Youth workers' use of Facebook for mediated pastoralism with juvenile delinquents and youths-at-risk

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ABSTRACT

Youth work seeks to rehabilitate juvenile delinquents for re-entry into mainstream society and to prevent youths-at-risk from falling into delinquency, thus necessitating that youth workers assiduously monitor their clients. With the avid use of social media by youths, youth workers must also adopt these communication platforms to reach out to their young clients. Drawing from interviews with youth workers, this study analyses how they use Facebook to communicate with their clients and monitor their activities. Surveillance forms a key thrust of youth workers' professional use of Facebook, enhancing their ability to oversee these youths' personal development for the purposes of mentoring and rehabilitation. Contrary to dystopian, power-centric conceptions of surveillance, the study finds that the youth workers' surveillance of their clients is undergirded by care and beneficence, better understood using Foucault's concept of pastoralism. Through mediated pastoralism via Facebook, these youth workers can derive a more extensive picture of their clients, including their emotional state and peer interactions. With this knowledge, the youth workers can then calibrate their interventions more strategically and only step in when their clients engage in behaviour that poses significant risks or danger. In so doing, the youth workers foster sustainable social capital with their clients that they can still leverage over time. Facebook communications also help the youth workers to bridge communication gaps with these youths. The study also examines how the youths resist the youth workers' oversight in various ways.

1. Introduction

Social workers who counsel juvenile delinquents and youths-at-risk, widely referred to as youth workers, are at the forefront of society's engagement with this marginalised population. As Walker (2003) opined, "Youth workers are essential players in community efforts to promote positive youth development" (p. 373). They bear the responsibility of rehabilitating juvenile delinquents and youths-at-risk to prevent them from becoming further disenfranchised, in a broader effort for society to be more inclusive and to engender greater social stability. This is a significant issue because global trends suggest that the swelling numbers of marginalised and disaffected youths can contribute to social instability (Renn, Jovanovic, & Schröter, 2011; Urdal & Hoelscher, 2009).

As youths are ardent technology adopters, youth workers too must increasingly utilise new communication technologies to engage with their young charges through "digital youth work" (Székely & Nagy, 2011). In particular, with young people's growing use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter, youth workers also have to adapt to this evolving communication landscape by interacting with their clients on these new platforms. Yet research on how digital media are used in

youth mentoring programmes and their impact on youth-mentor relationships has been scant (Schwartz et al., 2014). Ethical standards and codes of conduct governing how social workers should utilise online communication channels are already in existence, but these pertain to formal online counselling programmes (Mallen, Vogel, & Rochlen, 2005). Indeed, policies regarding how other social service organisations and government entities should utilise social media platforms in their professional communication have yet to adequately take into account their unique, interactive nature (Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, 2012). The present study examines how youth workers are incorporating Facebook into their communication outreach with juvenile delinquents and youths-at-risk, the opportunities and challenges they encounter in the process and the strategies that they have developed to manage this novel communication platform. It finds that the approach they adopt is primarily grounded in mediated pastoralism, where Facebook serves as an anchor in their surveillant assemblage for keeping watch over their clients. The resistance that they encounter from their clients is also interrogated. This article is based on interviews with youth workers who rehabilitate youths-at-risk and aid in the reintegration of juvenile offenders into society after they have completed residential rehabilitation. The interviews are part of a larger 20-month long study,

conducted between December 2011 and June 2012, on the media use of juvenile delinquents and youths-at-risk in Singapore, a city-state where Internet, mobile phone and social media adoption is widespread. In 2011, 65.4% of Singapore's population used Facebook, 11.6% of which were in the age range of 14–17 (Incitez, 2011). With regard to Singapore's youth crime statistics, 4174 youths aged 7–19 were arrested for offences such as shop theft, rioting, and gang activities, constituting less than 1% of the total population of 642,340 youths aged 7–19 in 2010 (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2010; The National Committee on Youth Guidance and Rehabilitation, 2015).

The next section outlines the nature of the relationship between social workers and their clients, and the principles underpinning social work in general, and youth work in particular. Thereafter, the article explains why surveillance forms a key thrust of youth work and how surveillance of youths is typically practised, as well as the types of surveillance that have emerged with the intensified use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). A description of the research methodology follows. The findings are then discussed, centring on how the youth workers use Facebook to bridge communication gaps, to exercise mediated pastoralism and the resistance that they encounter from the youths.

2. The social worker-client relationship

The management of juvenile delinquents and youths-at-risk primarily involves rehabilitation (Bazemore & Walgrave, 1999) and prevention (Yoshikawa, 1994). These youths are assigned to the care of youth workers whose task is to offer counsel by providing advice and intervention that strives to complement and supplement the adult influences already present in the youths' lives, such as those of relatives or teachers. Banks (2010) highlights the particular nature of youth work, noting that it "involves working with participants who have fewer rights than adults, are often vulnerable, lack power and may be suggestible – hence giving scope for their exploitation, harm or manipulation" (p.3). While youth work focuses on a distinct group with unique developmental issues, its practice is governed by the tenets underpinning social work in general.

That youths' rights are comparatively limited implies that youth workers need to protect and respect their clients' autonomy, while also exercising a reasonable degree of adult supervision. After all, social work is fundamentally based on the principles of care and control (Garland, 1985). In reaching out to marginalised individuals, social work has long been grounded in the "creation of the subject, [referring] to the central philosophical approach which presented a picture of the subject's essential humanity and potential for sociability where everyone else was seeing cold, hard, objective fact" (Parton, 2008, p. 256). In this way, social workers are also tasked with interpreting the objective characteristics of the subject, so as to incorporate them into the subject's personal situation, while also integrating the subject into the larger societal context (Philip, 1979). These activities prepare social workers for their ultimate task of speaking for the subject, where they advocate for "the potential, the possibilities and the essential nature of the client" (Parton, 2008, p. 257). Social work thus seeks to:

> "produce a picture of the individual which was at once both subjective and social and operated to integrate subjects into the wider society, it also acted as a form of surveillance for those in the community who were not sufficiently dangerous to require more rigorous attention from other agencies, including closed institutions such as prisons or hospitals. (Parton, 2008, p. 257)"

Social workers therefore constitute the human face of the state, simultaneously reaching out to marginalised individuals and drawing them in by looking out for them, and seeking to understand their personal situation within their familial and social context. The knowledge that social workers produce from these efforts is then captured in the form of written reports, forms and surveys that are used to better inform

the state's provision of welfare services. In this regard, information and communication technologies (ICTs) that facilitate and expedite such knowledge creation have assumed a growing role as social workers fulfil their professional responsibilities. Although Parton (2008, 2009) acknowledges that there are benefits to such knowledge being accumulated, shared and quantified, he asserts that social work has become more concerned with the informational rather than social and relational aspects of their clients, thus privileging data over narrative, and rapid action over considered reflection. Related to this development is a diminished interest in understanding *why* clients behave as they do, and a growing preoccupation with knowing merely *what* they do (Howe, 1996). Parton (2009) therefore decries the intensified deployment of management information systems (for case assessment and client monitoring) that increases the accountability and surveillance of social workers and their clients, and devalues the role of sustained engagement and discourse. Despite these reservations about the heightened use of ICTs in social work, the strategic use of computer-mediated communication in counselling has been welcomed, particularly if used to facilitate interactive and anonymous discussions of sensitive issues (Caspar & Berger, 2005). Computer-mediated communication also offers potential value for child welfare social work because of young people's enthusiasm for the Internet (Parton, 2009). Indeed, previous research on social workers has uncovered a growing use among such professionals to communicate with their young charges via social media and instant communication platforms. Humphry (2014) found that smartphones and Internet-based communication platforms such as Skype, Facebook Messenger and Live Chat were widely used by homeless young people, adults and families in Australia including to contact homelessness support. Another study found that homeless youths in the US used social media pervasively, including to communicate with social workers (Barman-Adhikari et al., 2016). Hence, in light of the goals of social work and the avid use of Facebook by Singaporean youths, the present study seeks to address the following questions:

RQ1. How do youth workers communicate with their clients via Facebook?

RQ2. What kinds of knowledge can youth workers obtain about their clients through their use of Facebook?

3. Surveillance and youths

As mentioned earlier, because social workers are entrusted with developing their knowledge and understanding of clients for more efficacious customisation of care, the surveillance of clients thus forms a cornerstone of social work. Youth work in particular, by virtue of its proactive thrust to prevent youths-at-risk from falling into delinquency, and its rehabilitative mission to reform juvenile offenders for re-entry into mainstream society, necessitates that youth workers assiduously monitor their clients. In other words, youth workers' surveillance of their clients can be interpreted as the literal meaning of surveillance, that is to 'watch over' (Lyon, 2007, p. 449).

The nature and practice of the surveillance of youths is dependent on the underlying motivations of the authority in question. Consider the surveillance of high school students in the United States. Davis (2003) observes that African American and Latino boys in American inner-city schools are subjected to surveillance that is modelled after the prison labour system, thereby socialising them into expectations of future incarceration. In such a context, surveillance serves to discriminate on the basis of race, gender and class (Hirschfield, 2009; Lewis, 2006) and "students are not regulated but policed to be expelled" (Lewis, 2006, p. 274). The "surveillant assemblage" that is then deployed, typically comprises on-campus police, metal detectors and cameras to record suspected violations that may be used to justify police raids (Hirschfield, 2009). In contrast, surveillance in White, middle-class