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Crossing the line? Personal and professional boundaries in tension

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Introduction

This paper will consider personal and professional boundaries, and the tensions which can arise for the practitioner when the personal and professional conflict. Though the focus is primarily on work with young people, many of the issues apply equally to work with people of any age.

Drawing on critical incident case studies as a basis for exploration, some key questions will be discussed:

- How do I remain young person focused in a target-driven service?
- Am I really offering a confidential service to young people?
- How can I advise a young person about something which is incompatible with my own values?
- How can I work effectively with other agencies if their culture and values are different from my own?
- What are the risks – and potential benefits – of crossing the boundary line?

Is it cricket?

I chose the cricket analogy, as the term 'boundary' is widely recognized, even by many who are not fans of the game. In cricket, the boundary is clearly defined, and is marked by a physical object such as a rope. The consequences for each team are also clear when the boundary is crossed, and these can be positive in terms of runs scored. However the nature of a rope is that it is flexible, and can be moved, it can accommodate things pushing against it, and can be stepped over. A flexible boundary can be beneficial in enabling a practitioner to respond to a client's needs and situation, but working with young people requires a different approach in

which appropriate boundaries need to be clearly defined (Geldard and Geldard, 2010). Geldard and Geldard (2010) also suggest that it is important to respect the young person's own boundaries, in terms of what they are prepared to discuss, and this can necessitate some negotiation to agree appropriate shared boundaries for any interaction.

Why consider this now?

The coalition government has made a commitment to an all-age guidance service, which will include services for young people to replace the provision currently delivered by Connexions in England. The way this service will be financed and delivered is still unclear (Watts, 2011), but it has been suggested that there will continue to be impartial guidance available for young people in school. Again there is a lack of clarity about what this will look like. For many young people, there remains a need for additional support, particularly for those with a learning difficulty or disability (LDD), and for those who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). For many practitioners who work for Connexions, or the local authority, the focus of the work has changed from a more generic service to working mainly with young people with LDD or who are NEET (Connexions Kent, online). This has challenged practitioners' view of their professional identity and expertise, leaving many confused about the role they are expected to undertake.

To add to the uncertainty, David Cameron is committed to the concept of 'The Big Society' (Norman, 2010) with the implication that, as public services are reduced, practitioners will be increasingly reliant on, and therefore required to work with, a much wider range of other services, including the voluntary and community sector. This is not necessarily a problem, but is causing practitioners to question their contribution. Morale is low, and many are leaving the profession, either voluntarily or through redundancy. The need to be clear about professional boundaries becomes increasingly difficult as personal issues intrude. As Bond (2010: 41) suggests 'This dichotomy of ethical responses can be very uncomfortable and can raise fundamental choices between personal and professional integrity.' We can alleviate some of the tension by reference to professional guidelines on ethical practice, but still need to recognise the impact of the personal on how we take our practice forward.

The ICG Code of Ethical Principles

For this paper, I will focus on the ethical principles set out by the Institute of Career Guidance (ICG). These provide practitioners with the guidelines they need to ensure that they are working 'to the highest standards of professional behaviour as set out in the seven principles' (ICG, online):

1. Impartiality
2. Confidentiality
3. Duty of care – to clients, colleagues, organisations and self
4. Equality
5. Accessibility
6. Accountability
7. Continuous professional development

As we consider the issues raised by the critical incident case studies, many of these principles will be discussed. The ICG, 'whilst recognising the diversity of backgrounds and work settings of its members' (online), requires all members to subscribe to the principles and to apply them in their practice. This has informed my responses to the ethical dilemmas posed in the case studies. The principles of impartiality and duty of care recognise that work with clients must be 'based solely on the best interests of and potential benefits to the client' (online). This underpins the client- or person-centred approach to our work.

Client autonomy

When working in a client- or person-centred way (Wosket, 2006), we want our clients to take responsibility for themselves and their outcomes. These may be hard outcomes such as getting a job or gaining a place at college, or soft outcomes – which may be much harder to recognise and often impossible to measure – like improved self-confidence or organisation skills (Dewson et al, 2000). Many young people find taking responsibility difficult as they are not usually expected to be an equal partner in interactions with adults, and as practitioners we need to recognise this and encourage young people to become an active participant by sharing the process and making the boundaries clear (Reid and Fielding, 2007).

For this to happen, we need to be especially clear about our own boundaries, which implies a level of reflection and self-awareness. Bond (2010: 84/85) expresses this very clearly:

These dilemmas are intrinsic to counselling and have to be evaluated in the light of specific circumstances. Part of this involves asking:

- Am I as a counsellor taking on responsibilities which are more properly the client's?
- Is there a way I could respond which maximizes the client's autonomy and minimizes his dependence on me?

...Counsellors who systematically ask themselves these questions are much more likely to stay within boundaries that give clients their appropriate responsibility for the outcome.

It is important to recognise that this may take time, but that as the client is increasingly able to take more responsibility, the practitioner's role becomes less clearly defined, but should facilitate situations 'in which the client is an agent of change' (Winslade and Monk, 2007: 133). As the relationship between practitioner and client changes, the boundaries may well move, which may give rise to ethical questions which need to be addressed.

Ethical dilemmas

It is difficult to consider some of the ethical issues in the abstract. Often we know that we have reached a boundary when a situation arises that makes us feel uncomfortable in our professional response, or unsure how to continue to work with a young person. We will each of us respond differently to the following critical incident case studies depending on our own personal and professional boundaries. This is not a problem. We are each reflecting on our practice to make informed decisions about our response to different situations, and this will depend very much on our own previous experience. For each of these critical incidents, ask yourself: What are my feelings about this situation? What would I do?

Consider these situations:

1 You are working with a young person who left school last summer and is still NEET. She has become very withdrawn and finds it difficult to leave the house. You have been working with her to build her confidence and she is now able to come to meet you without her Mum also coming along. She is beginning to think about going to college in September. You have been told that the client is now too dependent on you, and that you need to move her on more quickly so that she no longer shows as NEET in the statistics.

Perhaps the first issue to think about here is that of the relationship between the client and the practitioner. It seems that the client is growing in confidence, but it is difficult to measure this (Dewson et al, 2000), and to justify continuing to work with her may be difficult in a target driven service. The number of sessions may be limited, though it is never easy to identify the number of sessions a client may need as so much depends on their individual needs (Green, 2010). When we have built up an effective relationship with a client it can be difficult to let this go, but we need to be clear that we are acting for the client's best interest if we continue to work with them, and to ensure that someone else will do so when we need to end our relationship (Reid and Fielding, 2007). We want our clients to move from a situation where they may be dependent on us, to one of independence – indeed Mearns and Thorne (2007) warn specifically against encouraging a dependent attitude in clients, though Green (2010) recognises that it is often a normal stage in the relationship between client and practitioner.

The second dilemma relates to the need to ensure that young people are moved out of the NEET group. Recent figures (DfE, 2011) indicate that the proportion of 16 – 18 year olds who are currently NEET is just under 10%, so the pressure on services to reduce these numbers is huge, and often causes tensions where appropriate provision for a young person is not available. Gracey and Kelly (2010) stress the need for more flexibility of provision to meet individual needs, as well as a need to get away from the unhelpful blanket term NEET, to something which recognises the distinctiveness of young people's experiences.

What would I do? I would put together a case for continuing to work with the client, based on slowly reducing the support provided as her confidence improves. At the same time I would want to work with her to explore the options for college courses, which would enable her to move from NEET to EET.

2 You are working in school with a 15 year old student who disclosed to you some weeks ago that his personal circumstances are quite stressful at the moment as his father and older brother have been imprisoned for assault on a neighbour, and he is now at home with his mother who is depressed. At that time he was coping fairly well and did not want any additional help. You have assured him that this information will remain confidential. You are due to see him again today. His Form Tutor asks you to give them an update on the client's situation after you have seen him. You ask how they know about this client's situation, and the Tutor says that the other Adviser in the school had noticed your note on the system and had mentioned it to the Tutor.

The first thing to consider here is the apparent breach of confidentiality by a colleague. In our work with clients we assure them that what they say will remain confidential, though with many exceptions when working with young people, and it is often this assurance which enables them to share sensitive information. Bond (2010:155) suggests that for practitioners confidentiality 'is probably the single issue that raises most ethical ... anxiety', and Green (2010) stresses the need to work within the constraints of the policy of their organisation. This can be difficult when two organisations have different views about confidentiality, in this case, the school expecting to have information passed on, and the practitioner having assured the client that this will not happen. Haynes (1998) suggests that these tensions are common in school situations, and are not straightforward to resolve. A further complication here is the intervention of 'the other Adviser'. It would be

easy to criticise this person for not behaving in an ethical way, but situations are rarely so simple. It is possible that they were acting in good faith, believing that it would help the client if the school were aware of the circumstances. It may be that they responded to a direct question about the client, or assumed that the Tutor as a fellow professional was included in the confidentiality agreement with the client. Winslade and Monk (2007) recognise the value in working with the wider school community to support a young person, but that this must happen in a context of informed consent to share information to avoid 'the dangers of circulating such stories around a community' (p. 128).

This takes us to the heart of the dilemma – what to do now to minimise the potential damage to the relationship with the client. The trust which enabled the client to share information with the practitioner may be shattered if he finds out that other people know about things he thought would not be passed on. What would I do? I would first explain to the Form Tutor the nature of the confidentiality agreement with the client, and stress the need to respect this in not passing any information further. I would want, as soon as possible, to discuss the situation with the colleague who had, in my view, broken confidentiality, in the hope that we could arrive at a shared perception of what is ethical in such a situation. Most importantly, I would want to explain to the client what had happened, and what I had done about it, so that he can continue to work with me in a relationship of trust. This is very difficult, and needs to be handled sensitively, but not to be honest risks damaging the trust between you, and ultimately may end the relationship.

3 You see a 15 year old client in school who tells you that they will be joining the Army as soon as they are old enough, and that their father is happy to sign the paperwork. They visited the Army Careers Office and got a very positive response. Their main reason is that they want to get away from home. You suspect that the client has not thought through the implications of this, but they are unwilling to discuss it further.

The first difficulty here is that, though we may be able to see that a client would benefit from more information and discussion, we cannot make them engage with this if they are not willing. We want our clients to make informed choices, but we need to recognise the context of their lives, and the impact this may have (Reid and Fielding, 2007). Kidd (2006:1) also recognises the complexity of the 'interdependence of work and non-work concerns' which clients need to take into account. The influence of family, particularly parents, is especially strong for many young people, though we would want them to make their own choices (Barnes et al, 2011). As Mearns and Thorne (2007:66) stress, the decisions need to be made 'without neglecting the constraints of his social context', and go on to suggest that 'What we are trying to achieve is the stimulation and promotion of the client's agency' (ibid). For this client, the wish to leave home may be more significant than the choice of a career in the Army.

It is also important to be aware of how our own values may impact on our perception of the client's choices (Wosket, 2006). My own feelings mean that this situation has always been difficult for me, but I have always tried to see things from the client's perspective. I think that 15 is too young to consider joining the army, and that a client of this age is too young to make an informed choice about a decision as big as this. However, my views may cloud the situation. So, what would I do? I would acknowledge the client's choice, recognise their wish not to discuss it further, but ensure that the client would know they could come back in future if things do not work out as they anticipate at the moment.

4 You have just been asked to work with a new Training Provider, and visit to find out what they can offer the young people you work with. The motor vehicle workshop is very impressive, and you can think of several clients who may be interested. The scheme is run by an ex-Army Sergeant who tells you that he will soon sort out 'the little toe-rags', and that all they need is

a bit of discipline, less 'mollycoddling', and to learn respect for teachers 'which none of them have'. You begin to wonder if some of the young people you had thought to send along may not be quite ready for this approach.

In this situation we need to be particularly aware of how our own values impact on our perceptions of what is right for clients. Culley and Bond (2004: 32) make the point that the practitioner needs to set aside 'beliefs about the way clients should conduct their lives' as well as leaving our own private concerns and preoccupations out of our interactions with clients. Bond (2010: 44) advocates a need for self-awareness since 'an unexamined value may become dangerous or counterproductive.' We must not make assumptions about what sort of provision will work well for our clients, based on our own perceptions, but give them the opportunity to decide for themselves.

The second issue for me would be the wish to challenge the provider's use of language in relation to young people, and the assumptions that he is making about all young people. Wosket (2006: 51) acknowledges the need to 'earn the right to challenge', to have a relationship in which it can be seen as helpful, and perhaps at the first meeting it is too soon to do this! So, what would I do? I would encourage young people to apply, but ensure that they were aware of the ethos in the workshop, and I would continue to work with the provider to move towards a shared understanding of the needs of the young people.

Conclusion

We have considered some of the issues around knowing our own personal and professional boundaries, and the challenges this can present in our practice. The clarity of professional guidelines (ICG, online) ensures that we understand the ethical implications of our work with clients, but we are dealing with complexity in clients' lives, so situations are rarely straightforward. Green (2010: 124) makes the point clearly:

Boundaries are there to serve the work and they do so really effectively. They have been developed out of collective wisdom and out of counsellors' bitter experience. However, sometimes, for sound therapeutic reasons, you need to take a risk and break or at least stretch them somewhat. ...Sometimes a human response is more appropriate than slavish adherence to a set of rules.

We can see boundaries in this clear but flexible way – the flexibility of the rope boundary – or we can allow them to prevent us from doing the best we can for our clients if we see them as rigid, insurmountable barriers. This is actually all about being professional, and exercising professional judgement, while retaining our personal values.

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