Youth work and ethics: why the 'professional turn' won't do

Abstract

Youth work is deemed to require a distinctive commitment to ethical behaviour from the adults involved. This is expressed in the requirements for the initial education of workers, in the subject benchmarks and national expectations for youth workers. A significant influence in this debate is Howard Sercombe (2010). Sercombe seeks a substantive framework for youth work ethics. The project offers clear potential benefits alongside equally great dangers. His platform is an integration of two foundations: a particular definition of youth work, and a particular account of what it means to be 'a profession'. I argue that both foundations are flawed, and potentially harmful to practice and policy. At the heart of Sercombe's account, however, is a focus on youth work as based on a 'covenantal relation of trust between youth workers and young person'. This insight, submerged and marginalized, does offer a substantive foundation for youth work ethics.

Introduction

Youth work, informal education with young people, is deemed to be an activity that requires a distinctive commitment to particular ethical behaviour from the adults involved. This has long been an element of the requirements for the initial education of workers (NYA, 2010), the subject benchmarks (QAA, 2009), the UK national youth agencies' expectations for youth workers' conduct (NYA, 2004; CLD, 2011) and more recently as part of the agenda for the Institute of Youth Work (IYW, 2015). A significant influence in this debate has been the work of Howard Sercombe (Sercombe, 2010). Whilst earlier work in youth work ethics focused on identifying and exploring ethical issues (see Banks, 1999) or applying quasi-ethical, political frameworks (see, for example, Roberts, 2009 drawing on human rights), Sercombe sought to provide a substantive framework for 'youth work ethics'. The approach offers clear potential benefits, however, in moving from the ad hoc resolution of practical ethical issues to a platform that informs and frames the ethical judgements of youth workers. Such potential benefits come with equally great dangers: an insecure, misplaced or fictitious platform risks undermining youth work practice and offering false assurance to workers on the ethical legitimacy of their actions.

This paper focuses on the foundations of informal educators' ethical judgements. Youth work is an essentially ethical activity concerned, as it is, with:

> 'Enabl[ing] young people to develop holistically, working with them to facilitate their personal, social and educational development, to enable them to

> develop their voice, influence and place in society and to reach their full potential' (Youth Work National Occupational Standards, 2012).

At the heart of the activity of youth work is the ability of youth workers to make appropriate, justifiable ethical judgements. As such it is embedded in policy and practice through the, previously mentioned, occupational standards, benchmarking statements and codes of expected conduct. My contention is that Sercombe's framing of 'youth work ethics' is seriously flawed. In the paper I use the term 'youth work ethics', the title of Sercombe's key monograph, to mean the ethics that underpin the practice of youth workers/informal educators, rather than the ethical content of youth work's educational agenda for young people.

Sercombe's platform is an integration of two foundations: a particular definition of youth work, and a particular account of what it means to be 'a profession'. If my arguments are sound then both foundations are irredeemably flawed, and the utilisation of his account of 'youth work ethics' cannot but harm not only practice, but also emerging policy. At the heart of Sercombe's account are, however, a few insights which do offer potential for a renewed framework for youth work ethics, not least his focus on youth work as based on a covenantal relation of trust between youth workers and young people. This insight is, however, submerged and marginalized by a range of unsupported and unsupportable further claims about youth work and youth work practice.

The central difficulty with Sercombe's analysis is his desire to specify and narrowly define both 'youth work' and 'a profession'; the latter being drawn from Koehn (1994). The result is that, in the case of 'youth work', he ends up with a series of related definitions, none of which capture the everyday use of the term. In the case of 'professions', Sercombe (and Koehn) seek a level of generality which, whilst true, ignores the specific differences between professions. Whilst this causes no problems for Koehn's thesis, starting as it does from the general agreement that medicine, law and ministry are professions, it is significant for Sercombe's argument that 'youth work' *ought* to be part of the pantheon of t*he professions*.

I begin with a consideration of Koehn's argument and its suitability for grounding Sercombe's debate. I conclude that Koehn's thesis cannot provide the support that Sercombe needs. Sercombe's argument shows that some (incomplete) account of youth work shares some characteristics in common with one or other of the professions. This is not, however, sufficient for 'youth work' to be identified as a profession. I then move on to consider Sercombe's definition of 'youth work'. I argue that Sercombe's definition is both highly limited and only provides a purchase on ethical matters as a result of conceptual slippage in relation to the term 'exclusion'. Whilst Sercombe is no doubt identifying a small sample of youth work practices, a much broader definition is necessary to capture the range of activities normally described by the term. In conclusion, I draw attention to a submerged insight in Sercombe's argument; the focus on covenantal relationships of trust with young people.

Is Koehn a good foundation for youth work ethics?

It is perhaps worth clarifying Koehn's own thesis. Koehn, located in a north american context, is concerned with the legitimacy and authority of the 'traditional' professions: medical doctors, lawyers, and ministers of religion. The attacks on their legitimacy have come, she claims, from three sources. Firstly, that the professions are no more than ideologically constructed attempts to maintain a monopolistic approach to particular trading activities. Secondly, that the professions make unsupported claims to distinct ethical codes disassociated from ordinary morality. Thirdly, that professions ought to be legitimated by what they do and how effectively they do it, not by their ethical principles. Koehn argues that this decline in the legitimacy of professions is important for two reasons: the professions are the 'only mechanism we have for collectively providing ourselves with the goods of health, legal justice, and spiritual peace' (Koehn, 1994, 5), and that they '...represent our communally *chosen* response to the problem...We could have endorsed alternative solutions to this problem' (Koehn, 1994, 6). The advantage of the professions over alternatives,within western liberal democracies is, Koehn claims, that the '...professions are in some sense and to some degree independent of state control (Koehn, 1994, 6). Koehn's project is then summed up as:

> '..to justify trust in the practice of professionals by showing that this practice is in fact morally legitimate. I will argue that professional practices qualify as morally legitimate because, and to the extent that, they are structured to merit the trust of clients. Contrary to the assertions of our first set of criticism, professions are not mere ideologies but inherently ethical practices. Furthermore, each of these practices has its own special ethic, one deriving its particular and distinctive character from its end of engendering and preserving the trust of clients….While each professional ethics is not identical with ordinary morality, we shall see that they do not violate its dictates and therefore can escape the philosophers' charge that they are immoral. Finally, we shall see that the descriptive versus normative distinction dear to the hearts of our third group of critics...cannot be sustained when one is discussing the practice of professions.' (Koehn, 1994, 7-8)

For Koehn the starting point is that there are a series of specific practices committed to health, legal justice and spiritual peace. She argues that these practices require a particular ethical relationship between the professional and their client, such that the professional both embraces the ethical demands of that practice and is legitimately able to act in particular kinds of ways in that practice. These ethical norms, whilst being consistent with ordinary morality nevertheless 'bind professionals and only professionals' (Koehn, 1994, 8). If they were to bind all persons then they would not be distinctive to a particular group of practitioners. So Koehn's argument is that professions are legitimated by the normative demands placed on professionals which are *both* consistent with ordinary morality and also more demanding than those placed on ordinary citizens. These additional norms offer

confidence to both the community and the vulnerable individuals in need of their services that they can be trusted. They also transform at least some of the practical judgements the professional makes, and their consequent actions. For example, Koehn notes the issue of a doctor lying to a patient. Honesty is rarely 'total truth telling', we make judgements about what to say based on competing ethical norms, including not wanting to upset others, maintaining good relations, etc. So, my Great Aunt's new favourite hat is always 'glorious' regardless of my level of aesthetic revulsion. What the doctor says to her patient is therefore partly informed by the ethical norms of her profession as well as ordinary ethical commitments to honesty. As such the practical action may not conform to the expected action of an ordinary citizen - the doctor may be 'less honest'. Increasing the number of ethical norms does not just add ethical commitments, it changes practical judgements and consequent action.

As I quoted earlier, Koehn describes professions as 'inherently ethical practices' (Koehn, 1994, 7) a comment that one can read one of two ways. The first is that the professions are just members of a, broader, set of 'inherently ethical practices', and the second is that the professions are coterminous with such a set. It is not, however, clear what Koehn means by an inherently ethical practice.

Her argument is that the professions require trust and offer ethical commitments to the public at large as well as those who use their services. However, consider an example drawn from a non-professional occupational group. I expect hygiene standards in my local restaurant to be higher than that in my own kitchen. It is not only that I think I have more of a right to 'give' food poisoning to myself and my family: it is because I am *vulnerable* in my local restaurant to such risks. Unlike in my own kitchen, I do not know the provenance of the ingredients and the normal practices of storage. I do not know of the illnesses that are being experienced by members of the restaurant staff (and their families) like I do with my own. I need to *trust* the restaurant owner. I would not, however, ascribe to her the status of a professional, and managing a restaurant as a 'profession'.

On the first reading of 'inherently ethical practices', the difficulty for Sercombe is that whilst known professions (as identified by Koehn) do in fact display these characteristics, so do a range of other non-professions. The claim that professions are 'inherently ethical practices' seems to offer something distinct from normal ethics of everyday practices, but this is illusionary. There are a range of practices which differ in the ethical demands they place upon agents. But there is no boundary between inherently ethical practices and other practices. However ethically loaded Sercombe seeks to make 'youth work' this qualitative increase in ethical demands will not reach some threshold to be an 'inherently ethical practice'. There is no such threshold.

On the second reading, that 'inherently ethical practices' are coterminous with professions, given that there is no independent characterization of such practices, all that can be said is that professions are such practices - and no more. This reading leaves no possibility for

justifying another practice, for example youth work, as a profession regardless of the ethical commitments that it seems to require of those who are engaged in that practice.

Further, Koehn's claim that a professional makes a 'public pledge' that is *professes* their particular commitment to the client (Koehn, 1994, 54ff) does not do sufficient work either. It is characteristic of professionals that they make a public pledge ensuring their best efforts to do good to future clients. They do so in the presence of members of their profession and request to be held accountable to it. Making a pledge to another, however, in no way indicates a profession. I make pledges to my wife, daughter, siblings, etc. all the time and yet I do not have a professional-client relationship with any of them. Neither do I have such a relationship with my students, although a range of ethical commitments and trust are required. Koehn's claim is that such a pledge, a personal embracing of the particular commitments of one's profession, *legitimates* the right of professional to act in the ways demanded by their profession. It is not that demanding such a pledge identifies a particular practice, for example youth work, as a profession.

Youth work as a profession?

Sercombe builds his case by claiming to show that youth work is not only concerned with ethics, but is a particular kind of ethical activity. As such, it ought to place on youth workers a requirement to *profess* a particular commitment to young people. I am not convinced that Sercombe's case is made even on these points, and I shall return to the definition of youth work shortly. *However*, even if this case were made then it would not be sufficient to show that youth work was, or ought to be, a profession. All Sercombe has shown is that the practice of youth work shares common characteristics with other practices that already have the status of 'a profession'. He could easily have shown how youth work also shows characteristics in common with a range of other practices which are not professions. Sercombe needs more in order to justify his claim that youth work is a profession.

Drawing on Koehn there would seem to be two possible routes forward for Sercombe. The first is either to argue that I have misrepresented Koehn's argument on 'inherently ethical practices' or to develop this account to show that the traditional professions and youth work have something deeper in common; that the 'inherently' here is more substantive than I have allowed. Koehn's use of the term, sufficient for her purposes, is relatively weak and it is possible to develop a stronger view, as for example I have done utilising the work of MacIntyre (see Davies, 2003). This stronger account of i*nherently ethical practices* does not, however, give rise to a distinction between 'professions' and 'non-professions'. I cannot see how Sercombe might reconstruct this argument in his favour.

The second is to offer a further distinctive characteristic shared by the professions and youth work, such that its possession implies status as a profession. Although Koehn's argument seeks to show that there are few characteristics in common that have this potential, nevertheless she does offer some indication in her defense of her project as a whole. She argues that there are two reasons why the legitimacy of the professions is important in

modern society, and it is these that underpin her rationale for the focus of her study. This might offer a way forward. Sercombe would need to show that a suitable characteristic was shared by the professions and that youth work also shared this characteristic.

Koehn's two key reasons why the legitimacy of the professions is important, at least in North America, are:

> 'We should not forget that professions represent the only mechanism we have for collectively providing ourselves with the goods of health, legal justice, and spiritual peace.' (Koehn, 1993, 5)

> 'Professions represent our communally *chosen* response to the problem of delivering help to the ill, the injured or accused, or the sick in spirit. We could have endorsed alternative solutions to the problem...Citizens of Western liberal democracies...have collectively prefered an arrangement in which the professions are in some sense and to some degree independent of state control.' (Koehn, 1993, 6)

In order for Sercombe's argument to get airborne, we need to see Koehn's list of the goods of professional practices as illustrative rather than exhaustive. Sercombe needs to argue that this list has some logic into which the key goods of youth work can be intelligibly added. One such reading is that these goods do seem to be fundamental for our well-being. Although one might argue that 'shelter providers' are equally critical, and whilst we have professional builders we do not have a building profession. (We do of course need to trust the builders and require of them ethical commitments.) Whilst we might read this as simply a class based affirmation of 'white-collar' activities, there are other distinctions. The particular complex forms of judgements made by doctors or lawyers would seem to be of a different order to building a wall or even a house. Builders do make judgements, for example, getting the consistency of the mortar right, but after some experience one relatively easily gets a feel for good mortar and the stuff that will make your flemish bonding sag.

So, the list of specific goods allied to the professions seems to be concerned primarily with well-being, but this does not seem to be sufficient. Space precludes a full development of this theme, and that it not my purpose here. Rather, *if* the list is illustrative, Sercombe needs to explain, what it illustrates and how this supports youth work's claim to be a profession. Does youth work, for example, require the level of complex judgements distinctive to medicine or law?

The second feature that Koehn draws attention to is the singular, communally chosen mechanism for the provision of each of these goods. Much depends here on what might count as a mechanism. It is certainly true that in order to legally practice many types of medicine, understood in terms of the western tradition, one needs to be a member of the medical profession. By this I mean that as communities (in each nation-state) we have decided that we will regulate certain behaviours and allow only registered professional doctors to engage in

them. Of course that does not restrict those who adopt an alternative form of medicine, for example shamans or homeopaths. The same is true of lawyers in relation to the state's legal system (though not to religious courts). It is only those duly registered in a particular jurisdiction who can perform certain actions. We might therefore conclude that, communally, we have limited certain activities which are critical to the enhancement of health and legal justice to those who are members of particular professions. This does not of course imply that all vocational groups who can act in similar ways are professions, for example, nurses, or police officers who act in similar ways to doctors and lawyers respectively. The situation with ministers of religion would seem to be quite different. The differences between religious traditions, their acceptance and rejection of different conceptions of spiritual peace make for a complex picture. Rather than legal limitations, here the limitation appears to be more concerned with the way that we think about who are the primary practitioners in supporting 'the spiritual', and they are usually religious leaders. This seems broadly correct in that if someone has an illness of spirit (and both I *and* they mean spirit not mind) then they would be directed towards a minister of religion, presumably of the tradition which which one has most affinity. As Koehn points out, it could in fact be different, perhaps by redefining the relationship between the spiritual and the mental, or organizing religious groups differently.

Finally, Koehn draws attention to the fact that professions, in western liberal contexts, have a certain independence from the state. She distinguishes this from the plethora of state sponsored priests in the former Soviet Union who were concerned with supporting the political goods of regime. Here some caution needs to be taken with context. In the UK, unlike the US, doctors are largely employed within a state system funded directly from taxation, rather than a system of private hospitals funded via the insurance of individual patients. In the UK the treatments and medicines available to doctors in the state health service are limited by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE). This is a non-departmental government body, sponsored by, but operationally independent of, the government's department of health. Whilst NICE is an evidence driven organisation, central to this evidence is the 'cost effectiveness' calculation in relation to forms of treatment brought to its attention by government departments (see NICE, 2015). Further issues, such as the government control of funding and workforce planning, do indicate that any margin of independence, in the UK, is for the profession as a whole rather than the individual professional. This is primarily a concern with registration to practice, misconduct and related matters. This may be distinct from the US position where a marketised approach leads to more individual freedoms for professionals.

Now if the legitimacy of a profession is a matter of concern for these reasons, Sercombe needs to show that this is the case for youth work. He needs to identify the specific characteristics uniquely common to professions and youth work, and not to other (non-professional) practices. This he has failed to do. Not only does he not demonstrate this, but his account of youth work is distorted by an attempt to link youth work with the

professions. It is distorted such that it neither tracks 'reality' nor 'common useage'. It is to this matter I now turn.

Sercombe on 'youth work'

It is worth noting that in the UK, youth work does not have the trappings of a profession. There is no requirement for registration, no need to make any *'profession of commitment'*, there is no misconduct body for youth work. Whilst there are 'professionally qualifying' programmes of study, there is no requirement that youth workers must undertaken such programmes nor are pay and conditions tightly related to professional qualification. Youth work is funded in a range of contexts: directly by the state, by the state through commissioning it from other organisations and directly by charities and companies. Some of this is explicitly 'youth work', whilst some of the provision is embedded in other activities (such as health, or religious ministry). I have explored some of this diversity and the difficulties this causes for defining youth work elsewhere (see Davies, 2013).

Sercombe's initial definition of youth work is relatively general:

> 'Youth work is a **professional** relationship in which the young person is engaged as the **primary client** in their **social context**.' (Sercombe, 2010, 27 emphasis in original)

Sercombe has not proven that youth work is 'a profession', and what he means by a professional relationship is a covenantal relationship of trust between the youth worker and the young person. By 'primary client', Sercombe means that youth workers work in the best interests of the young person, respecting their views about what is in their interest. The term 'social context' captures both the fact that the young person is part of a community of other persons and that they find themselves with a particular social location typically articulated in terms such as class, gender, etc. Disregarding the 'technical words' in Sercombe's definition, we can restate it as:

Central to youth work is a covenantal relationship with a young person, in which the worker listens to the young person and works in the young person's best interest, and the young person trusts the worker to do so. This is a particular relationship which reflects the social characteristics of the young person and their community.

Whilst we might have some difficulties with this definition, it is consistent with my own (Davies, 2013) and does seem to capture the diverse kinds of activity that are identified as youth work. We could easily adapt this as a statement about a doctor or lawyer, but this does not imply that youth work is a profession. So, for example, we might say of the doctor:

Central to **medicine** is a covenantal relationship with a **patient**, in which the **doctor** listens to the **patient** and works in the best interest of the **patient's health**, and the **patient** trusts the

doctor to do so. This is a particular relationship which reflects the **health related** characteristics of the **patient**.

The key differences are that the doctor's relationship is with a *patient*, a distinctive title only applicable in healthcare rather than the more generally applicable title of 'young person'. The doctor has a delineated interest, she is to focus on the patient's health related characteristics, not a range of other needs. Sercombe is keen to hold onto the title of 'client', though it is clear that only lawyers have clients, doctors have patients and ministers congregants (or parishioners). This does lead to an inclusion of normativity by the backdoor; terms such as patient, client, parishioner carry normative weight that 'young person' does not. Sercombe also seeks to offer a specific area of interest for youth workers based in a particular reading of inclusion/exclusion. What I will show, however, is that whilst this reflects some aspects of youth work practice; it is incomplete and leads Sercombe into error.

Secombe identifies the key feature of youth work as 'facilitat[ing young people's] ethical agency, and with their society to clear barriers of oppression and exclusion' (Sercombe, 2010, 5). The difficulty with this is that it either: (a) excludes, without rationale, a range of activities which are presently described as youth work, or (b) offers a confused use of the language of exclusion, which depends on conceptual slippage across three uses of the term. The first use of the term is 'purely' descriptive, that those in the category 'youth' are excluded from certain goods and services on the grounds of their age. The second use is normative, that those in the category 'youth', are *unfairly* excluded from certain goods and services on the grounds of their age. The third is that some young people, members of the category 'youth', are unfairly excluded from certain goods and services. Now it is certainly the case that there is a widespread belief that there are some young people who are *unfairly excluded* by dint of their circumstances, for example, family poverty, school difficulties, being young carers, etc. Further, it is the case that a range of youth work is conducted with such young people in order to overcome, or mitigate the effects of, such exclusion. What is more, in general in the UK, there has been broad support for such activities. Sercombe, however, focusses on the category 'youth' rather than individual young people. He asserts that youth are excluded and assumes that this is a problem: (a) that needs to be overcome, and (b) is the distinct province of youth work.

There are two areas in which I agree with Sercombe. The first is that some young people are unfairly excluded because of particular characteristics (e.g. poverty). The second is that 'youth' as a category of persons is excluded by dint of age from certain goods and services. What Sercombe does not show is that this latter exclusion of a category of persons is in any way unfair or unethical. Now if Sercombe is limiting youth work to work with young people who are unfairly excluded this is too narrow a definition of youth work. It simply excludes too much of the present activity described as youth work. If he wants to include all young people (category 'youth') then more needs to be said about the role of 'exclusion' in his account of youth work.

Sercombe could show that there are a number of areas in which all young people are *unfairly excluded*, certainly there have been claims that the voting age ought to be lowered or that the reduced funding of public transport disproportionately affects young people's leisure time opportunities. We could debate and perhaps even agree some examples, but again this limits what will count as 'youth work' to these specific issues. This tracks only a small portion what we presently identify as youth work practices. Alternatively one could focus on the broader set of 'exclusions' which 'youth' as a category experience, that is focus on both *fair and unfair* forms of exclusion. What then is the range of *fair* exclusions? They surely relate to those aspects of life and practice which are deemed to be the remit *only* of adult citizens. As such youth workers may work with young people in order that they, in time, will be able to take their place as adults within their communities, or to put it more simply, support them to grow up. On this reading of 'youth' being fairly excluded, the focus of youth work becomes 'upbringing' which was my own frame for defining the diverse scope of actual youth work practice (Davies, 2013). As with the case of the use of 'client' as opposed to 'young person', Sercombe has smuggled in normative content by assuming that exclusion is always unfair.

Sercombe's definition of youth work is therefore unsubstantiated. Deconstructing his argument shows that, at best, youth work is concerned with young person and youth worker trusting each other as they seek, in the young person's interest, to enable that young person both to take their place as an adult member of their community and oppose unfair forms of exclusion[1]. Whilst such a definition needs further defense and refinement it does include much of the work presently conducted under the title in the UK. It does not, however, do sufficient work for Sercombe. Let us return to my earlier development of Koehn's account of why her project was important. Professions are concerned with significant specific goods, delivered through a single communally agree mechanism which ought, in a western liberal society, to have some independence from the state. It is not obvious from the discussion of Koehn on this point, or of Sercombe in relation to youth work, that youth work reflects the structure of the traditional professions.

If not a profession, then what?

Sercombe's account of youth work ethics has become influential in the UK, and as such is deserving of further analysis. It plays to a gallery that believes that youth work *ought* to be a profession. I have not shown that there are no foundation for such a claim, but rather Sercombe's argument does not bear the weight. Koehn's analysis of established professions and how they achieve their legitimacy is unsuited for a task of supporting youth work's claim to professional status. What is more important, Sercombe's attempt to utilise Koehn distorts the definition of youth work, and of youth work ethics. We are left, in the latter half of the book, with a series of claims about how youth workers ought to behave which lack any

[1] Though the term exclusion, though utilised by Sercombe, might be unhelpful. It is absent from occupational standards where minor reference to promotion of equality (CLD, 2008, 11) or tackling barriers to participation, (CLD, 2008,, 60) amongst a range of other values and competencies is prefered.

reasonable foundations. However, at the centre of Sercombe's narrative, which he under utilises, is a kernel which offers potential for a defensible ethics which reflects the diversity of youth work activities.

Sercombe notes (rather than argues) that youth work is based on a particular kind of covenantal relationship of trust between worker and young person. This obviously reflects his interest in Koehn's work. As I noted earlier the fact that professions have this general characteristic in no way implies that all practices which also show this characteristic are professions. In fact, however, this kind of relationship does seem to capture an essential feature of youth work practice. By covenantal relationship we are distinguishing it from one grounded in contractual relationships. In contractual relationships we agree to act together in order that we both gain some good we desire. For example, we agree to an exchange of goods (buying and selling), or the way we will divide up the proceeds of our joint labours. It is a relationship which is loosely 'pre-scripted'; if you do X then you will receive Y. Covenantal relationships, on the other hand, are primarily concerned with the quality of the relationship, and it is from such qualities that goods emerge. Sacks (2008) states the difference in the following way:

> 'What is a covenant? A covenant is not a contract. A contract is made for a limited period, for a specific purpose, between two or more parties, each seeking their own benefit. A covenant is made open-endedly by two or more parties who come together in a bond of loyalty and trust to achieve together what none can achieve alone. A contract is like a deal; a covenant is like a marriage. Contracts belong to the market and to the state, to economics and politics, both of which are arenas of competition. Covenants belong to families, communities, charities, which are arenas of cooperation. A contract is between me and you – separate selves – but a covenant is about us – collective belonging. A contract is about interests; a covenant is about identity.'

In fact under Sacks' account we just need to say that it is a covenantal relationship, trust and loyalty are 'built in' to the definition. It emerges from a longer term commitment to each other. As Kolodny (2010) points out the characteristics of a relationship emerge from the characteristics of the experiences that, over time, compose that relationship. Thus individual interactions between a youth worker and young people reflect the characteristics of such a covenantal relationship.

What is central to the ethics of youth work, is not a profession, but a particular kind of relationship emerging over time, between young people and particular adults, all embedded in the same social milieu: families and communities. The relationship is not concerned with the exchange of money for services, but collaborative acts with those with whom they 'are relationally close'. The discourse of the professional militates against such a view, not only by advocating 'professional detachment', but more importantly by prioritising the 'community' of practitioners over the communities of adults and young people of which those practitioners ought to be part. It is, of course, perfectly consistent with this position that a youth worker receive payment, in the form of a 'stipend' or 'living' from the community in

order to be freed from having to earn a living elsewhere. But such a living is not for services, but rather an expression of value of their work as a member of, and on behalf of, the wider community.

Conclusion

Education has long been held to be an ethical activity, and particularly so when conducted informally as in youth work. As the UK framework on occupational standards, higher education benchmarks and codes of conduct make clear youth work requires from workers ethical understanding and commitment to ethical practice. Sercombe's text on youth work ethics has become seminal in UK based discussions about the ethical practice of youth workers. In this paper I have argued that his argument is unmade and that practitioners, policymakers and educators would be wise to distance themselves from it. His arguments, drawn from Koehn, are insufficient and combined with an unrealistic definition of youth work, offer a distorted and unhelpful framework for ethical practice. There may be a case for seeing youth work as a profession, but Sercombe's argument does not provide it. In fact, there is a good reason to be suspicious of identifying youth work as a profession. Sercombe's identification of covenantal relationships of trust as at the heart of youth work practice leads one away from such a conclusion.

If covenantal relationships offer a core to youth work practice *and youth work ethics* then the direction of travel ought to be away from a profession of youth work. The core community is not one of practitioners, but of families and young people; communities of which the youth worker is a part. In this paper I have focused on the foundations of Sercombe's argument, if goes without saying that if the foundations are wrong then his later arguments for particular ethical behaviours also fall.

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