ABSTRACT

Given youth work is frequently entered into with the intention of making a difference in young people’s lives, this article has been undertaken with the intention of making a difference differently. Drawing on actor-network theory, and the concept of hinterlands, influences shaping the practice of text counselling at a youth oriented helpline are discussed. This is however a contested space. There is no evidence base for such practice; but for new practices there never is. How then does novel practice come into being and become accepted? And how does this occur for people whose ways of engaging involves being neither seen nor heard? In presenting stories of practice as it is shaped there is opportunity to consider whose stories are heard and perhaps whose should be. In uncovering relations that would hold this particular practice more and less stable, scope is also provided for considering how making a difference might also be done differently.

Keywords: Actor-Network Theory, Change, Crisis Helpline, Hinterland, Performative, Text Counselling, Youth Work

INTRODUCTION

Realities get made for better, or for worse, in practice. That some people’s realities might be made better or worse through the provision of a helpline service draws attention to the practices provided. Taking Law’s stance that practices always demand effort (Law, 2009) and therefore that such effort might be channeled otherwise, I argue for making a difference differently in the lives of young people.

Youthline New Zealand (hereafter referred to as Youthline), provides a 24/7 crisis helpline for young people, and has done so since 1976. With recent changes in mobile telephony their helpline hardly rings anymore; young people still have problems, and Youthline continues to provide help through this helpline, however, to a large extent, this now occurs silently. Mobile telephony provides us with more options than making a phone call, and as with any technology, those who would make use of a technology as well as the work that would be undertaken, are simultaneously being reconfigured. That work predicated on talking therapies would shift to a near silent medium, and one that places extreme limits of brevity on each interaction, was not an anticipated outcome in the provision of a

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text messaging service. The expectation that was described in the launch of this service by Youthline, was that this service would be a portal to the telephone helpline or to the face to face counselling services Youthline offers (Simpson Grierson, 2004).

There was no planned roll out of this innovative practice such as diffusion of innovation studies might suggest (see for example Rogers, 2003). Nor was it the result of reflective practitioners actively seeking a solution to named and framed problems (see for example Argyris, 1997; Argyris, 2004; Schön, 1990; Schön & Rein, 1994). And while a community of young people could be described as having influence on the changes that occurred and which continue to occur, this was not the outcome of a group of people coming together to effect change; the young people making use of this helpline never met to share ideas on the shape of the service. For these reasons it would also be wrong to name this as a user-initiated consumer innovation (see for example van Oost, Verhaegh, & Oudshoorn, 2009). The use of text messaging was initiated by Youthline, albeit, with an expectation that texting might provide a means for young people to contact the service when they might not otherwise. Texting for young people, at least in New Zealand and at least in these times, is very much the commonest way of reaching out when at a distance (Office of Film and Literature Classification and UMR Research, 2010). Youthline’s provision of a text service at least in the form of texting being a portal to other services, was a considered response to the ways in which young people were relating. To attribute such changes to a disruptive technology (see for example Bower & Christensen, 1995) would, therefore, also be wrong. While this change has occurred for Youthline, the technology has not resulted in texting being widespread in similar services, not even by other helpline services that this organization helps to staff. Attempts to explain this in terms of contextual determinants (see for example Schatzki, 2002), are similarly flawed. With the context of same staff and same building, and even same target population, the unique phenomenon of a silent helpline is accordingly worthy of further exploration.

However, more than curiosity is at stake here; the practice of providing a texting service is one for which there is no evidence base for practice (EBP). How then does an organization justify new practice? How might it be known as to whether new practice is “doing good” or at least that it does no harm? And if a practice is to make a positive difference for people, what might be needed to support such difference making? While there is no evidence base for this particular practice it is also worth noting that for new practice there never is. This provides a conundrum: how can practices evolve when tied to measures developed in a past? In wanting to be responsive to current demands how is this space of past and present to be traversed? The current article explores these concerns through use of the metaphorical construct of hinterlands.

The metaphor of “hinterlands that circulate” draws on the work of John Law (2004, 2009). Law (2009) suggests the work of practice is in negotiating such territories even to arraying such spaces that others might also traverse them. Accepting this metaphor, I tell of hinterlands experienced by young people in New Zealand in the hope that such spaces, and associated practices as develop, might be better understood. In addition, through exploring the hinterlands that have shaped text counselling practices, as developed within Youthline, there is also scope to consider how making a difference in youth work might also be done differently.

Where empirical data is referred to in this article, this was drawn from a larger study into change processes (Haxell, 2013) undertaken as part of a Doctoral study at Deakin University in Australia.Permission was obtained through the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee and because the study was situated in New Zealand, permission was also obtained through the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee. The study involved interviews with people who had been involved in text counselling whether providing or receiving this service. To maintain the privacy of those who consented to be interviewed, personally
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