

# Models of Youth Work: A Conceptual Overview<sup>1</sup>

**NOTE:** This paper focuses on youth work, but the principles behind it apply equally to any area of community services work.

**Why do you choose to work with young people?** Surely you could have higher income and greater security, in a *straight* job! Participants in a variety of training programs have identified the following as just some of the possibilities:

- To be able to control young people (i.e. experience a sense of power in your life).
- To be able to act on your beliefs about the world – how it is and how you would like it to be.
- To help young people better fit into society.
- To be able to stay young, through interacting with young people.
- To stay in touch with, or better understand, your own children.
- To feel a sense of achievement/self esteem/confidence.
- To help young people to a better job of growing up than you did! (eg. avoid the pitfalls).
- To work through your own personal issues (or, reassure yourself that you're not crazy!).
- To avoid focusing on your own problems.
- To remind yourself that others are worse off than you are.
- To have a job (ie. you weren't able to find another one, or are so fixed in this career path now, that it would be difficult to make a change).
- To appease your guilt about being relatively well off.

I can certainly identify with several of these. Which motivations might play a part in your decision to do youth work? Unless you believe in *altruism* (the idea that humans can act without self-interest), there must be something in it for you!

**Knowing that working with young people meets some of your own needs is not automatically a problem.** In fact, acknowledging the part self-interest plays in your work can contribute significantly to more honest interaction with young people. It can help you to identify your own hidden agendas, and consciously minimize your potential abuse of power.

---

<sup>1</sup> © Copyright Suzi Quixley 2006 & 2008 (revised). (Based on earlier material entitled *The Impact of Beliefs on Practice* © 1991, and an article of the same title © 1996. It was first published in this form in the August 1996 edition of *Transitions*, the Journal of the Youth Affairs Network of Queensland.)

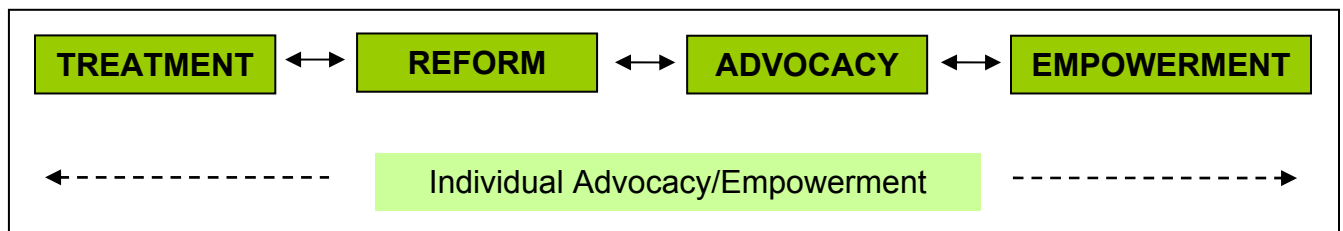
**In the end, it all comes down to 5 key questions:**

1. What's in it for you?
2. What are the beliefs/values you are working from?
3. How are these packaged into a personal picture of the world as it is, and as you'd like it to be (your *personal ideology*)?
4. Which model of youth work is most compatible with your ideology?
5. What are the consequences of your answer for the young people you work with/for?

Unfortunately, there isn't space in this article to address all 5 questions in detail. However, thinking about models of youth work should help you in the overall process of exploring your meaning as a youth worker.

### One Way to Conceptualise Youth Work

The following is a broad outline of 4 models of youth work (and *Individual Advocacy/Empowerment* – a technique that can be used in any of them). It draws heavily on a concept by Chris Brown<sup>2</sup> which is further developed in *Toward An Ideology of 'Helping' Young People*<sup>3</sup>. He described them as the *Treatment, Reform, Advocacy* and *Empowerment* approaches.

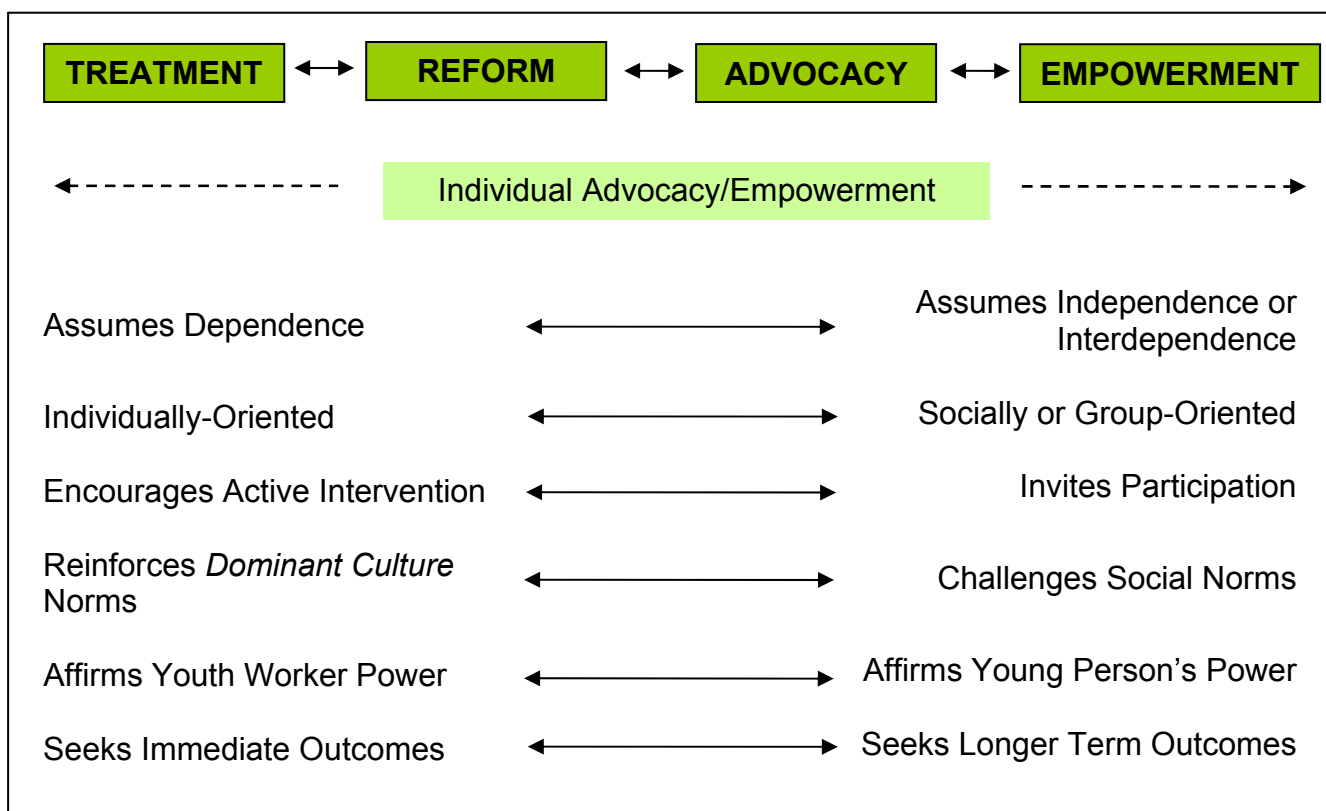


**Diagram 1:** Conceptual Approaches to Youth Work

If you imagine these approaches as a left/right dichotomy, some features of the two extremes would be:

<sup>2</sup> **See:** Brown, Chris (1989) **YWK1205: Principles and Practices of Youth Work**, an External Study Unit, Edith Cowan University, Perth, WA

<sup>3</sup> **See:** Quixley, Suzi (1991) *Topic 2/Module 1* in **YWK2235: Helping Skills in Youth Work**, an External Study Unit, Edith Cowan University, Perth, WA



**Diagram 2:** Features of the Two Extremes of Youth Work Practice

**TREATMENT**  
Approaches

are most concerned with asserting (directly or by implication) the essential inadequacy of the *fallen* individual, and the fundamental *good*/strength of the society in which they live. If the individual cannot, or will not, *fit in* they must be taught/forced to do so. For the society to continue to work effectively, aberrant young people must be made to conform if they fail to behave in a *socially acceptable* manner. These values legitimise the worker taking power over the individual young person, until such time as they can/do behave consistent with the norms of the *dominant culture*. The level of intervention *required* is determined by the degree of *waywardness* of the individual. Generally, measurable criteria (in terms of personal change) are used to ascertain whether the individual has *adjusted* or not ... in this sense, the outcomes of the Treatment Model are *immediate*.

**Some Examples:** Youth prisons, drop in centres with lots of conventional rules, many adventure-based programs, most employment/training programs, uniform youth groups, most forms of therapy/counselling, most schools and some youth accommodation services.

**Possible Positive Consequences:** Provides a quick response, young people feel safe/familiar, worker response is consistent with young people's expectations and perceived problem is acknowledged/validated.

**Possible Negative Consequences:** Doesn't address underlying causes, young person blames themselves, youth workers are rescuers, young person not ultimately valued, encourages thoughtless conformity and stifles creativity/lateral thinking.

### COLLECTIVE EMPOWERMENT Approaches

At the other extreme, are concerned with the maladjustment of society to the needs of the majority of individuals within it. They are interested in *class action* – encouraging young people who are affected by the same social limitation, to act as a group, to improve their situation. (This, in turn, is seen to alter/improve the society.) Rather than being forced to depend (on the society, professionals, etc.), the *Collective Empowerment Model* seeks to give initially less powerful people the capacity to act independently and/or interdependently. Youth worker involvement is by invitation. Intervention is only justified if it is needed to give young people the **means** to improve their social situation/status. In order to give young people maximum power, the youth worker (who starts off with more *social power*) must be constantly *on their guard* against taking power away from young people, as a collective group. Within the *Collective Empowerment Model*, workers are a tool by which less powerful groups of people can challenge the *status quo*, and achieve long term outcomes. These approaches prioritise proactive/preventative work over reactive/repetitive/*band aid* youth work.

**Some Examples:** Some youth action groups, many community arts projects, some youth networks/councils/round-tables and some young women's programs.

**Possible Positive Consequences:** Young people feel a sense of ownership of process, they become more informed about issues, problems tackled are those young people find relevant, young people learn how to deal with conflict/differences and young people develop skills transferable to other social change settings.

**Possible Negative Consequences:** Young people set up to fail, failure experience leaves them feeling more powerless than before, a few young people are overwhelmed with work, individual young people focus on meeting their individual agendas/needs and a *youth elite* is established.

The *Reform* and *Collective Advocacy* approaches fall between these extremes.

### REFORM Approaches

for example, don't assert the complete *goodness* of the society ... they see *minor adjustment* or *fine tuning* as a necessary ongoing role. However, they do see change as being a mainly individual matter – that is, *the society is mostly OK ... by and large, individual young people must learn to fit in.*

**Some Examples:** Most neighbourhood/community development work, most *non-directive* counselling, many church youth groups, some youth accommodation services, some youth legal services and most youth health programs.

**Possible Positive Consequences:** Relatively quick social outcomes, (young) people feel safe with mild change, more immediately accepting of young people's perceptions than models which challenge fundamental thinking, can provide a resource base for further thinking/exploration/action.

**Possible Negative Consequences:** Don't address underlying causes, young person blames themselves, discourages independent thinking, largely operates within social norms, doesn't produce substantial improvement, discounts young people who don't largely fit socially and can operate as a more subtle version of social control.

## COLLECTIVE ADVOCACY Approaches

see the dominant culture within society as the fundamental basis of individual young people's problems. However, they place more emphasis upon meeting the immediate needs of groups damaged by society than does the *Collective Empowerment Model*. Because of the amount of damage (*disempowerment*) done to young people as a group (and individual young people who are a part of that group), it is argued that they do not have the means/skills/confidence/resources to act to improve their situation. Accordingly, young people are far more likely to end up with their *fair share* of social resources, if those with these competencies (eg. youth workers) act on their behalf.

**Some Examples:** Some youth peak bodies, some youth legal services and most youth advocacy services.

**Possible Positive Consequences:** Significant social control may result, increases competencies of youth workers, can have positive benefits for wider community, legitimizes those young people who see deeper causes to their situation and educates the wider community.

**Possible Negative Consequences:** Young people are stereotyped, youth worker assumes uniform issues/causes therefore doesn't explore individual situations, risks a focus on individual rather than collective needs, risks focus on youth interests to detriment of other socially disenfranchised groups and takes lots of time.

## The Tricky One! ... Individual Advocacy/Empowerment

The *Individual Advocacy/Empowerment* approach was added to this diagram as a result of the *loose use* (or maybe cooption!) of the language of *advocacy* and *empowerment* during the 1990's. The fundamental values of the youth worker (and

their response to the other 4 models) will determine the way in which advocacy or empowerment work with individual young people is carried out. In this sense, **Individual Advocacy/Empowerment** can be a **technique** employed within any of the other 4 models depending upon how it's used (rather than an approach, or model of service).

### Individual Empowerment

has been used as a way of describing a commitment to teaching young people to *fit in* to society:

**Example:** A worker with unemployed young people might argue that their best chance of improving their power/status in society will come if they meet employer preferences (eg. taking lower pay, dressing to a particular image).

Individual interests can be promoted at the expense of other young people or other social group(s):

**Example:** A young working class man (who happens to be a member of an extremist group) want to learn about handling guns, and asks a worker to help him fundraise money to arm his group. He believes that he can make a contribution to improving society for working class people through shooting as many Muslims as possible! It could be hard to argue against the legitimacy of this claim if working from an ideological base focused on Individual Empowerment.

When this happens, **Individual Advocacy/Empowerment** may function in direct opposition to **Collective Advocacy/Empowerment** (ie. the interests of working class young men ... or Aboriginal people ... or NESB people ... as social groups).

**On the other hand, work with individual young people can be an integral part of an overall strategy of *Collective Advocacy/Empowerment*:**

**Example:** A group of young women who have been in violent relationships may decide that they want greater police support in DV call-outs. Some of the jobs they see as necessary might be producing pamphlets, negotiating with local police, talking with MP's, organising a demonstration, getting Unions *on side*, etc. In this situation, it might be perfectly consistent to support different young women to undertake different parts of this process – and to *individually empower/advocate* for them.

## Key Exponents of the 4 Approaches

**Treatment and Reform approaches** form the basis of most models of community services work. Most are based in the psychological, rather than sociological, disciplines. Most are focused on work with individuals – or where they are concerned

with group work, it is with teaching groups to adjust to society's demands (eg. training programs for the unemployed; most *self-help* models; conventional *community development* work). **Most models of youth work draw heavily on these approaches** ... in fact, they are widely taught in youth work courses, and are often advocated within the sector. The majority of practitioners with individuals (eg. social workers, therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists), have been primarily trained to work from within this frame of reference. After all ... why would a society pay for provision of services which result in them being seriously challenged?

Most of the alternate ways of working (i.e. **Collective Advocacy and Collective Empowerment**) have been developed in the margins of the professions/academia, or from outside them. **Again, these approaches get far less air time within the youth sector, than the more conventional approaches.** Most are being developed/used by *non-professional* grassroots organisations. Such groups do not have the same means to document and publish their work as the *professional* groups. These include:

- **Social/political action groups** (e.g. the women's movement, the gay movement) which offer their membership direct services such as counselling, support groups and training programs.
- **Anti-welfare action groups** (e.g. groups arguing the interests of the incarcerated mentally ill; anti-poverty groups) which lobby against the system's power and provide services to those affected.
- **(Some) self help groups** (... responding to everything from anorexia to agoraphobia! Including the trade union movement) which are concerned with offering preventative programs and approaches which provide an alternative to those they've experienced from *professional helpers*.
- **Lay therapy/counselling/encounter groups** (e.g. Re-evaluation/co-counselling) which are concerned with the whole context of an individual's life/needs/problems and focus on development of alternative *community*.
- **Anti-medical alternate professions** (e.g. palmists, naturopaths, astrologists) which propose alternate social models.

It is important to note that some of the groups which fall into the general headings above, base their approaches on quite conservative values. In particular, some of the *self help groups* comprise survivors whose only experience of a response to their problem has been the model(s) used on them by *professionals* ... which they, in turn, reapply to others dealing with a similar problem.

## The Link between Ideology and Youth Work Approaches

Which of the above approaches did you *warm* to? When developing your personal ideology, it can be useful to draw on the ways other people have packaged their values (ie. **formal ideologies**, or the ...isms).

The following diagram is an attempt to pull together three main things – some formal ideologies, the sorts of methods of youth work intervention/working/helping approaches that might be consistent with each, and the assumptions/values/beliefs behind each approach. **Please note that this table seeks to indicate trends in ideological thought, rather than prescribing who should believe what!** (Apart from anything else, many schools of thought within each formal ideology vary enormously ... some would even hold opposite views on the assumptions behind these approaches.)

Formal Ideology	Model of Intervention	Underlying Assumptions & Role of Youth Work
Pragmatisms Individualisms Conservatisms Capitalisms ..... Humanisms Liberalisms	Treatment  .....  Reform	<p><b>Assumptions:</b> Individual young people are responsible for their inability to act within the social system. Society is completely (<i>Treatment</i>) or mainly (<i>Reform</i>) sound.</p> <p><b>The role of youth work</b> is therefore to change young people so they fit better into society.</p>
Marxisms Socialisms Feminisms Anarchisms	Collective Advocacy Collective Empowerment	<p><b>Assumptions:</b> The problems experienced by individual young people derive from factors in the social system (eg. inequality – leading to poverty, discrimination, etc.) The overall focus of work with young people should be long term social change.</p> <p><b>The role of youth work</b> is therefore to give individual young people the means to cope with their maltreatment and/or act to change the factors affecting them (and others in similar situations).</p>

**Table 1:** Relationship between Formal Ideologies and Youth Work

The Youth Work Sector in Australia includes people holding elements of each of the formal ideologies listed here (... and many others besides!) Programs using all four models of intervention have been considered part of the sector. Many individual youth workers hold elements of left wing ideologies (ideologies in the bottom half) and right wing ideologies (top half) ... perhaps you're one of them? Many youth agencies offer a range of services which include Treatment/Reform and Advocacy/Empowerment approaches.

## Another Way to Conceptualise Models of Youth Work

The term *social justice* has accumulated a variety of meanings over the past few years. The following model draws on the original understanding of the term:

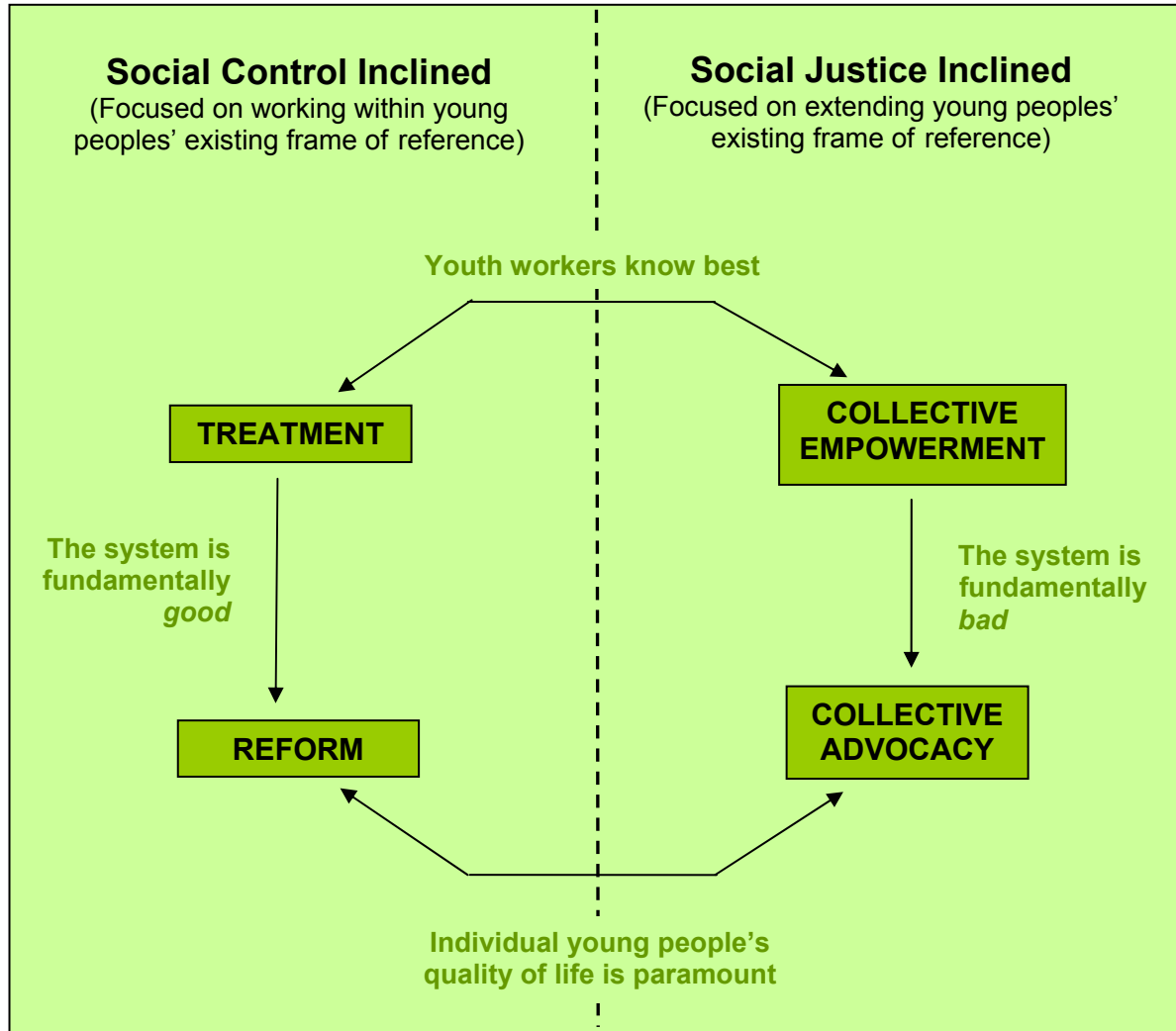


Diagram 3: An Alternate Way to Conceptualise Youth Work Practice

## Summary

The concepts outlined above are designed to be tools to help you identify parts of your motivation for working with young people ... and to check that you are clear about why you are a youth worker. Hopefully, the above diagram will help you to identify the level of consistency (or inconsistency!) in your day-to-day practice ... and to make the connection between your beliefs, values, personal ideology, agency values and practice.