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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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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.

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.

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.

1. 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

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an increased awareness that they fail to reflect the realities of everyday practice in many social professions (Bates, Smith, & Nisbet, 2015; Meltzer, Muir, & Craig, 2016; Murphy & Ord, 2013; Walker & Larson, 2006) (Hart, 2014a,b). 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, Tsui, & Ruch, 2013; Shevellar & 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, Denholm, and Wyld (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, Thomas, Toumbourou, Patton, & Catalano, 2000), and they are less likely to be 'ready-for-work' if they have few adults engaged in their lives (Phillips, Blustein, Jobin-Davis, & White, 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 and Deutsch' (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, Larson, Camino, & O'Connor, 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 & Smith, 1999:3, Holloway & 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.

2. 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 & Harris, 2005:16–8, Jeffs & 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, Helen, & Mandin, 2007, Turney, 2012, Larson, 2006:684, Krauss et al., 2012:305, see also Smith & 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 (Hamilton et al., 2016; Larson, 2006).

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 & Deutsch, 2011) authors differ on their approach. Some see friendship as a useful concept for helping prevent an imbalance of power (e.g. Walker & Larson, 2006:110, Blacker, 2010:29, Jeffs & Smith, 2005:8). Others however, prefer the relationship to be based on trust without friendship (Batsleer & 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 & 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).