Like the Loch Ness monster, the subject of youth work professionalism raises its head now and then. Judith Bassant outlines the arguments for and against the development of a youth work professional identity in the hope that this will stimulate debate about the future of youth work in Australia.

Youth work professional identity is a bit like Scotland's Loch Ness monster. Both phenomena involve stories that arise every so often and enjoy considerable attention. Both are central to powerful cultural stories with almost the identity of particular groups. Both never clear how believable they are.

Wonderful stories about their monster with photographs, mysterious sound and against the backdrop of a youth work phenomenon 

The Loch Ness monster and professionalism

YOUTH WORK

The Loch Ness monster and professionalism

to move further in that direction (Hamilton-Smith & Brownell 1973), while others warn of the many risks associated with that option – not only to youth workers, but also to young people and to the community generally (Illich 1975a, 1975b, 1978).

Whether or not youth workers sought to professionalise is hardly a new question for the sector (Hamilton-Smith & Brownell 1973; Chew 1995; Youth Affairs Council of Victoria 1996; Wilson 1995; Sercombe 1998; Grogas 2004). It is an issue youth workers have struggled with for decades, and each time the question is raised we tend to get similar arguments.

The purpose of this paper is to solicit debate about youth work professionalisation by informing discussion. I do this by offering some background by way of a brief survey of theoretical trends in the literature about professionalisation, and then by considering the main arguments for and against youth work professionalisation.

Literature on professionalism

How occupational groups describe themselves and their employment relates to the range of theoretical trends drawn from the sociology of professions. Many professional groups that have been established for a long time tend to fit conventional structural-functionalist descriptions of professionalism that were dominant in the 1940s through to the 1960s, and developed by classic sociologists like Durkheim (1956), Parsons (1954) and Parsons (1967).

Parsons (1954) played a key role in creating an authoritative model of professionalism by identifying certain qualities seen to differentiate "real" professions (medicine or the law) from semi-professions (like social work, teaching or nursing). Moreover, professionals were said to be morally superior to other occupations because their competence, skills and knowledge were scientific, and their interventions were benevolent and selfless (Pemberton & Boreham 1976). The traits and principles that defined "real professions" included altruism, ethical practice, autonomy, specialist knowledge and control of access to a unique body of knowledge. In principle, those who fitted the "real professional" ideal had a legal entitlement to practice, a right maintained through professional associations rather than unions or guilds (Perkin 1990; Becker 1962). According to this model, youth workers, teachers, nurses and social workers were clearly identified as para-professionals (Bessant 1992, pp.155-73).

Through the 1970s and 1980s in Australia, many groups, like nurses and social workers, fought to attain government-endorsed definitions of expert knowledge and restricted control over the right to practice. By the 1980s, professional associations, like social workers, nurses and teachers, succeeded in gaining state support to regulate education, registration and the development of codes of practice (Etzioni 1968; Bessant & Bassant 1991).

Still reliant on those structural-functionalist accounts, those associations declared themselves professional by claiming that:

• enhanced the social and moral consensus of a liberal, modern society;
• were altruistic and served the public interest;
• had an exclusive access to a unique body of knowledge and a skill base earned through a specialist tertiary education program;
• had professional accreditation by a professional association;
• had an ethical code; and
• had a professional practice founded on scientific research and knowledge.

These identity markers were used by various groups to define themselves as professional. Ironically, the 1960s and 1970s also produced a range of challenges to those older functionalist accounts of professionalism. Neo-Marxists and skeptics argued that professionals were implicated in "capitalism", "the patriarchal state", and had powerful social and economic interests of their own that overrode any concern with those they "serviced" (Pemberton & Boreham 1976, p.29).

Many proponents of this critical response pointed to a conspiracy between professionals and certain powerful oppressive forces. That collusion was said to be evident in the ways professions replicated systems of class, race or gender-based domination and exploitation. This reaction was part of a tradition of radical, anti-professional activism that characterised the 1960s and 1970s and was informed by the re-emergence of neo-Marxist thinking in conjunction with the sixties politics of student activism and student campaigns and other forms of social action like the gay, black and women's rights social movements. For many human service workers who identified themselves as progressive, this was translated into a practice of "anti-professionalism" or "community development" that focused on values such as equity, rights, social justice and empowerment.

More recently, interest in the professions as a subject of research has declined considerably. This may be explained partly in terms of a declining interest in...
in the academic areas that informed debates about professionalism (i.e. structural functionalism, Marxism, and post-modernism) and an increasing interest in "post-modernism", "post-structuralism" and "cultural studies".

Interest in the professions seems to have been supplanted by a less specific interest in governmentality, informed by Foucault. This has been a growing area of interest evident in professionalism specifically, and a more general interest in a range of techniques used to manage the self, various institutions, the state and professions.

Following this brief survey of the theories that have informed debates about professionalisation over the past few decades, I now present five key features of professionalism, and use these categories to articulate the arguments for and against professionalisation of youth work.

The development of a professional body

Professional associations can take a range of different forms. They can, for example, like the Australian Medical Association, require membership before workers can practice. Alternatively, registration can be voluntary, as with the Australian Social Workers Association. All professional associations are concerned with governance or the self-regulation of those identified as belonging to an area of practice. Indirectly professional associations are also concerned with the governance of "clients" — in the case of the youth workers, "clients" are young people.

Professional associations typically lay a claim to a discrete and unique body of knowledge and field of practice, an exclusive entitlement and ability to practice, and a desire to serve the public interest by, among other things, securing and maintaining certain standards.

The establishment of a professional association does not automatically rely on the adoption of traditional models (such as codes of ethics) and an increasing interest in "post-modernism", "post-structuralism" and "cultural studies".

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the power of youth workers. It also has the potential to create a context of revelations of a history of systemic abuse of young people at the hands of carers.

5. It will help secure and restore public trust in those who work with young people because "the public" can observe internal regulatory processes operating that are directed towards preventing abuse.

6. The existence of a code of ethics means ignorance cannot be used to defend activities that harm young people (Sercombe 2000, p.4).

7. Beyond formal legal avenues, there currently are no official processes for dealing with unethical conduct. A code of ethics, especially if it had a disciplinary capacity, would go some way towards filling this gap.

AGAINST a code of ethics

1. Imposing a code of practice is itself unethical because it imposes moral requirements and in so doing overrides the individual's right and need to act according to their conscience.

2. It removes the worker's "rightful" entitlements to exercise professional judgement.

3. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to identify an agreed on set of values in the context of a multicultural, pluralistic society.

4. A code of ethics will not stop unethical conduct.

5. It sets up a watchdog or policing mechanism that can become cumbersome and/or oppressive.

Accreditation to educate or train youth workers

Accreditation is a public statement that a certain threshold of quality has been realised or surpassed by an education or training organisation. Ideally judgments about the requirements that need to be met to pass that threshold are based on transparent, agreed upon and predefined standards (Harvey 2004, pp.209-20).

In most cases, accreditation focuses on inputs of, and processes or outcomes of, education or training programs. It can also focus on matters such as teaching, research, level of student support, and library resources (Harvey 2004, pp.209-20). This official endorsement requires a professional association to assume the authority to judge whether or not a program adequately prepares a student for entry into the profession. In other words, it can act as a gatekeeper by determining who has access to the field.

Accreditation is a powerful governing technique available to an association, and it is through this authorisation process that a professional body can exercise considerable political clout within education institutions.

FOR accreditation

1. Accreditation will help produce graduates with professional competencies to practice. This involves the youth work professional body assuming an overre role and ensuring that education and training institutions continue to fulfill certain expectations.

2. Currently, education institutions, like universities, can virtually do as they please when establishing youth work/studies programs, in developing curriculum, in specifying the qualifications and other credentials of teaching staff, in determining staffing/students ratios. In a context where managers in many institutions are constantly looking for ways to economise, typically it is the smaller, or what are euphemistically called "boutique programs", which are targeted. These programs also tend to be unprotected by a professional association. Indeed the proximity of a strong professional association, like the Australian Psychological Society or the AMA, can be seen as a good reason for leaving a program alone. "Savings" are made by "rationalising" subjects, which often results in the disappearance of youth-specific areas of study in favour of more generic studies. "Economies" are also made through the imposition of rulings like the regulation that high minimal enrolments are required before a subject is offered. The imperative to economise can also result in unqualified staff from other areas teaching youth work subjects to "fill-up their workloads", rather than the employment of specialist teachers. It can mean, for example, that social workers, psychologists or even nurses teach youth work subjects, or staff with no youth work studies qualification or knowledge teach other core units or coordinating programs.

2. Accreditation can positively influence important decisions about matters like staff/student ratios, the development of a relevant and up-to-date curriculum as well as the establishment of active higher degree and research programs. When youth work programs are under threat, a professional association can be called on to exercise its authority in ways that secure the program.

3. In the prevailing tight fiscal context, accreditation and a professional body can help build and secure quality youth work education.

4. Accreditation can increase the status, and marketability of the program.

5. Accreditation can attract "better" students.

6. Accreditation can lead to the standardisation of tuition requirements and the curriculum. (This has advantages and disadvantages, which include the reduced likelihood of programs being able to cater for local needs or reflect local cultures.)

7. Well-established institutions are more likely to succeed in obtaining accreditation because they can more readily accommodate the fiscal and other costs associated with accreditation.

8. Accreditation can help ensure that what is taught within education organisations is relevant to "the field" and up-to-date with required practices and issues.

A licence to practice can help secure and improve the quality of youth work and enhance the well-being of young people.

AGAINST accreditation

1. Accreditation is first and foremost about control of the sector by a specific group whose primary interest is their current members.

2. Improvement of the youth sector cannot be guaranteed through accreditation.

3. Accreditation is a deeply political process.

4. Accreditation reports can result in the closure or penalising of a program. (This can be both a negative and positive – depending on the quality of the program.)

5. Well-established institutions are more likely to succeed in obtaining accreditation because they can more readily accommodate the fiscal and other costs associated with accreditation.

6. Accreditation involves an external body controlling a learning area in an education or training institution. This may have an impact on teaching staff and the quality of the program.

7. The accreditation is not, nor can it ever be, an objective process. The quality of the accreditation process, and its capacity to be relatively equitable across institutions and time, depends on the capacity of individual members of the review panel.

8. Absence of accreditation can affect student retention and recruitment into youth work studies programs.

9. Accreditation may result in rigidity and an inability to respond to changes and the specific needs of the community and students.

10. Accreditation can also inhibit innovative and creative education practices.

A licence to practice can help secure and improve the quality of youth work and enhance the well-being of young people.

FOR a licence to practice

1. A licence to practice can help secure and improve the quality of youth work and, in doing so, enhance the well-being of young people. It would help clarify youth work practices that do and do not meet expectations of credible practice (e.g. street clearing exercises, breaching young people) (Sercombe 2000, p.3).

2. It can help remove or eliminate suspect practitioners.

3. It will help eliminate practice that damages the reputation of youth work.

4. A licence helps regulate the sector.

5. This can include, for example, the establishment of a database that has other positive outcomes (e.g. a capacity to establish a communication process with all practitioners).

6. Youth workers can be marginalised in some professional settings and teams. This relates partly to the absence of a registration or licensing system. As Sercombe (2000, p.3) observes, it can make the knowledge and expertise of youth workers is often dismissed by other workers. A licence to practice can give some guarantee to other professionals (teachers, doctors, psychologists, etc.) of a standard of practice.
There may also be a need to draw distinctions between different kinds of youth work professionals.

**AGAINST a licence to practice**

1. A licence to work does not prevent bad practice.
2. It creates a "closed-shop".
3. It can prevent people who do not meet the official licensing requirements, but who are good workers, from practicing.
4. A licence to practice can restrict entry to the field. Among other things, this could lead to an increased income for those interested in ensnaring a scarcity of licensed practitioners.
5. There may be difficulties in regulating or getting practitioners to register for a licence. This is likely to be the case if it is not a legislative requirement.

**Developing a professional identity**

Before youth workers will be amenable to any form of self-governance, the activities of youth work need to be conceptualised and described. This entails delineating youth work as a specific milieu of activity or field of action, involving for example: what makes youth work practice distinctive and different from that of other professionals who also work with young people (e.g. school teachers, adolescent psychologists, social workers)? This raises questions, such as: what can be referred to or used to mark out territory or space called youth work? It can refer to more than space in the physical sense of place or land and can include the identification of areas of knowledge. Articulating a professional identity also entails describing what happens in youth work, it means saying what conventions, customs and moral orders operate. And, who are youth workers "clients"?

There may also be a need to draw distinctions between different kinds of youth work professionals, like those who identify themselves predominantly in terms of the traditional welfare state where they might continue emphasising the redistributive role of the state and where they might continue emphasising their interests. This may, for example, involve their professional enemies, the professionalisation of youth work. This raises questions, such as: what conventions, customs and moral orders operate. And, who are youth workers "clients"?

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**AGAINST developing a youth work identity**

1. An attempt to articulate a youth work identity will create new divisions and exacerbate the existing points of difference between youth workers.
2. It will alienate and exclude those who do not fit the new definition of youth work.

**FOR developing a youth work identity**

A collective identity can encourage collective action and the capacity of youth workers to operate in more collective ways. This can benefit youth workers because it will increase their bargaining power and ability to secure their interests.

A clear youth work identity helps establish a foundation from which youth workers can operate cooperatively to promote the sector and interests of young people. It is like: what makes youth work practice distinctive and different from that of other professionals who also work with young people (e.g. school teachers, adolescent psychologists, social workers)? It can take the form of resistance to enterprises that may harm young people or youth work.

Clarity about youth work identity will require discussion about the purpose and role of youth work. This can help practitioners and others understand more clearly what youth work is and is not, and what the practitioners' primary reasons for practice are. Identification of those objectives is important if they are to be realised.

A youth work identity provides an understanding of what youth work is for other professionals. This helps them understand how their work relates to the youth work practice. This can facilitate team work and improve general practices such as when and why it is appropriate to make referrals to a youth worker (Sercombe nd).

**Conclusion**

The recurring debates about youth work professionalism were observed and discussed in the context of the main theoretical understandings of professionalism in the late 20th century. While the time and space constraints of this paper prevent a detailed exploration of whether professionalism will, or can, improve the status and treatment of young people, some of the key arguments for and against professionalism were identified. This intervention may go some way towards clarifying the issues and encouraging conversation and action about the future of youth work in Australia.

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