

# Inter-Subjectivity and Worker Self-Disclosure in Professional Relationships With Young People: A Psychosocial Study of Youth Violence and Desistance

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*Abstract*: This article explores the psychosocial processes that influence the disclosure of intimate partner violence (IPV) by young people to their professional workers. Drawing on a sample of 100 young people who had disclosed IPV to their professional workers, the study examines the role of self-disclosure in the process of desistance from IPV. The findings suggest that self-disclosure is a key factor in the process of desistance, and that professional workers play a crucial role in supporting young people to disclose IPV and to seek help. The study also highlights the need for professional workers to be trained in recognizing and responding to the needs of young people who have disclosed IPV.

**Keywords:** desistance; intersubjectivity; psychosocial; self-disclosure; young people; youth violence

This article draws on psychosocial theory to drill down into relationships between young people and youth professionals, arguing for a need to

To begin with, I discuss issues of boundaries and self-disclosure in professional relationships. I then introduce a psychosocial perspective on intersubjectivity and organisational defensiveness, arguing that this provides an apposite framework for work with young offenders. A detailed dyadic case study then follows a young person – a care-leaver (Daniel) with a history of maltreatment and abuse – and his worker (Jim), charting their own biographies and their experience of each other in a homeless hostel for young people over five months. The story includes Jim's attempts to engender shifts in Daniel's perception of himself and others around him via an approach rooted in dialogical and empathic practice. A psychosocial analysis employs object relations theory to explore the aetiology of Daniel's violent behaviour and then views this in tandem with selected excerpts from Jim's own biographical narrative to plot the processes of intersubjective recognition (Benjamin 2004) and master-slave (Lacan 1977) dynamics that feature within the dyad. I highlight Jim's decision to disclose an aspect of his own biography that renders him more fallible in Daniel's eyes and show how that begins to shift the asymmetry within that dynamic, thereby generating an opportunity for Daniel to construct an alternative, less pervasively violent subjectivity.

However, as the case ultimately unfolds and reveals, this opportunity is quashed by endemic organisational failures within the hostel where Daniel was living. Inept professional practice, inadequate supervision and the dominance of professional discourses that valorise dispassionate, bounded engagement, stymie, rather than enable, Jim's practice. I argue that these systemic failings and limited practice repertoire of Jim's co-workers represents (if replicated elsewhere) a serious shortcoming in services that purport to look after and rehabilitate young people like Daniel, many of whom are in dire need of professional adult support. The article concludes that workers like Jim might be able to offer meaningful support to young people like Daniel, but if their work is to have maximum desistance-promoting potential, youth services and professional development regimes may need to further emphasise understanding of the psychosocial nature of intersubjective dynamics within relationships and organisations.

### **Professional Relationships, Boundaries and Self-disclosure**

The National Youth Agency (2004) ethical code of conduct states that workers should:

recognise the boundaries between personal and professional life and be aware of the need to balance a caring and supportive relationship with young people with *a professional distance*. (p.6, italics added)

How this might translate into practice remains ambiguous; inevitably perhaps, as any evaluation of appropriateness can only ever be meaningfully explored in detailed case studies that provide the necessary contextualisation. Merry (1999) argues that workers taking an objective, distant, and uninvolved stance can have the effect that young people see workers as only

about them as individuals with unique life stories. Aron (2013) argues that clients in psychoanalytic therapy often probe their therapists in an attempt to penetrate his/her professional calm and reserve. They do this because they need to connect with others emotionally, 'where they are authentic and fully present' (p.80). There is some empirical evidence of young people expressing similar views on their relationships with workers. Feaviour and Acres (2000) identified that young people highlight shared experience as a key factor they look for in workers. Seal and Harris (2016) also found that young people involved in violence needed to feel that youth workers were willing to show themselves to be fallible as part of mutually-trustful relationships. Workers disclosing their own experiences, particularly those that echo young people's, might help facilitate a working alliance (Bordin 1979) with the potential to effect beneficial changes in behaviour, such as desistance from crime and violence.

This suggests that it might be worthwhile drilling down into the complexity of professional relationships and the use of self-disclosure by workers taking into account intersubjective and unconscious dynamics. Psychosocial approaches to criminality (Gadd and Jefferson 2007; Jones 2008) seek to blend psychoanalytic and post-structuralist insights in order to capture how subjects position themselves within a number of competing discourses and the psychological function this serves for them. Adopting such a framework encompasses an acceptance that aspects of the self will always (consciously and unconsciously) be communicated verbally and non-verbally within the intersubjective field of personal and professional relationships. In settings where young people have experienced maltreatment, loss and abuse, this unconscious transmission of unwanted parts of the self, if not contained by another (Bion 1962) can often be repressed or projected outwards, giving rise to greater challenges for workers seeking to develop productive relationships. What may be required of the worker therefore is to develop a finely-tuned understanding of how to use these unconscious intersubjective dynamics productively and this requires a solid conceptual basis.

### **Theorising Intersubjectivity in Professional Contexts**

The term 'intersubjectivity' has been used variably within philosophy (Habermas 1970; Hegel 1807; Honneth 1995), symbolic interactionism (Mead 1934), and psychoanalysis (Benjamin 2004). For Mead, human self-consciousness derives from the ability to adopt the standpoint of the 'other' toward the self (the 'me' as opposed to 'I'). Benjamin uses the term to emphasise the mutual *recognition* of subjective mental states in the other as well as in oneself; a relationship in which each person experiences the other as a like subject – another mind who can be felt with, yet has a distinct, separate centre of feeling and perception. Benjamin sees the ability to recognise the other in this way as a developmental attainment that begins with the mutual gazing between caregiver and infant and leads to attunement with the other as part of processes of attachment (Bowlby 1958). These early relationships with external others or objects (Klein 1946) are internalised



young people may observe aspects that they wish to emulate or notice that their workers have been moved affectively by them. Young people

which enter into them. Transcripts were read and re-read in conjunction with desistance and psychosocial literature. All information gathered

something' to them. At school, his status as a child in care marked him out from his peers and he was relentlessly bullied, 'pushed into lockers', 'strangled', and 'punched'. When he became more violent he was eventually moved to another school for young people with similar behavioural issues. From age 11–16 years he was moved 148 times between different care homes. This had left him with a sense that all professionals were engaged in a personal vendetta against him and had moved him 'for no reason'

home town and lived on the streets until they were offered a place in the hostel where they were living at the time we met.

Daniel felt his allocated (female) support worker at the hostel (Mary) was 'a waste of time' and 'didn't give a shit'; she was 'useless', 'arrogant', 'cocky', and 'stuck up her own arse'. They had met once in five months even though they were supposed to have weekly meetings and she had not helped with practical things such as organising a passport for Daniel. She had failed to 'read up' on Daniel and suggested that he might seek to make contact with his birth parents. This had 'wound' Daniel up, not just because of what she said but 'the way she said it'. He felt he needed 'professional' help but that it needed to be someone who 'knew what they were doing'.

His relationship with Tracey became increasingly turbulent, including many break-ups. In his final interview Daniel told me that Tracey had fallen pregnant. The prospect of being a father was leading Daniel to feel that he had to 'grow up and act like a man':

I am not going to give up on my child like I was given up on. I am not going to turn round and throw my child into the fucking middle of the ocean and let it survive on your own. I am going to rear my child how I was supposed to be reared. I am one of them people that will stand up for my child. I will do anything for my child. I want to be able to just do something with my life that is actually meaningful, instead of fucking up all the time.



don't know . . . God knows what. Then the Police come along, took me to the Police station. They were gonna arrest me for trespassing. I had an interview with the Police . . . sort of got my thought pattern together.

Jim described this time as 'the worst three months of my life'. Before his first operation he abruptly decided to stop 'drinking, smoking and gambling' and began a course of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT):

From that time, I worked on myself. I had to strip myself back to the core. First of all I had to give up alcohol, cos that was fuelling the depression, get rid of that, and then the depression was clearer – that's what it was . . . so I muddled through that and from that day it just kind of fell into place. I sat down I evaluated what's going on in my life, what the positives are, what the negatives are and the positive outweighed the negatives. I looked at the reasons why I was going to do that, the impact on that. I shiver to think about it even today. Then I looked at when I go into work with people, I want to do my best possible and that's it . . . I've not drunk or smoked for 4½ years since.

He began to explore other career options and found himself drawn to working with young offenders. He enrolled on a youth and community work training course at a local university and found employment in the homeless hostel where he had met Daniel.

### **Intersubjectivity in Focus: Daniel and Jim**

Jim described his first meeting and conversation with Daniel as one where Daniel 'ranted' and Jim simply listened to him so he could 'let off the steam':

[Daniel] turned around and said, 'Who the fucking hell are you anyway?'. So I said, 'Well I'm somebody who's just stood here and listened to you for five minutes, all right?' He went, 'Oh, okay, all right then. Well I'm Daniel.' So I said, 'That's good, I'm Jim. Right, so now we've got past that then. So was that your worst? Or was that your . . . is there more? Because I'm just starting here'.

Jim quickly became a 'buffer' between Daniel and other staff at the hostel, who according to Jim could not 'handle the aggression' and 'handed out warnings left, right and centre'. According to Jim, communication between Daniel and the hostel workers (many of whom were temporary staff who spoke English as a second language) was a problem due to 'language barriers' and their overly 'authoritarian' approach. When Daniel met Jim he felt Jim was different as he intervened in conflicts, remained calm and offered Daniel opportunities to 'think outside the box'. He could see Jim was frustrated at times, but when he told Jim to 'fuck off' Jim would still return and seek to resolve the issue. This made him appear more 'human' to Daniel:

He's good; he'll sit there and he'll find a way. He's not generally my support worker

Speak to me like I'm a 15-year-old, don't speak to me like I don't know what I'm doing, because I've been there, I've done it.

Daniel felt that some of the incidents in his past would 'scare people' but that Jim might be able to understand. The relationship felt more authentic to him than others he had encountered. It was very important to Daniel how Jim *looked* at him:

Jim looks at you like you're a human. He doesn't look at you like you're a youth; he looks at you like you're just a normal human being that needs help.

Daniel did not share all the details of his past with Jim although he felt that if Jim was allocated to be his support worker he might 'open up' to him eventually. Then, on Christmas Eve, Daniel showed Jim a SMS he had received from his adoptive brothers with a picture of Christmas presents they had been given and a message gloating that Daniel was not as fortunate. Daniel began to cry within sight of the hostel staff. Jim said

I tell you one thing, if I hadn't have stopped drinking, I definitely wouldn't be going to university, and I wouldn't be taking you along.

Daniel did not reply, but Jim felt it 'got his attention' and that there was a 'shift' in Daniel's perception of him and in the dynamic within their relationship:

*im*: I could see the cogs going round . . . he was thinking about stuff . . . it may have brought us down to kind of a level . . . I'm not this wonderful support worker who knows all; sees all. The way his reaction was, without even saying anything, when he looked at me kind of, it was more of a . . . oh right . . . ok, so you've got your issues yourself then.





It is far from certain that any worker could have marshalled the disparate voices within Daniel's subjectivity into a more cohesive whole in such a short timescale. However, Jim's impromptu decision to allow Daniel to see his own fallibility by disclosing his struggle with alcohol seems to have eased Daniel's sense that only he was 'born in to the wrong type of family'. It shows that others can experience internal conflict too and moves Jim from a master-subject position in Daniel's mind that could have otherwise left Daniel feeling that Jim owned him and that he had nothing to give back. The prominence of this dynamic within his relationships to other professionals was leading to an impasse. When Jim simply contains (Bion 1962) Daniel's rage it pulls Daniel up sharply enough for him to ask 'who are you?' Not accustomed to Jim's calm acceptance, he begins to see Jim's professional interpretation of his behaviour as supportive rather than judgmental and this triggers some introspection. This seems to have led Daniel to seek a different way to regulate his emotional responses. He begins to experience Jim as a like subject; another mind who can be felt with and the pair move beyond a doer and done to (Benjamin 2017) relational frame. This prompts Daniel to see the need to apologise to another professional in the hostel who he feels he has wronged in the past. If Jim had had the opportunity to express more of his own vulnerabilities by becoming his support worker this might have amplified this new voice within Daniel and created room for Daniel to construct a subjectivity less centred on violence. In the end the frailties of the system induced a recapitulation of Daniel's long list of broken attachments as hostel staff are drawn into his re-enactments of previous relationships and then defensively retreat into impersonal professional identities. Any potential to promote desistance is foreclosed because Daniel is, again, pushed out; evicted by workers who are unwilling or unable to tolerate his challenging behaviour, leaving him abandoned to fend for himself once more. The opportunity to explore the underlying reasons for his violent behaviour and continual conflict with professionals is lost. The implications of all this for Daniel, his equally-traumatised and damaged partner, Tracey, and their unborn child (despite Daniel's resolve to desist and be the kind of father that he never had) are deeply troubling.

Jim's own experiences of beginning to work through his own issues



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