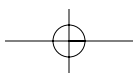
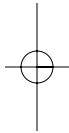
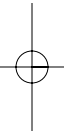
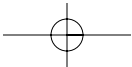
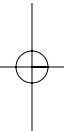
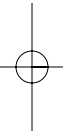


Part One

The Youth Work Profession





1

INTRODUCTION

The intention of this book is to engage in a conversation about the core ethics of youth work as a profession. It isn't the first conversation about this: for youth workers, the ethical dimension is never far from the surface (Young 2006, Sapin 2009). All the things that youth work claims to do and to be for young people are about the ethics of the situation. Social justice is an ethical requirement. Empowerment is an ethical project. Inclusion is ethically driven. Poverty, homelessness, violence, destructive drug use, dispossession... these aren't technical problems, awaiting the skill and resource to fix them. They are deeply moral issues. To use that most unfashionable of words, their continued existence, and the structures that maintain them, are *wrong*. The reason that many of us got into youth work, and the reason we stayed, is because of that.

But these conversations haven't always happened overtly within an ethics framework. Over the last few years there have been stronger attempts to be more consistent in our thinking, and to connect our thinking to wider conversations about ethics as a philosophical discipline, especially in the field of professional ethics (see Banks 1999, Roberts 2009). And to work harder to develop shared, articulate positions on common ethical questions.

There is a wide range of perspectives on the relationship between a practice and its ethics. Much of this work, building on Ernest Greenwood's classic essay (1957), identified the professions by a list of attributes, with ethics one attribute among many (such as formal training, a license to practice, processes for registration and deregistration). However, in a pivotal piece of scholarship published in 1994, Daryl Koehn argued that ethics is not one of several *attributes* of the professions. Ethics is the core, it is what makes a profession a profession.

This position changes our understanding of ethics and the professions. From this perspective, ethics is not primarily about *prohibition*, about lists of things one should not do. It is about *identity*, what we claim, what constitutes us. The essence of youth work is its ethics.

While this book is grounded in youth work practice, it also takes theory seriously. The theory has mostly come from the discipline of moral philosophy. The issues that moral philosophers are interested in are often frustratingly distant from the day-to-day practice of youth workers, but the theoretical thinking is, and continues to be, useful. That is where I have gone to find the kind of disciplined language that will work for youth work, that will sharpen and strengthen our thinking, and that will call us out when we are kidding ourselves.

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Sometimes, we won't be comfortable with that language. I try to translate and adapt where I can, but some terms don't translate. The term 'client' is an example of that (see Chapter 3). Youth workers (particularly in the UK) are typically put off by connotations of inferiority or condescension that they feel in the word, and there are good reasons for that, particularly in the history of the helping professions. We'll try to work with that and other similar problems as the argument progresses. However, readers will find in this book a struggle for precision in what words like that *mean*, rather than whether they are popular or not.

The book also tries to be international, engaging with the ethics of practice at least across the UK (and England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland all have their differences), Australia and New Zealand as well as North America. Each of these has its own way of thinking about youth work, and its own languages for talking about practice, and there are distinct sensitivities in each. In each context, youth workers are responding to and being shaped by different funding and policy agendas, which themselves change continuously. Some I understand better than others. But while the way that youth workers talk about their practice can be very different across the planet and across time, the way their practice feels, the way it 'smells' if you like, is congruent.

I try to engage with that core, though readers may find that the language is not immediately familiar or conventional or aligned with current policy where they are. Where I can, I try to avoid jargon, to speak directly and simply, or to use concepts that belong to no particular setting at the moment but might be useful across settings. Youth work has been around for a 150 years (Davies, 1999): a book like this needs to still be relevant when governments, policy settings and priorities have changed, as they do so often.

The book is set out in three sections. Part One explores the idea of a profession, and the place of youth work among the professions. The conversation is important because it establishes not only what we *do* but what we *are*. Zygmunt Bauman (1992) argues that truth in the (post) modern world is established by our own commitment to it. The ethical claims of youth work then become real and true because collectively we affirm, assert and commit ourselves to those ethical objectives.

Part Two mines the body of philosophical writing about ethics, covering method and theory in thinking about ethics. The major schools of thinking are canvassed (though all too briefly and with many variations left out) along with their strengths and weaknesses. Each of them has attempted at various points in history to assert itself as the one truth about ethics. I have my own preferences, as you will discover, but theory is a conceptual toolbox to break open situations, work them out, and work out what is to be done, not a set of divine and unalterable pronouncements. Different situations call for different tools, and, as much as we can, I want to keep the dialogue open between these very different approaches to working out what is important and what ought to be done. The role and utility of Codes of Ethics in shaping professional practice is part of that conversation.

Part Three deals with a range of common ethical issues and conflicts in our practice. Broadly, these mirror the issues that most codes of ethics are concerned to deal

with, though hopefully these chapters will be much more than a commentary on the standard set of clauses in professional codes of ethics. Because focused writing on ethics from within youth work is so scant, we'll raid the other professions for what insights they have, as well as reflecting on experience within my own practice and that of my colleagues over the years. In the process of working through the dilemmas that youth workers face every day, this section attempts also to define and describe what an authentic youth work response might look like: again, addressing not only our behaviour, but our identity. Sometimes, this section will read like a youth work manual. To some extent that is unavoidable, if youth work is constituted by its ethics. But it is not the intention of this book to lay down youth work *method*, even though we will talk all the time about practice. Readers who are looking for guidance about youth work method will find lots of gaps.

It is clear that this is not a book that tries to be dispassionately objective. You might have worked that out already. I am a youth worker. I have been a youth worker all my working life, and all my professional thinking, theory development and research has happened within that commitment. Many of the perspectives and insights in this book come out of that history, out of my own experience and of those I have worked with and shared with, across three continents. That history has not always necessarily been pretty. Plenty of whatever wisdom might have ended up in this book has come out of seeing too late that I have crossed a line (or knowing exactly where the line was and convincing myself that it was excusable cross it) and often enough, the damage which has followed.

As a youth worker, I am partisan. While this book is written for youth workers, it is not primarily the interests of youth workers that are at its heart. It is the interests of young people, particularly the most dispossessed, which define our practice. Young people deserve the best, most creative, most disciplined, most informed, most thoughtful, most compassionate connection that we can provide. This book is a conversation with youth workers that hopes to contribute to that end. As such, it is not *about* youth work ethics. It is, or tries to be, a youth work ethics. It is certainly not the only possible youth work ethics, but a sustained, applied ethical argument nonetheless.

The attempt by one person to write that ethics is presumptive, I know. It is unlikely that I have got it right for practitioners across several continents and a bewildering range of practice contexts and ideological positions, particularly when I have spent so little time especially with colleagues outside Australia, New Zealand and the UK. We youth workers tend to resist definition and 'being boxed' almost as a point of principle. However, across our different national contexts, the call for clarity in articulation of our practice is universal. Hopefully, this narrative – of a profession constituted by its commitment to young people as their primary client, working with them in their social context to facilitate their ethical agency, and with their society to clear barriers of oppression and exclusion – is useful, and will work for some, giving them a clarity of purpose and solidarity with others likewise committed.

Some acknowledgments. My own development has been shaped by some fine youth work minds: Greg and Rosemary Miller, John West, George Davies,

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