How morally aware is youth and community work? [1] [2]

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[1] I would like to acknowledge the help and encouragement given to me in writing this article by Bert Jones, Principal Lecturer in Youth and Community Work at the North East Wales Institute of Higher Education.

[2] Along with colleagues in North Wales Gavin Fairbairn is currently planning a series of workshops on ethical issues in youth and community work. In doing so he would be grateful for the support of colleagues who have an interest in the moral issues that arise in their practice - either as workers in the field, or in training contexts. He therefore invites comments, suggestions and offers of help from any who are convinced in any way by what he has argued in this article.

Is youth and community work morally aware?

Like all members of the so-called 'people professions', youth and community workers face moral decisions everyday. For example, they must decide how to use their time. This is a moral issue because if they are spending time with one person or group they are not spending it with others who may be in more need of the services they provide; it is a moral issue because they are accountable to others for the services they offer, for the efficient use of resources and for meeting the needs of users of their services as well as they can; and it is a moral issue because personal integrity demands a job well done. Time is a scarce resource and its allocation, like the allocation of all scarce resources, is a matter of great moral significance.

For those who are unfamiliar with the world of ethics and morality in which I live and work, it might seem a little strange that I should choose to begin a brief discussion about ethics in youth and community work by talking about the allocation of time. They might have the idea that ethics is about much more serious stuff. And there are, of course, many important ethical issues of a very serious kind including, for example, the taboo against workers having intimate relationships with clients. Another significant ethical issue that is frequently recognised not only by youth and community workers but by colleagues in the other 'people professions', concerns the need to maintain confidentiality in relation to private information mat is shared by users of services though interestingly many colleagues do not view gossiping about them as involving a breach of confidentiality. Finally let me mention a range of issues that are thrown up by the area of practice which, .other than intimacy between users of services and staff is perhaps most likely to be recognised as raising issues of moral significance - those mat revolve round equal opportunity and discrimination - round the need, that is, for practice to be conducted in a non-discriminatory or even anti-discriminatory way. Discussions of issues and dilemmas in mis area are likely to be quite heated and they are certainly of moral significance.

Now of course, professional ethics is about obviously important aspects of practice and professional conduct such as those I have outlined in the last paragraph. But it is also about much less dramatic and apparently less serious issues - for example, the question of whether it is appropriate for workers to swear in front of the young people with whom they are working and the need to offer a good example to young people in all things. Like it or not, youth and community workers do serve as role models for young people and thus all aspects of one's behaviour carry both moral and professional significance whenever there are young people around.

It is my contention that in coming to age as a profession the youth and community work service must turn its corporate mind towards questions of ethics that arise in everyday practice. It needs to get to grips with the creation of a Code of Ethics, a code of conduct - call it what you will - we all know what is meant by the various titles that professions such as psychology, social work, medicine and nursing have chosen. But it needs also, to acknowledge the necessity of incorporating some element of moral education into the courses by which it trains its workers - both professional and voluntary. Of course by *moral education* I don't mean anything so banal as telling workers what's right and what's wrong so that they can pass on the truth about such things to young people and other service users with whom they work. Rather by moral education I mean work on the development of skills in moral reasoning that can both be turned on the ethical dilemmas of practice and used in helping clients to come to understand aspects of their experience that are only validly considered in terms of moral terms such as right and wrong, good and bad, respect, care, responsibility, duty and obligation.

My professional background is as a teacher and social worker in child, adolescent and adult psychiatry, 'maladjustment' and learning disability. My academic background is in philosophy and in particular, in applied ethics. I thus have little direct experience of youth and community work. However, the contact I have had with colleagues in youth and community work over the years leads me to believe that I am right in guessing, as I said at the beginning, that youth and community workers face moral decisions every day

Some people might want to object to my contention that youth and community workers must take the moral dimension of their work seriously. They may believe that morality is a personal matter which should not be allowed to contaminate the workplace, that since everyone has the right to their own moral views no-one has any right to attempt to impose moral standards on anyone else and in particular that as workers they have no right to impose their own moral views ('prejudices') on the young people with whom they work. They may think of morality and ethics as having to do with one lot of people - usually those in power, telling another lot of people - those who have little power, what they should and shouldn't do. The vogue in recent years for political parties and other powerful bodies such as the churches, to broadcast the need for moral regeneration - engaging, for example, in discussions about the need, to 'get back to basics', certainly lends some support to this idea. However, the truth is that moral issues surround us in our everyday lives; and they certainly arise in all areas of professional life.

If you are inclined to believe that you don't face moral issues in your work try asking yourself what it is that upsets and worries and grieves you most in your workplace - what makes you must likely to come home depressed, stressed-out or angry; then think carefully about the issues you come up with. If in relation to any of these you find yourself using words like care, respect, trust, fair/unfair, right, wrong, good, bad, rights, duties, obligation, truth and honesty, there is little doubt that you are concerned about issues of a moral kind. Whatever the media seem to suggest, morality is not just about people like bishops and politicians berating us all with the need to avoid actions mat are wrong in an obvious sense, but about the need to treat one another decently. And for those with responsibility for helping to shape the lives and values of others, it is about the need to help those others to see both the need and the value of treating others decently.

There are several ways in which youth and community workers like colleagues in the other 'people professions' can deal with the moral dilemmas they face. First of all they can acknowledge that an issue with which they are faced is a moral one and as such is difficult to solve - even in cases where we believe something to be morally wrong it can be difficult to decide what the morally best course of action is. But facing up to the fact that issues are moral ones can be a source of great anxiety and so a range of other strategies may be adopted to avoid doing so. For example, a group of workers may choose to ignore moral issues in the hope mat they will go away (they won't). More cleverly, they can reconstrue the moral issues that trouble them in such a way that they appear to be issues of another kind. Consider, for example, a situation in which the staff of a dub have to decide what to do about the fact mat some of the young people in their dub are dabbling in drugs - perhaps even, in a very minor way (whatever that means) dealing in them - buying enough so that they can supply a few of their friends. This seems uncontentiously to me to raise moral issues. However, in an attempt to avoid reflecting on the morality of condoning (even encouraging) drug taking among young people, and the anxiety this might cause, this team of workers might construe their dilemma simply as an issue about the best way to maintain the fragile relationship they have developed with this group of young people. And thus they might attempt to justify Non--intervention to themselves on the grounds, for example, that to express disapproval would jeopardise the hard won and important relationship they have been working for many months at forming.

So, as an outsider whose only knowledge of youth and community work comes from contact with colleagues in the HE sector who are involved in the training and education of student youth and community workers, but who believes in the

importance of a consideration of the ethical dimension of practice, I want to suggest a plan of action.

Firstly, I want to suggest that the youth service in Wales should spearhead a movement towards raising the awareness of youth and community workers that moral issues are to be found in almost every encounter that they have with the users of their services. I want to suggest that such moral issues can be a source of stress for workers who may know what they could do but be worried about whether they should do it - in other words I want to draw attention to the stress that can arise from having to worry about whether it is right to act in certain ways. And I want to suggest that if it is to fulfil its role in helping to shape young people into confident, well adjusted and responsible citizens - aware not only of their own needs and aspirations but of those of others, youth and community work must take seriously the need to offer a moral lead to the young people with whom it engages.

Secondly, I want to suggest mat the youth service in Wales should set about the production of a *Code of Ethics for Youth and Community Work* - one that is owned by its practitioners in the sense that they have both been invited and given opportunities to contribute to its creation.

Finally I want to suggest that the youth service in Wales should take seriously the need to incorporate into its ongoing training programmes opportunities for workers and students to reflect upon and work with the moral problems they encounter, acknowledging the effects that such problems may have on practice if they are allowed to go unremarked and untreated.

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