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ETHICS AND THE IDEA OF A PROFESSION

Summary

The question of an ethics for youth work implies the question of youth work as a profession, just by virtue of the long association between thinking about professions and thinking about ethics. This chapter explores the idea of a 'profession' – both what professions are in practice, and what they should be in principle – from an ethical point of view. The conclusion is that in these terms, youth work is a profession, whether or not it is recognised as one and whether or not it organises itself that way.

As the first chapter indicates, this book is primarily interested in youth work ethics, not youth work as a profession. Like many youth workers, I have always been ambivalent on the question of whether youth work ought to consider itself a profession and whether it ought to organise itself as one (Walker 2002; Banks 2004). But you can't go far in an exploration of one without being confronted with the other. What you do with that depends greatly on how you define what a profession is and how you analyse the way a profession works.

A lot of the primary work on the professions has been done by sociologists, rather than philosophers (e.g. Durkheim 1957). As sociologists, their primary concern was to look at the professions in terms of their social function, their role in the economy, and the ways that professional status was able to leverage power. Their approach was to study the existing professions, identifying the features they had in common, and the way they worked on the ground.

The work was difficult, given the number of professions and the number of occupations aspiring to be professions, and the manifold complexity of the way that professions work in practice. Many of their judgements were harsh. According to commentators like Illich and his collaborators (1977), the professions operate as self-interested associations of the privileged (or aspiring thereto) who organise in order to:

- restrict entry to the profession, and therefore artificially inflate their own incomes by maintaining scarcity of professional labour,
- use their collective power to promote their own interests,
- make professionals less, not more, accountable by mystifying processes that are in themselves easy to understand,

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- disempower clients through the use of jargon and technical language, which puts their business out of their own reach, and
- protect each other by closing ranks when complaints are made against their members.

This analysis points out how corrupt the professions are, how they masquerade as something noble while acting as a vehicle for the greed of their members, and how they all support the *status quo*. Or, as George Bernard Shaw once said, ‘every profession is a conspiracy against the laity’ (Koehn 1994: 1). (We’ll look at the question of corruption in Chapter 17.)

The key positive legacy of the research was a way of defining the professions by listing their common traits. Greenwood’s (1957) influential paper, for example, used a kind of ‘ideal type’ analysis to paint a picture of the ‘typical’ or ‘iconic’ profession, based on the features that most professions had, or at least those that everyone agreed were professions. Occupations were deemed to be professions to the degree that they possessed these common traits. Others were classified as para-professions or quasi-professions or emerging professions.

Greenwood’s key attributes of a profession

A profession is a social grouping with:

- a systematic body of knowledge
- professional authority and credibility
- regulation and control of its members
- a professional code of ethics
- a culture of values, norms and symbols.

(Greenwood 1957)

A different idea of what a profession is

The problem with this analysis is that it confuses the idea of what a profession is at its core, its *essence*, with its external features, or its *attributes*. It’s like defining a person by their hair colour. In principle at least, you don’t develop a code of ethics or lobby for recognition in law in order to become a profession. *You do those things to defend the profession that you already are.*

This is really the project that Daryl Koehn took on in *The Ground of Professional Ethics* (1994). From the outset, Koehn’s intention was analytical. That is, she wasn’t so much interested in describing the professions by listing their attributes, like Greenwood and those following him were. This was another way of thinking. She wanted to identify the central core, the engine that drove them, the central logic.

Generally, the status of the three classical professions (law, medicine, the clergy) as professions is not disputed. There might be argument about who gets included in them, but the profession itself generally is not in question: if 'profession' means anything, it means these three. Using them, Koehn works with a long history of literature to try to discover the heart of the professions, and what makes them professions. Her philosophical technique is to test a range of candidates for the title to this central defining logic.

The first candidate might be that they are paid. The distinction here is between professionals and amateurs, or professionals and volunteers. She scotches this one fairly quickly. Boxers or hit men might be called professional, but we think that is a different animal from the one we are tracking. The clergy have often not been paid for what they do, but the clergy is still seen as a profession. And conceptually, there is a tradition that the fee is not a wage or a payment for services delivered, but a grateful contribution for the support of the professional who also needs to eat and pay the bills. Koehn cites the very old law, still current in the USA, that a lawyer may not sue for their fee (1994: 50).

The second candidate is expertise. This has a better chance. These people are good at what they do. They have trained a long time, they know their stuff, they are 'true professionals'. They can be trusted because of this expertise. Koehn isn't convinced by this either. Working with a professional requires a great deal of trust because the professional relationship often involves disclosing things that we would really prefer to keep to ourselves: unsightly growths or infected wounds, compromised behaviour, guilty consciences. How does expertise merit our trust?

At one level, expertise works. I know, or am pretty sure, that you, as a professional, can fix this problem I have, if anybody can, because of your skill and because you know your stuff. So I can trust you. But, Koehn argues, expertise has no moral compass. The human guinea pig experimenters in Hitler's concentration camps were skilled, but expertise engendered no obligation to cure the patient, or even to treat the patient with respect (Weindling 2005). This is the limitation of using *competence* as a measure of the professions or as a basis for professional training or accreditation. Sure, it is a necessary condition, but it is far from sufficient. Otherwise manipulative, pathological but skilled youth workers would be just fine.

A third candidate is the idea of contract. Professionals can be trusted because I can make a binding agreement with the professional to fix the problem I have. I pay their fee, whether directly or indirectly through the state, and they fix my problem. It is a transaction, in which I am the customer. No altruism is expected or sought: we are in this for our mutual benefit, and the professional is accountable through the contract. This doesn't work either. Following William May (1975), Koehn argues that it is difficult to contain the professional relationship within a contract because you often don't know what the outcome will be at the beginning. So how do you set out the terms of the contract? The relationship needs to be open-ended, open to discovering new things. It is much more like a journey than a transaction: some of those new things we might not like, but they are part of the journey.

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May argues that the professional relationship is not a buyer/seller-like one, but more a marriage-like relationship in the for-better-or-worse sense. It is, May argues, a kind of partnership, a *covenant*, not a contract. Young people are not our customers, they are our clients. We do not provide a service, we serve.

Example

We live on the river in Glasgow, the Clyde, across from the last of the shipyards. One evening, I was home around dinner time, getting ready to go out to a meeting and there was a bit of a commotion outside. There was a girl, very drunk, in a flimsy dressing gown and bare feet in the freezing cold and on the wrong side of the railings. If she went in, and that is what she said she wanted to do, there wouldn't have been much that anyone could have done.

I have no contract with her. As a private citizen, I have a responsibility to look out the window and call the police or the ambulance, no more – the general moral obligation that anyone has for 'easy rescue' (Reiman 1990). As someone who provides youth work services, I am a trainer and researcher. No one has funded me for suicide prevention. It is outside hours and I am off duty. As a youth worker, however, my professional responsibility is to do what I can. And yes, eventually, she came back on to the path, and eventually the ambulance and the police arrived and they were doing a sterling job and I left them to it, after checking that that was what she wanted to happen. Am I a hero? No. It took a little time, but I was dressed up warm and on the right side of the railings. I was just being a youth worker. No youth worker would do any differently. Would they?

There is something else wrong with contract. The covenant of the professional relationship demands more of the client than that they simply 'receive the service'. If transformation is going to happen, it is the client who does that, not the professional. The professional may be the catalyst, but it is still the client who does the work. Or not. If it fails, Koehn suggests, it is quite proper to ask myself 'Has this particular physician failed me or have I failed my physician?' (Koehn 1994: 46). The idea of contract is wrong also because it erodes client discipline.

Having worked through a couple of other possibilities, she comes to a conclusion. The clue is in the name. A *professional is someone who professes*, who makes a profession of some kind. In other words, a vow, a pledge, a commitment. A professional is someone who commits him or herself to serve some sort of constituency, typically people in some state of vulnerability, with a particular focus to their service. This is essentially a *moral* position, an ethical commitment to serve. All the professions, she argues, are constituted in this way.

A profession is a relationship

This turns the question on its head. *A profession is defined not by a set of practices, but by a relationship.* A dentist isn't someone who fixes teeth. A dentist is someone who works with people to ensure their mouths stay healthy. The implications of this shift are very interesting indeed.

First, it means that the term 'professional' does not initially describe a state or a status. It is a relational term, like parent or partner. As a parent must have a child, so there must also be, for a professional, a client. If there is no client, there is no professional. Greenwood's list of attributes of a profession suddenly becomes very secondary indeed.

Second, the relationship is intentionally limited (Bayles 1981). These limits are in place in order to create conditions of safety within which a client can make themselves vulnerable. Typically, this is through some sort of disclosure: a client is able to tell someone about ugly, guilty, embarrassing, dangerous or broken aspects of themselves. The idea is that the opportunity for such disclosure can be the first step towards healing and transformation. When commentators talk about the importance of trust, they are talking about the process by which a client makes the decision that it is safe to be vulnerable with you.

In our work, the disclosure is often not verbal, and the intervention we take is often not verbal either (Morgan and Banks 1999). It might just be that we know about some of the circumstances that young people have to live with. We then create a kind of space within which options, alternatives, and different ways to be can emerge. Talking is important, but it doesn't mean that nothing has happened if the chat hasn't happened. We also wouldn't see young people's vulnerability as a product of any deficit in young people as such. Young people are emerging into adulthood, and there is a transformation that is going on in the teenage years, a confirmation of the self and the young person's position among their peers and in the world. This process involves some risk. Social conditions of exclusion and poverty exacerbate the risk, and distort what should be (and still is for many) an interesting, difficult, fun, liberating, celebrated process. Youth work creates spaces within which that can happen well, and walks with young people through the process of it happening.

This understanding is, I think, critical. Our profession, and others, work to create a kind of sacred circle within which we will meet a client (to use the general term), work with whoever they are, and whatever they have done, in order to create possibilities of transformation (see Chapter 16). It is a partnership within that space – a covenant, to use May's term – in which youth worker and young person work together to heal hurts, to repair damage, to grow into responsibility, and to promote new ways of being. This might include trying to change the external circumstances that prevent new ways of being, or that created the distortions in the first place. It doesn't always work, but it does often enough.

Third, the usual characteristics of a profession – codes of ethics, professional associations, training and recognition in law – are essentially strategies designed to protect the inner and outer integrity of that circle. In terms of the inner

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integrity, they are designed to ensure that the intimacy developed within that circle stays within its purpose: the healing, defence and transformation of the client. Sexual expression is excluded from the relationship because it exploits an intimacy which had a different pretext, and which held a promise that it would be protected from the complications and mixed motives of sexual demand (see Chapter 12). Economic intimacies, such as gifts, inheritances or exchanges are similarly excluded (see Chapter 14).

In terms of the outer integrity, the practice of confidentiality makes sure that the safety of the professional relationship is not betrayed by exposure to the outside world – even to other professionals – without the overt consent of the client (see Chapter 11). The principle of non-maleficence (‘do no further harm’) that appears in many professional codes of ethics takes responsibility for ensuring that the relationship does not put the client in further jeopardy (see Chapter 13).

Contrary to the view put by commentators such as Greenwood, therefore, Koehn argues that a profession is not constituted by features like codes of ethics, professional associations and university training. The profession already exists. These instruments are put in place to protect and strengthen the professional commitment that is already made.

Fourth, the relationship is not a symmetrical relationship but a relationship of service. It is in its nature other-directed. The professional is there to serve the client, not the other way round (see Chapters 15 and 17). It is not the case that we give the young person something, and they are then obliged to give something to us. They are obliged to give *nothing* to us, not even gratitude (though that is nice when it happens). They aren’t even obliged to like us. Their only obligation in the transaction is to engage in developing their own ethical agency. Professional service certainly has its rewards, and some of them may come from clients, but we aren’t hard done by if they don’t, and clients aren’t responsible for them (see Chapter 4). In particular, the professional relationship is not a commercial or contractual relationship, though contracts can sometimes be used within them (May 1975). Clients are not customers, buying a service. Service is primarily a verb, something we do, not a noun, a product we deliver.

Are young people ‘clients’?

We have had lots of conversations in the preparation of this book about the term ‘client’. Youth workers often react to it, especially in the UK. It does depend a bit on where you live: North American, South African and most Australian youth workers seem pretty comfortable using the term. Some British youth workers hear connotations of condescension or lack of respect which they find hard to look past.

Substitutes are, however, routinely weak and ambiguous. *Constituency* is probably the best of them because it means that the youth worker is constituted by young people, that the power comes from them, and that we are accountable to them. But it doesn’t recognise what is often our prior initiative

in the relationship, or really describe the quality of the relationship. It also doesn't evoke the 'professional' as the other side of the relationship: the responsive term is probably something like 'delegate' or 'representative'. *Participant*, unless we develop an expanded meaning, primarily describes a relationship with the programme, not with the youth worker.

Some youth workers don't like the term because it implies an unequal power relationship, with the youth worker as expert, further disempowering young people (Walker 2002). But the relationship *is* a power relationship (see Chapter 15), and it isn't symmetrical. Good youth workers *are* expert (brilliant, in fact) at empowering people. Recognising the power imbalances means you take responsibility for your power in the relationship, and young people want us to be powerful on their behalf, knowing that that will not mean that we are oppressive or dominating.

The National Youth Agency code just uses 'young people'. But a young person is a young person irrespective of the relationship with a youth worker: the term says nothing special about the young person *in* the relationship, or what the relationship is. It doesn't allow you to distinguish between a young person you have a professional responsibility for and one you don't. The Victorian Code of Ethics (Youth Affairs Council of Victoria 2008) used '*primary concern*' and that is OK too, but has the problem of being unilateral: it is the youth worker who has the concern.

'Client' describes a relationship, a covenant, a partnership – in fact, all the things I have just been saying. And paradoxically, the relationship it describes is one in which the client has a great deal of power, and is active in pursuing the goals of the relationship and in holding their professional accountable.

I think the term needs to be rehabilitated. In itself, it is a good word. The smell of condescension isn't anything to do with the actual meaning of the word (its denotation) but the odour it has picked up from the corruptions of the professions (its connotation), particularly their temptation to elevate their own status at the expense of their client. It doesn't have that connotation everywhere: I doubt whether a billionaire businessman feels inferior when he is described as a client by his lawyers or accountants, so it isn't anything in the word itself. Sometimes, the term is seen to be limited to a particular context, such as closed-door counselling, but again, if you move outside social work and psychology into professions like law and engineering, those implications disappear. When I say that a young person is my client, that implies a whole set of obligations to that person that come from my understanding of the professional relationship: about what this is for, about whose interests are to be served, about who needs to be protected and how they need to be protected. I think that the concept deserves another go.

In this book, when I am talking about the relationship between a youth worker and the person they are working with, I will generally use the term 'young person', as youth work discourse prescribes (see Chapter 3). The equivalent relational term for 'professional', however, is 'client'. So when I talk about the youth worker *as a professional*, I will also need to talk about the young person *as a client*.

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Conclusion

So is youth work a profession? At its core, the professional, as Koehn describes it across the classical professions, is constituted by a particular kind of relationship with the client. It is a relationship in which the client is to some extent vulnerable – to sickness, to accusation, to spiritual dislocation. The dimensions of their vulnerability may not be known beforehand, and so the relationship cannot be just a matter of commercial contract: it must be to some extent open-ended. In the light of their vulnerability, the client needs to be able to trust the professional to act in ways that protect them, and which do not exploit the intimacy evoked when people talk about sensitive matters or put themselves into another's hands. This trust may be based on the individual professional's reputation or recommendation from others, but more fundamentally rests on the professional's own public commitment to serve.

In these terms, youth work is clearly a profession. It is precisely a practice in which clients, at a point of vulnerability, are engaged in an intentionally limited (and therefore safe) relationship directed towards the transformation of their situation. To borrow Marx's terminology, youth work is a profession 'in itself' (it meets all the objective criteria) whether or not it is organised as a profession 'for itself' (self-conscious and aware of its identity and its obligations).

If that is so, then like other professions, youth work is grounded in its core ethical commitment, its public pledge to its client group. It is not that youth work *has* an ethics; rather, that youth work *is* an ethics. It is a practice of promoting justice, wholeness, and, if you will allow the somewhat old-fashioned language, individual and collective virtue: better people in a better world (Young 2006). But that needs filling out. Who is our client, then? What is a young person, such that we are called to work with them? What is the nature of our commitment? What are its limits? And how do we balance that against the other obligations that we have – to parents, to funding bodies, to our employers, to society in general?

Things to consider

This chapter has acknowledged the dangers of corruption that all professions (and, indeed, all organised and powerful groups of people) are prone to. In the light of that (acknowledging also that 'unprofessionalised' practitioners aren't necessarily squeaky clean either), do you think that youth workers in your region or country should be working towards setting up a professional association for youth workers? Should this include compulsory tertiary education and registration (and deregistration) processes, so that you couldn't call yourself a youth worker unless you were trained and registered?