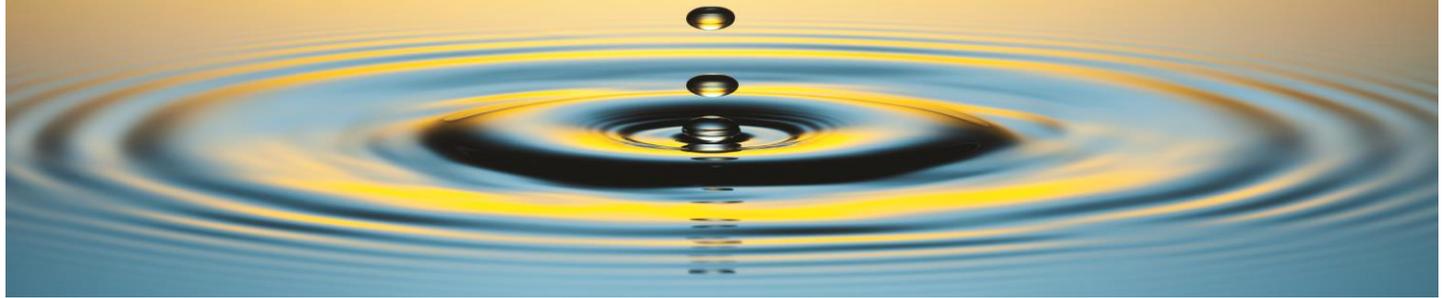


# Practice Matters



*Practice Matters was created as an educational resource for social workers in Newfoundland and Labrador. It is intended that this resource will generate ethical dialogue and enhance critical thinking on issues that impact social work practice. Practice Matters is provided for general information.*

## Regulatory Trends - Integrity in Professional Practice

**Phil O'Neil MSW, RSW**

Integrity in Professional social work practice although a core value in the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics is not often discussed nor are there many references to it in social work literature. It is one of the core social work values that is difficult to appreciate until it is not there (Baylor et al, 2019). This article will focus on the importance of maintaining professional integrity in social work practice.

So, what is integrity in professional social work practice? The CASW (2005) Code of Ethics informs social work practice and states that an essential element of integrity in professional practice is ethical accountability based on the Code of Ethics, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) International Declaration of Ethical Principles of Social Work and other relevant provincial/territorial standards and guidelines. It outlines the key principles as follows:

- Social workers demonstrate and promote the qualities of honesty, reliability, impartiality, and diligence in their professional practice.
- Social workers demonstrate adherence to the values and ethical principles of the profession and promote respect for the profession's values and principles in organizations where they work or with which they have a professional affiliation.
- Social workers establish appropriate boundaries in relationships with clients and ensure that the relationship serves the need of clients.

- Social workers value openness and transparency in professional practice and avoid relationships where their integrity or impartiality may be compromised, ensuring that should a conflict of interest be unavoidable, the nature of the conflict is fully disclosed.

The CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice goes further in providing a practical application outlining ethical responsibilities to clients, ethical responsibilities in professional relationships, ethical responsibilities to colleagues, ethical responsibilities to the workplace, ethical responsibilities in private practice, ethical responsibilities in research, ethical responsibilities to the profession and ethical responsibilities to society. The philosophy of integrity and the pragmatic application of integrity in social work practice are reflected in and measured in the Code of Ethics, Guidelines for Ethical Practice and Standards of Practice (NLCSW, 2020).

Integrity in professional practice cuts across all these areas of social work practice and extends far beyond an individual's commitment to honesty, reliability and loyalty (Campbellsville University, 2020). Achievement of professional integrity can be extremely challenging particularly when faced with demanding work environments, difficult decisions and the requirement to reconcile personal and professional values and roles. Making sense of social work values, principles, relationships, commitments, and accountability are a daily part of the life and work of social workers. It takes more than a commitment to a set of professional values and principles as there is a requirement for ongoing self-reflective practice, courage, and moral character (Banks, 2004). Social workers are required to have the capacity and moral competence to think and make choices sometimes amongst alternative and competing courses of action, and ultimately choosing what is right based on adherence to their professional and ethical responsibilities. In essence, social workers must know what they are doing and why, and this requires that they possess rational thinking, knowledge, skills, decision making capacity and accountability to their actions in day-to-day work. Integrity in professional practice is revealed when social workers make sound, ethical choices and do the right thing regardless of the circumstances or consequences. This is the critical connection between ethics and moral action (McCombs, 2022).

Acting with integrity means that a social worker understands, accepts and is choosing to live and work in accordance with personal and professional principles and values. Social workers first though, need to make sense of and reconcile personal and professional values, principles, relationships, commitments, and accountability in the context of their work situations. Social workers require the ability to recognize the conflict that can exist between personal interests, values and beliefs and professional responsibilities. Being accountable for one's work and mistakes, accepting constructive criticism, following through on commitments, and continuously striving to improve knowledge, skills and abilities will assist social workers in acquiring integrity and meeting professional responsibilities. No doubt this is an ongoing challenge that can test an individual's resolve and it requires a healthy degree of self awareness and critical self reflection to help make sense of it all (Indeed, 2020).

When faced with difficult situations and having to make important decisions, social workers have the challenge of not diminishing their own integrity while at the same time contributing to the building of integrity in the workplace. The reality for social workers is that agencies, organizations, and the workplace are all influenced both positively and negatively by co-workers, leadership, management, policy, and procedure and this can have an enormous impact on practice. Social workers can play a role in challenging systems, injustices and policies or practices that fall short of standards for integrity while still having an individual responsibility to clients, their colleagues, and the workplace. It is essential that social workers remain collaborative and meet their responsibilities in honest, ethical ways.

For the most part social workers act with a high degree of integrity despite very challenging situations yet there are times when this is not the case. An important question is what leads social workers to act in ways that do not show professional integrity? There is no easy answer to this, however sometimes people make mistakes, exercise poor judgment, or struggle with external factors that impact on their behavior and decision making. It is also true that social workers sometimes make conscious choices to act without integrity. In other words, they knowingly make choices to not do the right thing and as a result, violate the Code of Ethics or Standards of Practice. This type of behavior can have far reaching impacts on clients, colleagues, the employer, and the profession.

Here are four scenarios where social workers struggle with issues related to professional integrity:

## Case Scenario # 1

Sandy is employed in child protection with a large caseload of high risk and complex cases. She falls behind on her documentation and required home visits on several families where children who are at high risk. Her supervisor reviews her caseload following several client complaints indicating they have not heard from Sandy for some time. The supervisor is surprised by this information as Sandy has not advised her that she has been experiencing challenges in keeping up with the work and when she reviews the case files the limited documentation suggests that the home visits are up to date. Sandy is in a very uncomfortable situation, and she must make a choice by either accepting responsibility for her actions or looking for other reasons to explain why the work has not been completed (systemic issues, a lack of supervision or external factors). Sandy is stressed at work and knows she has not made good choices including not appropriately consulting with her supervisor when she began to struggle. Now she is facing a much more difficult situation where questions of competence and potential risk to clients will likely arise.

In this scenario, Sandy has both an ethical responsibility to her clients and the workplace and should consider all the consequences of each course of action. Sandy chooses to acknowledge that she let things get away from her and that she entered client notes to cover the fact that she did not complete the required home visits. Although uncomfortable and facing discipline from the employer and possibly the regulatory body, Sandy chose to do the right thing and be accountable for her behavior.

It is an ethical expectation that social workers have the capacity to make choices regarding alternative courses of action that are in the best interests of clients and the workplace. This is a clear example of how integrity can have an impact not only on the decisions and image as a social worker, but also on relationships and work completed in a competent manner in the client's best interests.

## Case Scenario # 2

Jennifer works with a multidisciplinary team providing mental health services to high-risk clients. She has witnessed one of her social work colleagues (Sarah) engaging in questionable practice with several clients including not seeking informed consent, not spending required time in helping her clients understand available services and not spending the time necessary to assess the complex needs of her clients. Jennifer suspects that Sarah is struggling with personal issues as she has repeatedly shown up late for work and looks tired and stressed and there are rumors amongst the staff that she has impairment issues related to addictions. Jennifer is very uncomfortable and unsure as to how to deal with the situation, however, is concerned regarding Sarah's competence to practice, the potential impact on the clients and Sarah's wellbeing.

Jennifer understands that building integrity in social work practice is not merely a client-centered act, and that she has a broader responsibility. It would be easy for Jennifer to carry on with her work and let someone else worry about what is happening with Sarah, but instead she chooses to do the right thing by identifying and dealing with the concerning behavior of a colleague to uphold professional integrity. She refers to the NLCSW Standards of Practice (2020) and the Guiding Framework for Social Workers Concerned about The Practice of a Colleague (2021) to assist in her decision making. Jennifer approaches Sarah and offers assistance in dealing with the situation to bring the concerns forward to the manager to request support and EFAP.

## Case Scenario # 3

Paul is a new hire in a casual position with a regional health authority after graduating with a BSW less than a year ago. He is provided orientation by his supervisor who has been in her position for over ten years. She tells him to watch out for the social work assistant who has a history of poor performance and blaming others when things don't work out well. A few weeks into his work, during a lunch break, Paul hears his supervisor and several of the other social workers make disparaging and culturally insensitive jokes against the social work assistant who is indigenous. Paul is very uncomfortable in this situation and unsure how to deal with it. He initially decides to ignore it for fear that as a new employee he will be judged harshly. He also does not want to be seen as being a part of that inappropriate conduct and hopes it won't happen again. Unfortunately, the racist and discriminatory comments continue and although Paul tries to remove himself from situations where this is happening, it is impossible for him to avoid.

Paul understands that the behavior of his colleagues is inappropriate and unprofessional, however he feels trapped between doing the right thing or choosing to try and ignore what is happening, in the hope it will go away. Paul reviews the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice and decides that it is his ethical responsibility to address conduct and behavior. He eventually summons the courage and advises his supervisor that her behavior and the behavior of the other workers is inappropriate and reports the same to the manager who engages Human Resources and the regulatory body. In this scenario. Although in a very difficult position, Paul had enough self-awareness and moral courage to not diminish his own professional integrity by ignoring the unprofessional behavior of his colleagues and ultimately acted ethically by taking the necessary steps to build integrity in the workplace.

## Case Scenario # 4

Mary is a social worker in an emergency department (ER) of a large health center. In recent months the number of visits to the ER and the complexity of the cases has increased dramatically. Mary is struggling to keep up with the workload and believes many of the clients she sees are not receiving adequate assessment and referral for appropriate services as she just does not have the time. She also witnesses many vulnerable clients who she believes do not receive adequate medical assessment and intervention. Mary becomes increasingly stressed and struggles with feeling cynical and disillusioned regarding the system and questions her own ability to be effective in her practice. Mary understands that the crisis nature of her work and the potential for compassion fatigue/burn out is very real and starts to feel that it is not worthwhile anymore. She realizes that she is trying to hold onto the principles of the profession but is not seeing any way around the predicament as she has been advised there will be no additional social work resources allocated to the ER. Mary believes the accepted standards for social work are being compromised and that she has an ethical responsibility to take action.

Mary decides that she wants to preserve her professional integrity and rather than quit her job she decides that it is her responsibility to help find solutions to the problems being experienced by clients in the ER. She consults with the manager and Professional Practice for social work regarding the impact on client services to begin a dialogue on making changes that can improve client outcomes. Despite all of the challenges, she believes that she has a role in challenging the current system and contributing to the development of better practice and integrity in the workplace.

## Summary

Integrity describes the way in which social workers make sense of values, relationships and commitments that are part of their lives and work. Integrity for social workers is more than something that can just be grasped intuitively as a given or part of one's own sense of knowing self and others and what is right. It requires maintaining appropriate ethical behavior and a commitment to professional values and principles along with courage to do the right thing even in difficult situations.

An essential piece of developing professional integrity also involves social workers contributing to the development of better practice and advancement of the profession. In essence, integrity is the critical connection between ethics, standards, and moral action. A high level of integrity is the intersection of why and how social workers should serve their clients, communities, and the profession and what the profession should be at its best (Baylor et al, 2019).

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