'Ethics work' in career guidance: navigating ethical principles and ethical pressures in an under-resourced service

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There are widespread expectations that strong ethical principles will be at the heart of professional practice in career guidance. But what does 'doing ethics' involve at the day-to-day level of front-line work? And how do higher-level institutional arrangements and policy decisions impact on this? Recent research on career guidance in Connexions suggests that we need to take a much closer look.

Professional ethics: principles and problems

Ethics in career guidance, as in many other human service occupations, have always been held to be of great importance in underpinning high standards of practice, conferring professional status, and at the same time ensuring professional self-regulation and protection of the public. Formal Codes of Practice adopted by professional membership bodies, such as the Institute of Career Guidance (ICG), are often viewed as the foundation on which all other aspects of professional work – knowledge, skills, competencies, attitudes – rest (Plant, 2001). In turn, such Codes of Practice are themselves usually founded on principles drawn from the realm of moral philosophy, such as beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy and justice (Mulvey, 2002), although such principles tend to be less explicit in career guidance than in some other professions (Reid, 2004). It would be naïve to assume that the existence of these codes renders the resolution of ethical issues simple in practice; indeed, the ICG itself acknowledges this (ICG, n.d., a). Real-world situations, of course, require personal dedication,

the constant exercise of professional judgement, and the balancing of different principles which may at times stand in tension.

However, there remain widespread tendencies to simplify the complexities of ethics-in-practice, not least by the presentation of out-of-the-ordinary examples in case studies commonly used in initial education and continuing professional development (CPD) for practitioners. A typical set of such case studies can be found on the ICG's website in support of its Code of Ethical Practice, some of which appear also to be drawn from a university programme in career guidance (ICG, n.d., b). Some convey scenarios in which a schoolgirl has been beaten up by bullies, or a young girl sexually abused by an employer; others, for example, portray moments at which career advisers are put under pressure by the educational institution in which they work to promote its interests above those of their clients. I do not wish in any way to decry the importance of career guidance practitioners understanding how to deal with such serious issues, which of course arise from time to time. Nevertheless, using these kinds of case studies as the main vehicle for learning tends to suggest that ethical matters are posed only by exceptional or occasional problems or dilemmas – an approach that hinders educators, students and practitioners from exploring ethics as an integral and constant aspect of day-to-day practice (Banks, 2009).

Other questions have also been raised about the extent to which Codes of Practice, underpinned by awareness of moral philosophies, can robustly

guarantee ethical practice. A decade ago, Mulvey (2001) pointed to the pressures brought to bear upon professional practice by the new managerialism dominating public services in recent years, and attendant risks of 'ethical drift' (pg. 23). Audit cultures and accountancy practices prioritise technical rationality, instrumental thinking, and institutional performance indicators over 'thicker' understandings of public service goods. Not only can this lead to a general distortion of priorities, but also to 'ritual practices' (Cribb, 2009: 34) oriented to meeting targets rather than service users' needs – and even to downright cheating.

The new ICG Code of Ethical Principles (c.2009) for the first time addresses such issues. Within its third principle of 'duty of care – to clients, colleagues, organisations and self', it states:

> Members must fulfil their obligations and duties to their employer, except where to do so would compromise the best interests of individual clients.

In its supporting guidance for the Code, the Institute also argues that this is not simply a matter for individual practitioners:

> Organisations should be operating to principles congruent to the ICG Code of Ethical Practice. […] Members should be prepared to challenge [*their organisation's*] policies and procedures if they could be an infringement of the Code of Ethical Practice. (ICG, n.d., a)

Unfortunately, although the other principles of the Code are illustrated in this document with case studies and commentaries, this element of the third one is not. Once again, this raises issues about power relations in the workplace if practitioners do challenge perceived breaches of the Code by the organisation. It is also blurred by the possibility that organisations may powerfully but informally insist on practices which are never formally specified in written policies and procedures. Any practitioner challenging their organisations may therefore find themselves either ignored or, more seriously, disciplined for their pains. It is unclear from the ICG's guidance what recourse they might have in

the situation, or what support might be on offer to them.

A difficulty in this whole discussion is that it can remain at a highly abstract level. Banks (2009) argues that there is a need to pay attention to what she terms 'ethics work': the day-to-day, even hour-by-hour, work of practising ethically, and of confronting ethical issues of a more pervasive, if mundane, kind. To investigate and understand such issues is neither a philosophical nor a codified approach, but a *situated* one, concerned with the often invisible and unspoken social practices of being ethical that permeate our working lives. How *do* practitioners – consciously or otherwise – enact ethical principles in their regular professional activities? What *work* do they have to do to invoke, attend to, or defend these principles? What is the *nature* of routine ethical decisions they have to make and ethical stances they take?

Such 'ethics work' comprised a key theme that emerged from a recent project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, on the 14-19 career guidance profession in England since its absorption into Connexions in 2001 (Colley et al, 2010). The core data in the project were generated in 2008 through narrative 'career history' interviews with 26 practitioners who had originally trained as careers advisers and then worked in Connexions, with lengths of service ranging from 2 to 20 years. Nine of these had subsequently left Connexions for reasons of professional disagreement with the way policy was being implemented through this service; while 17 were still working in Connexions, and were drawn from three local services in the North of England. All participants and locations have been anonymised to protect confidentiality (See end note for details of the full report, including methodology.) The findings shed considerable light on the issues we have discussed so far.

'Ethics work' in Connexions

As many readers will be aware, the delivery of career guidance for young people in England has undergone a series of radical infrastructural changes as a result of government policies over the last 15

years. Provided through specialist careers services since 1973, the New Labour government elected in 1997 first 'refocused' their work to target 'disaffected' youth; and then subsumed careers services whole-scale into a new generic youth support service, Connexions, in 2001. Career guidance was only a part of the broader remit of the new service, which has remained severely understaffed throughout its existence. Careers advisers worked alongside other practitioners drawn from youth services, school-teaching and other social services, all designated as Personal Advisers (PAs). Resources no longer allowed for universal career guidance provision, practitioner caseloads were very high, and service funding was tied to targets for reducing the numbers of young people not in education, employment or training ('NEET'). In April 2008 a further, chaotic restructuring took place as the national Connexions service and its area structures were devolved to the much larger number of local authorities, resulting in further funding reductions. Here, I explore three aspects of PAs' 'ethics work' in this context: ethical dilemmas; pressures to engage in unethical practices; and challenging these pressures.

Ethical dilemmas: whom to help and how?

PAs offered many accounts of ethical dilemmas they faced on a daily basis. In particular, they had to make constant choices about whom they could help, and how best to allocate their meagre time-resources. Some of those working in schools worried about how to try and maintain a universal service and offer CG interviews to all Year 11 pupils, when caseload size meant they had to resort either to inadequate 10-minute interviews, or group interviews which did not offer confidentiality. It was difficult for them to have to make judgements about which young people they could help, whilst others would be seen only cursorily, or not at all:

> I just felt like I was doing a really poor quality of job everywhere and actually not being particularly effective with anybody, and that was really stressful, and I thought that I'm not going to continue doing this. It's not me. (HS, ex-PA)

This tension was sometimes felt particularly sharply by PAs working with young people classified as needing intensive support. Some of the most vulnerable young people needed a lengthy period of help, and were unlikely to come off the 'NEET' register in the foreseeable future – but PAs felt under pressure from managers to meet their 'NEET' reduction targets. This meant prioritising those most likely to come off the register because they needed less support. Faced with this situation, the same PA could take different stances at different times:

> I spent most of last week with one client who is homeless and has got lots of issues and no one seems to want to help him because they've tried before and they say he doesn't engage and goes round and round in circles. That was most of my week. (BM, PA, pg.2 of transcript)

> If you can help the majority a bit, it's better than helping one person a lot when they might not even move into something positive. (BM, PA, pg. 4 of transcript)

PAs seemed to feel that these were individualised decisions they had to make on a continual basis. Organisational policies and procedures appeared to be reduced for them to the singular imperative of meeting 'NEET' targets, offering little guidance to practitioners in their decision-making. Supervision meetings, which might have been an opportunity to gain support and spread some of the responsibility away from the purely individual level, were described by most PAs as managerialist and disciplinary in nature.

Pressures towards unethical practice

A number of PAs recounted instances where they had felt under pressure to engage in practices which they felt were clearly unethical. One typical example involved submitting young people on the 'NEET' register to vacancies which the PA believed were inappropriate for the client, as in this account:

> I can't remember which training provider I sent [*the client*] along to, but it was whichever one was recruiting at the time, and I sent him off

to the training provider and that was it. If I had the choice, I would not do that with him, but you know, when these e-mails go out, you're monitored. You'll have a monthly supervision, and you were sort of given – it wasn't the thumbscrews – but you were basically grilled on why you didn't offer this person this or that or what-have-you. So I felt with this person I had no choice, and you go home, at the end of the day, thinking: 'Why do I bother? This is not what I trained for'. (BT, ex-PA)

This highlights how difficult it can be for PAs to adhere consistently to their ethical beliefs and practices. Other examples reflect different inconsistencies. One ex-PA told us of 'creative accounting' measures by one manager and their team to ensure that an unfeasibly large target had been 'met'. Here, the unethical aspects of such cheating appeared to be outweighed by the ethical benefits of maintaining resources to help those young people with intensive needs who could realistically be supported by the service.

A number of ex-PAs also felt their role had been shifted away from caring for young people, and towards surveillance and control. This was reinforced by the fact that Connexions had very few resources or facilities for directly supporting young people, but was equipped mainly with tools for tracking, and represented another ethical pale they were unwilling to go on crossing.

> I found it a little paradoxical that we had to go and do home visits and sort of play a heavy-handed role, and yet if the [*young person*] came into the office, we had nothing, nothing more to offer, really. That was a difficult situation to be in because it was like a policing, authoritarian thing to do to them. (LJ, ex-PA)

Challenging unethical pressures

Nevertheless, in line with the ICG Code of Ethical Practice, PAs and ex-PAs had often challenged managers about 'ethical drift'. However, this led mainly to conflictual encounters rather than any change. One narrative here illustrates very well the on-going 'ethics work' of one recently-qualified PA,

encountering, internalising, and then resisting the pressure to meet targets:

> It's pressure all the time to get people signed up [*for training courses*], and I've got one [*client*] now and I can tell he doesn't really want to do it, and before I came here [*today*], I was supposed to take him to his training provider for his first induction, and I said, 'You need to go'. He said, 'I can't. I've got to stay at home and look after my sister', or something. So I came away agitated because I couldn't get the sign on.

> But it shouldn't be like that at all. The young person has got a situation at home. He can't deal with it. He's got things going on at home. He wants to do his driving lessons. He's got to look after his older sister who apparently is disabled. So this is the second time he missed his appointment, and I'm putting pressure on that young person to sign up, and it almost reminds me of back years ago when a double glazing salesman rang, saying: 'Come on! Sign here, sign here!' I'm thinking, this isn't right, this. I had to back right off and say, 'Fine, if you've got things on the go. If you want to sign up, fine. If you're not ready for it, that's cool', and yet I'll get a bit of background grief [*in supervision*] about me not achieving a sign-up. I don't think it should be like that, myself. It shouldn't be like that at all. It should be person-centred. (SB, PA)

This PA repeatedly challenged his manager over similar situations, but found the response conflictual. He was warned to remember that meeting targets paid his wages, and the 'grief' did not remain in the 'background'. When his short-term contract came to an end, it was not renewed, and he lost his job. Similar accounts of these pressures were frequent among ex-PAs, and contributed significantly to their decisions to quit Connexions.

There is a postscript to add to these data before moving on. In disseminating this research, I have been struck by the polarisation of responses these accounts have provoked. We have had many practitioners say how strongly the data resonate with their own experiences, and how pleased they

are that the project has made visible the pressures and dilemmas they face. On the other hand, some senior managers from Connexions have stated that they do not recognise these problems, denied that they exist in their services, and challenged the validity of our findings. This may of course be the case: to gain such in-depth data, we could only talk to PAs and ex-PAs from 11 of the 73 local services existing in early 2008. But this does not eradicate the validity nor the broad generalisability of such case study research, for – as physical scientists well know – we can learn a very great deal from only one single case, so long as it is thoroughly investigated and properly theorised (Flyvbjerg, 2006). In our project, the strong similarity of experiences within 11 different services, and across PAs with very different lengths of service since their career guidance training, suggests that this is not just coincidental. (We would also question the basis on which managers' objections are raised, since they seem founded on assertion rather than evidence.) How, then, can we understand the research data about ethics work in Connexions, and their broader implications?

Professional ethics: from top to bottom

The narratives constructed by PAs demonstrate the on-going deployment of their vocational commitment and their professional judgement in trying to 'do the right thing' by their young clients, and the tensions and pressures they had to navigate as policy decisions conflicted with this. All this, I would argue, constitutes work although it is not often recognised as such. Reid (2004) has argued that we need to trust this 'ethical watchfulness' (pg. 46), balancing practitioners' common sense with more formal measures of accountability. While she suggests that supervision might offer a means to do that, and support PAs by providing a space for reflection and co-reflection, our data indicate that this is not necessarily the direction that supervisory practices have taken in Connexions. Moreover, we see clearly how the filtering down of national policies, mediated by targets and resources allocated to services, have a major impact on the day-to-day ethics work of individual PAs. This indicates the need

to 'zoom out' from the practitioner level in order to understand fully these processes.

Cribb (2009) argues that, while professions and practitioners themselves clearly do play an important part in the construction of ethical principles and practice, we need also to consider other levels at which these are formed. Caring work in human services does not comprise only the relationship between practitioner and client, but also the work of those who determine care needs and allocate care resources – that is to say, policy-makers and employing institutions (Tronto, 2010). All too often, these remain invisible behind front-line human service work, and absent from the day-to-day ethics work this entails; yet part of their work is in the pre-construction of occupational roles *and the ethical positions and practices they invoke*, prior to the entry of any actual practitioners into those roles (Cribb, 2009). Yet this policy formulation tends to be conducted from positions of power and privilege, assuming a hierarchy of expediency over responsibility, and outcome over process, which obscures concerns about the manner of policy implementation (Wilson, 1999). Managers of human service institutions are in a difficult position, mediating between those who formulate policy and those who implement it as front-line practitioners. But as Mulvey notes, they cannot place all the responsibility for ethical practice on the shoulders of practitioners:

> …a professional-become-manager managing in a way that is at odds with the values of his or her professional discipline is simply incongruent (2001, pg. 22)

As we have seen from the project data, practitioners' position at the end of the 'implementation' chain confronts them with considerable dilemmas around ethical boundaries. When, for example, is the greatest good served by ensuring the provision meets its targets, retains its funding, and is thereby enabled to continue functioning as best it can? Where does the boundary lie between the valid claim that work roles can have on our ethical behaviour, and our own independent ethical agency? To what extent does the re-ordering of work such as career guidance constitute a

reorientation of ethics, or go over into an *erosion* of ethics? When should we conscientiously object, comply, or adopt a stance of 'principled infidelity' (Cribb, 2005: 7-8)? At the very least, there is a need to understand that ethics work goes on from top to bottom in career guidance and other human service work. At the same time, the top-down imposition of ethical positions and practices, however unintentional, can create unsustainable tensions for practitioners at the 'bottom', and intensify – both in terms of frequency and in terms of difficulty – the ethics work they have to do. As the ICG notes these tensions in its new Code of Practice, it would be very helpful for its supporting guidance to include discussion of how the conflicts recounted by PAs in our project might best be addressed, and what support may be on offer to practitioners issuing challenges to unethical procedures.

Finally, this poses a research agenda for career guidance, youth support, and other forms of human service work. Ethics work arose in our project as a powerful theme within a broader investigation of the changing roles, identities and practices of careers advisers within Connexions. There is, however, a need for further, in-depth investigation focused on the study of ethics work, situated in authentic practice settings, and using sociological methods and frameworks of analysis. We have already seen in our project the value of narrative 'career history' interviews. Ethnographic approaches, using on-going observation in addition to interviews, might be particularly revelatory – although gaining access to services for such research might be difficult, especially when they are facing further cuts in resources. At the same time, a larger-scale survey might also be useful in identifying more fully the extent of ethical conflicts and issues that are being encountered across 14-19 career guidance in England. Whilst such research may not have an immediate impact at the 'top', it might provide evidence for professional bodies like the ICG to advocate with policy-makers, and it might be valuable in informing the initial education and CPD of practitioners, as well as supervision practices in the workplace.

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Notes