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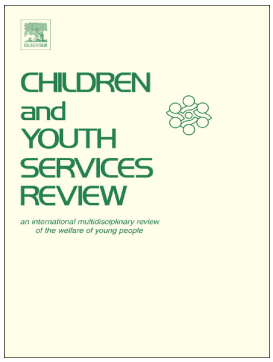

The reality of relationships with young people in caring professions: A qualitative approach to professional boundaries rooted in virtue ethics

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The reality of relationships with young people in caring professions: A qualitative approach to professional boundaries rooted in virtue ethics.

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BIOGRAPHY (UP TO 150 WORDS)

Having completed an ethnographic study of youth clubs for his PhD at Durham University, Peter has worked on projects researching young people's politics, community development, models of leadership in churches, and now as a research fellow evaluating Character Education curricula at the University of Leeds. He worked as a practitioner for 10 years in church-based and local authority settings, where he also acts as deputy director for the Centre for Policy Studies in Education.

THE REALITY OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE IN CARING PROFESSIONS: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH TO PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES ROOTED IN VIRTUE ETHICS.

ABSTRACT

The rigidity of professional boundaries have been critiqued in previous work and alternative models and metaphors have been offered, however few are rooted in empirical research that highlights normative practices. In this article, professional boundaries are examined in light of an ethnographic study into youth work practice in the UK. The quasi-quantitative language around boundaries (e.g. someone is 'too close' to a client) can be considered unhelpful and fail to reflect the complex reality of youth workers' practice (and those of wider caring professions), where relationships between youth worker and young person are based on multiple interrelated aspects. It is suggested, therefore, that a qualitative approach to boundaries is adopted based on interactions that differ in *kind* rather than *quantity*. This approach to boundaries is then rooted in virtue ethics to provide a framework that makes the adoption of qualitative professional boundaries plausible.

KEY WORDS

caring professions, ethnography, professional boundaries, virtue ethics, youth work.

Since introduced by Freud, 'boundaries' have become the dominant metaphor used to describe the limits of acceptable behaviour in professional relationships in the UK[1]. Discourses on relationships between members of the 'caring professions' and their clients are saturated with language that assumes a relationship can be judged on discrete aspects (for example, a professional is 'too close' to the client, or they are sharing stories that are 'too personal'). The perception of 'too much' of an aspect of a relationship implies a quantitative measurement and can suggest that boundaries exist on a sliding scale. Often these boundaries can appear 'fixed' on that scale. Even in organisations where there is room for flexibility the assumption is still that there is one discrete scale for a specific aspect of the relationship: for example, self-disclosures can be deemed appropriate or inappropriate without reference to the wider relationship shared with the young person.

[1] For example, the UK Institute for Youth Work code of ethics says 'Our relationship with young people *remains within professional boundaries* at all times, to protect the young person and the purpose of the work.' (emphasis in the original), found at https://iyw.org.uk/code-of-ethics/.

The aim of this article is to use empirical evidence from an ethnographic study of relationships in youth work to argue that this common discourse does not always reflect the complexity of professional relationships with young people, and offers an alternative conceptualisation of interactions through considering boundaries qualitatively. That is, interactions within a professional relationship should be understood as different in *kind* rather than *severity;* in *quality* rather than *quantity*. Therefore I refer to these as 'qualitative boundaries'. This is done through exploring the eight dominant themes of the youth work relationship from this study: self-disclosures, the youth worker's role in the wider lives of young people, setting an example, offering respect, use of authority and power, prioritising needs and best interests, formality and distance, and trusting young people. It then considers virtue ethics as a framework to begin theorising the notion of qualitative boundaries. Although this article is relevant to all caring professions (community work, nursing, social work, etc), the empirical research investigated youth work in the UK, where the informal and young-person centred nature exemplifies the kind of relationships that are difficult to quantify through traditional discourses on boundaries.

The article begins with a review of the literature into existing critiques of 'professional boundaries', explores evidence of the importance of young people engaging in relationships with adults, and finishes with specific boundary issues within youth work. The ethnographic methodology is then presented, followed by a presentation of the key themes and how they relate to each other to evidence how considering appropriate behaviours and interactions in a relationship with young people are better understood as *kinds* of behaviours than a *quantity* of a particular aspect of a relationship. Finally, virtue ethics is used as a dialogical partner to explore the notion of qualitative boundaries further.

BOUNDARIES AND RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN YOUNG PEOPLE AND ADULTS

The concept of the boundary dominates professional discourses on ethics and good practice, however there is a growing dis-ease with the metaphor. The assumption boundaries should be rigid is being met with an increased awareness that they fail to reflect the realities of everyday practice in many social professions (Meltzer et al., 2016, Murphy and Ord, 2013, Bates et al., 2015, Walker and Larson, 2006)(AUTHOR). The work of Marshall and Mellon (2011) particularly highlights the dilemma of practitioners placed in difficult situations when they feel compelled to choose between the best interests of the child and the boundaries of

their organisation. Often, they found, the boundaries take precedence at a time that may be detrimental to the young person/child.

'Boundaries' were founded in a therapeutic setting where the clients are likely to be particularly vulnerable and the power differential between professional and service user are likely to be greater. Therefore, despite best intentions, they can become incongruent with the aim of other professions (O'Leary et al., 2013, Shevellar and Barringham, 2016), especially in organisations where managerialism is in danger of replacing professional wisdom and the dynamism that comes from autonomy once inherent in professional roles.

This can increase the distance between young people and professionals at a time when research is showing that relationships with trusted adults outside the home are a key indicator to a successful transition into adulthood. Abbott-Chapman et al. (2008) found less formal adult and peer support was seen as particularly helpful by the young people who need support, and other empirical studies have found that young people are more likely to engage in 'risky' behaviour without non-parental adult support (Bond et al., 2000), and they are less likely to be 'ready-for-work' if they have few adults engaged in their lives (Phillips et al., 2002). Taylor (2003) extends this to argue that profound psycho-social changes become increasingly stressful and confusing if coupled with a difficult time (such as the death of a loved-one) without supportive adult relationships outside the home.

Research has also shown supportive adult relationships can be of proactive benefit to young people. In Jones' (2011) interview-based study, young people are shown to build greater social capital and develop more 'competencies' if they engage with adults who adopt 'relational strategies'. Similarly, Sanders et al. (2017) found that in social work relationships young clients were more receptive to interventions when the practitioners had formed meaningful relationships. The rise in social capital through relationships also increases the self-confidence and resilience of young people (McCay et al., 2011), and young people are more likely to achieve personal goals with adult support (Zeldin et al., 2005:3), however Abbott-Chapman et al. (2008:618) found many young people do not have access to these relationships. The work on Positive Youth Development has led to intentionally developing relationships with adults outside the home that seeks to reduce barriers between young people and adults, however in some of this work the safeguarding and ethical implications have not been fully explored (for example, the interesting work by Hamilton et al., 2016: uses the benefits of social capital as a motivator to increase this kind of work, but without elaborating on how these relationships could be built safely).

Barriers to adult relationships with young people are legion in a culture in which 'youth' and 'adulthood' are artificially separated (Jeffs and Smith, 1999:3, Holloway and Valentine, 2003, Holland, 2004, Mizen, 2004, Zeldin et al., 2005:1, Yaconelli, 2006). The effects of this are documented in a range of research, including: acknowledging young people do not enjoy their relationships with many adults (Rishel et al., 2007) and that previous relationships with adults have been unreliable or authoritarian which negatively affects their willingness to engage with other adults (Taylor, 2003:8). Professional boundaries are, perhaps, also part of the wider distancing of young people from potential close, supportive relationships with adults we see in society.

RELATIONSHIPS IN YOUTH WORK

Therefore, we have inherited a situation where adult relationships are seemingly required to help young people navigate the socially constructed age of adolescence, while simultaneously (and for many laudable reasons) allowed fewer socially and professionally acceptable opportunities for young people to build those relationships with adults outside the home. Traditionally youth work has been seen as providing a less formal adult/young person relationship that could overcome this imbalance.

Youth work in the UK (and beyond) is often conceived of as focussing on the holistic development of young people. It is an educational endeavour often rooted in a sense of social justice, where workers often offer support and advice to young people in an informal, usually group, setting. Youth work has at its core a relationship between young people and youth workers through which change is negotiated (Ingram and Harris, 2005:16-8, Jeffs and Smith, 2010, Collander-Brown, 2010:41, Ord, 2007:7, Nicholls, 2012:42). Practitioners may use various activities to aid them in building this relationship (Harte, 2010), however these are often considered secondary to the educative or developmental tasks of youth work. Procedures that frustrate this relationship are often viewed negatively by practitioners (Hingley and Mandin, 2007, Turney, 2012, Larson, 2006:684, Krauss et al., 2012:305, see also Smith and Smith, 2008, Andersson, 2013). In a wider context, globally youth work is increasingly influenced by the Positive Youth Development movement, that also recognise and strongly recommend the reduction of barriers in youth/adult relationships to achieve meaningful change (Larson, 2006, Hamilton et al., 2016).

A healthy relationship with a youth worker is argued to create spaces for reflection, growth, increase in wellbeing, and flourishing (Dunning, 2010, Ward, 1998:53, McLeod,

2010:772, Rhodes, 2004) and the youth worker can be best placed to offer meaningful support if (or when) difficulties emerge for the young person (Taylor, 2003:6, 152). Though concepts of informality, intimacy and friendship are common in discourses around youth work relationships (Jones and Deutsch, 2011) authors differ on their approach. Some see friendship as a useful concept for helping prevent an imbalance of power (e.g. Walker and Larson, 2006:110, Blacker, 2010:29, Jeffs and Smith, 2005:8). Others however, prefer the relationship to be based on trust without friendship (Batsleer and Davies, 2010:3). Sapin (2009:69) echoes a common theme in the literature, suggesting youth workers need to be 'friendly' (i.e. showing interest and receptivity), without becoming friends. Or, as Blacker (2010) suggests, the word 'friendship' may have become unfashionable as the language of 'client' and 'provider' have become more commonplace; though she notes that in some voluntary work the idea of 'befriending' is still current. Walker and Larson (2006) argue that youth workers are more effective if they engage in 'peer-like' ways: 'a personal bond [is] helpful in building rapport, motivating youth, and gaining trust' (p110). Sercombe (2010:120) explains:

> *Our capacity for empathy, to be able to connect with the emotional state of the young person we are working with, to understand the emotional space and to work with a young person in it – these are core skills of youth workers. You can't do it if you are not emotionally available.*

Despite this, the unquantifiable nature of relationships make them rare in policy documents or funding criteria despite practitioners feeling there are of great import: 'even if we do not consciously "educate" or "counsel" but spend our time "being with" someone then we may be doing something of incalculable value' (Jeffs and Smith, 2010:30). Although epistemic outcomes are often resisted by the youth work community in the UK, the prevalence of neoliberalism has required some forms of youth work to shift in emphasis towards a more formal and contract based relationship (De St Croix, 2016:1-2).

VIRTUE AS A BASIS FOR PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

From the 1980s there has been a rise of an externally controlled, homogenising, managerial systems within western public services that focussed on targets and outcomes (Banks 2004:38, Gilchrist 2004:76, 18). This has had a profound effect on ethical discourses in practice, encompassing the elements of Kantian, rights-based, and utilitarian philosophies that offer a sense of consistency by judging actions against predefined 'rules' or principles. These sets of managerial or bureaucratic rules can increase the good the organisation can

achieve if they enable a greater level of efficiency, however they may be predominantly motivated through an attempt to protect an organisation from accusation and blame rather than the best intentions for young people (Belton, 2009:119). Despite its advantages in efficiency and conformity, the steady increase in managerialism in youth work over the last two decades has produced professional boundaries which conceive of youth workers as an object of risk (Beck, 1992) and aim to distance the worker from the young person (Banks, 2004:20-1, Banks, 1999:5, Austin et al., 2006:81, Kelly, 1990:167, Knapp and Slattery, 2004:555, Popple, 1995:75, Powell, 1990:178). In Beck's theory, this happens when managers see practitioners as an 'object-of-risk' and young people as an 'object-at-risk', and as physical separation is not possible or desirable, boundaries become the mechanism through which they seek to distance the object-at-risk from the object-of-risk.

Virtue ethics is becoming increasingly used as an alternative framework for professional ethics (Moore and Grandy, 2017, Sinnicks, 2014, Banks and Gallagher, 2009, Carr, 2011, Russell, 2014). With virtue ethics, each situation is taken as a discrete phenomenon (Hursthouse, 1999:85-6). In all decisions, McDowell (1997:162) explains, a virtuous person is not one who decides what to do through applying principles, but "one who sees situations in a certain distinctive way" influenced by having a disposition to display certain characteristics. Thus decisions about how to engage with a young person come about through approaching the relationship from a perspective that enables the worker to make judgements about how to use the various aspects of the relationship flexibly.

To act rightly is therefore a creative endeavour, that makes reference to particular contexts, and may deal with 'the rare, the unusual, the highly specific' (Griffin, 1998:60). That said, many virtue ethicists recognise that there are broadly predictable patterns to human behaviour (Griffin, 1998:60, MacIntyre, 2011, Wolfgang, 2005). Therefore, this flexibility is not arbitrary or inconsistent, but grounded. Whether referring to MacIntyre's 'practice' and 'heroic stories', Aristotle's 'Polis', Hursthouse's appeal to the 'social and rational animal', or Hauerwas's 'community', the virtues are often referred to as being situated in some kind of tradition or narrative, opposed to being purely situated in an objective natural law. Within the caring professions there is a community or practice and set of professional aims and standards that roots the virtues in a tradition.

The helpfulness of rigid boundaries are, therefore, disputed. They offer the basis of safe forms of practice to some, but can be paternalistic, work against the aims of a profession, and distance young people from adults when they may benefit from a closer relationship. Youth work particularly emphasises this professional-peer tension through its informal

nature, often based in young people's social space, and traditionally is rooted in closer relationships with young people than they share with other 'professionals'.

METHODOLOGY

This ethnography included observations, interviews, and focus groups in four youth work organisations simultaneously across an 8 month period. The organisations were chosen based on a 'most difference' approach within north east England, to compare sufficiently different organisational cultures (Ragin and Rihoux, 2009:xvii) and how that affects ethical practice in youth clubs. The choosing of centres focussed around differences in sector, management, funding and aims, however all clubs were defined by offering centre based, voluntarily accessed, universal youth provision. Four organisations were chosen, with two from the Christian and two from the 'secular' sectors. Each was funded through a different mechanism: one was a local authority-run centre in the heart of an area of multiple deprivation (abbreviated as the LAYC), another a community-run centre in an ex-mining village (CCYC), the third a church-based project funded through secular charities also in an area of multiple deprivation (Youth Café), and finally a congregation-funded youth ministry in a more affluent small city (YM).

In total there were ninety-two observations (at total of around 250 hours), nineteen interviews with workers and managers, and six focus groups with young people. The ages of the young people observed were from 10 to 18, with a roughly equal gender split over all, however one organisation (the CCYC) was almost exclusively female, while the Youth Café was almost exclusively male. The focus groups had a total of 30 young people, 13 male and 17 female.

The analysis was conducted inductively, attempting to allow the data to 'speak' (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007:11, Greener, 2011:90-1), though there was an underlying interest in ethical practice when entering the field by the author. As a result, an abductive strategy was adopted (Blaikie, 2007:8, 64-7), recognising the cyclical relationship between pre-existing research and analysing the themes emergent from the data. Using NVivo, I began with some basic descriptive analysis during the field work. These were codes that had clear, bounded, usually objective categories (LeCompte and Schensul 1999:62, Silver and Lewins 2007:71). Coding the data required pulling together similar examples of phenomena experienced in the field work in an attempt to 'give meaning' to the raw observations and

transcripts (LeCompte and Schensul 1999:3-5, 57). The process of drawing out and developing inferred themes took three full readings of all the field notes and transcripts, with some key field notes and passages re-read several more times. The process of inductive coding was used, beginning with having many codes covering every conceivable theme, followed by a second pass of axial coding where those codes are grouped together with a greater focus, and finally selective coding, returning to the data in an attempt to find more examples of the emerging themes (Silver and Lewins 2007:84-85).

I gained ethical approval through the usual university procedures, which was predominantly concerned with consent, privacy and preventing harm. That helped me to consider some predictable ethical considerations, and I considered these the foundation on which to further build an ethical piece of research. In particular, consent was considered flexibly, and during the process of observations it was sometimes obvious young people did not want to be observed (through body language or conversation), and at those times I moved to observe another space in the centres.

THE REALITY OF PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN YOUTH WORK SETTINGS

In this section I present the findings from this research, and highlight what the reality of relationships between young people and youth workers could mean for dominant discourses on professional boundaries.

Through the analysis of the data I recognised several associated aspects of the youth work relationship. In order to progress to the focus of the article, I have briefly summarised them here:

- **self-disclosures** relates to the pieces of information about the youth worker's personal situation, history or experiences that are shared with young people.
- **the youth worker's role in the wider lives of young people** includes working 'out-of-hours' with young people, conversations with a focus on young people's private lives, seeing young people outside the centre (accidentally or by arrangement), and engaging with the young person's family.
- **setting an example** includes the worker using their position (deliberately or otherwise) to potentially influence the thoughts, attitudes, or behaviours of a young person (positively or negatively).

- **showing respect** draws together examples where workers appeared to be genuinely listening to young people, showing positive regard for their wellbeing, engaging with young people's issues without judgement, situations where young people are assumed to be autonomous social agents able to make their own choices, offering young people opportunities to participate, and affirming young people's worth by going 'above and beyond' usual expectations.
- **use of authority and power** reflected the way workers controlled events during the evening, the enforcing (or not) of rules, the way attitudes and behaviours were challenged, and the general egalitarian ethos (or otherwise) of activities and conversations.
- **trusting young people** relates specifically to whether, and to what extent, youth workers show they trust the young people, including observations where young people are allowed to make decisions, to be in rooms or use resources unsupervised, to plan sessions, or have been given responsibility.
- **prioritising needs and best interests** refers to the needs (actual and perceived) of young people, youth workers, and the organisation.
- **formality and distance** were originally two themes, that overlapped significantly, which draws together examples of how body language, sharing experiences, styles of working, use of touch, and the use of paperwork and money created a sense of (in)formality in the relationship.

The process of analysing the data and divesting it into constituent themes showed how complex youth work relationships were. It would be tempting to take a quasi-quantitative approach to each theme – that with some particular set of actions a worker become *too close* to a young person, or they were prioritising their own needs *too much*. That is: the language around relationships could – and as seen in the literature it often dues - assume a linear scale, where each interaction can be given an implicit rating on each aspect of the relationship how 'close' to one or the other end of the scale a professional has been. This, however, would be disingenuous to the complexity found during observations and interview.

The extract below, for example, shows a youth worker making a decision about what self-disclosure to make based on whether it helps a young person make an informed choice, but not if it would legitimise potentially harmful behaviour.

> *Being a mum - being a teenage mum - I kind of share that [with young people] and say what problems, the risks that has. As well as all the fantastic stuff, it is about*

helping them to make that informed choice in the same way, because I've been through it, and a bit about the homelessness and stuff. But I wouldn't go as far as getting on to stuff that was really emotional to me and things like that. Just the basics. I would say, "Well, I used to smoke."

If they said, "Have you ever tried cannabis?" or something, it is certain things like that you can answer, and certain things you can't. You know your limits, don't you? You would just say, "I don't really want to tell you that," and, "Why are you asking that?" [CCYC interview Patsy]

This is significantly different from a self-disclosure that is being shared to meet a need of the youth workers, as below:

Ben [volunteer] played [table tennis] the whole time [around 45 minutes], [the other workers came in and out of the game]. Afterwards Ben played a song on his phone to the group (including 2-3 young people), he then said today was supposed to be his wedding day and this was the song his fiancé was going to walk down the aisle to. One of the workers challenged this – "did you just play it so you could tell us the story?" – but he said he was playing it just because it was a good song. The young people responded with signs of sympathy: 'ohhh', and 'that's sad'. [Youth Café field note #01]

The aspects of the youth work relationship mentioned above, then, are not isolated themes. Rather the prevalence of multiple themes in an interaction can affect judgements on the appropriateness of the encounter. For example, this difference between an appropriate and inappropriate self-disclosure is not simply one of 'degree' of sensitivity involved in the disclosure, but of 'kind' of disclosure. The 'kind' of disclosure is understood through the way other aspects of the relationship are manifest in the interaction. That is, conversing about tastes in music and TV may seem less personal and sensitive than talking about sexual experiences, so it may encourage a conception of good practice based around the production of strict and very specific rules in which certain topics of conversation are deemed taboo ('sex is too personal, workers are never to discuss it'). Instead if the sensitivity of the self-disclosure is judged in the presence and absence of other aspects of the relationship we begin to perceive a more complex picture of the suitability of the discussion. We may ask, for example, whether it is the *young person's needs* being met through this conversation? We may ask who initiated the conversation and what does this tell us of the use of *power and*

authority in the *self-disclosure*? Here, therefore, not just the actions but the motives become important in discerning the appropriateness of an interaction. With regard to virtue, we see the importance of motivation. If Patsy is sharing a personal story of her role as a single mum with an aim to educate and inform, that's fulfilling an aim of her role as a youth worker. Ben, on the other hand, seemed to be sharing his news as a way to garner attention and have an opportunity to share his story. Patsy wanted to engage in dialogue with young people using her experience, Ben did not use his disclosure in such a way. There may be times when Ben's disclosure would be entirely appropriate: for example, if it was in a conversation led by the young person, for the purpose of showing empathy, advice, or a perspective on a similar issue.

Taking a second example, this time of *engaging in the wider lives of young people*. For example:

> *Interviewer - If a young person were to send a Facebook friend request, how would you react to that request?*
>
> *Paul - If they, if they requested that I be their friend then generally I'd just accept that. That would be fine. I, er, I'm very aware that I have young people as friends on Facebook. And, so I'm sort of quite careful about what I put on there or, like, I see that as part of my, erm, both Facebook and Twitter, the things that I share on there are things that I'm happy to share with… You know, I think it is part of being transparent and the integrity thing, there's nothing I need to hide on Facebook or anything like that. But I wouldn't search for the young people in the group and ask to be their friend, but I think if they want to be my friend or if they want to follow me on twitter that's fine. I wouldn't initiate it, but I wouldn't reject them. [YM interview Paul]*

In the UK, at the time of writing, it is very rare for practitioners of any persuasion to use personal social media accounts to interact with young people, usually for fear of disclosing anything too personal, anything , or unwittingly legitimating 'facebook friends' (during interview on manager explained that she did not know many of her facebook friends very well any more, and an old school friend could have become a paedophile, and she would be offering legitimacy to them from the perspective of the young person simply through being their friend). Here Paul is against the norm. However he is offering a personal strategy for mitigating risk through what he posts, he recognises the power differential means he should wait until he is approached by a young person, he believes there is a benefit to

transparency in sharing social media that increases his sense of integrity, and he sees a lack of online friendships as a 'rejection' that would harm the youth work relationship. He has framed his online interaction through the lens of the youth work relationship.

As a final set of examples, the idea of *'closeness'* in a relationship is one particularly susceptible to being assumed to be on a linear scale. Emma, a volunteer at the YM, shows a very informal approach to interacting with this particular young person she knows well:

> *Emma was sitting for most of the evening on the sofa talking to Emily [15 year old young person]. There was a peer-like quality to the conversations, in that they were sharing their favourite TV programmes at the moment, and favourite songs. They used Emma's iPad to share music, and Emma has quite a 'young' taste in music (e.g. Taylor Swift, One direction, Ollie Murs). When Emily first came in Emma gave her an enthusiastic 'come and sit here', and patted the sofa next to her. They were virtually horizontal and they relaxed into the sofa with their feet on the table, shoulders and elbows often rubbing against each other. [YM field note #08]*

Here the topic of conversation, the sharing of an iPad, the body language of slipping down into the sofa, and the lack of embarrassment about physical touch all highlight an informal encounter. By contrast at the CCYC the manager talked of workers having a greater physical distance between the worker and the young person, in a setting with greater formality. This extract involving the manager are notes from a conversation and not a transcription:

> *Dennis [manager] said here they have cameras in case something happens [when a worker is alone with a young person]. He said, and Maureen [local authority worker] agreed, that you almost never have one to ones, but if it is needed then there's always a business-like approach – with a sizeable gap between the young person and the worker – which is their policy for reducing complaints against staff. [CCYC informal interview Dennis]*

Though Dennis believed in this 'business like' approach to sensitive issues, equally he recognised during the same conversation that paper work could increase the formality of the relationship, so he attempts to decrease it to ensure the relationships can remain as flexible as possible. The contexts of the YM and CCYC extracts are, of course, different. Emma is engaged in a typical, everyday conversation. Her posture, tone of voice, and line of

questioning may change and become more formal if the conversation took a more serious tone, as is assumed by Dennis.

Therefore the measure for boundaries – and closeness in particular - is not a linear scale, but closeness (or intimacy) can be *qualitatively different.* As such, I am arguing it is not the level of closeness (or self-disclosure, or engagement in the wider lives of young people) but the form that closeness takes that is important in maintaining an appropriate relationship, ensuring an appropriate distance between workers and young people remains within the purpose of the relationship. That is, not the right amount of distance, but the right *kind* of distance. To that end I am arguing that professional discourses around safeguarding can be re-focussed around the quality of the distance in the relationship, rather than 'how close is too close?'.

DISCUSSION: VIRTUE ETHICS

If it can be claimed that quasi-quantitative professional boundaries with young people can increase the distance in the youth work relationship, and that in reality many workers appear to use their professional judgement to make decisions over whether an interaction is a breach of a boundary, then virtue ethics is a frame work that makes a good dialogical partner to begin to conceptualise qualitative professional boundaries.

Phronesis (practical wisdom) is particularly important here. MacIntyre (2011:180) argues *phronesis* has four elements: the wants and goals of the agent which provide the context for reasoning; the 'major premise' that doing or having something is good or contributes to flourishing for self or others; the 'minor premise' where a person judges that this is an occasion that works towards the fulfilment of the major premise; and finally to act in a way that is consistent with the major and minor premise. For example, observing the Tuck Shop (a place in the youth centre to buy drinks and snacks) was a fruitful source of ethical issues. In YM's tuck shop the immediate 'wants and goals' are to provide (or be provided with) food and drink, that is the context of the ethical decision making to follow (the reasoning for this example is hypothetical, and the motives are being inferred for the sake of providing an illustration). The major premise of the youth work at YM is assumed to be the flourishing and development of young people. The minor premise is questioning how providing food and drink via the tuck shop can help with the flourishing of the young people – the workers at YM decided that trusting young people is one step that will lead to their

future flourishing. The action, therefore, is to allow young people to serve themselves with an honesty system.

An ethical framework for the relationship with young people that includes virtue ethics would draw from the traditions of the practice of the profession – its values and aims. It would root ethical practice in the expectations of the community of practice. As such, practitioners would remain committed to the holistic development of young people through recognising the need for flourishing. Workers do this, in part, through modelling the virtues – setting a positive example, and avoiding normalising undesirable behaviours or attitudes. Workers would engage with authenticity, allowing an emotional response to situations that can be the motivator for finding the best actions. This is important to protect the practices of the caring professions, in which building informal and transformative relationships is marked by the integrity, wisdom, and trustworthiness of the worker. I have argued the context of this relationship should be taken as a whole when making judgements around 'good practice'; however I have acknowledged a concern that rules governing practices in relationships with young people can reduce this complex relationship down into a handful of codifiable behaviours that can promote some behaviours (for example, information sharing between organisations) and prohibit others (for example, self-disclosures) without considering whether these are helpful for building relationships that will meet some larger aim of the youth work relationship. Though, that said, there were examples throughout the four organisations where workers *were* using their own judgement and making context specific decisions, but this was more prominent in the YM and CCYC, and only with particular workers at the Youth Café and LAYC.

I am not attempting to imply that virtue ethics does not result in consistency or predictability in practice. MacIntyre (2011) criticises the lack of predictability in understanding human behaviour after 400 years of exploring with a rationalist epistemological perspective, and Hursthouse (1999:29, 58) declares ethics to be 'uncodifiable' and refutes 'absolutes' in ethical decision making. However both still recognise that there are broadly predictable patterns to human behaviour (see also Griffin, 1998:60, Wolfgang, 2005). Hursthouse in particular draws on 'V-Rules' which provide a semi-codified set of actions, which can be amended and nuanced according to the context, while still remaining a broadly sound basis for right action in the youth work relationship. There are also some extreme cases (such as sexual exploitation) where a worker can be so certain a virtuous person would never engage in it, they can treat it *as if it were* absolute.

Rules here are short-hand reminders for context specific decisions, which retain their values as long as the narrative which formed them is remembered (Hauerwas 1974:72).

As seen in several examples in this research, and echoed by Dunne (2011:21-2), ethical interactions are not isolated incidents, but they become part of an ongoing narrative of the relationships where a larger story is being created and negotiated between the actors. A commitment to virtue ethics, which provides the resources for workers to make judgements based on the context of the situation, could prevent the unfortunate situations where adults are too fearful of litigation to care for children in need (Marshall and Mellon, 2011).

Therefore a virtue ethics for professional relationships with young people would not take every situation as entirely new, but recognise there have been good practices and community and organisational expectations that may apply to a given situation in the majority of cases, while being able to identify those actions that do not seem virtuous in specific situations. The response would remain grounded in the local and overarching communities of practice and directed towards the *telos* of the relationship.

Taking youth work as an example, an Aristotelian approach (as developed by Young, 2006, Bessant, 2009, Ord, 2014, Smith and Smith, 2008) would have as the major premise of the occupation the flourishing of young people. This would require youth work to focus on developing the virtues and, as a result, in cultivating the virtues in the youth workers. Young (2006) suggests the work of virtue formation commences when young people begin asking themselves questions about identity and what sort of person they want to be. She does not suggest a particular set of virtues that should be important, but does argue that the purpose of the youth worker is to support young people's decision making that leads to a virtuous life (Young, 2010:94). Ord (2007:88-92) would agree, arguing that the modelling of virtues, and their impact on the character of the young people, is not easily quantifiable.

CONCLUSION

In this article a fledgling theory of a new way to conceive as boundaries as recognising interactions as different in *kind* not *severity* has been articulated. The aim is still to maintain the highest standards of protection for children and young people, but to do so while rooting safeguarding practices in the *telos* of the occupation and to recognise quasi-quantitative boundaries may limit the quality of the work (and therefore the effectiveness) practitioners can engage in. This requires greater work in practice and in research to see what these *kinds* of interaction may be, and what they look like in specific occupations. However

broadly speaking, if an interaction is part of an ongoing relationship that is building towards the 'major premise' of the occupation it is likely to be appropriate in *kind*.

Boundaries can fail young people by preventing the potential for more good work to occur – there are alternative histories where young people could benefit from more support and deeper relationships with professional adults than current boundaries allow. Alongside this, it is recognised that in some situations and with some practitioners the notion of quasi-quantitative boundaries simply does not reflect the nature of the practice. Rather, they are artificially invoked at specific times, in a way counter to the overall ethos of the relationship.

Using ethnographic data I have argued that relationships between youth workers (and, perhaps, more widely in with practitioners of the caring professions) and young people are complex, and are best understood holistically through a range of eight related aspects drawn from a thematic analysis of the field notes. These complex relationships, I argued, are not well served by creating reductionist set of 'professional boundaries'. Rather, by taking a holistic view of an interaction it is possible to recognise whether it is the *kind* of behaviour that is appropriate in the relationship with young people, rather than attempting to categorise a behaviour as (un)acceptable through implying some form of quantitative measurement – that is, the question should not be *how close is too close?* But *what form of closeness* is appropriate? Not *is this self disclosure too personal*? But *is this kind of self-disclosure appropriate for the whole relationship*?

These themes are not discrete entities. They overlap, and together build up a basis on which to judge the appropriateness and health of a relationship between a youth worker and a young person. This comes into conflict with dominant discourses on good practice that decontextualize actions and assume abstract rules and codes are the best mechanism for discerning the most appropriate behaviours in a given situation. As such it may be helpful to reconceive restrictive rules that may prevent good work. This cynicism of boundaries is not assuming all predefined limits on behaviour in the youth work relationships should be abolished, but that these limits should be a failsafe to ensure young people do not come to harm from a worker with malicious intent, rather than the dominant approach to defining good practice.

Some boundaries preventing obviously destructive or extreme behaviour will always be important, but the focus of this article is not on the extreme cases, but the tendency to codify the mundane interactions and the propensity to boundary everyday relational activities under the guise of 'safeguarding'. In appealing to 'professional boundaries' and 'organisational policy' when faced with a young person alone outside a centre asking for a

lift, young people asking to borrow money to buy tuck, requesting online interactions with the workers, or any number of other examples, the worker is at risk of overlooking the nuanced detail and complexity within the relationship they share with young people by imposing a 'rule' (and one that may not even have been written for the purpose they are using it).

Therefore I argue safeguarding policies could be written in a language that reflects the ambiguity that can come from this complexity. That it is presented more humbly as the beginning of an ongoing conversation for what good practice looks like in a given organisation, rather than the paternalistic final ruling on the practices of the worker. This is not suggesting an ad hoc approach to professional practice with young people; there will always be norms and expectations within an organisation and community of practice. However, a system could be developed that allowed workers to deviate from the norm and policies could be worded to recognise they *are* presenting a shorthand rule that may be appropriate in many situations, but a worker's judgement may lead them to recognise a situation is atypical and requires a different response. Or, that many situations a worker engages with do not fit into relatively neat categories assumed by policies written in a finite space. There are questions over how this can work in practice, in particular how we train practitioners to recognise whether their interactions are building towards the 'major premise' of the occupation, or not, and to ensure the development character and virtue are at the heart of training.

Within youth work, or any similar occupation, there are certain conditions that provide the environment for a virtue-based qualitative approach to safeguarding. Firstly, being Aristotelian in influence, the role of dialogue, debate, and learning is paramount. The role of supervision. Secondly, it also necessitates role models – exemplars of practices. However, perhaps too often exemplars of practice can take a managerial or administrative position that means the good work is no longer seen first hand by other practitioners. Thirdly, easy access to those people who can help the less experienced make wise decisions. Finally, the development of and placement in a community of practice for youth workers. This may happen in various times and places.

While there is a dominant conception of professionalism that promotes detachment, there are approaches that prioritise attachment and care that could still be conceptualised as safe and accountable practices. At least in part, attention should be given to the 'major premise' of the particular caring profession being considered, and the development of *phronesis* of the worker to make judgement on interactions in *kind* is important.

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Rigid professional boundaries do not reflect the reality of relationships between young people and youth workers.
- Based on ethnographic research, boundaries could be considered qualitatively (opposed to quasi-quantitative).
- This could be rooted in virtue ethics as a philosophical basis for these boundaries.
- It is therefore important professional wisdom and an awareness of the 'major premise' of the work is developed