they were already friends with off-line. Their networked publics were able to share with and about them, and therefore profile holders become co-

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constructors of each others' profiles. Self enhancement was less likely to take place as those friended were co-constructing content- sharing photos and comments about time spent together, mutual activities undertaken, etc. By tagging the other person in the comment or post this information was shared with the wider network of the tagged person. Therefore, young people tended to take their off-line relationships online and a more socially intimate picture of young people emerged online.

Thus, my research suggested that boundaries for young people be drawn in terms of personal and socially intimate boundaries. Personal boundaries referred to the information that young people were willing to share with practitioners within youth work settings. Socially intimate information referred to information that young people shared or that might have been shared by others within their networked publics. This was therefore information that practitioners would not have been aware of if they did not connect with young people through social network sites.

Young people were therefore happy to share both personal and socially intimate information with those practitioners that they perceived they had developed a relationship with; akin to a friendship. Practitioners that connected with young people mostly did not connect, not because they perceived the young people as friends, but because they viewed their role as more than 'just a job'. In some instances they gained access to socially intimate information through deception in order to be able to use this information within their sessions. Practitioners mostly did not feel that this deception was uncalled for. Rather they perceived it as part of their attempts to protect young people and to gain useful information that could have enhanced their

face to face youth work practice. Lack of awareness of young peoples' boundaries and also how young people maintained their privacy on social network sites led them to assume that some boundary management behaviours, for example duplicity, interact and interact with social norms were to the young people's benefit.

The majority of practitioners avoided unsanctioned connections in order to maintain their personal and professional boundaries. They wanted to self-verify on social network sites without having to be concerned that young people were able to view their personal lives. The majority of practitioners were happy for organisations and youth work settings to create social network site groups as long as they did not have to take responsibility for the management of these as they already felt over-worked.

Practitioners were more comfortable with work profiles as young people would have been unable to view practitioners' personal lives. They perceived this as a means to manage their own boundaries, whilst still having access to information about young people. However, at the time of interviews work profiles were not created within the existing policy and guidance perimeters and therefore left both young people and practitioners open to potential boundary crossings and boundary violations. Smith and Fitzpatrick (1995) and Jackson (2004) distinguished between boundary violations and boundary crossings. A boundary crossing might be considered necessary by a practitioner in order to get a young person to open up, and this practice may or may not benefit the young person. A boundary violation is a departure from the standard or commonly accepted practice that places either the young person or the practice at serious risk (Smith and Fitzpatrick, 1995).

Young people's connections with practitioners were because they considered they have developed a 'like a friendship' type relationship with the particular practitioner. Young people also connected with practitioners to have access to advice and support whenever they needed it. Young people allowed these practitioners to cross their personal and socially intimate boundaries.

V. IMPLICATIONS OF SOCIAL NETWORK SITE BOUNDARY MANAGEMENT OF PRACTITIONERS AND YOUNG PEOPLE

This research provided insight into how young people and practitioners perceived their relationships with each other and the links with boundary considerations. The nature of the relationship determined where boundaries were drawn. Youth work as a profession has as a mantra to develop professional relationships with young people. Few youth workers in England will not know the saying 'you must be friendly but never their friend'. However, we need to consider why young people viewed practitioners as their friends and if this truly was a hindrance within modern youth work?

This research highlighted the need for practitioners to be consistent in their approach to young people on social network sites. Geographically dispersed practitioners were following a range of ways to manage their boundaries. The differentiation in boundary management techniques on social network sites

suggested that differences in offline boundary management could also be prevalent.

The research also highlighted the need to consider the current boundaries within the field of youth work to reflect the nature and responsibilities of the available positions and to acknowledge the multiple relationships and the ever increasing number of voluntary rather than paid practitioners.

VI. CONCLUSION

Due to the unsanctioned nature of these connections very little was known about these connections before this research study.

At a turbulent time for the youth work profession this research begs the question if professional youth work provision in traditional youth work settings are still possible? Does the professional ethics and principles of youth work support practitioners and volunteers that live and work in the same geographical spaces? Social network sites and the resultant networked publics create situations where just being on a site creates personal and professional boundary concerns. The boundary management techniques discussed in this article shares the approaches that practitioners and young people took to manage this reality of youth work practice in these networked spaces.

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