

Point of view: the need for moral compass in career guidance

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Abstract

This article revisits research on the ethical tensions experienced by professional careers advisers from the former English Careers Service after they were transferred into the Connexions service as Personal Advisers. It examines how austerity distorted their practice and intensified the ethical labour required of them. By reconsidering these dynamics through the lens of this special issue on Ethics, Philosophies and Principles, the article identifies enduring questions for contemporary career education and guidance, particularly around care and control, professional impartiality, and the need for policy on and management of career services to sustain moral compass in practice.

Keywords: ethics, professional practice, Connexions, career guidance

Introduction

This reflective commentary revisits research undertaken more than a decade ago on the ethical tensions experienced by former careers advisers transferred into the Connexions service as Personal Advisers for disadvantaged young people (Lewin & Colley, 2011, Chadderton & Colley, 2012, and Colley, 2011, 2012 report the research fully, including its methodology). The aim in returning to this work is not to re-state past critiques, but to explore what the Connexions experience reveals about the philosophical and ethical foundations of career guidance provision for young people in times of neo-liberal politics and austerity for public services. The article considers the relevance of these lessons for contemporary practice.

Much changed in career guidance work with young people when Connexions was launched in 2001, even more so since it was disbanded in 2010. Services have diversified – many careers advisers are now employed individually by schools, colleges, and universities, so that provision tends to be driven by these institutions' priorities, not necessarily aligned with clients' needs. Information technology is seen more than ever as both a silver bullet for clients and a cost-cutting measure for delivery. A generation has spent their childhood or adolescence in lockdown during the Covid pandemic, with all the attendant difficulties that has created for them. Moreover, young people's transitions have become disrupted further still, as entry-level jobs disappear in part thanks to artificial intelligence (AI) (Prospects Luminate, 2025; Department for Education, 2023; Mousicos, 2025).

Yet many issues still appear basically familiar: marketisation, performance management, fragmentation of provision, and the increasing complexity of young people's transitions. Against this backdrop, the focus in this NICEC special edition on Ethics, Philosophies and Principles provides a timely opportunity to revisit the moral foundations of the field. Viewed through this lens, the Connexions story becomes a philosophical provocation rather than a historical account. It shows what can happen to career guidance when its ethical base is destabilised, and highlights what is asked of practitioners who attempt to sustain a moral commitment within such an environment.

The argument developed here centres on the idea of 'ethical labour' (Banks, 2009; Colley, 2011, 2012). This notion refers to the ongoing, invisible, and often emotionally costly work practitioners undertake to maintain principled client-centred practice in contexts where organisational targets, limited resources and policy directives pull in another direction. In Connexions, ethical labour intensified under austerity and became central to the daily experience of practitioners. (There are of course other aspects of ethics in relation to career guidance, such as the just transition to a green economy, but they are not the focus of this article.) Today, we must interrogate varied organisational settings and ask if similar dynamics persist. This field, like any other human service work, faces a continuing challenge to recognise ethical labour as a core element of practice and to understand how policy and institutional structures can either support or diminish it.

From welfare to austerity: a shifting philosophical ground

Connexions was created with a rhetoric of inclusion and holistic support for the 'hardest-to-help' young people. In practice, the service operated within a wider political turn towards market-driven values, public sector reform and austerity. Let us not forget that the Careers Service was the first public service to be entirely scrapped after the banking crisis of 2008, and its workforce entirely subsumed into the multi-professional Connexions service. Critical social theorists (e.g. Bauman, 2004) writing in the early 2000s highlighted how economic crisis and austerity narrow the purposes of public services to economic participation, and position some young people as marginal or disposable – notably those not in education, employment or training: 'NEETs'.

In-depth qualitative research with 24 career guidance-trained Personal Advisers (PAs) and their managers across four Connexions services illustrated how such philosophical shifts influenced everyday practice. Practitioners were working with young people navigating homelessness, mental health difficulties, family conflict and poverty. Yet the official priorities of the service became increasingly dominated by measurable outcomes,

particularly the reduction of the number of young people classified as 'NEET'. Resources were limited, timescales were short, specialist support was scarce, and practitioners were left with tools for tracking young people rather than tools for their care. This was not simply a reduction in provision: it constituted a redefinition of purpose.

As client-centred support became displaced by instrumental aims, the ethical terrain of practice began to distort. Connexions reflected a broader trend in which the moral vision of career guidance, grounded in empowerment, equality of opportunity and professional impartiality, became subordinated to narrow interpretations of economic utility. These consequences were felt by young people, but also by practitioners who bore the emotional weight of navigating contradictions between their ethical training – closely linked to their professional and personal identity – and the demands placed on them by their managers.

When systemic pressures distort practice

One of the most striking findings of the Connexions research was the way institutional pressures produced what I described – drawing on Hannah Arendt's (1963) notion of the 'banalisation of evil' – as the banalisation of unethical practice. This phenomenon did not arise from intentional wrongdoing by PAs themselves, but from situations in which committed practitioners found themselves under constant pressure to carry out actions that conflicted with their values. On the one hand, the organisational framework, with the targets imposed on it by policy-makers – mediated by service managers – and the austerity reductions in related services, afforded no realistic alternative. On the other hand, PAs themselves were threatened with losing their jobs if they did not conform to managerial imperatives. How did these pressures manifest themselves?

Dual triage and the quiet exclusion of the most vulnerable

Connexions ostensibly prioritised young people with the most intensive needs. Yet pressure to meet 'NEET' reduction targets generated a second, hidden level of triage. Practitioners were compelled to focus not on the hardest to help, but on those easiest to help, so that unrealistic time-limited targets could be met. Young people requiring long-term relational work or specialist support were often sidelined, with practitioners even instructed not to record them as clients so that targets would not be undermined. This amounted to the silent exclusion of the young people the service had supposedly been designed to support.

Surveillance over support

Many practitioners found their work shifting from relationship-building towards monitoring and control. Home visits intended to provide support were described by PAs as feeling more like policing. Young people were contacted repeatedly to update data rather than to receive meaningful assistance. Practitioners reported discomfort with forms of surveillance that conflicted with their professional ethos.

Coercive guidance and the erosion of impartiality

Practitioners also experienced pressure from their managers to secure participation in education, employment or training programmes, even when these were clearly unsuitable for the young person. Impartiality became compromised. One practitioner likened the experience to working as a double-glazing salesperson, distressed by feeling forced to

push clients into any opportunity available, however inappropriate. (There is a broader discussion about impartiality in career guidance, see Hooley 2023; here the focal point is about institutional pressures overriding appropriate client care.)

Ethical labour: The invisible work of struggling to maintain integrity

A central question explored in the original research, and relevant still today, concerns how practitioners maintained professional integrity under such pressures – or we should say, struggled to maintain it. Ethical labour includes the work of questioning decisions, negotiating tensions, advocating for young people’s interests, and attempting to honour professional values even when organisational constraints make this challenging or impossible.

In Connexions, ethical labour was widespread – an intrinsic part of the role – but unrecognised. It was also greatly intensified by the contradictions imposed on practitioners by the lack of resources and managers’ pursuit of targets. Practitioners described feelings of dread, guilt, frustration, fear and loss of professional identity. Some PAs on temporary contracts, who had raised ethical objections with their managers, did not have their contracts renewed. Almost all the other PAs who participated in the study told us that they had become mentally and/or physically ill as a result of the tensions they faced, and almost all had quit their jobs in Connexions, or were actively trying to, by the time the research was completed.

Our encounters with managers were also revealing (Colley, 2014). After sending them our findings from the initial round of interviews with PAs and seeking discussion with them, managers refused to respond to or re-engage with us. When presenting the findings of the completed study to a national commission on the career guidance profession, senior managers of Connexions services flatly denied the issues we had uncovered – even though members of their own staff were studying for a career guidance qualification with us and had confirmed that our findings chimed strongly with their own experiences. Indeed, the unethical pressures on front-line practitioners had become so routinely banalised by managers that they could be dismissed in this way. As this article presents a ‘point of view’ rather than a purely academic account, I would state here that this situation was a truly shameful one for our profession.

In the face of such serious disjuncture between policy, management implementation, and front-line practice, how can or should we define the underlying purpose of career guidance for disadvantaged young people?

Questions about purpose and ethics in career guidance

In a context of labour market instability and persistent inequality, career guidance requires a clear philosophical foundation. This is not some ‘optional extra’, an unaffordable luxury in times when funding is tight. If services are shaped primarily by scant resources tied to labour market participation goals, the most vulnerable young people will be marginalised further still. A commitment to well-being, flourishing and equality of opportunity must be supported by ethical principles that guide both policy and practice. This raises questions that need to be addressed today.

What mechanisms protect impartiality and professional integrity?

Connexions showed how vulnerable impartiality becomes under strong organisational pressures. Contemporary practitioners require mechanisms that enable them to raise concerns and challenge practices that conflict with young people's interests. These may include ethical guidelines (that are not abstract, but confront the *realities* of front-line work), professional dialogue, or collective representation. This does, however, also mean that service managers at every level need to embrace the same commitments, and speak truth back to political power. It is just morally wrong to continually report upwards that everything in the garden is rosy.

How can career guidance structures recognise and support ethical labour?

Other sectors such as therapeutic counselling have typically acknowledged the emotional and moral dimensions of practice. Career guidance could benefit from similar recognition. Without supervision, reflective dialogue and cohesive professional communities to address these issues, ethical labour becomes unsustainable.

What new forms of control are emerging?

New technologies, especially AI, raise new questions about surveillance, data privacy and autonomy. The philosophical issue remains the same: whether technological tools enhance care or reinforce systems of control.

How do we support practitioners in fragmented or precarious environments?

Fragmentation and short-term funding create challenges for ethical consistency. When practitioners move between organisations or teams are restructured, shared ethical principles and values become vital. Yet many practitioners today work virtually alone, or in very small companies, and therefore without a community of peers to sustain their emotional and mental wellbeing.

Furthermore, a feature of neo-liberalism in public services today is the appointment of managers who have no training or practical background in the services they oversee. 'Management' has been increasingly re-constructed as an abstract activity, divorced from expertise in specific professional practice and its ethical basis. If this continues to be the case, it is hard to see how the gulf between instrumental policy and ethical practice can be bridged.

Conclusion

Returning to this research after more than a decade highlights that maintaining a moral compass in career guidance is not simply a matter of adhering to formal codes. It is a daily, lived negotiation shaped by organisational structures, economic pressures and political ideologies. Connexions shows how easily ethical principles can be stymied when systems prioritise metrics over relationships, 'efficiency' over trust, and control over care.

This concern feels particularly urgent today as the UK government renews its focus on young people not in education, employment or training. Current policy rhetoric, including

claims about the supposed over-diagnosis of mental health difficulties (The Guardian, 2025), indicates the potential for punitive approaches which prioritise sanctions over support. Promises of support to help young people overcome barriers are worryingly vague and as yet unfunded. The government's pledge of £85 million to boost career guidance provision in schools, including the recruitment of 1000 careers advisers, did not appear to have any clear institutional strategy, and has been quietly shelved (Career Development Policy Group, 2025).

For the field today, a central task is to define what good practice in career guidance with young people looks like, and to ensure practitioners are supported to enact it. It also requires that managers are committed to this end *and* prepared to speak out if policies threaten to drive practice in an ethically wrong direction. This requires attention to the philosophical foundations of the work, recognition of the ethical labour involved, and a willingness to address and, where need be, challenge the political, economic and societal forces shaping young people's transitions. In practical terms, it also requires career guidance training to avoid formulaic, decontextualised approaches to ethics; professional bodies and membership organisations need to champion ethical practice proactively, and support whistleblowing in the kinds of situations that our research revealed.

If this NICEC special issue stimulates debate on these questions, it may help to renew moral clarity within the field. Such clarity recognises the humanity of practitioners and the young people they support, and emphasises that career guidance must remain anchored in values that resist the narrowing pressures of austerity and marketisation. A moral compass in career guidance has to be maintained – without it, there will be no guidance for disadvantaged young people, only coercion or neglect.



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