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## **Professional integrity**

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### **Introduction**

The previous two chapters covered the values of human rights and social justice. These values relate to the substantive ends of social work (what it is designed to achieve), as well as the process (how practitioners should work). For example, a commitment to human rights entails promoting human rights in society generally and in relation to users of social work services (ends) and acting in ways that respect people's human rights and dignity (process). In this chapter I will look at professional integrity, which has a focus on how well social workers integrate the values of social work into their practice. In this sense, it is a complex, over-arching value, which entails commitment to all the values of social work, a capacity to make sense of them and to put them into practice.

In this chapter I will first explore what is meant by 'professional integrity', drawing on philosophical accounts of integrity and outlining three different interpretations of professional integrity as an excellence of character or virtue, as an ordinary quality of character and as professionalism or good professional conduct. I will then discuss how professional integrity is manifest in practice, drawing on three case examples. Finally I will consider recommendations for developing professional integrity as a virtue in practice and in social work education.

### **Professional integrity as a complex moral quality**

'Integrity' literally means wholeness. It is about parts fitting together, and the whole being complete, undamaged or uncorrupted. All sorts of entities – people, objects, institutions – may be described as having integrity. Furthermore, integrity may refer to wholeness in a variety of domains – for example, aesthetic, intellectual, scientific or moral. In this chapter I will focus on the moral integrity of people practising as social workers. The moral domain covers those areas of life relating to human and planetary flourishing, including how people treat each other and how resources are used and distributed. In ordinary usage, the term integrity is often used to refer to integrity in the moral domain, which is usually associated with people displaying reliability, honesty and trustworthiness in their attitudes and actions. Professional integrity relates specifically to people's character and conduct in professional life, and includes generic moral integrity (reliability, honesty and trustworthiness) as well as more specific features relating to the upholding of the values of the profession in question.

Professional integrity, in its broadest sense, is about professionals being aware of, and committed to, the purpose, values, ethical principles and standards of their profession;

making sense of them as a whole; and putting them into practice in their work, including upholding them in challenging circumstances. Stated in this way, professional integrity is an over-arching value. It is often characterised as a complex moral quality or disposition of the professional (a 'virtue'), which entails not just upholding and acting upon all the values of the profession, but also working to hold them together as a whole (Cox *et al.*, 2003, pp. 103-104; Banks, 2004b; Banks and Gallagher, 2009; Banks, 2010).

This clearly entails some effort on the part of the practitioner, not only to understand and commit to the purpose and values of the profession, but also to negotiate contradictions and conflicts in theory and practice. This requires professional wisdom and moral courage. By professional wisdom I mean a capacity to see ethically salient features of a situation and make discerning judgements about what is the right course of action in the context of particular circumstances (Banks and Gallagher, 2009, pp. 72-95; Bondi *et al.*, 2011; Banks, 2013). This entails a high degree of criticality and reflexivity on the part of professionals. By criticality, I mean not taking for granted the professional values as found in codes of ethics or current practice, nor features of situations as they first appear. Having a critical stance entails closely examining and questioning a situation and people's perspectives and thinking on it, uncovering hidden assumptions and unspoken implications and placing the situation in a bigger political and social context (Fook, 2002; Banks, 2007). By 'reflexivity' I mean putting oneself in the picture – seeing what role one is playing *qua* social worker (Taylor, 2006) and what are the effects of one's positionality in terms of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age and so on.

This is a relatively demanding interpretation of 'professional integrity' as a complex virtue, or excellence of character, of the social worker. Before examining the virtue of professional integrity in more detail, it is important to stress that the term 'professional integrity' is increasingly commonly used in a weaker sense to refer to what Cox *et al.* (2003, p. 103) call 'professionalism' – namely acting in accordance with current standards of a profession. Indeed, 'professional integrity' is sometimes used almost synonymously with 'good professional conduct'. Here the focus is less on the character and motivations of the professionals and more on their behaviours and whether these conform to, or are consistent with, the current principles and standards of the profession. For example, we find the following statement in the code of ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (2008) in the USA describing the principle of integrity:

Social workers are continually aware of the profession's mission, values, ethical principles, and ethical standards and practice in a manner consistent with them.

This implies that as long as social workers are aware of the code and their actions are not in breach of the stated mission and values, then they would be regarded as acting with professional integrity. Certainly, they would usually not find themselves subject to complaint or disciplinary proceedings by the professional association or regulatory body. So in that sense, their professional integrity would not be in question. However, observers

would probably not tend to refer positively to someone who just follows the rules and ensures they do not get into trouble as a person of professional integrity. The term generally has stronger connotations. It is often used to refer to people who hold onto their values in the face of challenge or adversity and who are particularly committed to a cause. It is this stronger sense of professional integrity, which requires a capacity to work on the ethical self, that I am concerned about here. I will draw on some of the philosophical discussions of integrity in general as a way of better understanding professional integrity.

### **Philosophical perspectives on integrity**

Williams (1973, 1981) in his discussions of integrity in general, characterises it as holding steadfastly true to certain identity-conferring commitments or ground projects. These projects are what give people's lives meaning and might include commitment to a cause (such as combatting climate change) or may be linked to more general dispositions such as hatred of injustice or cruelty. Williams's account can be criticised as entailing that a fanatic or sadist might be regarded as a person of integrity as long as they had a set of deeply-held commitments and carried them out consistently. However, this critique is less potent in the case of professional integrity. For here the commitments and ground projects would be those endorsed by a community of professional practitioners, rather than just the individual person. This has resonances with Calhoun's (1995) characterisation of integrity as 'standing for something' that is endorsed by the individual person, but within a social context. This provides a broader reference point for evaluating the projects and commitments. Although Calhoun is also referring to integrity in general, her discussion is very relevant for professional integrity. She characterises integrity as a social virtue, that is, a disposition to act well in the context of a moral community. In the case of professional integrity, the 'moral community' would be the community of practitioners who are engaged in developing, maintaining and changing the values and standards of the professional practice. MacIntyre (1981, p. 187) calls this type of community 'a practice', which is a complex form of cooperative human activity through which goods are achieved that contribute to human flourishing (Banks and Gallagher, 2009, pp. 46-9).

Of course, there is no guarantee that the whole community of practice does not endorse evil and corrupt practices. This is why the individual practitioner also needs a sense of personal integrity – an ability to check out and balance their generic values and commitments against those promoted in their profession and/or in particular workplaces. This is also why the ideal, or core purpose of the profession, to which they give their commitment, is described by Cox et al (2003, p 103) as 'a semi-independent ideal of what the profession might be at its best'. This is sometimes referred to as a 'service ideal' or 'regulative ideal' (Oakley and Cocking, 2001, pp. 25-31; Banks, 2004a, pp. 53-8). As an ideal, it can be regarded as providing a vision towards which to work. It is 'semi-independent' in that whilst it may be defined and given meaning in the context of current professional practice, it is also aspirational and goes beyond current practice. According to the

traditional view of professions, all professions have a service ideal, which encapsulates their roles in contributing to human flourishing. Service ideals are very general and abstract, such as the promotion of health for the profession of medicine, justice for law and social welfare for social work (Banks and Gallagher, 2009, pp. 20-27). However, the articulation of more specific values and principles, and more concrete standards, shows how a service ideal infuses and influences professional practice, as outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1: From service ideal to ethical standards in social work**

<b>Service ideal</b>	<b>Values</b>	<b>Ethical principles/qualities</b>	<b>Ethical standards</b>
<i>Core purpose or mission of the profession</i> E.g. Promotion of social welfare.	<i>Broad beliefs about the nature of the good society and the role of social work in this.</i> E.g. Human dignity & worth; Social justice.	<i>Principles of action and qualities of character that promote these values.</i> E.g. Respect basic human rights; Reliability; Honesty.	<i>Based on &amp; applying the values &amp; principles or qualities. May be used as a benchmark for assessment of professional behaviour.</i> E.g. Communicate with users in a language & by means that they understand.

### **Versions of professional integrity**

As already indicated, professional integrity is a complex concept. Based on the discussion so far, professional integrity as a virtue is about the motives and dispositions (character) of the person in a professional role, who has a critical commitment to a semi-independent ideal of what the profession might be at its best. As already noted, this goes beyond the meanings of professional integrity that are often found in professional codes and other documents, which tend to be more conduct-focussed and based on consistency of actions with extant values and standards of the profession. Table 2 illustrates how the term ‘professional integrity’ may be used in different ways, ranging from its use as a virtue or excellence of character, to its use to refer to an ordinary quality of character and to refer to professionalism or professional conduct.

**Table 2: Versions of professional integrity in social work**

	<b>Professional integrity as a virtue</b>	<b>Professional integrity as an ordinary quality of character</b>	<b>Professional integrity as professionalism</b>
<b><i>A social worker exhibits</i></b>	excellence of character	ordinary good character	professional conduct
<b><i>by showing</i></b>	critical and reflexive commitment	ordinary commitment	conformity
<b><i>to</i></b>	a semi-independent ideal of the profession at its best	the mission, values, principles and standards of the professional code of ethics	current professional standards

Often in discussions in the literature it is not clear what version of professional integrity is in use, which leads to some confusion. A crucial feature of professional integrity as a virtue is, arguably, the element of criticality and reflexivity. This takes us beyond commitment to what is currently accepted in the profession to an external reference point. It allows the practitioner to ask ‘has the profession been corrupted?’ or ‘have its mission and standards been watered down?’ Of course, frequently what practitioners, along with service users and employers, are concerned about is professionalism. Practitioners want to ensure the conditions in their employing agencies enable them to do the job in line with professional standards; service users want to be sure they engage with competent professionals working to accepted standards; and employers want their workers to follow currently accepted professional norms. Using professional standards as a benchmark enables practitioners to complain or mount a challenge against their employers, if employer standards or practices breach or fall short of the professional standards laid down by their professional association and/or professional regulatory body. Similarly, service users or employers can complain if practitioners do not act in accordance with accepted professional standards.

If serious complaints are made about the conduct of a social worker, then this may be the subject of a disciplinary or conduct hearing by the employer or professional body. At this point, the ‘ordinary character’ of the worker (including their motives and the likelihood of repetition of the misconduct) are taken into account in deciding if the person is fit to continue to practise, and if so, what sanctions or conditions to impose. Reference would also be made to relevant current codes of ethics or guidelines on professional conduct.

However, codes of ethics and conduct are living documents and are updated and changed as circumstances and ideas change. So although a professional misconduct panel will take the current versions as a benchmark, they should not be regarded as unchallengeable. And

above all, as they are based on values that may be contradictory (for example, freedom of choice and protection from harm), which need to be interpreted in the context of each specific situation. Codes do not legislate for all eventualities. It is important that professionals develop a capacity to engage critically with current norms and standards as laid down in codes and as practised in employing agencies. Being a good professional would mean exhibiting professionalism and/or ordinary good character. But it would also mean having a high degree of critical and reflexive engagement with one's performance in the professional role. This means not only questioning taken-for-granted norms and assumptions that are pervasive in the profession, but also questioning one's own commitments, values and actions and being prepared to change.

Cox et al. (2003, p. 41) talk of integrity as involving a capacity to respond to change and as involving a continual remaking of the self. They suggest it may be instructive to think of integrity as a virtue in Aristotle's (350 BCE/1954) sense, as a mean between two excesses (or vices). In which case it may be described as standing between qualities associated with inflexibility (such as arrogance or dogmatism) and those associated with superficiality (such as weakness of will or hypocrisy). They talk of people of integrity living their lives in a 'fragile balance' between these traits. This characterisation of integrity emphasises the psychological and practical work that people need to do to maintain their integrity and is particularly pertinent for integrity in professional life. It also 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. 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 complex virtue and enables us more easily to undertake empirical explorations of integrity based on social workers' accounts of their practice.

## **Cases**

I will now give three examples of situations from real-life social work practice, which are relevant to our discussion of professional integrity. They are shortened versions of cases written by social workers from different countries about ethical challenges in their work that were collected for a book on practising social work ethics around the world (Banks and Nøhr, 2012).

### **Case 1: A request for health care in Peru**

This case was contributed by a female social worker employed in a government health insurance office in Peru. The office deals with standards and difficult cases in relation to claims for government-funded health insurance. Only those in poverty and who are not covered by any other form of health care insurance are eligible for assistance. The social worker gives an account of an occasion when she was faced with a claim from a woman whose child was sick and needed non-urgent medical care. However, the woman's estranged husband had health care insurance, so the child had been refused treatment at the Child Health Institute as staff judged the child was not eligible. The social worker comments about this case:

This dilemma particularly challenged my actual, effective role as a social worker, my ethical performance, as well as my assessment of the case. It struck at the heart of my professional identity as a social worker, and raised issues about the relationship between professional and public responsibilities. If I decided that the child was entitled to the SIS [government health insurance], this would be against the institutional rules and against the establishment. If I decided otherwise, I would go against the most important principles according to my analysis as a social worker, including the child's right to health.

However, if we examine the institutional rule for eligibility for SIS, it does not actually take into account a number of social situations, such as parental abandonment, as was the case with this family. This is detrimental not only to this child, but to many others as well, according to the statistics about cases similar to this that I and other colleagues have been collecting.

The social worker then gives an account of her reasoning, decision and actions in relation to making a case to her boss for this woman to be given assistance for her child's health care. She presents herself as working to improve and change policies and practices that affect many families adversely and as acting in accordance with social work values and principles, particularly a child's right to health and human solidarity.

If we take this account at face value, we would probably say that the social worker in this case had acted with professional integrity in the virtue sense of the term. As the last sentence indicates, she has a vision of social work at its best, based on values of children's rights and human solidarity, beyond the actual practice happening in her employing agency. She identifies the interests and rights of the child as her primary focus, regardless of the circumstances of the child's parents. She also sees the bigger picture of similar injustices affecting other children and is able to make a reasoned case to her boss. Hence she not only has a strong commitment to social work values, she also exhibits professional wisdom (seeing ethically salient features of situations, making judgements based on specific circumstances and using moral reasoning) and moral courage and persistence in pressing

the case and challenging the authorities. Furthermore, she is also able to give a consistent account of her motivations, reasoning and actions as evidenced in her written case example.

The next case, from a social worker in Japan, also concerns a mother and child and their eligibility for state-provided assistance. However, in this case, despite the efforts of the social worker, the assistance was denied.

### **Case 2: A request for welfare assistance in Japan**

A young male social worker employed by a public welfare office in a Japanese city recounted how a Filipino woman sought assistance for herself and her young daughter. She had been working at a hot spring resort in Japan and had a child with her Japanese boyfriend, who had then left them. She was not able to continue to work and look after her daughter, so had come to the city. She was an illegal migrant and was not legally married. Illegal migrants are not eligible for welfare benefits in Japan. The social worker was troubled by the situation:

As a social worker I wanted to try to protect her and her child and to help them re-organise their lives. I thought they also had a human right to live continuously in Japan. But there was a big barrier in front of me: the problem of 'nationality'.

He worked with his colleagues to look into possible ways of helping the woman and her child, including foster care. However, in spite of the social worker's efforts, his boss reported the woman to the immigration authorities and she and her child were deported. The social worker commented:

As an ethical social worker, I would like to have taken more action to protect her human rights, but at the same time, I was a civil servant with a legal obligation to uphold the civil law. My supervisor also told me that if the woman had married legally, this problem would not have happened. However, I did not agree with the result of the case in terms of social work ethics (social justice and human rights).

The social worker in this case presents himself as committed to the core values of social work, but struggles to implement them in the bureaucratic and legal system within which he works. From the account given, the social worker clearly demonstrates professionalism and professional integrity in the sense of displaying ordinary moral character. He did his best: he worked with his colleagues to find ways of supporting the mother and child. But his boss over-rode him. In his commentary on this case, Namae (2012) makes the point that the illegal status of the Filipino mother was seen as the main issue by the social worker. However, if we view the situation from the perspective of the child, we should consider both parents. The father hardly features in the account of the case, as he has disappeared, and is therefore assumed to be out of the picture. However, as Namae points out, in Japan a



child takes its nationality from its father. Although the child did not have a birth certificate proving the nationality of her father, if the father was found and accepted paternity, then the child would be eligible for welfare support.

This was a young social worker. Would we expect him to display more than professionalism or ordinary good character? Probably we would not. However, if faced with a similar situation now, when older, more experienced and confident, might he be able to do something different? He might or might not succeed. But Namae suggests how the case could be taken further by putting the father in the picture and by at least making the argument that the child is Japanese. For the social worker to engage in this degree of advocacy might be too time-consuming and might result in neglect of other cases. He might judge that he would not succeed and so it would waste his time. However, if he is committed to social work values of human rights and social justice, then might he be able to report his concerns to an organisation that advocates for the rights of migrants or take some other form of action? Acting with professional integrity as a virtue entails that social workers take account of as many aspects of particular situations as possible, which requires an ability to see the bigger picture, identify salient features and take action.

The next case involved a social worker and teacher actually breaching current regulations and standards of good practice for social work in Palestine, in order to respect and maintain a young girl's right to a safe life within her family home.

### **3. A response to sexual abuse in the Occupied Palestinian Territories**

This case comes from a female school-based social worker working in the Occupied Palestinian Territories of East Jerusalem. The social worker and school's head teacher worked with the parents of a 14-year old young woman, Rana, who told the social worker that she was being sexually abuse by her father. Rather than reporting to the Israeli authorities as required by law, they worked with the family to ensure the young woman was protected in the home. The father agreed to live in a separate room apart from the main family home, for which he would not have keys and which he would not enter unless his wife was present. The young woman was given a key to lock her bedroom door. The social worker and teacher judged that following the law, which would entail involving the Israeli authorities and result in family shame, would be potentially more damaging for the young woman. This was justified by the social worker who wrote the case:

Had it been reported, the girl might have been removed from her family and placed in a children's home under Israeli supervision while the situation was being investigated. There is community suspicion of these institutions and it is rumoured that girls who are placed in such institutions get involved in drugs, prostitution or may even be induced to inform on their communities.... Had Rana been removed, she might never have been able to return to

'normal' community life. The case would have become community knowledge. This could have meant that Rana might also have been at risk of being killed (as she was living in a so-called 'honour' community). She would not have been able to complete her schooling, work or even marry. Furthermore, her father would have been arrested and imprisoned. As the main wage-earner for a large family, the family would have been ruined socially and economically, the former being more important culturally. The community would know the reason for the arrest. Not only Rana would have been affected, but also her sisters' and brothers' life chances would have been impacted negatively.

The social worker reports that the father kept his promise and that Rana's academic performance and self-esteem improved.

The immediate question raised by this case is: were the social worker and teacher right to deal with this situation in the way they did? Since the reported outcome was good, readers' judgments are more likely to be positive. Both commentators on this case appreciate the reasons for the professionals' response. Yet both also point out that this way of handling reported sexual abuse would not work in many cases (Baidoun and Lindsey, 2012; Jones, 2012). Jones notes that Western research evidence shows that male perpetrators tend to continue to commit abuse, even when agreements have been made to desist. Hence the proposed solution carries a risk for the young woman. In this case the professionals made a judgement. We do not know the extent to which it was 'naïve' or well-considered. If we assume the latter, were they acting with professional integrity? They were breaching current professional standards and the law, which suggests that their professionalism may be questioned. Whether we say they acted with professional integrity would depend upon further details in the account they gave of their motives and reasons for acting as they did. The main argument written down is essentially consequentialist, justifying their action as that which would produce least harm, given the political and social context. The social worker and teacher clearly take a critical stance towards the legal and professional requirements. However, we do not have any information about what Rana herself wanted, the relationship between Rana and her parents or the relationship between the social worker and the family.

Yet, while a more detailed account of the precise circumstances of the case would provide some further evidence of the social worker's and teacher's professional integrity, this kind of case is never clear-cut and highlights the challenges in evaluating cases when professionals break the law or bend the rules. The circumstances of this case are very different from those faced by the Peruvian social worker. In both cases, the professionals had to work hard on behalf of young people, to preserve their rights and protect them from harm. But in the Peruvian case, there was a possibility of influencing those in charge. In the Palestinian case, this would be a harder task. However, it is a task that one of the

commentators (Baidoun) is working on - the implementation of a Palestinian law concerning children, which has a procedure for reporting and working on child protection cases within the Palestinian legal and social work system. The social worker does not mention this in her account. But one of the questions a reader might ask is what might be her role, and other social workers faced with similar situations, in developing a more adequate child protection system. Does 'hiding' cases of child sexual abuse help perpetuate or condone sexual exploitation; and how can the profile of such cases be raised without causing harm to young people and other innocent family members?

### **Reflections on the cases**

Looking at the short accounts given in these case summaries demonstrates the work that social work practitioners have to do to maintain, implement and demonstrate their professional integrity in specific situations in practice. The information we are given in these short accounts is necessarily partial, written from one person's perspective and summarising key features of very complex situations. Whether we, the readers, judge that the social workers acted with professional integrity will depend on how we interpret the information we are given and what assumptions we make about the circumstances of the cases. These cases are all concerned with specific situations, and whilst we can judge whether we think the professionals concerned acted with professional integrity in these cases, it is more difficult to judge if the social workers are people of professional integrity and would act with professional integrity in other situations. And this is the point of professional integrity as a virtue or excellence of character: that social workers have a disposition to act with integrity in the variety of situations encountered in their professional lives, and, according to many theorists and most codes of ethics, also in their personal lives (Musschenga, 2001b; Oakley and Cocking, 2001, pp. 137-171).

If we heard that the Peruvian social worker in case 1 routinely discussed her social work cases with her friends outside work, disclosing their names and details of their lives, this would bring into question her global professional integrity, that is, her integrity across all roles and domains of professional and personal life (Musschenga, 2001a). This highlights the difference between describing an action as performed 'with professional integrity' and describing a person as someone 'of professional integrity'. In the professions we clearly want to encourage people to act with professional integrity on all occasions. What does this mean for professional education?

### **Developing professional integrity in practice and education**

I will now make some suggestions for professional practice and education, drawing on the recommendations outlined by Banks and Gallagher (2009, pp. 210-211).

***Developing, debating and owning professional values*** - If commitment to a set of professional values lies at the heart of professional integrity, then it is clearly important in professional education to discuss, debate, refine and develop a sense of ownership of the professional values as stated in the codes and other professional literature. Professional values are often presented in the form of lists of statements of principles or moral qualities, externally created and de-contextualised. To develop commitment to the values entails questioning and interpreting them, and above all, exercising critical reflection and reflexivity during the course of practitioners' own work. Sharing experiences with colleagues or supervisors can help this process, as can studying case examples and vignettes and working through dilemmas and problems. Encouraging students in professional education and practitioners in supervision and continuing professional development to undertake a process of consciously asking themselves how their actions cohere with their own values and those of the profession can be a useful exercise.

***Awareness of and location within a professional tradition*** - A sense of the history of the profession or occupational group to which a practitioner belongs, its changing roles and values, is also important in locating the current roles and values in a context, and reminding us that these are constantly subject to change and revision. 'What is good practice?' and 'What kind of person is a good professional?' are questions that stimulate us to think about the profession or occupational group as a whole, how what counts as 'good' may have changed and is the subject of ongoing debate, especially in inter-professional contexts. Often professionals bemoan changes that have taken place in their work settings, looking back to a time in the past when conditions were 'better' and trying to hold on to this vision. Yet if they are to remain in jobs and preserve integrity, they may have to adjust their ideals to new circumstances as well as try to change aspects of the new context that are inimical to 'good practice'.

***Practising dialogue and debate*** - If a large part of performing as a person of professional integrity entails a process of reflexive sense-making and the giving of coherent accounts, then it is also important that practitioners 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, entering into debate and dialogue as students and professionals in the context of their peers is an important set of skills to learn and rehearse.

***Being part of and working through professional groups and networks*** - Integrity is often invoked in situations of adversity – when someone's values are undermined or threatened. This means practitioners need courage to stand up for their beliefs and act in accordance with them. They may need to resist pressures to cover up or conform to corrupt agency norms (Preston-Shoot, 2011). Solidarity with other work colleagues and through professional associations, political networks and trade unions is also important in such

cases. Individual practitioners, no matter how resilient or courageous, risk victimisation and disempowerment if they stand alone as isolated individuals.

### **Concluding comments**

Social workers need a capacity to make sense of how they act in a work role in the context of a broader narrative of ideals, values, character and consistency. Having a capacity and the moral competence to do this is important, so that practitioners working with vulnerable people can play a role in challenging systems of which the procedures and outcomes often perpetuate and encourage injustice, disrespectful treatment and a lack of genuine care and sensitivity. 'Professional integrity', as this process of reflexive sense-making, is part of what contributes to people's capacity to 'blow the whistle' on bad practice, to protest against injustice and to challenge demeaning behaviour. It is part of contributing to the development of better practice and a constant process of revision of accepted professional values and commitments in the light of new challenges and demands. If practitioners are to be able to remain in their jobs and maintain professional integrity, then they require not just a commitment to a set of professional values (as articulated in professional codes) but courage, commitment and a sense of solidarity. Professional integrity is very important in current social work practice, particularly if it can be used as part of an active ethics of resistance, which not only maintains commitment to a set of professional values and ideals, but also serves to promote their critical re-examination and recreation.

### **Acknowledgements**

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