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Title: Reconsidering adolescent subjectivity; a 'practice-near' approach to the study of adolescents, including those with severe learning disabilities

Abstract:

This article aims to explore new approaches to working with young people that are relevant to changed techno-social contexts. Firstly an emerging theory of adolescent development is elaborated, based on the notion of subjectivation, which takes into account new contexts and thinking about the development and experiences of young people and which is oriented towards inclusive practice. Secondly, appropriate practice-near methods for exploring and empirically assessing the applicability of this approach are discussed and applied through two examples; the first, more briefly discussed is an example from social work practice with young people in a mental health setting, while the second example, based on an observational study, focuses on the relational and emotional aspects of development of severely learning disabled young adolescents. The article concludes that the delineation of four distinct fields of subjectivation facilitates emotionally and relationally sensitive and relevant practice with young people.

Key Words:

Subjectivation, adolescence, severe learning disability, practice near research methods

Introduction

Social work theory and practice with young people has been challenged by the emergence of a gap between experience and established ways of theorising adolescent development. Driven by a radically changing techno-social context, changing notions and experiences of the meaning and practice of developing identity have been subject to intense debate flowing from the dichotomy between individualised and structural, or social, theses of identity. In its most radical, the individualisation thesis reconceptualises identity as characterised by a reflexive self-constructed 'continuous project of self' (Thomson et al 2004, Beck 1992, Giddens 1991). Identity in this view is more open, fluid, complex and questioning of traditions; it is more differentiated and inclusive of a number of identifications which can change over time. It is influenced by and makes use of the vast flow of information through, predominantly, the internet. There is a choice between keeping in touch with new information and becoming marginalised outside reflexive society; the threat is to 'get with it, or miss out' (Johannsson 2007, page 105).

On the other hand, the structural approach to identity stresses the increasing inequalities that restrict choices and opportunities, the epistemological fallacy of the individualisation thesis (Furlong and Cartmel 1997) and the limitations of individualised agency within these pervasive contexts (Bynner 2005). In this view, agency is limited by structures and leads to biographies grounded in different backgrounds of class, place, gender and ethnicity. Identity depends on and is conditioned by the biographical history of the individual – what has taken place before. It is wrought within a complex matrix, made up of social capital, 'the personal, financial, social and cultural resources to which the growing individual has

access, and by the social and institutional contexts through which the individual moves' (Bynner 2005, page 379).

There appears to be little doubt that the individualisation thesis has radically changed previous conceptions of identity. When applied to the process of identity formation in adolescence, previous monolithic and universalist conceptions have been replaced by those which incorporate greater diversity, flexibility and reflexivity. Attempts to increase the inclusivity of these recent conceptions of identity, to be more accurately reflecting realistic and socially embedded notions of agency and subjectivity require recognition of the potential breadth of the project. This includes young people's social, cultural, material, community, relational, emotional and cognitive worlds. Addressing the dichotomy between structure and agency raises challenging theoretical and methodological issues. Theoretical perspectives that cross the social – agency divide are increasingly drawn upon to provide an integrating perspective of what, it is increasingly clear, is a complex set of interactions between structure and agency (Sharland 2006, p.260).

Bourdieu's work holds importance here, exemplifying a theoretical approach which occupies a middle ground between structural and individualization approaches, through providing one of the most useable frameworks to study "the internalisation of externality and the externalisation of internality" (Bourdieu 1977 page72) whilst also accommodating the possibility of diversity. A central Bourdieusian concept, habitus, is inclusive of the impact of social and cultural capital within particular fields and practices, and of tacit knowledge. This makes connection with psychosocial approaches which include conceptualising unconscious intersubjectivity (Hollway and

Jefferson 2000). Thus there are emerging new perspectives; psychosocial approaches that aim to connect the micro-narratives of individuals with structures – and this is a methodological aspect to which we will return – and these have begun to demonstrate the limits of agency within specific contexts through convincing narratives of biographies of young people (e.g. Walkerdine et al 2001). The potential for introducing psychoanalytic perspectives to deepen understanding of agency within these contexts, provides one axis which holds promise for enriching this discussion to the benefit of social work theory and practice for working with young people.

The question for social work is how to develop this thinking to provide a practice-oriented theory and method that fits with the needs, issues and experiences of contemporary young people. Thus, the emerging and deepening articulation of the relationship between structure and agency requires grounding in practice in order to test its value. One of the key criteria for this should be the need to demonstrate inclusiveness of the diversity of young people's experiences, across gender, ethnicity, religion and disabilities; too often theories of adolescent development have privileged one group, at the expense of others (Noam 1999). The group most excluded in discussions of identity formation during the period of adolescence consists of those young people with severe learning disabilities(SLD)[1]. There is, firstly, a relative paucity of studies in the literature which elaborate particularly the emotional and relational aspects of adolescent development for these young people (Stalker and Collins 2010) and, secondly, there are both theoretical and empirical difficulties in

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[1] We will use this term throughout whilst recognising that 'intellectual disability' is more often used in some contexts and settings. We wish to convey that we are discussing young people who are adversely affected by the inability to receive and process information, and this leads to restrictions in functioning and learning.

applying ideas of emerging adolescent subjectivity in the context of their lived experiences (Walmsley 2001).

In this article, the aim is to elaborate an emerging theory of adolescent development which gets beyond the structure-agency divide, takes into account new contexts and thinking about the development and experiences of young people and is oriented towards inclusive practice. Secondly, the discussion identifies appropriate practice-near methodologies for assessing the applicability of this approach. Thirdly, the aim is to explore its inclusivity by applying the theory and method to practice examples in different settings. The first – more briefly discussed - is from social work practice with young people in a mental health setting; the second focuses on relational and emotional aspects of development of severely learning disabled young people.

Reconceptualising adolescent subjectivity

A key task is the articulation of a theory of adolescent subjectivity which is practice oriented and inclusive of embodied, social, emotional, relational and cultural aspects, relevant to the diversity of young people and their contexts. Such a theory of adolescent subjectivity will aim to describe the field – or fields – for processes and contexts through which young people 'become subjects'. Subjectification, or 'subjectivation' was initially used by Foucault (1982) to describe active process of self-discovery located in and mediated by cultural norms, from which the subject develops. The connection between this concept and adolescence has been surprisingly under developed, except within French psychoanalysis (Cahn 1998, Ladame 2008). However, subjectivation has promise for making links across embodied, relational, social and cultural domains of experience. A framework,

developed from clinical psychotherapeutic work identifies four fields - separation-individuation, oscillating states of mind in an emotional field, self-esteem and competency, and power relations –for the process of subjectivation (author's own 2008). These four fields will be described initially in schematic form as a precursor to applying the concept of subjectivation in ways that are relevant and applicable to practice.

Four fields of subjectivation

The field of separation-individuation posits a pathway towards greater autonomy and independence through increased separateness from parental figures; it takes the individual from a position of being a child in the family to an adult in the world (Waddell 1998). This is closely related to more traditional views of adolescent development (e.g. Blos 1962) though this field is 'decentred' from its previous hegemonic position. Additionally, emphasis is placed on the close relationship between the acquisition of an adult sexual body, the power - and powers - that come with this, and the development of a more adult embodied sense of self. Owning the adult body, psychologically adjusting to it, is a process accompanied by anxieties and tensions leading to either progressive or regressive developmental pathways, facing more towards maturity or back towards childhood.

The pathway of development is undertaken within an emotional and relational intersubjective field, characterized by shifting states of mind. This second field of adolescent subjectivation is characterized by two distinct configurations of relatedness. In the first of these, the adolescent struggles within himself to maintain knowledge of his own emotions and to bear them. Others support the adolescent

through containing anxieties and tolerating changes in mood and relatedness. In this mode, the adolescent can be reasonable, and negotiable. Experiences are symbolized and the adolescent tries to maintain responsibility for managing his (the masculine is used for brevity) own feelings of becoming more separate, more adult. Applying Kennedy's (2000) terminology, young people in these states of mind are 'subjects of' their experiences.

In contrast, again using Kennedy's phrase, being 'subject to' emotional experiences occurs when anxieties are oppressive and overwhelming. In this second field, others are invested with responsibilities for emotions and experiences are characterized as actions arising from someone towards him, rather than as emerging from within himself. There is a blurring of boundaries between self and others; the adolescent is in a more turbulent state and anxieties can take on more persecutory qualities. In this mode the adolescent may be less easy to negotiate with, more prone to acting than thinking. Through projective processes, others who form part of this emotional field become filled with feelings about the adolescent. Adults may alternatively get carried away by the emotionality, or face down the adolescent with a rival ideology; this is potentially a force field for misunderstanding, conflict and defensiveness (author's own 2009).

The psychoanalytic basis for these two distinct states of mind is found in Klein's (1957) discussion of two 'positions', depressive and paranoid-schizoid, which are described as developmental (the depressive is more mature and follows on from the paranoid schizoid) and also occupying a field. Bion (1963) noted the shift between the two positions as occurring throughout life. The precariousness and rate of change

and growth in adolescence ensures that these shifts are more volatile in this period of human development, and adolescents oscillate between the two, sometimes rapidly – causing consternation in others about the sudden change of 'character' in the adolescent - and, at other times more slowly. The shift from one mode of relating to another can be triggered by – perhaps – objectively small events or changes, indicating the precariousness of the emerging subject, but these may be felt by the adolescent and others involved with him as extremely powerful and forceful experiences.

The third field of adolescent subjectivation consists of interactions between experiences of self-esteem, resilience and a sense of competence and how these enable young people to negotiate their way through their emotional and relational experiences. These terms are interrelated; experiences of competence may encourage investments in particular areas of activity, and this encourages self-esteem (Thomson et al 2004). Young people's social transitions through adolescence are defined by self-reflective retrospective self-definition, characterized as eitherstagnant, damaged or progressive, repaired transitions (Bynner 2005).

Fear of failure and repetition of previous experiences can be expressions of the fragility of self-esteem. The essential vulnerability of adolescent development and the need for bolstering fragile self- esteem is apparent when faced with 'intolerable uncertainties' and thus to 'restore a fragile self –conception…serving as a defence against feelings of isolation and possibly of smallness and humiliation' (Waddell 2006 page 24). Fear of failure underpins lack of confidence and thwarted agency. At an unconscious level, in the field of being 'subject to', are trends for more destructive,

repetitive behaviour, resorted to by young people when under pressure to develop in stressful internal and external contexts. The trend towards repetitive and (self) destructive behaviour may become entrenched, or alternatively, can be turned away from. Subjectivation in this field consists therefore of an interactive psychosocial 'field' including external, social events and their impact, and the young person's interpretation of these as either self-esteeming, self- criticizing, or leading to self-destructive thoughts and intentions.

Fourthly, adolescents are involved in a field of power and vulnerability. The field of power relations impacts in interactions between young people and adults invested with authority, as 'knowing' something. The power-knowledge base of adults can be either complied with or contested, as when some power and/or knowledge is wrested away from the adult. These challenges occur within the field where states of mind oscillate and may be uncomfortable, or explosive, or both. Authority is challenged by adolescents who are newly empowered by the acquisition of increased physical and cognitive strength which make him physically and mentally capable of resistance or contestation. But the choice of using the power to contest, to wrest some authority or knowledge from an adult, is at the cost –temporarily initially – of a relinquishment of dependence on others; vulnerable young people may not feel able to take the risk of potential loss of dependency and being positioned more alone, or separate. Loss of childhood relatedness to parents and reworking or re-evaluating new positioning is a continuous process, repeatedly revisited during the long transition to adulthood.

This description of the four fields for applying subjectivation to development in adolescence, albeit schematically at this point, provides a basis for exploring the application of the concept in practice.

Young people in mental health settings

The first practice example aims to illustrate emotional and relational interactions in practice. It consists of a brief interaction between a young person and a social worker in a mental health setting. It describes a critical moment as Martin, 19, aims to wrest some power/knowledge from the adult/therapist. In his background, briefly, Martin's parents are divorced and his mother has mental health difficulties and alcohol misuse. He was subject to bullying at school and was expelled for drug misuse. At the time of the interaction illustrated here he was anxious about leaving home to go to university and also anxious about the ending of his therapy. The therapist is one of the authors (initials) and the first person is used to evoke the feelings of the interactions.

> Martin told me he had dreamt he had failed his exams. It was just like last year. He very rarely talked about dreams and was in fact very anxious when unconscious aspects of himself 'slipped' into his sessions. I tried to ask him for more details about the dream, but he did not want to talk about it and I felt that if I pursued the subject he would close up. He said that his mother had wished him luck with his exams but he knew she did not mean it because she really did not want him to go to University and leave home. He sounded aggrieved. I said that he had started the session feeling anxious and he seemed to feel he had a lot to handle at the moment, including different ways of looking at how to think about leaving home and therapy.

He did talk then about his dream, in which he spoke again about feeling he was in the same situation as last year, and that after a year's therapy, nothing was different. I said it was true that his dream referred to failing exams, and that he felt drawn to similarities with last year, but that it was also possible to think about some differences between then and now. He asked what I meant and I said that he seems for example much more aware of his feelings now, though this awareness puts an additional pressure and burden upon him. He was thoughtful for a moment and then said that he did feel he was different and that he is more aware of his failings. I paused, wondering whether to draw attention to the implicit idea that feelings are synonymous with failings. In fact I said that he did seem to be worried that in the future he would fail in his attempts to manage this burden, of bearing his own feelings himself, after his therapy ended.

There was a pause and he seemed tense. He said he was going to change the subject. He looked directly at me and said, challenging, he wanted to know what would happen in the future. Will he be able to still come to see me? He said he wanted to prepare himself. He said this quite assertively, and I felt some discomfort, and put on the spot.

Martin's attempts to struggle with his predicament include aspects of the four fields of subjectivation. In the field of separation-individuation, the main theme of separating from home, and therapy, and the associated feelings of fear of repeated failure are apparent. He is at a critical point in separating- individuating and oscillates between

wanting to leave and wanting to stay. His states of mind shift quite rapidly from being tentatively interested in his internal states as illustrated by his dream and more aggrieved feelings about others, and their responsibility for his predicament. His fear of failure speaks to his doubts about his competence and self-esteem and is voiced as a fear of repetition, of not progressing. The dilemma is to an extent addressed by Martin's demand to 'know'. The idea of 'changing the subject' appears to mean that Martin becomes the subject, demanding knowledge from the therapist so that he can 'know where he is', and has the effect of making the therapist feel some of his discomfort. It is a risk that Martin takes, in interaction with the therapist and in facing his own vulnerability. The four fields of subjectivation can thus be applied to this interaction to make sense of the intersubjective relatedness between Martin and his therapist.

Applying subjectivation to adolescents with severe learning disabilities

The second practice example is an observational study of young adolescents with severe learning disabilities. This is chosen in order to rise to the challenge of developing an inclusive model for working with young people. It also challenges some of the prevailing thinking about learning disability. There are clear divisions between social and personal perspectives on identity in relation to theorizing disability and the experiences of adolescents with severe learning disabilities. The social construction of disability is the predominant theoretical approach (Oliver 2009) which states it is not impairment itself, but society's discriminatory attitude towards impairment which creates disability. A rather concrete view of adolescent development is applied through a 'normalizing' (Wolfsenberger, described in Race 2003) template of human development in which young people 'transition' into a state

of adult independence all at once on their eighteenth birthday. This view has been critiqued recently by authors who question the presumption of full adult agency for people with learning disability, as this can lead to policy and practice downplaying the importance of parent/carers' input to decision making (Clegg et al 2010) as well as minimizing concern for 'care, security, and wellbeing' in favour of 'voice' (Redley and Weinberg, 2007, p783).

Personal perspectives on lived disabled experience have been proposed to counter the social model (for example, Morris 1992). In adult learning disability, a range of research methods also consider the individual view, for example: biography (Middleton and Hewitt, 2000); autobiography (Atkinson and Walmsley, 1999) and; advocacy-based (Beart, 2005) research. In children's research however, there is a lack of research on the experience of young people with severe learning disabilities (Stalker 1998, Stalker and Connors 2010), and the existing studies focus mostly on social aspects of disabled children's experience, as an undifferentiated group (Watson et al 2000). Emotion and relatedness has mostly been left to psychotherapist researchers in relation to learning disability (Simpson, 2005; Miller, 1998; Sinason 1992).

There are ethical/theoretical and practical difficulties faced by those who wish to research the perspectives of young people with severe learning disabilities, which help to account for its sparseness. Barton (1996) proposes that disability research should be 'emancipatory'; controlled by disabled people, for disabled people, but this is difficult to achieve where it can be hard to transfer the researcher's expertise to the person with intellectual impairment, and so the potential for involving learning disabled people in research design may be limited (Walmsley 2001). It is difficult

also to develop research techniques as, firstly, it may not be possible to gain consent from participants with severe intellectual impairment to taking part in research (Detheridge 2000). Secondly, Stalker and Connors (2003) describe difficulties in refining methods to uncover SLD young people's views. They conclude that it would be necessary to spend some considerable length of time with young people 'to become familiar with their ways of communicating and be able to distinguish, for example, what crying meant on one occasion from what it meant on another' (Stalker and Connors, 2003, p 33). They propose that 'an ethnographic study using participant observation over many months' (Stalker and Connors, 2003, p 33) might be one way of gaining this understanding.

Sinason (1992) provides ways to begin to think about emotionality and relatedness in learning disability research, which form a bridge with traditional sociological perspectives. Firstly, she comments that emotional intelligence may be 'left intact and rich' despite cognitive impairment (Sinason, 1992, p 6). This perspective suggests that it is valid to place emotionality (rather than 'rational' verbal communication) at the centre of research with young people with severe learning disabilities, though she does not specify how this can be put into practice. Secondly, she says that learning disability presents in shifting ways: 'a fluid state that people moved in and out of throughout the day' (Sinason 1992, p7). This view is accommodating towards subjectivation, which considers that adolescents oscillate between different states of mind, between being 'subject to' and 'subject of' their social and emotional experiences. As young people with severe learning disabilities are likely to be living in dependent relationships with parents and carers, subjectivation might therefore

provide a useful theoretical frame for research, requiring the development of methods
sensitive to emotionality and relatedness within the social field.

**An observational practice-near study of severely learning disabled young
adolescents**

The second example is taken from a study undertaken by one of us (author's own
2009) and involved observing four adolescents with severe learning disabilities and
their families for an hour per week, over a six month period. The model of
observation applied here was adapted from the model of infant observation developed
in the Tavistock Clinic (Rustin 2006). An observer role was negotiated in each case,
and varied greatly depending on what the family felt comfortable with. In some
families the observer was in the role of a guest in the family and in others she was
more interactive. The way in which the observer was accommodated, or made use of
by the families formed a valuable part of the data (Hunt 1989).

The focus on interactions between the participants and researcher, especially
emotionality in these relationships, is a key factor in emerging practice-near research
methods, developed in response to the need to bridge the perceived gap between
practice and research, and thus to bring social work research closer to the experiences
of service users, carers and professionals (Marsh and Fisher 2005). In recent
articulations (e.g. author's own 2009), practice-near research has three key
characteristics. Firstly, it uses methodologies that yield 'thick description' of the
social world to provide understanding of the experiences of service-users and
professionals and their interactions. Secondly, through allowing in the data collected
and its interpretation, the exploration of emotionality and relationships, it includes

reflexive understanding of the research participants' experiences. Thirdly, though it may seem to be paradoxical, the closer research is to practice, the more it is necessary to work with clear and explicit theorisations. (author's own 2009: 378). Practice-near research is closely connected to Geertz' (1974) writing on 'experience-near' and 'experience-distant' epistemologies; data are gathered as narratives often using observational methods in which the observer is located on a spectrum from participant to pure observer. Case studies are frequently used to present the research so that a sense of the wholeness of the research encounter is maintained. The case study does not stand as objective truth, but instead it represents a detailed, experience-near view as Geertz (1974, p 2) puts it: 'The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to'. This requires conveying emotionality, relatedness and 'atmosphere' through evoking all kinds of sensory perceptions. Presentation of practice-near research thus often requires detailed descriptive evidencing of the data to demonstrate the development of particular patterns in time and space.

This approach is illustrated through extracts from one case study of observations of a boy with severe learning disabilities in his family. The account will follow descriptively the development of one theme that was identified in a series of observations and the elusive and subtle shifts in the field are thus tracked in the field comprising the intersubjectivity between the young person, family members and the observer/researcher. One key difference between this and the first example, above, is that the emotional field is located in all the family members and their relatedness to the observer rather than solely in the individual young person. .

Illustrative example: Daniel

The focal theme of this example is how Daniel, 12, impacts on his parents and the observer, generating conflict in the adults by his behaviour and their responses to him. Daniel, a white British boy, has autistic spectrum disorder and severe learning difficulties. He lives at home with his mother, father and 3 brothers (Peter 13, Andrew and John 6). Daniel's parents have different views about whether he should behave in a more 'grown up' way. The tension that ensued appeared to be heavily laden with ambiguous but emotionally powerful issues: should expectations be placed on Daniel to conform to age-appropriate behaviour, or, given his severe difficulties, was this actually a rather cruel way to treat him, depriving him of something he enjoyed. At the centre of the dispute is what he should do with his body – display it if he wishes, or cover up. Though the issues arising from this conflict are held primarily between the parents, and in the observer, there occurred signs over the course of the sequence of observations of a shift in the way Daniel positioned himself. This will be assessed in terms of subjectivation.

 Extracts from observations over a period of 6 weeks (from week 9 to 15 of the 17 observations) show how Daniel became increasingly preoccupied with playing with water in the garden. Initially, the parents position themselves differently over this issue. Mother, perhaps on the side of allowing Daniel what pleasures he can find, was initially more sympathetic to his behaviour; father was aligned with Daniel adapting to conventional behaviour for someone of his age.

The first extract, week 9, when, Kate (mother) shares with the observer her wish to indulge Daniel, allowing him play with water, and she also confides that her husband has a different view:

As I walked through the conservatory at the back of the house, Kate returned

to cooking food for the boys' tea, calling out occasionally to the boys to try to

keep them in order. I could see several lads bouncing on the large trampoline

on the grass outside at the back. Daniel was at the far end of the garden,

flicking water from the wheelbarrow as I've seen him before. Their activities

were completely separate and I could see that there was at least one friend

with Peter (13 years). John (6 years) also seemed to have a friend with him.

As I went to go out of the back door, I noticed Kate behind me and she said

'Daniel's enjoying the water. His dad tells me not to let him have it, but I

can't see why he shouldn't' She said that Daniel had pulled the hose off the

tap while she was filling the barrow for him, which had been a bit annoying.

She'd known he'd wanted the water to play with as he'd taken her to it as soon

as he got home today. (9.1)

I become quite fascinated by the aesthetics of his play and begin to overstep my role
as observer, by helping with his care:

As I rounded the trampoline, I saw a wet looking Daniel, standing over the

wheelbarrow full of water at the raised area at the back of the garden. The

sun was shining and it was warm in the sun. Daniel was standing behind the

wheelbarrow, between the handles, leaning over it. It was filled to about 4 or

5" from its top with clear water. There were some leaves floating around in it

and I could see the rusty bottom of the barrow through the water…

…Daniel dipped his hands in the water in front of him and flicked the water, in the air. He seemed to have a variety of 'flicks', some soft, which kept the water spray fairly low down as it arched above the barrow, to medium and high flicks, when the water flew up a good few feet in the air, maintaining a droplet arch above the water surface. With these higher flicks, he'd quickly raise his hands above his head and twiddle his fingers together. Once in a while he'd vocalize, making a noise which didn't resemble speech or singing, just a medium-pitched sound. Daniel's trousers were wet and he had no shoes on. He had drops of water on his face too…

…I saw that he was flicking the water now onto the paddling pool, with a plastic, rattling sound and then onto the hardboard, with a wooden pattering, then onto the concrete with a much 'deader' sound. The hardboard sound seemed preferable to Daniel, who speeded-up the flicking, till he achieved a sound like falling rain on the wood. He repeated this a few times and whooped, enjoying the effect. I heard Kate call out that my cup of tea was ready…

…As I turned round, I saw that Daniel had now taken off all of his clothes and he was splashing about naked at the end of the garden. John (brother) shouted out 'he's taken off his clothes mum!' to Kate. Kate disappeared into the house, saying she'd fetch him some trunks. She came back and I offered to take them, carrying them over to Daniel to change into. She said 'give me a shout if you need help' and Daniel, slightly reluctantly, allowed me to help him step into the swimming trunks.

Mother's pairing with me continues: in week 11Kate invites me to take her side,

allowing Daniel to carry on playing with water, stripping his clothes off, even when

the father voices disapproval:

> *Kate seemed chirpy and said 'Daniel's out in the garden I think. Oh look,*
>
> *he's got nothing on!' At this, Ian (dad) stood to look through the kitchen*
>
> *window and shouted across 'Daniel, put some clothes on!' quite loudly, , but*
>
> *no way loud enough to gain Daniel's attention right across the other end of*
>
> *the garden. Kate and I both became a bit jumpy about wanting to get Daniel*
>
> *clothed. I could see Daniel in the garden, looking slightly plump and pale in*
>
> *the distance. Dad retreated to the living room (11:2)…*

> *…As Kate came back towards the house, she said 'Daniel's waiting for me to*
>
> *put the water on. Don't tell Ian as he hates it when Daniel plays with water'.*
>
> *Nevertheless, she walked down the side of the house extension to put the tap*
>
> *on. (11:2)*

Then, on the next week's visit there appears to be a subtle shift in the field; Kate has

moved closer to father's position and the observer is attributed with responsibility for

indulging Daniel's passion for naked water play.

> *Just then, Daniel came flashing through the kitchen, having taken his clothes*
>
> *off upstairs. He ran through to the garden. Kate shouted after him as he ran*
>
> *'put some clothes on!' His naked figure made it over to the back of the*
>
> *garden, to find some water to play with. Daniel looked comical as he'd left*

his black socks on- Kate drew attention to this dryly. I stood up and said,

'shall I give him his swimming costume?' and she moved out of the room to

find one for him. After a moment, she handed one to me and she speculated

that she thought Daniel probably associated seeing me with taking his clothes

off and heading to the garden to play with water. I laughed a bit nervously,

thinking gosh, how is this going down in the family (knowing dad's view from

last week)...I was still thinking about how I might be being seen to be

encouraging Daniel to do this activity. I was left with questions about my

role. Should I be trying to educate him or offer him some new activities I

wondered? (12:3); of course neither of these was compatible with the role of

observer

By the 13th visit, playing with water has been banned by father and I'm trying still to
make sense of how I feel about Kate's assertion:

Kate told me... that Daniel's dad had insisted he put his clothes back on

yesterday, even though it was quite warm, when Daniel was playing with

water... Kate was trying to work out whether Daniel just did this stripping-off

and 'bathing' when I was around I think. I felt awful at this- feeling that dad,

might associate me with actually encouraging Daniel to do these things.

(13:2)

I was trying to make sense of this and why I felt so guilty. By positioning me as the
indulgent one, parents can be united and the conflict is projected into me. The parents

seemed to be using me in some way to work out how they felt between them about Daniel's behaviour and development.

I speculated that they were using me as an intermediary, to 'take the blame' for behaviours that dad found unacceptable- running around naked at 4 or 5 years old may be seen as cute, but it has quite different connotations at 14 or 15 years. Father seemed to be able to see Daniel as a growing and developing young adolescent, needing to take on board more regulated, socially acceptable behaviour, with – it follows - more of a sense of his own subjectivity. Kate was more willing to allow him still to be young and dependent, less concerned about Daniel as developing greater separateness from her as his parent, and perhaps also worried about this. Father appears to see Daniel as needing external guidance to achieve more age appropriate and also less socially embarrassing behaviour. Guilt and embarrassment are projected into the observer from this emotional field in which feelings overflow, and are driven by the difficulty and precariousness of Daniel's predicament, and that of his parents. The projection of this mixture of emotions into the observer enables the parents to be more together and not feel so bad about themselves as parents at this moment in time, as parents of this young person whose prospects and subjectivity appear so limited.

Possibly brought about by the working out of the parental conflict over whether he should be allowed to follow his wish to indulge in sensory, repetitive play, and the shift in the emotional field between all of us, I observed that he now became slightly more socialised and engaged in relatedness and activities with others, especially his siblings:

In visit 14:

> *...Daniel had joined in at the edge of the trampoline and as an equal to the others, found his space effectively. Peter (older brother) responded and faced him, the 2 of them coordinating the bounces. It was an unusual piece of joint play or activity. They carried on for a few minutes...* (14:3)

And then in visit 15:

> *Andrew (younger brother) said 'good boy Daniel' patiently to him and kicked the football back in his direction. Daniel hesitated a little, allowing himself to respond at his own speed, a slow motion version of the other boys' footballing* (15:2)

Here is a different position, engaged with wither less than whole heartedly or with a fragile sense of competency. There are echoes of Wordsworth's (1806)

Shades of the prison house begin to close
Upon the growing boy

together with a sense of a painful loss of a past freedom to repetitively play with water, and an uncertain future.

Conclusion

To summarise, we identify changing techno-social context have initiated considerable debate about the formation of identity, forming the need for new theoretical

frameworks to underpin sensitive and relevant practice with young people. Engaging

with these issues, we have identified and discussed steps towards developing practice.

Firstly, we identify the task as developing a theoretical approach which is usable and

inclusive of different domains affecting identity development in young people's

social, cultural, material, community, relational, emotional and cognitive worlds.

Applying the concept of subjectivation, we identify four fields which are illustrated

by two examples. Both these examples evidence that the practice-near methods enable

recognition of processes of subjectivation and we suggest that this opens the

possibilities for sensitive and relevant reflective practice.

Both examples show that the process of subjectivation is relational, involving a

fluidity in locating the emotions in the self and others in an intersubjective field. In

the example of Martin, we saw a verbal attempt to change the pattern of relatedness

with the therapist – changing the subject. In the case of Daniel we see a shift in

pattern of relatedness connected with the way that the parents have resolved their

differences through 'recruiting' the observer to carry the role of indulging Daniel's

taste for naked water play. We suggest also that the practices of subjectivation involve

decision making, conflicts and ambivalence, and a giving up of a particular position –

cherished or as a defence against change – and that these decisions of an 'either/or'

quality mean the experience of taking on, or taking up a new role, whilst relinquishing

an old one, incurring a kind of disturbance that involves emotional work by the

adolescent, or someone who is emotionally involved with him.

The implications for social work practice with young people are that the emotional

and relational aspects of intersubjective 'fields' identify tensions and conflicts of

subjectivation and these are most likely to be experienced and hence recognized reflexively by the researcher or practitioners own experiences, feelings and reactions. Idntifying these and developing the skills to work within this relational framework, on the one hand, and applying the theoretical approach, on the other hand are key to the development of informed and sensitive social work practice with young people. Practice and training for practice need to be reoriented to take into account this perspective

In this article we have made a tentative – though arguably bold link between adolescent identity formation – in the contexts of current frameworks of thinking which host the debate between structural approaches and agency – and characteristics of the development of adolescents with severe learning disabilities. We conclude that this approach holds promise for practice opening up the crucial dimension of familial and individual emotionality, promoting ways of relating to this and setting an agenda for research and practice.

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