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Article

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Steven Eric Krauss
Institute for Social Science Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia

Khairuddin Idris
Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia

Ezhar Tamam
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia

Turiman Suandi
Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia

Ismi Arif Ismail
Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia

Nur Fatihah Abdullah Bandar
Universiti Malaya's Asia-Europe Institute

Dzuhailmi Dahalan
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Abstract

Despite the concerns about professionalism among youth work practitioners in Malaysia, valid and reliable instruments to measure the construct are lacking. This article reviews the psychometric development and initial exploration of a professionalism measure applicable for use with direct-service youth work practitioners. Results were based on a sampling of 813 government and non-government youth work practitioners throughout Malaysia. Exploratory factor analysis resulted in a 6-factor solution that was used as the basis for the subscales of the instrument. Comparison of means tests indicated higher mean scores according to academic qualification, age, income, gender, marital status and certification and years of

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involvement in youth work. Limitations and recommendations for further development of the professionalism scale are discussed.

Keywords
youth, youth work practitioners, youth worker professionalism, measurement development, Malaysia

Introduction

Although recent research has found that staff who work directly with youth are an essential component in facilitating positive programmatic and youth outcomes (Hartje et al., 2008), few known attempts have been made to measure professional practice among youth work practitioners, especially in non-Western contexts. Much of the related work in the West, such as that of Hartje et al. (2008) focuses on youth worker competencies, but does not include other aspects of professional practice that are relevant to local contexts.

The slow and steady progression towards greater professionalization of the youth work field in Malaysia (Azimi, 2005), in particular, has stopped short of the development of instruments that can identify gaps in youth work practitioner professional conduct. To support these efforts, evidence-based measures are necessary for gauging professionalism among youth work practitioners (Borden and Perkins 2006; Chisholm et al., 2006; Quinn, 2004). The present article addresses these issues by reviewing the psychometric development and initial exploration of a professionalism scale applicable for use with direct-service youth work practitioners from Malaysia.

Who are Youth Work Practitioners?

A youth work practitioner is an individual who works in a programme directly with young people to facilitate their personal, social and educational development (Stone et al., 2006). Youth work practitioners enter the field through a number of different paths and, thus, have backgrounds in a diverse range of occupations including social work, education, public health and community education. Unlike other human service workers, those who work in youth programs are not necessarily full-time workers; some are part-time workers and thus do not receive the benefits or earnings associated with a full-time job. Other youth work practitioners enter without any formal education and training and gain knowledge and skills on the job (Ezhar et al., 2009). Youth work practitioners often play a major role in supporting the development of the young people with whom they work through the forming of 'developmental relationships' with young people. Developmental relationships are grounded in the belief that a youth worker exists in the life of a young person to meet his or her developmental needs by providing supports and opportunities that youth might not otherwise have (Azimi, 2005; Morrow and Styles, 1995).

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Youth work is a sector that has long been perceived as a voluntary field rather than a formal occupation. In many countries the occupational category of youth worker does not even exist, or if it does, is not yet clearly defined or conceptualized by the majority of stakeholders, including policy makers. In some countries such as Malaysia, there are two main types of youth work, namely, governmental and NGO-based. At the governmental level, the youth work practitioner may be employed by a government agency while in NGOs, the worker may work for pay or as a volunteer. Regardless of their type and status, youth work practitioners are involved in communities, engaging young people, parents, neighbours, merchants in both human and community development (Krueger, 2000). Their function as a 'helping profession' includes a network of interpersonal relationships based on caring and trust (Ezhar et al., 2009; Sercombe, 2010).

Youth Work Practitioner Professionalization and Professionalism

In nascent fields such as youth work, defining professionalism suffers from substantial disagreement and a lack of conceptual clarity. Even from the perspective of established professions such as teaching, defining professionalism has been challenging. For example, Hargreaves and Goodson (1996) refer to the lack of consensus relating to the meaning of professionalism while Fox (1992: 2) points out that, 'Professionalism means different things to different people. Without a language police, however, it is unlikely that the term professional(ism) will be used in only one concrete way' (as cited in Evans, 2008).

From the perspective of 'professional conduct', professionalism has been broadly referred to by Hoyle (2001) to describe enhancement of the quality of service provided, while Sockett (1996) and Evans (2008) claim that the term refers to quality of practice within a particular occupation including accepted roles and responsibilities, key functions and remits, a range of requisite skills and knowledge, and the general nature of work-related tasks.

In the youth work literature, much attention has been given to the issue of professionalization of the field, which includes the ongoing development of the professional practice of youth work practitioners. As youth work is not yet an internationally recognized field, its status as a profession or para-profession varies greatly, depending on the context (Eisikovitz and Beker, 2001). In countries like the UK, youth work is a more formalized profession supported by a government youth service, formal codes of ethics, career articulation pathways, practice standards and a commitment to and system for continuing education for youth work practitioners. In countries like Malaysia, some of the abovementioned institutional elements are in place, yet others have yet to be developed and implemented.

Despite the differences in maturity of the youth work field, youth work practitioners and stakeholders tend to agree on the need for higher standards of professionalism (Beker, 2001). In the context of youth-serving organizations, the ability to make a difference in a young person's life ultimately depends on the people in those orga-

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nizations. Regardless of the programs and services offered, competent, trusted staff who are willing and able to connect with their young clients are essential to nurturing positive life outcomes (Astroth et al., 2004). This combination of factors, among others, has spurned a drive for professionalization that focuses on improving youth work practice through continuing education and competency-based programmes to raise workers' capacity and status as human service professionals.

The need to enhance the field of youth work through professionalism requires many supportive institutions and mechanisms. Ongoing professional development supports and opportunities have been cited as one of the keys to retaining youth work practitioners and enhancing their capacity to work effectively with young people (Walker, 2003). In the context of the US, for example, there has been a steady call for more intensive and formalized training structures for youth work practitioners, as well as a need for basic definitions of youth development work, an underlying research base and agreement on essential competencies for youth work practice (Huebner et al., 2003; Quinn, 2004). Borden and Perkins (2006: 101) write, 'Given the complexity of the needs of today's young people, it is both timely and prudent to increase the type, quality, and quantity of educational experiences available to community youth development professionals.'

With calls for greater professionalization of the field comes the need for ways to assess youth work practitioner professionalism itself. In many countries, youth work practitioners tend to be split along a philosophical divide. On the one hand, claims that practitioner characteristics are critical to high-quality youth work are offset by the fact that there is little consensus around what those professional characteristics are, or how one should acquire them. In fact, little research exists showing a connection between professionally trained youth work practitioners and positive youth outcomes (Astroth et al., 2004; Eisikovitz and Beker, 2001). Although some advocate professionalizing youth work through university-level education programmes, others argue just as vehemently for experience-based training and preparation. Despite the disagreement over the form of professional development, the field of youth work seems to be moving toward a more formal level of professionalism (Astroth et al., 2004).

While sufficient funding is necessary for implementing youth development programs, the quality of the people involved in planning, running and monitoring youth development programmes is equally important, if not more so. 'As public investments in youth development programmes continue, the preparation and ongoing development of adults who work with young people in programmes has increased in importance' (Borden and Perkins, 2006: 103). The quality development, control and professionalization of youth work practitioners is an important subject worth examining that will continue to grow in importance in light of the demand for greater standards and accountability in youth work, in line with global trends in the field. This calls for more concrete, empirical-based tools for assessing professionalism among youth work practitioners in their delivery of youth development programmes, particularly in the context of the developing world where resources for youth worker professional development are harder to come by. One such country that has begun to embark on such an effort is Malaysia.

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Youth Work Practitioner Professional Development in Malaysia

Malaysia is a small Southeast Asian country that is comprised of both peninsular Malaysia, which borders Thailand to its north and Singapore and Indonesia to its south, and East Malaysia. Peninsular Malaysia is comprised of 11 states, while East Malaysia is comprised of two states, Sarawak and Sabah, which share the island of Borneo with Indonesia. The official language of the country is Malay, while English is widely spoken alongside Mandarin and Tamil, particularly among the minority Chinese and Indian communities. The total population of Malaysia is approximately 27 million (Ministry of Youth and Sports Malaysia, 2011).

The Malaysian youth community is multicultural and reflects the larger population, comprised of about 57 per cent Malay, 25 per cent Chinese, 7 per cent Indian, and 10.1 per cent non-citizen and indigenous population (Imam et al., 2009). The National Youth Societies and Youth Development Act 2007 define youth as those between the ages of 15 to 40 years (Act 668, Section 2). According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2010), this group comprises more than 41 per cent of the total population of Malaysia.

Rates of drug use, sexual promiscuity, HIV/AIDS, crime, divorce, children born out of wedlock, child abuse and others have been reported as being on the rise in Malaysia (Idris et al., 2008; Low, 2009). Social ills, among Malaysian youth in particular, are now of primary concern to the Malaysian public and are even the focal point of apocalyptic discourses on the general demise of the family and other major social systems (Krauss, 2008; Stivens, 2006).These trends have caused the Ministry of Youth and Sports to increase its emphasis and funding of youth programming to address the perceived negative social trends. Flagship national youth programmes such as Rakan Muda (Young Friends) and PLKN (national service), along with many small-scale and community-based efforts have been implemented throughout the country.

Despite the heightened emphasis on youth programs, there have been few formal efforts to assess youth work practice and how it impacts on programme effectiveness. Bandar Abdullah (2009) reported that only approximately 10 per cent of youth workers in the country have any formal certification in youth work. Due to the poor image of youth work as an occupation, there are concerns that youth workers are under-qualified and lack the professional practice and dedication that is normally required of human service professionals. As such, the professionalism of those working with young people has come into question (Bandar Abdullah, 2009).

As a field of practice, youth work is not new to Malaysia. A wide range of youth development initiatives have been implemented by government and non-governmental organizations to harness youth potential and capacity as partners in national development. Increases in the national development allocation for youth work and related programmes testify to national concerns and commitment to the nation's youth development agenda. According to the 9th Malaysia Plan (that is, the 5-year national development plan), the total development expenditure and

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allocation for youth development programmes by the federal government for years 2006–2010 was 5.46 billion Ringgit (approximately 2 billion USD), an increase of 10.3 per cent as compared to the 8th Malaysia Plan where it stood at 4.95 billion Ringgit (Ninth Malaysian Plan, 2006).

According to the Ministry of Youth and Sports, there are nearly 1,000 government-based direct service youth practitioners in Malaysia, coupled with approximately 1,000 more working in NGOs (Bandar Abdullah, 2009). Youth work in Malaysia is not yet a recognized profession and most youth workers and youth officers tend to be undervalued by the larger society for the work they do with youth (Azimi, 2005). However, substantial efforts have been made over the past 20 years in formalizing youth work toward higher levels of professional practice and formal recognition. Beginning as far back as the 1970s, youth work moved towards professionalization through in-service courses (Azimi, 1987). In the mid 1990s, in-service training evolved culminating in the creation of the Diploma in Youth in Development Work through an innovative partnership involving the Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP), Ministry of Youth and Sports Malaysia (KBS), and a Malaysian public university (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1997). The concerted role played by the three key partners was unprecedented for Malaysia and the Diploma still stands today as the flagship programme for youth work practitioner professional development (Azimi, 2004).

Since the development of the Diploma in Youth Work programme, however, there have been few formal efforts to enhance professional practice in youth work in Malaysia. Since 2005, Azimi and others have called for the creation of a code of ethics for youth workers and sets of practice standards as integral steps toward raising the level and quality of youth work in the country. Although the initiative has received widespread support, it has yet to be embraced by national-level policy makers.

In addition to the recommendations made by Azimi (2005) and others, another important omission related to Malaysian youth work practitioner professional development has been the lack of evidence-based tools for assessing youth work practice. To date, youth work practice has been difficult to assess due to the lack of localized, context-relevant models and measures of youth work as a basis. Without such mechanisms to assess professional practice, professional development efforts risk being irrelevant, ineffective or redundant. To address this need, the current study proposes a new model and measure of youth work professionalism relevant to Malaysian youth work practitioners.

Professionalism among Malaysian Youth Work Practitioners: A Measurement Model

The steady and ongoing professionalization of youth work has called for new standards of measuring professionalism in youth work practice. As mentioned, the youth

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work field lacks baseline instruments for measuring professionalism, such as those found in professions like pharmacy (see Chisholm et al., 2006) or medicine (American Board of Internal Medicine Committees on Evaluation of Clinical Competence and Clinical Competence and Communication Programs, 2001).

For the field of youth work, no known attempts to develop a professionalism scale have been located to date. For the purpose of measurement, this raises the question of what professionalism among youth work practitioners looks like. Although a clear answer to this question is difficult to come by, Davies (1988 as cited in Harte, 2000), with specific regard to youth workers, emphasized that to be professional in their work, youth workers require a combination of unique knowledge and skills. For example, they should be carefully selected, they should have an appropriate kind of education (although it was not mentioned as to what kind), they should have professional ethics, they should be able to extend the body of knowledge on which their work is based, and they should have supervision in order to preserve and deepen their trained skill. Davies' list of professional constructs reflects what has been mentioned by others about the unique skills and techniques that youth workers require given the nature of their multi-disciplinary work. Furthermore, youth workers also require ethical guidelines and professional guidance similar to those of social workers, teachers and other helping professionals who engage in direct-service, interpersonal work with young people and their communities (Harte, 2000).

Although a formalized model of professionalism in youth work has yet to be identified, Davies, Harte and others point to some key components of 'quality' youth work that helped inform the development of the professionalism model put forth in this study. The components include: specific knowledge and skills unique to youth work (competency); ethics (integrity); and values (care and concern).

The first component of the model, unique knowledge and skills, has been operationalized as core competencies of youth work (Center for Youth Development and Policy Research, 1993; National Collaboration for Youth, 2004). Astroth et al. (2004) define competencies in youth work as the 'knowledge, skills, and personal attributes workers need to create and support positive youth development settings' (Astroth et al. 2004: 27). As youth work is essentially developmental in its essence, being competent—possessing demonstrated knowledge and skill in working with young people—must be a key feature of its professionalism that also reflects 'quality practice' (Evans, 2008; Sockett, 1996).

The second component of the youth work practitioner professionalism model includes the key role of ethics, which can also be broadly described as 'integrity'. According to Sercombe (2010), the issue of ethics has much to do with the unique nature of the youth work practitioner–young person relationship that defines the field. Aside from youth work being broadly defined as a 'helping profession' in many instances, particularly when working with young people from at-risk settings, youth workers might also take on more intensive roles even in settings where they are supposed to be promoting healthy developmental outcomes and not engaging in deficit reduction. Many of these youth workers find themselves working with young people to help them overcome adversity and a variety of difficulties as a result.

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The professional relationship goes beyond the minimal contractual code of tit-for-tat or fee for service to embrace the worker's position as a healer. It is this stance of the worker as healer, and the covenant with the client that is established in the professional relationship that makes a worker a professional…. (Sercombe, 2010: 7).

Youth work practitioners as 'helpers' or 'healers' and the special covenant made with their clients calls on youth work practitioners to be professional. Similar to the weighty responsibilities that medical doctors, lawyers, social workers and even pharmacists might carry in their relationships with clients, the youth work relationship involves a healing or helping role with often vulnerable clients that requires specific knowledge and skills, trust and healthy boundaries. The youth work relationship thus starts 'from an understanding that there are a number of situations in which a person needs to be able to make themselves vulnerable', which can include the youth worker as well as the client (Sercombe, 2010).

By its nature as a helping occupation, youth work involves an altruistic quality similar to what is found among social workers, counsellors and other helping professionals, despite their qualitative differences. The aforementioned occupations typically work from a deficit orientation and toward the reduction of risk among at-risk populations, while youth work is grounded in positive psychology and the promotion of developmental outcomes for the broader youth population. Although the focus of youth work is developmental, even settings such as community-based after-school programmes can act as fertile ground for the formation of strong intergenerational ties and unique opportunities to form close bonds with youth (Rhodes, 2004). Despite the typically low salaries and status that tends to go along with paid youth work (not to mention the large number of volunteer workers), youth work practitioners are often motivated by a sincere desire to help young people.

The third component of our professionalism model thus reflects the selfless, helping spirit that is often neglected in discussions of youth work professionalism, and is scant in the research literature on youth work (Beker and Maier, 2001). Without this third component of professionalism, however, a youth work practitioner risks becoming a helper with the knowledge and skills to help, but who lacks the caring and concern to go the extra mile for their clients. It also reflects a deeper empathy of the disadvantages and challenges that many young people face, such as the desire to relate to them as people, and to advocate for them when needed. Arguably, this third component of professionalism provides the foundation for everything a youth worker does and determines how he or she applies their knowledge and skills when working with youth people.

Methods

The methodology described below is organized into five main sections: (*a*) development of the Youth Worker Professionalism Scale (YWPS); (*b*) data collection and sampling; (*c*) social desirability scaling; (*d*) psychometric analysis of the YWPS using principal component analysis; and (*e*) initial testing of the YWPS.

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Scale Development

To develop the professionalism scale, items were selected from two sources and validated with a team of eight youth researchers from a Malaysian public university. As professionalism scales specific to youth work did not exist, the research team reviewed professionalism scales from other disciplines (for example, pharmacy and medicine) and related tools such as youth worker core competency inventories, in an effort to determine their relevance to youth work professionalism. The specific items/concepts were then adapted for use in the new professionalism scale. The research team included seven Malaysians and one international researcher, who brought to the process several years of experience in direct service work with young people, programming, counselling, policy, and research on youth issues, including three members who were actively involved in the creation and dissemination of the Commonwealth Youth in Development Diploma course.

In our model, the three main factors of (*a*) competency; (*b*) integrity; and (*c*) care and concern were identified based on a combination of the literature and expert feedback from the research team, while the six subscales were confirmed through factor and psychometric analysis (Figure 1). For the competency subscale, items were selected from the Singapore National Youth Council's Core Competency Assessment Tool (2006). This instrument was chosen over other competency assessment tools due to the close relationship that Singapore and Malaysia share including a common history and similar ethnic makeup and culture, as Singapore was once a state within Malaysia. Furthermore, both countries rely on a large public role in the direction and implementation of youth development programmes.

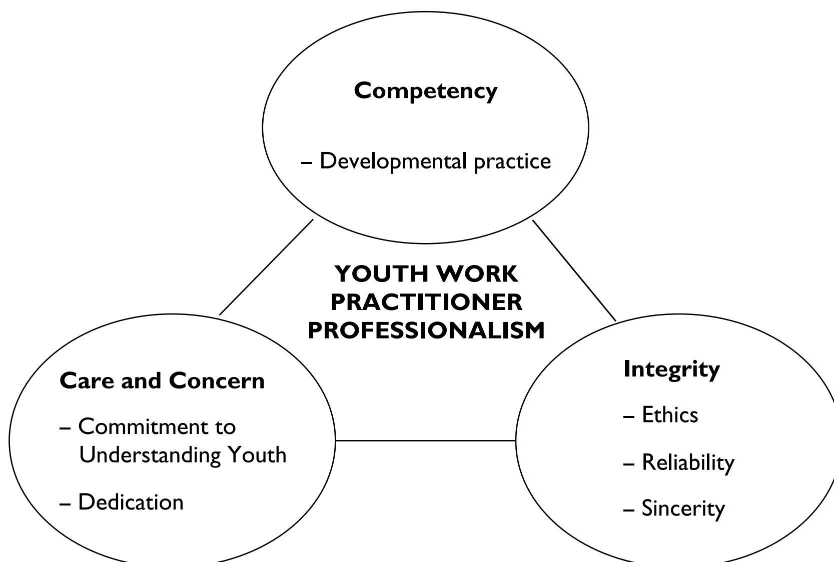

Figure 1. Youth Work Professionalism Scale Conceptual Model
Source: Authors' research.

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For the integrity and care and concern subscales, items were selected from the Pharmacy Professionalism Instrument (PPI) (Chisholm et al., 2006). As we recognized certain similarities between pharmacy and youth work, namely the human service factor and the emphasis on ethics and values in the context of the professional relationship (Sercombe, 2010), we used items from the PPI to construct the care and concern and integrity scales, with edits to wording to suit the field and local context (see Table 3 for scale items).

The study respondents were given a set of five-point Likert items pertaining to youth work practices. They were asked to indicate how frequently they engage in the practices with a response category of never (1), rarely (2), sometimes (3), often (4) and always (5).

Data Collection and Sampling

Procedures

Based on data provided to the researchers by the Malaysian Ministry of Youth and Sports, the total population of (organization-based) youth work practitioners in Malaysia was estimated to be 1,500. To ensure an adequate sample size, large-scale administration of the revised scale included 1,000 youth work practitioners from across the country, including both peninsular Malaysia and Borneo (Sabah and Sarawak states). Out of a total of 1,000 questionnaires distributed, 890 were returned. Following data cleaning and omission of incomplete surveys, the total number of respondents included in the analysis was 813. Depending on the location of the organization sampled, two methods of questionnaire administration were used, self-administered (n = 315) and mailed (n = 498).

The study respondents were selected from governmental organizations such as the Malaysian Ministry of Youth and Sports, the Malaysian Youth Council and its associate bodies who are involved in youth work activities. A list of potential respondents was initially developed based on the information given by the relevant agencies and NGOs. Respondents were randomly selected from the list and sent surveys either by mail or by drop-off method. Data collection was carried out for a period of four months. The questionnaire was presented in both Malay and English languages, and the respondents took an average of 20–30 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

Sample Description

Youth work practitioners were defined as those working with young people in direct-service youth-based activities, either on a full-time, part-time or volunteer basis. For the government sector, this included Youth and Sports Officers and Assistant Youth and Sports Officers. For the NGO sector, this included Secretariat members of youth organizations, executive committee members and volunteers. These definitions excluded officers or others who worked solely at the managerial or administrative levels without having direct contact with young people. A complete demographic profile of the study sample is shown in Table 1.

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Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents with Comparison of Means Tests ($N = 771$)

Variable	N	%	M(SD)	F	Variable	N	%	M(SD)	t
Age					Gender				
18–30	294	38.1	3.76(0.42)	10.05*	Male	392	50.8	3.93(0.43)	4.01*
31–35	172	22.3	3.97(0.43)		Female	379	49.2	3.80(0.46)	
36–40	97	12.6	3.88(0.41)						
41+	208	27.0	3.92(0.50)						
Academic Qualification					Marital Status				
SPM and lower	119	15.4	3.66(0.46)	11.08*	Single	268	34.8	3.77(0.44)	–4.24*
STPM[1]/Diploma[2]	244	31.6	3.89(0.45)		Married	503	65.2	3.91(0.45)	
Bachelor	237	30.7	3.95(0.42)						
Master/PhD	171	22.2	3.85(0.46)						
Race					Job Category				
Malay	530	68.7	3.87(0.47)	.03	Management/Professional	439	56.9	3.87(0.44)	.65
Chinese	140	18.2	3.85(0.42)		Support Staff	332	43.1	3.85(0.47)	
Indian	91	11.8	3.87(0.35)						
Other	10	1.3	3.87(0.62)						
Job Sector					Nature of Involvement				
Government	452	58.6	3.89(0.44)	2.45	Paid	454	58.9	3.88(0.47)	1.46
Non-Government	309	40.1	3.83(0.47)		Volunteer	317	41.1	3.84(0.42)	
Other	10	1.3	3.69(0.54)						

(*Table 1 continued*)

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(*Table 1 continued*)

Variable	N	%	M(SD)	F	Variable	N	%	M(SD)	t
Job Status					Youth Work Certification				
Permanent	630	81.7	3.87(0.44)	.53	Yes	94	12.2	4.04(0.42)	3.98*
Contract	99	12.8	3.82(0.48)		No	677	87.8	3.84(0.45)	
Temporary	42	5.4	3.86(0.49)						
Income (RM)[+]									
< 1000	54	7.0	3.70(0.60)	12.31*					
1000–2000	213	27.6	3.73(0.47)						
2000–3000	302	39.2	3.90(0.43)						
3000–4000	141	18.3	3.98(0.38)						
> 4000	61	7.9	4.04>(0.34)						
Years of Involvement in Youth Work				24.77*					
< 6	386	50.1	3.75(0.49)						
7–10	118	15.3	3.88(0.37)						
11–15	67	8.7	3.97(0.46)						
> 16	200	25.9	4.04(0.33)						

Source: Authors' research.

Notes: 1. STMP is a one-year post-secondary university preparatory programme.
2. Diploma is a three-year post-secondary degree similar to a junior college programme.
[+] 1RM = 0.26USD.
*Denotes significance at the $p < 0.001$ level.

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Social Desirability Scale

Prior to analysis, a social desirability (lie) scale was implemented to address the problem of socially desirable responding, a common phenomenon in survey testing dealing with sensitive topics. Poll data on sensitive subject matter such as morality, ethics and religion are notoriously unreliable, as individuals often describe their own behaviour inaccurately by answering questions according to what they think they should be doing (Robinson, 2001). To account for social desirability in surveying, social desirability/lie scales are used to respond to individuals' habitual response style and the goals and expectations that are aroused in situations of self-evaluation. The social desirability items present behaviours either socially desirable but uncommon, or socially unapproved of but very common among most people (Crowne and Marlowe, 1964). The rationale behind lie scales is that an average individual will not always behave in a socially desirable manner. Consequently, a person with higher need for approval would tend to present more socially desirable responses than the average (Leite and Beretvas, 2005).

To address social desirability, Leite and Beretvas (2005), in their extensive review of the literature on social desirability scaling, mention that some authors delete the scores of participants with high social desirability scores. In the current study, six items that were deemed to have a strong possibility toward social desirability were selected from the professionalism scale and parried out to form a lie scale, and subsequently removed from the focal scale for analysis (Sidek, 1998). Among the six items, respondents who showed a total summed score exceeding 90 per cent (> 27 out of a possible 30) were removed from the analysis (see Appendix A for items). From the results of the lie scale, 42 respondents (5 per cent) were removed, reducing the sample size to 771.

Psychometric Analysis

Following the implementation of the lie scale, an exploratory principal component analysis was conducted to determine the subscales of the YWPS. Six subscales resulted using response distribution, reliability (internal consistency), principal component analysis with oblique rotation and by determining the inter-dimensional correlations between the subscales.

Data Analysis

In addition to psychometric and principal component analyses of the professionalism scale, descriptive statistics and comparison of means tests (ANOVA) were conducted on the main professionalism scale for all demographic variables included in the profile section of the instrument. These included: age, academic qualification, race, gender, marital status, job sector, job status, job category, income, number of years involved in youth work, nature of involvement and youth work certification (see Table 1).

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Results

Psychometric Analysis of the Professionalism Scale

Response Distribution

For the overall Professionalism scale, although the distribution of responses among the 771 respondents had somewhat of a negative skew (–0.73), the value was within acceptable limits (that is, between –1.0 and +1.0) (Huebner et al., 2003).

Internal Consistency

We computed internal consistency estimates using Cronbach's coefficient alpha for the sample of youth work practitioners ($n = 771$). The internal consistency estimate for the overall scale was 0.87, while for the six subscales the estimates are shown in Table 2. Four of the six subscales indicated Cronbach alpha scores of above 0.7, while two of the scales, Reliability and Dependability and Sincerity (3 and 2 item scales, respectively), indicated alphas at 0.59. This is most likely due to the low number of items comprising the two scales.

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Cronbach Alpha Coefficients for Professionalism Scale and Subscales

Subscale	M	SD	α
Competency	4.25	0.60	0.91
• Developmental Practice (7 items)	4.25	0.60	0.91
Care and Concern	3.64	0.60	0.84
• Dedication (6 items)	3.90	0.62	0.78
• Commitment to Understanding Youth (6 items)	3.39	0.79	0.82
Integrity	3.96	0.56	0.68
• Ethics (4 items)	4.03	0.87	0.73
• Reliability and Dependability (3 items)	4.11	0.65	0.59
• Sincerity (2 items)	3.57	0.88	0.59
Professionalism (Total)	**3.95**	**0.46**	**0.87**

Source: Authors' research.

Exploratory Principal Component Analysis

Exploratory principal component analysis was conducted to determine the individual item loadings and component structure of the PFIL inventory. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity and the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy both indicated that the sample size and correlation matrix were adequate for conducting the analysis. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy index was 0.85, and Bartlett's test of Sphericity was significant, $\chi^2 = 10128.99$, $p < 0.0001$, indicating that the sample and correlation matrix were appropriate for the analysis (Ang, 2005).

We performed exploratory factor analysis using the principal component analysis extraction method with an oblique promax rotation on the initial 49-item instrument.

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An oblique rotation was used because we expected certain components relating to professionalism to correlate. The number of components to retain was based on a combination of methods (for example, Eigenvalue > 1.0, Scree plot) as well as conceptual clarity, interpretability and theoretical salience of the rotated components, and simple structure (Ang, 2005). Of the 49 items, we dropped 21 items from subsequent analyses because they loaded highly on more than one component, resulting in a 28-item instrument.

The component pattern and component structure coefficients are presented in Table 3, along with communalities (h2) of the measured variables. According to the component pattern and component structure coefficients, the first component consisted of eight items, accounted for 28.01 per cent of the variance, and was labelled Developmental Practice. The first component contained items that measure respondents' developmentally-based work with young people. Example items include 'I try to develop positive attitudes such as responsibility, respect and honesty among youth' and 'I encourage youth to develop positive relationships when working in groups'. Other items in the scale relate to quality youth programming practices such as 'I set clear goals when planning youth programs'.

The second component consisted of six items, accounted for 10.23 per cent of the variance and was labelled Dedication. This component contained items that measure respondents' concern and devotion to youth and youth work. Example items include 'I care for the welfare of youth' and 'I spend my own money to ensure the success of youth programs'.

The third component consisted of six items, accounted for 7.89 per cent of the variance and was labelled Commitment to Understanding Youth. This component contained items relating to continuing education in youth-related areas. Example items include: 'I attend courses/conferences related to youth development' and 'I read youth development related materials'.

The fourth component consisted of four items, accounted for 5.55 per cent of the variance and was labelled Ethics. This component contained items relating to ethical practices of youth work practitioners such as: 'I will break the rules if it brings higher reward' and 'I stop trying when I feel there is little chance of success'.

The fifth component consisted of three items, accounted for 4.81 per cent of the variance and was labelled Reliability and Dependability. This component contains items relating to reliability and dependability as a youth work practitioner including: 'If I'm going to be late for work, I contact the appropriate individual' and 'when I decide on a goal, I stick to it'.

The sixth component consisted of two items, accounted for 4.07 per cent of the variance and was labelled Sincerity. This component contained items relating to being honest even if it might result in negative consequences and persistence in completing one's work. The items are: 'I make honest comments even though they may hurt somebody' and 'I do not give up in achieving my goals'.

The percentage of variance explained refers to variance-accounted-for post-rotation. These components capture six different dimensions of factors and suggest that the instrument is multidimensional.

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Table 3. Rotated Component Pattern Matrix and Communalities for the Youth Work Professionalism Scale

Items	Component 1: Developmental Practice	Component 2: Dedication	Component 3: Commitment to Understanding Youth	Component 4: Ethics	Component 5: Reliability and Dependability	Component 6: Sincerity	h^2
1. I attend courses/conferences related to youth development			0.64				0.60
2. I read youth development related materials			0.62				0.59
3. I participate in youth development related research/ internships/extension programmes			0.85				0.62
4. I spend time building relationships with youth			0.57				0.71
5. I speak the 'youth lingo' when interacting with youth			0.67				0.62
6. I participate in youth activities			0.61				0.64
7. I try to develop positive attitudes such as responsibility, respect and honesty among youth	0.71						0.63
8. I emphasize positive values like caring, respect and responsibility in my work with youth	0.71						0.62
9. I encourage youth to develop positive relationships when working in groups	0.76						0.75
10. I receive positive responses from others when I make suggestions	0.68						0.57
11. I encourage youth to make suggestions during discussions	0.78						0.70
12. I set clear goals when planning youth programmes	0.86						0.73
13. I implement safety measures when conducting youth programmes	0.82						0.65
14. If I'm going to be late for work, I contact the appropriate individual					0.52		0.47

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15. When I decide on a goal, I stick to it			0.79		0.67
16. I always focus on the most important goal at a given time			0.75		0.71
17. I will break the rules if it brings higher reward (negative)		0.51			0.48
18. I make honest comments even though they may hurt somebody				0.73	0.63
19. I do not give up in achieving my goals				0.67	0.55
20. I stop trying when I feel there is little chance of success (negative)		0.69			0.61
21. I expect something in return when I help someone (negative)		0.71			0.54
22. I expect acknowledgement when I conduct youth activities (negative)		0.88			0.73
23. I care for the welfare of youth	0.62				0.61
24. I work with youth who come from different backgrounds (religion, race, etc.)	0.62				0.56
25. I spend my own money to ensure the success of youth programmes	0.71				0.54
26. I am willing to work overtime without any expectation of reward	0.63				0.46
27. I am sensitive to the latest issues affecting youths	0.59				0.53
28. I spend more time with problematic youths as compared to other youths	0.72				0.46

Source: Authors' research.

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Interdimensional Correlations

The component correlation matrix (Table 4) indicated that among the four subscales, the Developmental Practice scale correlated moderately ($r = 0.539$, $p < 0.01$) with the Dedication scale, as did the Developmental Practice scale and the Commitment to Understanding Youth scale ($r = 0.511$, $p < 0.01$). Dedication also correlated with Commitment to Understanding Youth moderately ($r = 0.413$, $p < 0.01$). Moderate correlations indicated some shared variance between the subscales, but ruled out multicollinearity.

Descriptives and Comparisons of Means

Descriptives for the overall scale and subscales are presented in Table 2. The mean score for the overall Professionalism scale was 3.95 (SD = 0.46). For the six subscale means, the highest were Developmental Practice (4.25, SD = 0.60), Reliability and Dependability (4.11, SD = 0.65) and Ethics (4.03, SD = 0.87) while the lowest mean scores resulted for Commitment to Understanding Youth (3.39, SD = 0.79) and Sincerity (3.57, SD = 0.88), while Dedication resulted in a score of 3.90 (SD = 0.62).

Results from the comparison of means tests for the demographic variables included in the study are presented in Table 1. Comparison of means tests (ANOVA and t-test) indicated significant differences in mean scores by age ($F = 10.05$, $p < 0.001$), academic qualification ($F = 11.08$, $p < 0.001$), income ($F = 12.31$, $p < 0.001$), years of involvement in youth work ($F = 24.77$, $p < 0.001$), gender ($t = 4.01$, $p < 0.001$), marital status ($t = -4.24$, $p < 0.001$) and youth work certification ($t = 3.98$, $p < 0.001$). The results indicate an increasing pattern in Professionalism for older, more educated, male, married, certified youth workers, implying that professionalism develops with age, experience, education and youth work-specific training.

Discussion

The youth service in Malaysia is at a critical juncture. With many years of experience under its belt, much has been learned from its successes and failures over the years. With various structures in place for youth worker development and the political will to invest in young people's healthy development in general, Malaysia is poised to catapult its youth service—with youth workers as the core—to new levels of formalization. With new initiatives such as the National Association of Professional Practitioners of Youth Work (NAPPYW), which is currently awaiting approval by the national government, the sector aims to take professionalization to the next level through the implementation of codes of ethics, monitoring, formalized professional development systems and others. Such initiatives are timely given the size of the youth population in the country and other factors discussed in this paper, such as increasing rates of social ills, ongoing racial tensions, economic uncertainty and an

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Table 4. Component Correlation Matrix for Youth Work Professionalism Subscales

	Developmental Practice	Dedication	Commitment to Understanding Youth	Ethics	Reliability and Dependability	Sincerity
Developmental Practice	1.000					
Dedication	0.539*	1.000				
Commitment to Understanding Youth	0.511*	0.413*	1.000			
Ethics	0.160*	–0.013	–0.006	1.000		
Reliability and Dependability	0.313*	0.305*	–0.005	0.069	1.000	
Sincerity	0.311*	0.122*	0.097*	0.332*	0.234*	1.000

Source: Authors' research.
*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

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unpredictable political climate. Undoubtedly, youth workers will be asked to give more in the years to come; they will be forced to take on new responsibilities that go beyond the traditional purview of programme provision and will be forced to take on the roles of counsellor, mediator, advocate, activist and educator. Within the context of these new roles and expectations, Malaysian society will look to them for answers and help. At that point, professionalism for Malaysian youth workers will no longer be a mere a luxury or strategy for enhancing the image of the field, but will become a necessity as these individuals will be at least partially responsible for the healthy development of nearly one-half of the nation's population. It is within this context that the issue of professionalism and professional conduct of Malaysian youth workers and the need for effective measurement tools to help them enhance their professionalism is undertaken.

In terms of the current study, there were important limitations that deserve mention. First, the findings of the study are based on self-report. Future research could include multiple data sources to observe professional conduct rather than relying solely on self-report measures (Hartje et al., 2007). Although the initial findings are a positive indication that the professionalism scale provides some early evidence of reliability and validity, additional content validation should be undertaken to ensure that the scale and its sub-constructs are indeed measuring the factors intended. As the scale was developed for a Malaysian population of youth work practitioners, exploratory component analysis was important for identifying the component structure, rather than relying solely on a theoretical model. Accordingly, we believe that one of the strengths of the process was the combination of methods used, which included a conceptual model to identify the three main constructs followed by statistical methods to arrive at the six subscales. As mentioned above, the study was conducted by a team of youth researchers and practitioners with many years of experience in the youth work field. This, we think, adds important credibility to the process and the output as much work went into the original thinking on what comprises youth work professionalism, despite the scant literature on the topic. Thus, the output reflects efforts to digest the related literature as well as group reflection from diverse experiences and research in Malaysian youth work. To take this one step further, broadening input from other youth work experts in the country would further strengthen the content validity of the scales.

In this article, the practice of grouping mean score results according to categories of low, moderate and high was avoided. As an initial study for developing the professionalism scale, it was important to establish the benchmarks first and to identify the appropriate factor structure before attempting to group respondents based on their scores according to classification. Too often, researchers are quick to label respondents without doing the necessary foundational work of establishing a reliable and stable factor structure for the scale in question and establishing benchmarks based on a sufficient sample size. In the present article, therefore, we chose not to group the results according to levels of professionalism, but rather limited our analysis to comparisons between groups. Future work should include the use of a larger sample of youth workers, tapping other private and NGO-based workers that were not included

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in the current study, along with the use of additional measures to explore convergent and discriminatory validity.

The initial findings using comparison of means test (ANOVA) indicate that education, certification, longevity and income are potentially significant factors related to youth work practitioner professionalism. Specifically, those youth work practitioners who have exceeded Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), or the Malaysian Certificate of Education level and those working six years or more in the field indicated significantly higher levels of professionalism, as well as those with bachelor's degrees or higher. This is in line with the current push for continuing education and higher salaries of youth work practitioners, and providing support for the need for youth work practitioners to increase their education, both formally and non-formally (Astroth et al., 2004). It also indirectly points to the importance of longevity in the field, an issue being taken up by researchers exploring predictors of intention to continue working with youth (Hartje et al., 2008). In their study, intent to continue working in the youth development field was higher for youth workers who reported higher overall job-related competencies and who received more professional development training. The current study is the first, however, to provide evidence of a relationship between length of service and professionalism, a potential area for further research.

Interestingly, the lowest mean score among the six subscales resulted for the Commitment to Understanding Youth scale. This scale includes three items that directly query respondents' level of involvement in youth development-related continuing education programmes. The item 'I participate in youth development related research/internships/extension programmes,' in particular, produced the lowest mean score for the entire 28-item scale (M = 2.84, SD = 1.24). This indicates the possibility of a lag in aspects of professionalism related to continuing education and professional upgrading. The finding could also reflect the largely top–down nature of youth programmes, particularly in the government sector in Malaysia, where workers are often required to attend training and other non-formal education programmes with few opportunities for self-selection according to one's interests or individual needs. It also reflects a need for youth work practitioners to expand their perspectives on youth, thus making programmes more relevant to the young people.

The early results indicate that more needs to be done to facilitate youth work practitioners' commitment to undertaking continuing education programmes. This is an area that can readily be addressed by bodies such as government ministries, who can encourage their youth work practitioners, particularly those who are younger and have lower levels of formal education, to further their education and/or pursue continuing education courses in youth development-related areas. The continuing upgrading of knowledge and competencies for youth work practitioners is critical to ensure high-quality youth work practice, for the key tasks and requirements of effective youth work practice require a professional level of training, sophistication, and skill (Beker, 2001).

It is, therefore, an important potential function of the YWPS to provide stakeholders with a measurement for identifying gaps in their workers' professional practice, helping them to act accordingly toward professional upgrading. Following further

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validation of the YWPS, the scale could be employed in the future as an assessment tool for youth work agencies and organizations to identify professionalism gaps among youth work practitioners, toward identifying their continuing education and professional development needs. This is an important gap in the field of youth work not only in Malaysia, as the field at large currently lacks such tools. At the present time, most youth work practitioners undertake further and continuing education based on personal career aspirations or by mandates from their organizational management, yet systematic approaches in many places are lacking. Enhancing professionalism requires professional development opportunities that extend beyond mere support for acquisition of new skills or knowledge toward incorporating occasions for youth work practitioners to critically reflect on their practice and fashion new knowledge and beliefs about the content and approach to their work with youth (Rizvi and Elliott, 2007). The scale presented in this study could thus be employed to assist organizations to systematically plan and coordinate the development of staff professionalism and continuing education. In so doing, the overall quality of services to young people as provided by youth-serving organizations can be enhanced.

Appendix A: Lie Scale Items

1. I participate in youth development-related research/internships/extension programmes.
2. I receive positive responses from others when I make suggestions.
3. I have done research on my youth organization's history.
4. I make honest comments even though they may hurt somebody.
5. I spend my own money to ensure the success of youth programmes.
6. I spend more time with problematic youths as compared to other youths.

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Steven Eric Krauss is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Social Science Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia. He received his Ph.D. in Youth Studies from Universiti Putra Malaysia in 2005. His research and teaching interests include youth development, human resource development, Islamic religiosity/spirituality and social work. [email: abd_lateef@hotmail.com]

Khairuddin Idris is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia. Khairuddin obtained his Ph.D. from the University of Georgia, USA, in adult education in 1994. His research interests focus on knowledge management, organizational learning and management. [email: kidin@putra.upm.edu.my]

Ezhar Tamam is an Associate Professor with the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia. He obtained his Ph.D. in Communication in 1994 from University of Oklahoma, USA. His research interests cover media and intercultural communication and youth development. [email: ezhar@fbmk.upm.edu.my]

Turiman Suandi is a Professor with the Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia. He received his Ph.D. in Extension Education from the Ohio State University, USA, in 1991. His research interests include youth development and volunteerism. [email: turiman55@gmail.com]

Ismi Arif Ismail is a Senior Lecturer with the Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia. He completed his Ph.D. in 2005 at Warwick University, UK. His research interests include youth development, continuing education, human resource development and leadership. [email: ismilina@hotmail.com]

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Nur Fatihah Abdullah Bandar is a Ph.D. candidate at Universiti Malaya's Asia–Europe Institute. She graduated from Universiti Putra Malaysia in 2009 with a Master's degree in Youth Studies with a focus on youth worker professionalism. [email: fatihah1984@gmail.com]

Dzuhailmi Dahalan is a Social Research Officer with Universiti Putra Malaysia. He received his Bachelor's degree in Human Resource Development from Universiti Putra Malaysia in 2002. Since then, his contributions to research and services have focused on the area of youth studies. [email: dzuhailmi@gmail.com]

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