



Local and Universal Virtue in Professional Decision Making: Exploring the Tensions Between Virtue Ethics and ‘Professional Boundaries’ in the Social Professions

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This is an unpublished conference paper for the 7th Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 3th – Saturday 5th January 2019.

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I. Abstract

Boundaries set the limit of what is deemed appropriate in a particular relationship, often assuming a decontextualizing of the approved practices within an organisation; however it is in tension with the current prevalence of Aristotelian virtue ethics discourses on the training of professionals. This assumes contextualised decision-making rooted in *phronesis* from practitioners who have internalised the virtues. Recognising this tension, in this paper I use findings from an ethnographic study of youth workers to argue for the formulation of '*Qualitative Boundaries*' as a framework for ensuring safe practices through a shift in the language we use to define boundaries.

Boundaries are constrictive but virtue ethics are flexible

Boundaries are the prevailing metaphor used to demarcate acceptable behaviour in professional relationships. Discourses on relationships between members of the 'social professions' and their clients are saturated with language that assumes a pseudo-quantitative measurement can be made on the appropriateness of a given interaction (a professional is 'too close' to the client, they are sharing stories that are 'too personal'). This is an assumption rooted in a deontological (principle or 'rule' based ethics) approach to professional ethics, that appears to be motivated by a commitment to safeguarding children, young people, and other members of society perceived as vulnerable. Here is a tension between rules for behaviour created in localised settings but assumed to be universally applicable, and notion of professional wisdom that is assumed to be universal and applied to everyday localised situations.

The aim of this paper is to use empirical evidence from an ethnographic study of relationships in youth work to argue that there is an alternative conceptualisation of professional interactions through considering them qualitatively; that is, interactions should be understood as different in *kind* rather than *severity*.

II. Professional Boundaries

From the 1980s there has been a rise of an externally controlled, homogenising, managerial systems within western public services that focus 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 service users (Belton, 2009:119).

The concept of the boundary dominates professional discourses on ethics and good practice, however there is both a growing dis-ease with the metaphor and an increasing awareness that the assumption that boundaries are fixed and rigid fail to reflect the realities of everyday practice in many social professions. For example, Meltzer et al. (2016) reported 'paid professional trusted adults' often referred to their relationship with young people as 'close' and described them as 'complex', and Murphy and Ord (2013) argue that self-disclosures are more complex than simply avoiding sharing personal stories, as everything from manners or speech to the way a professional dresses discloses something of themselves. In the social care sector Bates et al. (2015) argue that some 'norms' in boundary setting are without concrete reasons, based on paternalistic assumptions about what is best for the client. Rather, they argue that we need a 'person centred approach' to online contact (in their example), while previous work by this author (Hart, 2016b) argues young people often expertly negotiate and maintain boundaries with youth workers and the possibility of co-created boundaries should be explored. Research from youth work particularly highlights the complexity of maintaining personal–professional boundaries (Walker and Larson, 2006). Rigid boundaries do not help in all situations as they do not convey the "softness of reality" (Austin et al., 2006:83, Doel et al., 2010).

Boundaries assume that the professional holds the greater power (indeed, often boundaries erected by service users are considered 'barriers' and the professional assume their role is to remove them). Despite best intentions, they can become incongruent with the aim of other professions (O'Leary et al., 2013, Shevellar and Barringham, 2016). It can also be a symptom of a 'patriarchal' model (Doel et al., 2010), where boundaries to protect the agency can lead to a failure to meet user's needs. However the abstraction of any social phenomenon into an easily codifiable concept soon displaces the richness of the actual situation, and instead of concepts referring to realities, realities are reduced to "exemplifications of concepts" (Crotty, 1998:81).

The Problem of Risk

Beck (2000, 1992a, see also Douglas, 1992, Boyne, 2003) suggests contemporary society has become overly concerned with the idea of risk management and assessment to the point where any risk is deemed unacceptable, and those elements of society once assumed to bring safety, peace or prosperity (such as scientific discovery, or religion) are now seen cynically because of the public awareness of the dangers they may also bring. When combined with the psychological idea of the 'social amplification of risk' (Cieslik and Pollock, 2002, Slovic, 2000, Pidgeon et al., 2003, Duckett and Busby, 2013), risk avoidance is further heightened around the aspects of social life or particular values that are seen as being vulnerable, or that have a certain narrative quality about the risk (i.e. one newspaper story about child abuse is significantly more potent than any number of statistics). Here youth, both as a social ideal in decline (Holland, 2004, Layard and Dunn, 2009, Postman, 1994, Quartz, 2003) and young people

themselves, are often seen as being particularly vulnerable (Mizen, 2004, Batsleer and Davies, 2010, Yaconelli, 2007, Yaconelli, 2006).

The steady increase in managerialism in the social professions over the last two decades has produced professional boundaries which conceive of practitioners as an object of risk (Beck, 1992b) and aim to distance the worker from service users (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.

Boundaries are often invoked to reduce perceived level of risk while reducing the autonomy of professionals. This is in part because there is a wider concern in society about managing perceived 'risk', particularly in the social professions (Dixon, 2010:402) alongside a decline in public trust in professionals' judgement (Banks, 2004:152-3). This could be a well-founded concern, as it is possible both for workers to have a malicious intent but also for an otherwise 'good' individual to behave 'out of character' (Banks and Gallagher, 2009:60), or as Loudon (1997:206) phrases it, "even the best people can make the wrong choices". As such, boundaries increase the predictability of professional interactions.

Miles (2002) provides an explanation for this, arguing there is a tendency to portray young people as particularly vulnerable to the 'risk society' (Beck, 1992b) where they are viewed as passive victims of the structures around them. In reality young people's engagement with society is 'complex and sophisticated', and they are more adept at negotiating risk and relationships than often assumed (Hart, 2017). The assumption of risk is perhaps coming from a once dominant model of developmental work with young people: believing that they are to be 'worked on' by adults, rather than recognising they are 'able to be constructive agents of their own development' (Larson, 2006:677, see also Belton, 2009:57). Of course, some young people genuinely are vulnerable (as are some adults), but the default stance of professional boundaries is to assume they are all equally as vulnerable when the reality is many young people understand and mitigate the risks of relationships for themselves.

III. Virtue Ethics in Professional Discourse

As there is an increased awareness boundaries can prevent good work, 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 social professions there is a community or practice and set of professional aims and standards that roots the virtues in a tradition.

IV. The Importance, and Complexity, of Relationships

Making decisions about appropriate interactions in a professional relationship, therefore, requires an understanding of the *telos* of the practice. Work with adolescents, for example, often holds the aim to support the current and future flourishing of the young person as they transition into adulthood. It can be recognised boundaries 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, Bond et al., 2000, Phillips et al., 2002, Taylor, 2003, Jones and Deutsch, 2011, Sanders et al., 2017, Hamilton et al., 2016). For example, Rucinski et al. (2018) researched student-teacher relationships using the MyTeachingPartner programme, an intervention that uses attachment theory to underpin the development of emotionally supportive relationships between teachers and students. Ultimately they concluded that "educators should be trained and supported in building and maintaining positive relationships with all their students throughout the elementary grades, rather than concentrating increasingly and exclusively on academic instruction" (p1000). Other studies reinforce this finding and extend it to middle and high schoolers too (McCormick et al., 2013, Maldonado-Carreño and Votruba-Drzal, 2011, Baker et al., 2008).

Youth Work

The empirical research reported below is based on youth work organisations in the UK. Youth work is often thought of as focussing on the flourishing of young people or their personal and social development, it is an educational endeavour but 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). Workers may use various tools to aid them in building this relationship, such as sport (Haudenhuyse et al., 2012), conversation (Zeldin et al., 2005:7, Jeffs and Smith, 2005), and activities (Tyler et al., 2009:41, Harte, 2010). However these are often considered secondary to the educative or developmental tasks of youth work that are mediated through relationships. 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).

Epistemic outcomes are often resisted by the youth work community in the UK, however the prevalence of neoliberalism and austerity has required some forms of youth work has to shift in emphasis towards a more formal and contract based relationship. This tension is highlighted by Emslie (2018).

The helpfulness of 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. Virtue ethics, dominant now in discourses on ethics, allows for greater context and flexibility, particularly with workers who are assumed to be able to develop universalised virtues. Youth work particularly emphasises this professional-peer tension because of 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'.

V. Methodology

This ethnography included observations, interviews, and focus groups in four youth work organisations simultaneously across an 8 month period. Two organisations were from the Christian sector 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, 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.

VI. Findings

In this section I present the findings from the doctoral research, and highlight what the reality of relationships between young people and youth workers could mean for the social professions. A fuller methodology and analysis of the data is available in another publication (Hart, 2016b), where I recognised several associated aspects of the youth work relationship:

- **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' (Hart, 2016a) 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** where 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.

However 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 pseudo-quantitative approach to each theme – that some particular set of actions a worker become *too close* to a young person, or they were prioritising their own needs *too much*. Although this is the dominant assumption in the discourse around professional boundaries, the reality of the workers' practice in the field work was more complex.

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 the impression of whether this is positive and appropriate encounter, or otherwise. That is, this difference between an appropriate and inappropriate self-disclosure, then, 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. The findings from the research show it would be insufficient to label the strength or sensitivity of one particular disclosure to compare to another and pronounce a value judgement. For example, 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, or the youth worker's? 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.

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 (during a conversation after a session) 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 is from a conversation, which turned into an informal interview, at the end of one evening. Sadly it was not recorded, however the notes were made and typed up almost immediately after the conversation:

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.

However if there should be a closeness to the relationship with young people, then the measure of appropriate closeness 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 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. For example, I would argue that even a very low level of romantic ‘closeness’ or intimacy between a worker and a young person is not appropriate. While at the right time, a worker and young person could become very close through the mutual sharing of personal events if the young person needs significant pastoral support, and a close relationship will be beneficial. Therefore, rather than creating barriers to make all forms of closeness appear unprofessional, I am arguing that professional discourses around safeguarding can be re-focussed around the quality of the distance in the relationship.

VII. Summary

Taking specific interactions and aspects of a professional relationship with young people the youth work relationship as discrete entities is an insufficient measure of how appropriate an interaction is in a youth work relationship. Instead, any specific interaction is better understood as a mix of inter-related aspects of the youth work relationship based within a context. It is only through taking the relationship as a whole that the health of a relationship (and the place of a particular interaction within it) can be known. For example, we saw self-disclosures can be used to increase the range of influence and the potential of the relationship youth workers and young people share, but can be conceived of as a boundary issue. A potentially helpful, supportive exchange which aids the educative or relationship building aims of youth work can be undermined by rigid boundaries around what information a worker is allowed to share.

VIII. Discussion

To summarise the tension seen in the literature review and the data: the dominant policy framework is rooted in a notion of relatively rigid boundaries that seek to reduce the requirement for the professional judgement of practitioners; the dominant ethical narrative is around virtue ethics which rely on the promise of virtues being universally applied; in practice rigid boundaries do not reflect the complexity of mundane daily interactions. Therefore, the remainder of this paper will consider how boundaries can be reconceptualised to become more compatible with a virtue approach to professional ethics.

If it can be accepted that professional boundaries with young people can formalise a relationship and professional loses the space to make judgements and authority in reality many workers appear to use their professional judgement to make decisions over whether an interaction is a breach of a boundary – thus giving rise to the notion of interactions of *kind* rather than *severity* – then virtue ethics is a framework that makes a good dialogical partner to begin to conceptualise qualitative professional boundaries. From this I argue for the usefulness of virtue ethics when considering what is ‘good’ in these relationships. I

then explain *why* virtue ethics is helpful when developing an ethics of professional relationships still is able to recognise the safeguarding issues that boundaries are seeking to engage with.

Virtue Ethics

There is an assumption in modernity, according to MacIntyre (see Lutz, 2012:63-5), that people can be separated from their social roles. Virtue ethics, on the other hand, recognises the whole person. When a worker cares, or is trustworthy, for example, it affects the quality of the relationship and therefore the worker's ability to perform well in the role. Therefore qualitative boundaries will take into account the whole person.

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 Marshall and Mellon (2011) describe in their research: adults were described as too fearful of litigation and accusation to care for children in need.

Boundaries will still set limited of relationships but are based on the *telos* of the practice. Daily interactions become overly rooted in personal identity more than external rules, as this reflects the reality of much relationship work. To MacIntyre, practices were the equivalent of Aristotle's Polis, or what Hauerwas (1974) might call 'Tradition', a way of limiting the subjectivity of virtue, but is equally aware of distinct cultural norms of behaviour affecting what is considered 'virtuous'. A practice is an established set of activities that seek to achieve standard of excellence. Teaching, youth work and parenthood could all be considered practices.

Discerning if an interaction is 'good' requires an awareness of the telos of the practices, and ensuring attitudes and behaviours in a practice are building towards the standards of excellence in a practice and what is considered virtuous, as much as the conception of virtue is imposed externally (Higgins, 2010:237).

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). There are also some extreme cases (such as child abuse) 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 value as long as the narrative which formed them is remembered (Hauerwas 1974:72). Flexibility is not arbitrary or inconsistent, but grounded in the standards of excellence for the practice.

Therefore virtue informed boundaries for professional relationships with service users 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 this situation. The response would remain grounded

in the local and overarching youth work communities of practice and directed towards the *telos* of the relationship, and perhaps the beginning of a virtue ethics of the work would require some critical reflection on the communities of practice to which the workers belong, and which influence the work. There is a diversity of norms amongst caring professions because contemporary practice is based on a range of traditions, and so workers may need time and space to reflect on and identify with the tradition and community of practice they engage in.

IX. Conclusion

This paper has considered tensions in three places: the espoused, normative and operant forms of professional ethics that govern the relationship between practitioners and service users.

Using ethnographic data I have argued that relationships between 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 (though this is not intended to be an exhaustive list): self-disclosures; practitioner's role in the wider lives of young people; setting an example; showing respect; use of authority and power; trusting young people; prioritising needs and best interests; and formality and distance. These complex relationships, I argued, are not well served by creating reductionist set of 'professional boundaries' that serve to present a definitive list of behaviours that are acceptable, and those that are not. 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 situation?*

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 service user and practitioner. Some boundaries preventing obviously destructive or extreme behaviour (e.g. sexual exploitation) 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'. Use rules created for specific purposes as if they are universal, imposing rules to mitigate the assumed risk the practitioner is to the service user but 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 are 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.

While there's 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. There is also, in that dichotomy, an implicit gendered assumption that feminine approaches to safeguarding and good practice require greater defending than masculine ideals that imply objectivity and impartiality. 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.

The protection of vulnerable people is still the highest priority. Therefore how do we protect from people with malicious intent if we're relying on contextual decision making? We cannot be naïve, and greater thought and research will be needed here. However regular supervision sessions where decisions are asked to be defended on the basis of how they meet the *telos* of the relationship, and an awareness of what potentially exploitative boundary violations look like can create an environment in which a critical approach to ethics in relationships is expected.

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