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## **Integrity in professional life: issues of conduct, commitment and capacity**

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## **Integrity in professional life: issues of conduct, commitment and capacity**

### **Abstract**

This article explores the nature of professional integrity, considering the questions: 'what is professional integrity?' and 'how do social welfare practitioners perform as people of integrity in the course of their professional work?' The focus is on social welfare work, with a particular emphasis on social work as practised in England. Three versions of professional integrity are identified as: morally right conduct; commitment to a set of deeply-held values; and a capacity for reflexive sense-making and reliable accountability. These are explored through examples from professional misconduct cases in social care and accounts from professional practitioners about their working lives. Key elements of professional integrity are identified and implications for policy, practice and education are considered.

**Key words:** professional integrity, codes of conduct, professional values, virtue ethics

### **Introduction**

'Professional integrity' is becoming increasingly topical. I was first prompted to start thinking about this concept when analysing a series of interviews conducted in 2001 in England with senior practitioners in the social welfare field (social, community and youth workers) about their ethical dilemmas and problems. Further details of these interviews, and an analysis of the impact of aspects of new accountability regimes and inter-professional working on professional autonomy and ethical practice, can be found in Banks (2004a). I was struck by the accounts that a few practitioners gave of their commitment to hold on to a set of deeply-held professional values in the face of adversity or pressure. At this time the term 'integrity' was not in common usage in the professional literature. It did not feature in the British Association of Social Workers' *Code of Ethics* (British Association of Social Workers, 1996), it was not

prominent in textbooks on social work ethics (for example, Reamer, 1999; Clark, 2000; Banks, 2001) and none of the practitioners I interviewed actually used the terms 'integrity' or 'professional integrity'.

In an earlier paper I wrote on this theme (Banks, 2004b), I started with a quotation from an American philosopher, Robert Solomon (1997, p. 215), who had made the following comment: "Integrity" is a word like "honor" – its close kin – that sometimes seems all but archaic in the modern business world'. Although Solomon was writing about business, I argued that his comment could equally well apply to modern public services. One significant exception in a British context, however, was the Nolan principles relating to standards in public life, which included 'integrity' as one of the seven principles (Nolan Committee, 1996). The establishing of these principles was stimulated by a series of scandals, particularly over the private financial interests of British Members of Parliament. This marks, perhaps, the beginning of the revival of the use of the term 'integrity' in the context of a growing concern with misconduct, malpractice and a demand for minimum standards of good practice in public and professional services. Well over a decade after Solomon made this comment about integrity, far from being 'archaic', the term 'integrity' is becoming commonplace in professional codes and guidance on conduct and came to the fore again in 2009 in the wake of scandals in the British Parliament about Members' expenses.

The term 'integrity' made an appearance in the revised BASW code of ethics (British Association of Social Workers, 2002), clearly drawing on the wording of the earlier Australian and USA documents (National Association of Social Workers, 1999; Australian Association of Social Workers, 2000). It features in the latest version of the Nursing and Midwifery code (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2008), whilst being absent from the 2002 version (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2002). The term 'integrity' is much more frequently used in the health and scientific fields generally. For example, there is now a UK Research Integrity Office that carries out work on behalf of the UK Panel for Research Integrity in Health and Biomedical Sciences, set up in 2006 to provide guidance on dealing with research misconduct (see <http://www.ukrio.org>). A national Office for Research Integrity covering public health research in the USA has existed since the mid-1990s (see <http://ori.dhhs.gov>) and the term 'research integrity' is in frequent use in a university context.

Consideration of the topic of professional integrity is also highly topical in social work, particularly in the context of the relatively new system of regulation of professional conduct introduced in England from 2005 overseen by the General Social Care Council (GSCC), the body that registers and regulates social care workers. The term 'integrity' does not appear in the GSCC codes of practice (General Social Care Council, 2002) or the report of the registration and regulation process, which includes details of the conduct hearings (General Social Care Council, 2008). However, these documents and processes are clearly concerned with the same concepts, principles and behaviour that are categorised as 'integrity' in the BASW and NMC codes. Over one third of the conduct cases heard by the GSCC since its inception are reported as relating to 'crossing professional boundaries and inappropriate relationships with people who use services' (General Social Care Council, 2008, p. 8). Some of these cases involved social workers developing intimate relationships with service users.

The concept of integrity embodied in these recent uses of the term in the context of professional practice and public service focuses on integrity as conduct that meets commonly accepted standards. This is somewhat different from the construction of professional integrity in which I had become interested, based on the accounts given in interviews with social welfare practitioners. That version of professional integrity was about maintaining and acting upon a deeply held set of values, often in a hostile climate. This is exemplified by the narrative of a Youth Offending Team Manager, who reported that he had left his job because he was unable to offer young people the care and respect he felt they needed and deserved (my italics):

*I couldn't be part of that you know ... First hand experiences really kind of challenged my own sort of position, and my own thinking... I think anybody who cares about people and who sees that, and who comes up against the brick walls, you know, on a daily basis, you can only take so much really, as one person.*

This brief overview of the use of the concept suggests that professional integrity is complex and contested, with several meanings that would bear further examination. I

will now explore the concept of 'professional integrity' further, taking account of some of the relevant philosophical literature on integrity (there is little specifically on 'professional integrity' *per se*), along with a more detailed analysis of professional codes and reports of the social care conduct hearings.

### **What is 'integrity'?**

The term 'integrity' is derived from the Latin 'integritas', which means having no part taken away, that is, being in a state of completeness or wholeness. Integrity may be *created* through an act of unification of various aspects or parts, or it may be *maintained* or preserved. We often use the term to describe a quality of a person, action or object, such as a 'woman of integrity', 'an act of integrity', 'the integrity of a room and its furniture'. In this article I am concerned with integrity in relation to people and actions. In particular, I am interested in moral integrity – as distinct from other types of integrity that may not necessarily have a normative or moral content, such as intellectual integrity, artistic integrity or bodily integrity (de Raeve, 1997). Frequently when the term 'integrity' is used in relation to people and actions, it is 'moral integrity' that is meant. In the context of public life, integrity (with its connotations of wholeness) is often presented as the opposite of corruption (with its connotations of distortion, decay or breakup).

### **What is professional integrity?**

Whilst there is a small body of literature in moral philosophy on integrity, some of which considers professional integrity, there is much less on professional integrity *per se*. In exploring the nature of professional integrity, therefore, I will draw on some of the philosophical literature on the generic concept of integrity as well as some of the professional literature and practice guidance on ethics to develop ideas about professional integrity. Within this literature, it is possible to identify and develop at least three versions of 'professional integrity' as:

1. ***Morally good/right conduct***, according to accepted professional guidelines/codes of ethics. Cox, *et al.* (2003) call this 'professionalism'. Essentially this version focuses on *conduct*.

2. **'Standing for something'** (Calhoun, 1995). Applied to professional life, this version of integrity entails practitioners being committed to sets of professional ideals/principles, which may go beyond extant professional norms. Williams (1973), speaking about integrity generally, refers to 'identity-conferring commitments' adhered to over the course of a life. Essentially this version focuses on *commitment*.
3. **A capacity/moral competence**. This can be described as a process of continuous reflexive sense-making (Cox *et al.*, 2003), which may even involve re-evaluating and giving up previously held ideals and principles (Walker, 2007). This version of integrity is can easily be applied to integrity in professional life and essentially focuses on *capacity*.

I will now examine each of these versions of professional integrity in turn.

### 1. Professional integrity as right conduct

The term 'professional integrity' is often used to refer to conduct in carrying out a work role that is in accordance with commonly accepted general principles of the profession and the specific codes/guidance produced by professional bodies. Cox *et al.* (2003, p. 103) have characterised this as 'professionalism' rather than 'professional integrity' in so far as it amounts to 'pursuing the extant demands of the profession'. For example, this might involve sticking with the commonly accepted standards of confidentiality in the social work profession in a context where a newspaper is seeking details of a family where suspected child abuse has taken place.

This view of professional integrity as being essentially the same as professionalism is not uncommon in the context of many professions. As mentioned earlier, in biomedical and health research, a UK Panel for Research Integrity was set up in 2006 to offer advice and guidance regarding misconduct in research. Here the term 'research integrity' is used to refer to conduct in accordance with the commonly accepted standards of scientific experimentation and reporting expected in the academic community. In 2005 a group of research-intensive universities in the UK launched a code of practice for 'research integrity', covering matters such as

intellectual property rights, plagiarism and falsification of research results. This code was said to be designed 'to prove their professionalism' (Davis, 2005, p. 3).

## **Codes**

'Integrity', is a key value in many social work codes of ethics. According to the BASW (2002) code:

Integrity comprises honesty, reliability, openness and impartiality, and is an essential value in the practice of social work.

The statement produced by the National Association of Social Workers (1999) in the USA sums up integrity as follows:

Social workers are continually aware of the profession's mission, values, ethical principles, and ethical standards and practice in a manner consistent with them. Social workers act honestly and responsibly and promote ethical practices on the part of the organizations with which they are affiliated.

The focus is on the *actions* of the social worker *as a professional*. This statement suggests that professionals need to be aware of the totality of the aims, values and rules of the profession, ensuring that their actions are consistent with these norms. This means seeing the profession as a coherent whole and behaving in accordance with this professional framework. This particular statement implies that the professional framework is given and social workers need to be aware of it all the time. It does not present social workers as actively owning, reflecting on, questioning or contributing to the development and revision of the profession's values. This does not mean that this does not happen, that it is not valued, or that the importance of reflection does not appear elsewhere in the NASW code, just that this is not part of the description of 'integrity' given in the code. In addition to acting in accordance with the specific normative content of the professional ethical framework, social workers are said to act honestly and responsibly. Honesty is a quality frequently associated with integrity (McFall, 1987). The British Association of Social Workers' code (BASW, 2002, para 3.4.2) elaborates a set of principles under the heading of

integrity, which includes social workers being honest about their qualifications and competence, not using professional relationships for personal gain and not engaging in intimate or sexual conduct with service users.

Essentially such codes of ethics and practice outline what kinds of people good professionals should be and how they should act. If professionals contravene the code of good conduct (for example, if social workers engage in sexual relationships with service users, or researchers falsify research results) then this damages their integrity (wholeness) as good professionals and damages the profession itself. Developing a sexual relationship with a service user, for example, is not seen just as a mistake, or an isolated example of bad practice that can be compensated for by good practice in other areas. It is simply *not* what professional social workers do. People who do this damage their integrity as social workers. Furthermore, they will almost certainly be struck off the professional register, as recent cases dealt with by the GSCC (2008) indicate.

### ***Conduct hearings***

The first report of the General Social Care Council (GSCC, 2008) outlining the number and nature of the conduct cases considered between April 2005 and 31 March 2008 was published in September 2008. Although 'integrity' is not mentioned in the GSCC codes (2002) used as the basis for the conduct hearings, section 5 of the code for social care workers is in effect about professional integrity: 'As a social care worker you must uphold public trust and confidence in social care services'. Specific clauses under this heading include prohibitions on harming, neglecting, exploiting, abusing or discriminating against service users, carers or colleagues and on forming inappropriate relationships with service users. Of 49 cases heard, the council reports that 21 involved allegations of inappropriate relationships. The areas of the code most commonly breached related to trust and confidence of people who use services and the public. Cases heard by the GSCC included a male social worker who was removed from the professional register for having had sexual relationships with two vulnerable users of services, and a female social worker who was suspended for six months for having formed a personal relationship with the father of a child with whom she was working. In one of the early cases, the GSCC

conduct committee suspended a social worker from the register for advertising herself as an escort. The grounds for this included the fact that she had:

brought the profession into disrepute and damaged public confidence in social care services... Social workers have a duty to act appropriately and professionally both inside and outside work...it is essential that service users can trust them. (General Social Care Council, 2006)

Integrity as morally good conduct is essentially about adhering to minimum standards accepted in the profession. This is exemplified in a GSSC misconduct case I observed in 2008. The case concerned a social worker accused of using excessive force with a resident in a local authority residential home. The panel was concerned to establish whether the worker knew about the commonly accepted standards for physical handling in the home and in the local authority more widely.

## **2. Professional integrity as commitment**

The second version of professional integrity draws on philosophers' accounts of the nature of integrity. Bernard Williams (1973; 1981) speaks of integrity as holding steadfastly true to certain identity-conferring commitments or ground projects. He argues that these 'commitments' are projects with which people are deeply and extensively involved and identified. Abandoning these projects would mean losing touch with what gives their lives an identity. Such commitments might include supporting a cause (for example, Zionism or the abolition of chemical and biological warfare) or they may be projects that flow from a more general disposition such as hatred of injustice, cruelty or killing (Williams, 1973, p. 111). This involves people acting from motives, interests and commitments that are most deeply their own.

If we apply this in a professional context, then commitment to working for social justice as a social worker might be regarded as a 'ground project'. In professional contexts, however, the identity-conferring commitments are broader than just individual projects. According to Calhoun (1995), integrity involves 'standing for something' that is personally endorsed by the moral agent, but this is in a social

context that provides a broader reference point for evaluating the worth of the projects/commitments. Calhoun argues that persons of integrity do not just act consistently with what they personally endorse, they stand up for their best judgement within a community of people trying to discover what in life is worth doing. Integrity is a matter of having proper regard for one's role in a community process of deliberation over what is valuable and what is worth doing. This entails not only standing up, unhypocritically, for one's best judgement, but also that one has proper respect for the judgement of others. Calhoun characterises integrity as a 'social virtue', that is, a quality of character or disposition to act well in the context of a moral community.

This can be illustrated by the story of Jane, the manager of a child protection team in an English local authority Social Services Department (now Children's Services), summarised from two in-depth interviews with her about her work. Jane gives a view of why she came into social work and uses this as a standard against which to measure some of the current practices with which she has to engage.

*Jane's case: 'It's not why I came into social work.'*

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Jane started doing voluntary work in a social services setting, then took a professional qualification and started working with older people in a local authority social services department. She commented:

*I'd always wanted to work with older people. And those first few years, I couldn't believe I was being paid for it! You know, I was driving round [name of city], doing bits of social history really.*

She became interested in mental health during her work with older people and qualified as an approved mental health social worker, moving to work in the mental health field. She explained her move into mental health in the context of how the changes that were brought in as a result of the 1990 Community Care Act changed the nature of her work with older people:

I was very *disillusioned* with the community care legislation that came in, which I felt very much changed the process of what we were doing, and got quite *upset* about that really, as did many of my colleagues. Some of them had stuck with it and learned to live with it, or whatever you do. But *I didn't feel it gave me the capacity to do the job properly*, and I didn't want to go and see somebody who wanted a day centre place and ask if they could change a light bulb, you know.

She described her work with the mental health team as challenging and stimulating – valuing her colleagues and commenting how much autonomy and responsibility they had. After several years she moved into child care as a team manager. This move came about due to staff shortages and the need for an acting team manager, a post that she was persuaded to take temporarily, which then became permanent. She has developed the team and is very committed to doing a good job. She described one of the changes taking place in the social services department that she felt was impacting on her work. This was a plan to provide all placements for children who needed to be looked after by the local authority 'in house' rather than buying places from providers across the country. The in-house provision had not yet been developed, but nevertheless all 'out of town' placements were being stringently reviewed, particularly in terms of cost. Jane illustrated what this meant for her:

What I've spent the last three weeks in, is actually bartering over a residential placement with [placement provider] and saying 'well, if we pay that much more, will you do that much more?' And *it's not why I came into social work, I can't believe I'm doing it*, and you know, these changes are so insidious really, that you suddenly think, 'what am I doing, talking about a child's welfare in terms of how much it's costing?' ... It's not about what's best for the child. *That's quite difficult to live with, and it's difficult for social workers to live with*. It's hard to put a price on kids' heads really. And that's happening more and more.

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Jane's story is probably a fairly typical one in that she started doing voluntary caring work and then moved into professional social work in order to do a job that she

enjoyed and thought worthwhile ('I always wanted to work with older people'). She has a view of why she came into social work and uses this as a yardstick against which to measure some of the current practices with which she has to engage. Her talk of 'disillusionment' with the results of the community care legislation implies that she does have a vision of what she could do as a good social worker and wants to carry on being able to live up to this (hence the change of job). This is further exemplified when she says, in relation to the intense focus on the cost of children's placements: 'It's not why I came into social work'. In saying 'I can't believe I'm doing it' she is, in effect, standing back and reflecting on her role and her actions. She is implying that this does not fit with her self-image: 'That's quite difficult to live with'. She also adds: 'It's difficult for social workers to live with', reinforcing her vision of a good social worker as someone who does not put financial costs before children's welfare.

Jane can be seen as someone who has a vision of good social work and of herself as a good social worker and it is on the basis of this vision that she does the job. She has taken action during her career to maintain this vision through changing work settings. She shows herself in her talk to be working at maintaining her integrity through critically reflecting on her past and current roles. This begins to take us towards the third version of professional integrity, which focuses not just on a person's commitment or motivation, but on their character and competence, including an ability to engage in reflexive sense-making, which I will explore under the heading of 'capacity'.

### **3. Professional integrity as a capacity**

#### ***Character***

Cox *et al* (2003; 2005, p. 9) suggest that the concept of integrity may be better conceived as a 'cluster concept' that ties together different overlapping qualities of character. They argue that integrity is a virtue (that is a quality of character), but it is not reducible to the workings of a single moral capacity (in the way courage is, for example) or the wholehearted pursuit of a clear moral end (like benevolence). They characterise 'integrity' as a 'complex and thick virtue term'. They use the Aristotelian

characterisation of virtue as a mean between two excesses (although Aristotle himself does not discuss integrity as a virtue in this way). They suggest that it stands between the qualities associated with inflexibility such as arrogance, rigidity, dogmatism, sanctimoniousness and those associated with superficiality and artificiality, such as capriciousness, weakness of will, self-deception and hypocrisy. The person of integrity, they suggest, 'lives in a fragile balance between every one of these all-too-human traits' (Cox *et al.*, 2003, p. 41). They argue for an account of integrity as 'a capacity to respond to change in one's values or circumstances, a kind of continual remaking of the self, as well as a capacity to balance responsibility for one's work and thought.' (Cox *et al.*, 2003, p. 41). This is a much more dynamic account, which does not require a concept of an unchanging self or rigid identity, which the version of integrity as commitment might imply.

### **Competence**

On the above account, to be a person of integrity entails having a capacity to do the work necessary to sustain one's fragile self. Cox *et al.* (2003) talk of the capacity to respond to change and a continual remaking of the self. This has resonances with Walker's (2007) characterisation of integrity as 'reliable accountability', requiring a kind of moral competence in resolving conflicts and priorities, readjusting ideals and compromising principles. This is part of Walker's 'expressive-collaborative' approach to ethics, which regards the story as the basic form of representation for moral problems (Walker, 2007, p. 116). Within this, integrity can be regarded as a kind of reliable accountability that we construct in the stories we tell about our relationships, identities and values. Stories are reworked and revised and help us to see 'sense-making connections [that] serve to bundle up varied or repeating actions into legible configurations, such as neglecting a friendship or trying to disown a past' (Walker, 2007, p. 117). Walker argues that the point of integrity is 'to maintain – or reestablish – our reliability in matters involving important commitments and goods' (Walker, 2007, p. 113). It is based on the assumption that human lives are changing and are deeply entangled with others. We are often seeking, therefore, a local dependability (rather than global wholeness) and a responsiveness to the moral costs of error and change rather than consistency.

This approach to integrity as a kind of moral competence or capacity usefully extends its characterisation as a thick and complex virtue and enables us more easily to undertake empirical explorations of integrity.

The following example from an emergency duty social worker employed by an English local authority depicts him reflecting on his role and making sense of it in relation to an ideal of what good social work should be.

*Jim's case: 'It's not the right way to be doing it.'*

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Jim qualified as a social worker 15 years ago and worked in a variety of settings before taking on the post of emergency duty social worker for a local authority three years ago. He works evenings and weekends and takes urgent cases covering the whole of a large rural county. He is on duty on his own and deals with a large variety of situations – from child protection to mental health. His job is to make people and situations safe until the specialist social workers come back on duty during the weekdays. So he may have to ensure children are in a place of safety if he judges them to be at risk or arrange for people to go to hospital if they need to be there: 'tidying things up as best you can until the next day'. He described the work as very short term and very stressful.

In talking about his work, Jim said: 'I'm trying to fight hard against being cynical'; 'It's not worthwhile any more'. This could be categorised as 'burn out' due to the focus on crisis in emergency social work. Indeed, Jim commented that quite often: 'I'm just there by myself and it's not very pleasant'. But he also described his discomfort in broader terms than simply 'stress':

So I'm beginning to think I really don't like it any more. Knocking on people's doors and saying I need to talk to you because a report's been made that you're not looking after your child. You know, it's not worthwhile any more. *It's not the right way to be doing it.* There's other ways. And I'm just there by myself and it's not very pleasant. So I'm beginning to think I'm doing it out of a

very routine way. But I'm getting the sense back that it's not the right way and it's punishing people. And it's social work that's really cut down to the bone, about as stark as it gets. I don't really like it any more.

He felt this way of doing things was 'unhealthy for the profession of social work', which should pay more attention to 'how you regard people; how you treat people'. He indicated he was considering whether to stay in the job. In the meantime, he does what he can to mitigate the harmful effects of professional interventions on people's lives - such as recommending good solicitors and using his discretion to recommend extraordinary payments for people in crisis.

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In the account given above, Jim does not describe in detail what he thinks good social work is, but it is clear that he thinks it should involve treating people with respect, and seeing them holistically in the context of their own lives and families. In the process of giving the interview, Jim is reflecting on his role and making sense of it in relation to an ideal of what good social work should be. He is giving an image of himself as someone who is 'beginning to think' and 'getting the sense back'. He is becoming aware that what he is engaged with is not 'good social work' according to the ideal standard that he holds. He presents himself as having a kind of generalised internal dialogue. At the start of the quotation he says that he's 'beginning to think I really don't like it any more'. At the end of the quotation he simply states: 'I don't like it any more'. So his dislike has become more definite, although he still talks of 'dislike' rather than using a stronger term like not believing in what he's doing or 'I can't be part of that any more'. Like the youth offending team manager quoted earlier, he is thinking of leaving his job because it does not live up to his ideal – 'it's not the right way to be doing it'. He can do small actions to try to operate according to his own standards of good practice, but this is not enough.

### **The limitations of each version of professional integrity**

I have outlined three versions of the concept of professional integrity, based around the concepts of conduct, commitment and capacity. Each of these accounts taken on its own has some limitations.

1. **Conduct.** This version of professional integrity has an emphasis on *professional* conduct in accordance with commonly accepted standards in the professional community (generally as laid down by the professional body). The focus here is on questions such as: 'What do you do?' 'How do you do it?' If based on a prescriptive code of conduct or ethics, there is a danger that this approach can encourage unreflective rule-following and uncritical reliance on the professional code. However, it is interesting to note that in the context of professional conduct hearings, despite the fact that the main emphasis is on conduct (what people have done or failed to do), some account is taken of a person's character, especially in the context of there being mitigating circumstances or testimony from witnesses as to a person's generally 'good character' or their behaviour being 'out of character'. For example, in a General Social Care Council conduct case I observed on 9<sup>th</sup> September 2008, the GSCC legal advisor asked a witness how long she had known the social worker against whom the complaint had been made, and whether his action could have been out of character.
  
2. **Commitment.** This version of professional integrity has an emphasis on the *personal* commitment to a set of professional values based on an ideal of what the profession might be at its best (beyond extant standards). The main questions here are: 'What do you believe in?' 'What are your values, motivations and projects?' 'Why are you doing this job/work?' If someone takes on a job as part of a personal vocation or calling (to serve humanity, or to do God's work) or political project (to promote eco-socialism), there is a danger that their commitments may be too personal, self-referential and internally consistent, but not sufficiently grounded in professional values and goals. They might be uncompromising in their commitments, which might turn into a personal crusade. To guard against this, it is important to retain the concept of a community of professional practitioners (and their commonly accepted standards of conduct) as a reference point, so that the cause being pursued is not purely personal or individual.
  
3. **Capacity.** This version of professional integrity has an emphasis on *performance* of the practitioner as a person who is able to engage in a process of reflexive

sense-making in relation to their personal and professional goals and values and is disposed to be reliably accountable. This capacity involves professionals having flexibility and the ability to negotiate personal and professional commitments, to review and revise their values and projects as appropriate and to give publicly intelligible accounts of themselves and their work. The main questions here are: 'How do you make sense of what you do in terms of your values and ideals?' 'How do you make sense of your values in terms of what you do?' The danger in this version of professional integrity is that the emphasis on performance and public credibility could result in superficiality, ungrounded projects and changeability in relation to values and ideals. The idea of capacity comprising character as well as competence may help guard against this, as character refers to a more stable set of dispositions.

The implications of the discussion so far are that no one of the three versions of professional integrity is sufficient on its own to capture the ways in which we use the term and what we might want it to mean in professional life. They represent a number of different strands that are part of the concept of professional integrity, which may overlap and are not mutually exclusive.

### **Implications for practice, policy and future research**

This article has offered preliminary exploration of aspects of the concept of professional integrity in social welfare work. It was not the aim to produce a definitive account or definition of professional integrity, but rather to undertake a conceptual analysis drawing on and illustrated with accounts from the literature and interviews with professional practitioners. The discussion suggests that we need to maintain a critical awareness of how the concept of professional integrity is being used – whether in a weaker (thinner) sense of good conduct according to externally provided principles/rules, or in a stronger (thicker) sense that also incorporates the internally motivated commitments or performative capacities of practitioners. This analysis is a timely reminder of the complexities of the concept of professional integrity and the challenge of maintaining integrity in professional life. In this sense, the analysis presented here does have practical implications.

The arguments developed in this article imply that if we allow the first version of professional integrity, as conduct according to minimum standards of good practice, to become the norm, then this is a significant weakening of the concept. There is a need to reinvigorate dialogues and debates about the ideals and core purposes of professional work in the social welfare field and beyond, which rely on the second version of professional integrity as about commitment(s). We need to consider how the commitments and motivations of practitioners like Jane and Jim, whose accounts of their work were discussed earlier in this article, can not only be accommodated, but also valued and maintained within the current ways of organising and practising in social welfare work.

The second version of professional integrity, therefore, is very important and would benefit from further examination and development in a social welfare context. This version focuses on the moral motivations and commitments of professional practitioners and is based on the idea of professional integrity as a moral quality or virtue. While there is a large range of moral philosophical literature on virtue theories of ethics that we can draw upon to help with conceptual analysis and theorising (Swanton, 2003; Adams, 2006; Van Hooft, 2006), there is a need for further work to develop detailed virtue based approaches relevant to social welfare policy and practice (Banks and Gallagher, 2008 is an attempt to begin some of this more detailed work). This is especially necessary in a climate where the focus of concern in social welfare policy and to some extent in social work ethics tends to be on the conduct of professional practitioners and the outcomes of their actions, (Banks, 2008; Banks, 2009) rather than on the character and commitments of the professionals themselves. It is particularly important to undertake education, training and empirical research with professional practitioners that focuses both on their commitment and on their capacities to perform as people of integrity, as outlined in the third version of professional integrity.

According to the third version of integrity (as a capacity or moral competence) an important element of performing as a person of professional integrity entails a process of reflexive sense-making and the giving of coherent accounts. Practitioners need, therefore, to develop the capacity to be reflexive and to talk of themselves and their work in ways that are plausible and credible to themselves, colleagues,

employers, other professionals and the wider public. Hence practising the giving of accounts and entering into debate and dialogue as students and professionals is an essential set of skills to learn and rehearse. Indeed, arguably the ability to give a competent performance as 'good professional' is part of what 'being a good professional' entails (Taylor and White, 2000; White and Stancombe, 2003).

Focussing on the second and third versions of professional integrity, a number of important moral qualities, attitudes and abilities that need continual emphasis in professional education can be identified (drawing on Banks and Gallagher, 2008) that might offer a useful framework for further research. These elements include:

- *A commitment to a set of values*, the content of which relates to what it means to be a 'good person in a professional role' and/or a 'good professional'.
- *An awareness that the values are inter-related to each other and form a coherent whole* and that their inter-relationship is what constitutes the overarching goals or purpose of the profession.
- *A capacity to make sense of professional values* and their relationship to the practitioner's own personally-held values.
- *The ability to give a coherent account* of beliefs and actions.
- *Strength of purpose and ability to implement these values.*

The final point, about strength of purpose, is a crucial element of professional integrity in practice. I suggested at the beginning of the article that integrity is often associated with situations where practitioners' values are undermined or threatened. This requires practitioners to have courage. However, it is not just in particular cases or situations of adversity or poor practice that courage and determination to maintain integrity are needed. These qualities are also needed to defend or reclaim the values of the welfare professions as a whole – values that are about social justice, equality and the transformation of people, communities and societies. A personal commitment to good practice needs to be located within a set of political commitments (Ferguson, 2008) to resist neo-liberal policies and practices and promote the social justice processes and outcomes that should be at the heart of the social welfare professions.

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