Chapter 4 Motivations

Summary
Ethics and motivations are caught up in each other. Ethics calls for, and drives towards, response. Our motivations will shape our ethics, both individually and as a profession, and hopefully, our ethics will also shape our motivations, calling them into question and to account when they need to. This chapter examines what our motivations are, and what legitimate rewards might be, not only for each of us as individuals, but as members of the profession. Because it is so common, there is also a special discussion of religious motivations for practice.

Youth work sits in an interesting position with respect to the relationship with the client: it is a bit different to most of the professions. Unlike most professions, the professional relationship in youth work isn't initiated, in most cases, by the client. Young people may not perceive they have any need for a youth worker. On what basis do we pursue a relationship with young people (as we most definitely do)? What right do we have to interfere in people's lives? What is our mandate? And what are our motivations? Or at least, what are legitimate motivations?

There is no question that some motivations flow from our understanding of youth, and of youth work, as we explored in the last chapter. Koehn argues that the kind of knowledge that is developed in the professions is not neutral, objective expertise but a committed engagement with the object of their work – what the ancients called *scientia:* 'a passion or perfection arising from the union of something intelligible and an intellectual power' (Koehn 1994: 20). The object's own character guides the inquiry and the form it takes: the good to be pursued is present in the inquiry.

So the nature of youth determines the nature of youth work. If youth is created as a population group by its exclusion from the common wealth, and if youth work is about addressing that exclusion and mitigating its damage, then there is a moral claim for justice which motivates our profession. For many of us, the motivation to work with young people comes from the frustration of seeing the way that young people are pressed into lives that are less than they could be, of the waste of talent and capacity involved, and for the way that not only young people but we as a society are the poorer for that. When we express our motivations collectively, as a profession, in tends to be with this kind of intent, though not necessarily in these words.

But we also have our own motivations. We want to be financially secure. We want to be loved. We want to be respected. We want to help. We want to feel good about the society we live in. We want social recognition. We want to have fun. We want to keep learning, be stimulated. We want other people to be able to have those things too. We want to belong. We want to feel safe. We want to become more like the person we want to be. We might want to be rich and famous, though youth work seems an odd choice if that's at the top of the list.

All of those motives are fine. Any one of them can result in seriously disordered practice if they get out of balance. Professional discipline is significantly about keeping the

multitude of our motivations in their proper place. Part of that is knowing ourselves well enough to know what our motivations are. Another is about knowing where our different motivations belong, and which are about me, and which are about the interests of my client.

Other-directedness

> The peculiar characteristics of a profession as distinguished from other occupations, I take to be these:
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> *First*. A profession is an occupation for which the necessary preliminary training is intellectual in character, involving knowledge and to some extent learning, as distinguished from mere skill.
>
> *Second.* It is an occupation which is pursued largely for others and not merely for one's self.
>
> *Third.* It is an occupation in which the amount of financial return is not the accepted measure of success.
>
> (Brandeis 1914: 2)

So wrote Judge Brandeis in an address an opening of a new college – actually, a business college - in 1912. His argument was for business to embrace the ethical aspects of their work, especially the requirements of justice for their workers, and take their place among the professions. In doing so he laid down a template for a profession, as Koehn does, in terms of its ethics, and especially in terms of its motivations. Whether business was a good candidate for that, I'm not sure, but that is another question.

Brandeis' core argument is that a profession is distinguished by being *other-directed*. In other words, it isn't about you. Your youth work is about the young people you work with. As the previous chapter argued, *they* are your primary client, not you.

This characteristic used to be understood in terms of *altruism*, but this has become more difficult as a concept largely because the meaning of the word has itself moved. Originally, it meant activity that was directed primarily towards the interests of others. Over time, the term has hardened to mean activity in which any self-interest is absent. In doing so, it has lost its usefulness for our purposes. Aside from the question of whether anyone ever does anything in the complete absence of a personal motive, Koehn argues that altruism is, in the long term, unstable. I might be prepared to do all sorts of things for you without any reward, but after a while, that is going to be very annoying and I'm going to resent it. And probably start doing things badly, even vindictively. Practice becomes sound when it is "shown not only to benefit the client but necessarily and intrinsically to satisfy the professional" (Koehn 1994: 119-20)

Our practice is other-directed, but not altruistic. Our work is directed toward the service of young people, but we have our own motivations. How does that work? What are our rewards in the youth work relationship? How do we find the balance?

Koehn argues that unlike the trades or in commerce, the relationship is not one of contract. That is, we do not exchange goods in the transaction. It is not the case that we give the young person something, and they are then obliged to give something to us. They are obliged to give *nothing* to us, not even gratitude, (though that is nice when it

happens). They aren't even obliged to like us. Their only obligation in the transaction is to engage in the process of their own coming to wholeness.

Koehn describes the rewards of professional practice in two ways.

First, she argues that the professional shares in the good that they are pursuing for their client. There is, she says, the "physician's share of health" and the "lawyer's share of justice".

> The physician … examines her own as well as the patient's experience ... In achieving her own balance between her bodily limitations and transbodily purposes, the doctor actually obeys that age-old command of sceptical, mistrustful patients everywhere: 'Physician, heal thyself!' The covenanting physician gains a share of health while healing the patient … And since this good is obtained through and insofar as the physician's furthering client health, no conflict arises between the professional's and the client's good.
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> (Koehn 1994: 123)

So, as we facilitate young people's development, we facilitate our own. As we seek justice and inclusion for them, we make ourselves more just and inclusive. As we help young people learn, we learn. As we create environments that are open and accepting and developmental and fun, we are accepted and develop and become more open and fun.

Second, she argues that the act of professing, of taking on the profession, has a motive beyond the service which it provides to the client. It might be obvious that *someone* needs to engage young people if they are being excluded. But why should it be me?

The language she uses for this comes from the classics and might sound a bit high-minded, but that's ok. The motive for the professional, she argues, is the motive of self-perfection. This comes not as the object of our work: there is a long tradition that one cannot find perfection (or happiness, or a number of other good things) by seeking it directly. As John Lennon said, life is what happens while you are busy making other plans. If we try merely to become more perfect, more good (and so much more if we think we have succeeded) the great risk is that we become self-righteous and pretentious and frankly insufferable. It is in the process of *service*, in the process of being *other*-directed, that we become better people, better versions of ourselves.

At some level, I think we know that about our practice, though I don't think I was conscious of it until Koehn pointed it out. But from the beginning I liked what youth work was doing to me. I liked the kind of person it was making me, even as it confronted me with my limitations and inadequacies. Or maybe because it confronted me with those things. And having been insulated from many of the injustices of society all my life up until then, at least then I knew about some of them close up. I knew good and evil. I might not be able to do much about those injustices, but I wasn't just someone standing by.

For Koehn, then, the key motivation for the professional is

the pursuit of self-perfection through the service of the client.

Now, I'm not claiming anything about purity of motives here. The long list of motivations at the beginning of this chapter don't suddenly disappear because we recognise a more transcendent motive about becoming a better person, or self-perfection, or virtue, or whatever else you want to call it: the 'what kind of person do I want to be?' question. But these other motivations – the desire to earn good money, to be recognised, to be loved, to have fun, to feel safe – are put in context and ordered by this primary other-directedness: as much as I might want these things, and be motivated by them, this practice is not about me. It is about this young person that I am talking to, or this group of young people that I'm planning this event for. These other things have their place, I might still need to attend to them, and there may be a time when I need to give them some priority. But they are not why I do youth work.

There is a family of motivations, however, that require some further examination: not because they aren't other-directed, nor because they aren't concerned with self-perfection through the service of young people. They do, however, confront the question of what youth work is for.

Youth work and proselytising

The history of youth work in most Western countries began with evangelism, with the imperative to introduce young people to the Christian faith. For that matter, the histories of many individual youth workers begins with evangelism. Youth work is a process of "seeking the lost". The core logic wasn't that different to what we described in the last chapter. Young people were still seen as vulnerable, due to their exclusion and potential disengagement from social life. This took a particular line of analysis and intervention, however. The primary problem was alienation from God. The immediate context of that was disengagement from the community of faith, with the potential for losing one's way spiritually, perhaps permanently: and ultimately, eternally. The immediate temporal consequences, in terms of crime, unemployment, poverty and alcoholism, weren't much better. The stakes were high.

In some traditions, this was the only focus of interest. The analysis was that the primary need of young people was spiritual, the primary transformation a religious conversion, and that the transformation of a young person's material life would naturally follow the renunciation of alcohol and other drugs, unprincipled sexual activity, crime, fighting and the rest of the deadly sins. These pursuits would be replaced by sobriety, hard work, contribution to the community and usually (though by no means always) political conservatism.

Many people whose motivations began with evangelism began to notice more and more the difficulty of these young people's lives, and the often routine injustice that filled them. In most cases, it was that which drew them to those particular young people in the first place. To be sure, their lives would often get better with the moral focus of religious commitment and the support of religious communities, but the thing was, things should never have been like that in the first place. Rich people needed God no less, but somehow crime, unemployment, ignorance, poverty and alcoholism didn't seem to be as inevitable a consequence of a godless but affluent existence.

So the analysis tended to move on to understand the conditions of injustice and deprivation that shape the lives of young people like this. My own history, the history of

the profession, and the histories of individual organisations (like the YMCA, for instance) seem to run parallel in this respect. Without totally discarding theology as an explanatory schema, youth work moved on to political and sociological analysis to understand the position that young people were in. The move away from theological justifications for intervention was accelerated by partnerships with the state, where doctrines of the separation of church and state generally required government-supported youth work to be secular at least on the surface.

The first motivations of youth work, then, were religious. These motivations no longer dominate the field, at least not overtly. Official documents about youth work concentrate on the dynamic of exclusion, rather than conversion. However, religious motivations continue to be active: a huge number of youth workers would count a live and active faith among their primary motivations. A huge number of young people are engaged in church or other faith-based youth programmes. And faith-based organisations like the Salvation Army, the YMCA, and Bernardos, are big players in the field, as well as the welfare/care/youth work wings of the major denominations, Islamic and Jewish organisations and other religious groups. No book about youth work ethics would do its job without giving serious attention to faith-based traditions within youth work, and proselytising as a primary motivation for youth work practice.

So can work with religious intent be youth work?

The short answer is yes, it can. But not all work with young people done from a faith perspective is youth work. A rather stridently anti-Christian colleague once admitted that both the best and the worst youth workers she had ever worked with were Christians. There are deep homologies between the understandings of the world that Christians share, their moral philosophy, their impulse for engagement, and youth work perspectives on these things. Which is I guess not surprising given the deep influence that Christian thinking has had on shaping youth work practice throughout its history. And, of course, there is a massive diversity in Christian thinking, wide swathes of Christian expression of which this is absolutely not true, and other religious traditions where it is absolutely is.

Will the definition of youth work help?

This is a reasonable test case for the definition of youth work that we encountered in the last chapter. Faith-based youth work is youth work if it engages the young person in a professional relationship as the primary client, in their social context.

First, it isn't youth work if the relationship isn't a professional one. Many church-based youth groups work on friendship and peer based networks, and the language for the facilitative role reflects that: ”youth leader” rather than ”youth worker”. The professional disciplines are not presumed to apply, and don't. There isn't a problem if a youth leader forms a sexual attachment to another member of the youth group.

Second, it isn't youth work if the young person isn't the primary client. The work needs to be driven by the young person's situation, and significantly to be on their terms. If the motivation for service is the faith community's ambitions for growth or for the status attaching to conversion, or a programme of containment to make sure that the young people don't stray from the faith irrespective of their own reasonable but different choices, it isn't youth work. If service is withdrawn when a young person declines

conversion or leaves a faith community, there is clearly also a problem. If a young person has no interest in the faith question, but is continually confronted with it anyway, it is again difficult to see how they are the client. If formal religious instruction is a condition for access to more attractive parts of the programme, that is a problem too.

Being the client means more than that the work is in the young person's interest (as we perceive it). It means that the work is centred on the young person, especially their perceptions, needs and purposes. So it isn't enough that we think that what we are planning would be good for them.

Thirdly, it isn't youth work if the youth worker doesn't engage the young person in their social context. If the concern is only or even primarily with ultimate questions, on the person's spiritual life and on their religious commitments, it isn't youth work. Maybe here, "youth ministry" is a more honest term.

I'm not saying that there is anything wrong with a practice which is concerned with a person's spiritual or religious life. If I was working with a young person and that surfaced as the primary area of concern for them, I'd have no hesitation referring them to a youth minister (who, presumably, I had checked out and trusted). But leading them to religious commitment, and helping them to develop toward spiritual maturity as a member of a faith community, that would not be within my brief as a youth worker. The parallel for me would be psychology: I'm a reasonably adequate counsellor, have done a reasonable amount of training in that area, and worked professionally as a therapist in my time. But if a young person presented with emotional or intra-psychological difficulties that required therapy, I would refer. Or at least make another time when I am not in my youth worker role, and contract the difference of roles very clearly.

It is, I guess, a question of being clear about the scope of your professional practice. A cognitive psychologist might be at the top of their field, but they don't do brain surgery. Even though brains might be especially what they are interested in, and mostly what they work on. It is absolutely legitimate for a young person's spiritual life to be one of the questions that we pursue in the youth work encounter: not to tell them ours, or to tell them what theirs should be (because youth work is not about telling), but to listen, to assess, to clarify, and if required, to refer. The state of a young person's connection to their spiritual tradition or community of faith is part of their social context, and as important as their connection to school and to family. This is so especially if a young person engages me as their youth worker knowing that I am working for a faith organisation. And if I am, they should.

Conclusion

In youth work, as in life, our practice is shaped by our motivations. We are used to these being expressed in terms of the aims or goals of whatever project we happen to be working on, and sometimes, the goals or purposes of youth work more generally. For example the National Youth Agency's foundational document *Ethical conduct in youth work* says:

> The purpose of youth work is to facilitate and support young people's growth through dependence to interdependence, by encouraging their

> personal and social development and enabling them to have a voice, influence and place in their communities and society.
>
> (National Youth Agency 2004: 3)

The purposes of our practice derive directly from our analysis of what constitutes the problem with respect to young people. I have argued that the obligation to intervene arises from the exclusion of young people and our consciousness not only of the fundamental injustice of that exclusion but the damage and waste that it causes. The National Youth Agency's statement of purposes is congruent with this. The analysis here, I think, is that what ought to be a fluid, natural and celebrated transition from dependence to interdependence becomes problematic because of young people's exclusion (the absence of 'voice, influence and place in their communities and society') and that this inhibits their social and personal development.

There are always a number of motivations, both externally and internally, principled and practical. We need to keep funding bodies satisfied, to meet expectations of our communities, to keep our jobs. We need to be loved and accepted, to be safe and secure, to be stimulated and to learn, to feel like we are moving and making progress.

These various motivations are ordered by our core understanding of what our profession involves: in this case, the principle of the young person as the primary client, the field of practice as the young person in their social context, the purpose of their emancipation from exclusion and infantilisation into productive, responsible, ethical, critically engaged, committed and respected members of their societies.

Our personal motivations are ordered by the core purpose that we share with every true professional: to pursue self-perfection through the service of the other. As young people find life through our work, so do we.

Things to think about

Isn't this talk of self-perfection a bit pretentious? Isn't it just a job, and you do it the best you can? Is there anything wrong will doing youth work just to pay the bills?

Is political or philosophical proselytising any different from religious proselytising? For example, feminist consciousness-raising? Or socialist organising? Or trying to sign young people up to the environmental movement?

If you think religious proselytising is OK, does that mean that you can't reasonably object to political proselytising? And vice versa.

If you did lead a young person through a religious conversion, what are your obligations to them then? Are these consistent with your youth work?

Brandeis, L. D. (1914). Business: a profession. Boston, Small and Maynard.

Koehn, D. (1994). The ground of professional ethics. London, Routledge.

National Youth Agency (2004). Ethical Conduct in Youth Work a statement of values and principles from The National Youth Agency. Leicester, The National Youth Agency.