

A Code of Ethics. Why it won't make any difference

**Written for the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition
On-line debate**

Pretty much the whole show

I am not opposed to a code of ethics for youth workers. I simply do not think it will make any difference to the way youth workers will act. I *am* in favour of youth workers acting ethically and I *am* in favour of doing all we can to make sure this happens. I just don't think that a Code of Ethics will make much difference. The following adds some words to the above position, but basically that's it.

Code of Ethics – Codes of Conduct – Codes of Practice

Yes, they are different, but have much in common, each being concerned with right action and protection of individuals and those around them. However, for this discussion, I am putting them loosely together in the one basket, and refer to each, directly or indirectly, as we go.

We all already know

Think about these two questions:

- Do you know when you are acting ethically?
- Do you recognize unethical behaviour in others?

My guess is that you answered 'yes' to each of these questions. What if I asked:

- Have you ever acted unethically?
- How did you know?

You will know the answers to these questions too.

People who are in life-partner type relationships, whether married or not, know what is ethical and unethical. We each know, in all our relationships, what is okay and what is not okay to do. Yet our behaviour is rarely determined by a set of stated principles. It is more often governed by a set of unspoken and usually undiscussed principles. A code of conduct if you like. And we all know what this is. It just isn't recorded anywhere.

My five year old knows when he is doing the right thing and when he isn't. Even our 20 month old can be found hiding behind furniture in the corner of our lounge room as he dissects something he is not supposed to have. Why is he hiding? Because he knows he is doing the wrong thing and is trying to conceal it. But at 20 months old he already knows!

When people act 'badly', it is generally for one of three reasons:

1. The person has no ethical framework at all in any meaningful sense
2. They have an extremely unusual ethical framework
3. Their ethical framework is overwhelmed/defeated by circumstances and/or feelings such as anger, fear, pride, loyalty, need for power, lust...

Codes do not stop unethical behaviour. Those who act 'unethically' will do so whether a code exists or not. So for them, a code is ineffectual. For those who act 'ethically', they will also do so anyway; and so for them a code is irrelevant.

General or specific

There is a Code of Ethics endorsed by YAPA (and I am indeed a friend of YAPA)

<http://www.yapa.org.au/youthwork/ethics/codetext.php>

and YAPA is working towards it being adopted as a national code of ethics for youth work. Here are two points from that code:

- 'Point 3: Non-discrimination: *"Youth workers' practice will be equitable."*
- 'Point 5 Non-corruption: *"Youth workers and youth agencies will not advance themselves at the expense of young people."*

Who could possibly disagree with these genuinely noble sentiments?

Here is something from the [Early Childhood Australia code of ethics](#):

You will find on the website this statement: *'...the following values and processes are considered central to the Code of Ethics:*

- *respect*
- *democracy*
- *honesty*
- *integrity*
- *courage*
- *inclusivity*
- *social and cultural responsiveness*
- *education.'*

Again, who would disagree?

And the following from the [Code of Conduct](#) for the Australian Public Service:

- *'behave honestly and with integrity in the course of APS employment;*
- *act with care and diligence in the course of APS employment;*
- *when acting in the course of APS employment, treat everyone with respect and courtesy, and without harassment;'*

And this too is genuinely admirable stuff. And that's it right there. Codes of Ethics are usually so general (as they must be) that they are almost impossible to disagree with. Codes of Conduct although often more specific, suffer from the same difficulty. And if Codes of Ethics or Conduct ever become more specific (and they won't) they will be enormous (endless?) and then in the detail, we shall start to see disagreement.

So let's get into detail.

How would you respond to these questions:

- Is it okay to drive a young person home at night?
- Is it okay to give a young person your mobile number?
- Should Aboriginal young people in need of a foster home only ever be placed with an Aboriginal family?
- Is it okay to hug a young person?
- Is it okay to be on your own with a young person?
- Is it a good idea to notify a person's family if you are worried about them?
- Would you let a young person spend the night at your house if you thought they were unsafe?

And straight away the responses will be: 'Yes.' 'No.' Or 'It all depends.'

And what if the agency you work for has these amongst its aims:

- To provide information to pregnant young women about their life options, including termination of the pregnancy
- To provide information to young people about less-harmful methods of drug use.

You will agree that these are good ideas. Or you won't.

Not unethical; just human, uncertain or different

There is a difference between unethical behaviour and just getting it wrong. Most of us as youth workers have made mistakes. We see them as such, and try to learn from them and try to not repeat them.

There is a difference too between being uncertain about how to proceed, what to do, what would be best, what is going to be most productive, and what is unethical.

Nor does disagreement constitute unethical behaviour. Should we involve a young person's parents in what is happening in our service? Should we notify Community Services if we have concerns about a young person? Are drop-in centres good youth work?

And 'different' also does not equal 'unethical.'

Service Variations

Some services/centres/agencies define quite specifically how they wish their workers to behave. Such as:

- Give only your first name to clients
- Give only the work mobile telephone number
- Do not give your personal mobile telephone number
- Never be on your own with a client, always have a colleague present

And so on...

These are not decisions of ethics per se. They are specific operational decisions that workers are required to follow. We agree with them or we don't. We accept these or we don't, and ideally if we don't accept them, then we don't work for the agency.

Unuseful – Unhelpful - Damaging

Now the debate gets tougher and probably more heated. The research around 'Drug Education Programmes' in schools is becoming pretty convincing. Most approaches seem to be, at best unproductive, and at worst, counter productive. So how do we respond to a youth worker who continues to present education programmes that have the evidence stacked against them? Is this simply Individual choice? Poor judgment? Unethical?

The evidence also tells us that expulsion and suspension are closely connected with a student 'failing to complete.' Why then do schools continue with these practices? Should we, do we, consider these actions 'unethical?'

Covering your rear end

If the purpose of a Code is to bust someone after they have done something and say: '*Aha! you never should have done that and you did agree to abide by our code of ethics...*' then okay! So spend a little time and get a code of conduct from somewhere and put it in place. If there is some requirement, then I am right behind services finding and/or creating a code of ethics and a code of conduct that meets this requirement. Do it quickly and efficiently.

A source of discussion

I have heard the comment that a Code can serve as a guide, a discussion point, something to refer to. It won't. Because people don't sit around discussing codes of conduct. Not youth workers nor anyone else. I checked. I asked two child care workers, two lawyers, a doctor, one ex-policeman, a radiographer, a psychologist, a dancer, a manager of a health service, and three youth workers about codes of ethics for their respective fields. There were varying responses but generally along the lines that, yes there was one, and it had something to say about treating people respectfully and fairly, though no-one could actually say just what was in it. But what we did start to do straight away was talk about our work. And that's what everyone does. We talk about the work we do. Youth workers *do* discuss the young people we work with and ways in which we can best be of help to those young people. And embedded in these discussions are the ongoing ethical dilemmas, tricky situations and messy circumstances that we face on a daily basis. These discussions will take place whether we have codes or not, because how we live and how we act is always of importance. But significantly, what is not discussed are Codes of Ethics. (Except possibly during this and other articles like it.)

Ethical youthwork

So why did I agree to write this? Because ethics and discussion about ethical behaviour in youthwork are important. As youth workers we need to be able to articulate our theoretical underpinnings (not just our philosophical ones) which underpin our approaches, programmes and individual actions; we need to be aware of and build into our work what research and evidence is telling us about what helps young people grow well and what helps them turn around destructive behaviour. We need to be accountable for how (mostly) tax payers' money is spent and how we impact on the lives of young people. And accountability is more than filling out forms, ticking boxes and getting numbers outcomes. It involves being open to scrutiny, observation and discussion. It means ongoing solid professional development, supervision/mentoring with those with more experience, and discussions, and creative and adventurous endeavours with peers.

A code does not guarantee right action, quality or excellence of work. So would I vote against a national code of ethics? No. Would I be in favour of thousands of hours and dollars being spent on developing one? Definitely no. When so much needs to be done and can be done, would it be sensible to spend valuable resources in this way? Some might even consider it 'unethical.' Yes? No? It all depends?

Peter Slattery April 21st 2011