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Negotiating personal engagement and professional accountability: professional wisdom and ethics work

Sarah Banks

School of Applied Social Sciences, Durham University, UK

s.j.banks@durham.ac.uk

Abstract

This article examines the relationship between personal engagement and professional accountability in social work – considering whether the increasing focus on professional accountability in the context of the new public management, public austerity and market-based systems of welfare is incompatible with the personal engagement of social workers with service users and with their work. After undertaking a conceptual analysis of the terms, it is argued that both personal engagement and professional accountability are essential features of social work. Indeed, it is this negotiation of the creative tension between them that constitutes the subject matter and work of professional ethics. This requires a capacity and disposition for good judgement based in professional wisdom and a process of practical reasoning or 'ethics work' to find the right balance between closeness and distance, passion and rationality, empathic relationships and measurable social outcomes. It also requires a space for the exercise of professional wisdom.

Key words: personal engagement, professional accountability, professional ethics, professional wisdom, ethics work

Introduction

Do standards of professional accountability interfere with the personal engagement of the social professional with user groups? Are personal engagement and professional accountability in opposition or do they reinforce each other? These questions were raised by the organisers of a conference of the European Network of Social Action (ENSACT) in Dubrovnik in April 2009, where I was asked to speak on the theme of 'personal engagement and professional accountability'.

The rationale for exploring these questions was, and still is, the growing concern across Europe about the impact of neo-liberal policies and new managerialist practices on the capacity of professionals in the social welfare field to act in the best interests of service users and to engage in social action for progressive change. Whilst accountability to service users, the general public, employers and others is an essential feature of developed professions, and specifically public service professions, in recent decades the accountability requirements placed on professionals have intensified. Writing about this topic in 2004, I referred to the 'new accountability' – epitomised in this quotation from a British social work manager interviewed as part of a research project (Banks 2004, p. 151):

> More than ever before, because I've been in social work for a long time, it seems like accountability is very hot on the agenda – demonstrating outcomes and having to have almost number crunching type pieces of information that you can give.

Social workers have long been characterised as 'bureau professionals' (Parry & Parry 1979), often working in hierarchical public service organisations and within frameworks of rules. However, arguably the last two to three decades have seen a qualitative shift in the management and organisation of their work, which has not only increased bureaucracy and reduced discretionary space, but also imported private sector ideas and practices into public

services (Harris 2003; Harris & White 2009). This trend towards increasing standardisation and regulation of practice, the imposition of externally defined targets, the introduction of private sector-style competition and contracts for services and the demand for measurable outputs, outcomes and impacts are all associated with what has been termed 'the new public management' (NPM). Different configurations of these trends, which developed from the 1980s and might be regarded as contributing to greater requirements for professional accountability, are apparent to varying degrees in all European countries, and in other parts of the world (Clarke 2004; Flynn 2000; Hood 1995; Pollitt & Bouckaert 2004; Travers 2007). Whilst some authors argue that NPM is now dead or dying (Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow, & Tinkler 2006; Levy 2010) and certainly some features (such as internal markets, centralised targets and audits, and nationally designed databases and procedures) have been abandoned as unworkable or too expensive, many other features are embedded in the attitudes and practices of public service organisations and professionals.

Arguably some of the demands for professional accountability in general, and particularly in relation to public service professionals, have intensified as a result of cuts in public services following the 2008 economic crisis (Pollitt 2010).This new public austerity is not only accelerating the privatisation or take-over by NGOs of former state-run services in many countries that had strong or moderately strong welfare states or systems, it is also increasing demands for value for money and for demonstrable outputs and outcomes. In the UK, which had developed very centralised national systems of audit, inspection, regulation and target setting, the new public austerity has resulted in some measures to localise and de-bureaucratise public services. For example, plans for a very complex national computerised information and tracking database on children and young people were abandoned in 2010 (Barr, 2010). However, the demands to demonstrate cost-effectiveness are still very much present. This is especially so in situations where services are privatised or contracted out by central or local government to profit-making or not-for-profit organisations, which are in competition for the work.

As these shifts in welfare policy and practice have taken hold, there has been a growing concern amongst professional practitioners, academics and researchers that the idea and reality of social workers as people who are personally engaged with their work is either under threat, or has indeed been lost in some work contexts (Banks 2004; Ferguson 2008; Jones 2001; White, Wastell, Broadhurst, & Hall 2010). This implies that important aspects of the work are being under-valued or are impossible for social workers to live out in their practice. Such elements of personal engagement might include a commitment by professional practitioners to social work as a socially valuable occupation, a caring attitude towards service users as whole people and the development of feelings of empathy and compassion towards them.

Approach

In order to address the questions posed earlier about the nature of the relationship between personal engagement and professional accountability, I will first consider what might be meant by 'personal engagement' and 'professional accountability'. These are very generic and complex concepts. In order to examine them in more detail, I will break down each concept into four different elements. When discussing each of these elements, I suggest indicative features (for example, for 'personal engagement', within the element 'values/commitments' I identify personal, religious and political values). These are not meant to be definitive or exhaustive accounts of each element, but merely to serve as illustrations. The discussion of personal engagement and professional accountability draws on literature in social work and moral philosophy, as well as empirical studies that have assembled accounts given by social professionals of their motivations and work experiences (e.g. Banks 2004, Cree and Davis 2007, Le Croy 2002). The analysis of these two concepts is from the perspective of the social worker, and is a conceptual analysis, not a model of practice. Figure 1 (see end of next section) is a diagrammatic overview of the analysis of the two concepts and should be understood as a conceptual map rather than a framework for practice.

After analysing the terms, I will then consider the extent to which aspects of personal engagement and professional accountability might in certain respects be in opposition to each other (that is, they are incompatible and/or contradictory) and in other respects might reinforce each other (that is, they are compatible and/or complementary). I will argue that a vital element of the role of social professionals comprises what I call 'ethics work', which includes a process of negotiating the tension between personal engagement and professional accountability.

Elements of personal engagement

In this section I will first consider what might be meant by 'personal engagement' in a general sense, before proceeding to analyse the concept by identifying and exploring its various elements.

'Engagement' is a generic term that implies some kind of linkage or relationship between people or things. If we engage in an activity, it means we take part. If we are engaged to be married to another person, it means we have expressed a commitment to marry that person. If we have an engagement to meet someone, it implies both a promise to meet and an encounter between us. Engagement in relation to social work immediately brings to mind the relationship between social professionals and service users. However, the term is broader than this, in that it may also refer to social workers' engagement with the job as a whole (their practice or the profession), which is about their motivations, value commitments and the process of how they do the work.

What is meant by describing engagement as 'personal' in this context? I will interpret 'personal' to mean that aspects of the self as a particular human being are invested in the engagement. Aspects of the self might include personal identity, aspirations and emotions. In this sense, 'personal' is the opposite of 'impersonal', which implies a more distant relationship or linkage, with little of the self invested in it. In an impersonal relationship, a

professional's role or organisational identity would be more important than personal identity, and emotional involvement would be minimised.

There is a question about whether we include within the concept of the 'personal self' aspects of social workers' lives that relate to their own families, household finances, friendships, intimate or sexual relationships. When speaking of the personal engagement of a social worker in a professional context, we might want to distinguish appropriate personal engagement from inappropriate personal engagement. We might make a distinction between the private domain of the person who is employed as a social worker (which covers matters such as friendship and intimacy that should not be brought into work) and the personal domain (which covers commitments to ideals, expressions of human concern and empathy as legitimate and important aspects of working life). However, the conceptual distinction between private and personal is not a clear one, and in practice there are no clear lines that can be drawn between the private, personal and professional domains. The matter is complicated by the fact that the professional encounter with service users may frequently take place in the 'private' spaces of service users (their homes) and concern their 'private' lives (family, relationships, mental health). The situation is further complicated in countries and cultures where the conceptual distinctions between private, personal and professional are not only unclear, but barely recognised. For example, the giving of a job or an extra service to a family member would be regarded as acceptable or indeed a moral duty in some countries in the global South, but not in most countries in the global North.

For the purpose of this article, I suggest that 'private relationships' could be regarded conceptually as a sub-set of 'personal relationships'. So under the heading of personal engagement of the social worker, we might include intimate relationships with service users or motives of private financial gain.

In analysing the concept of 'personal engagement', I suggest four important elements, which I will now outline.

1. Values/commitments

The guiding values behind the personal engagement of professionals might include personal, political and religious values. By 'personal values' I mean beliefs about what is worthy or valuable that are specifically held by someone as part of their own personal identity (not simply as part of their professional role nor indeed as a member of a religious or political group or social movement). Examples of personal values might include women's rights to choose abortion, the importance of truth-telling in all circumstances or pacifism. Political values might be linked to a certain ideological position (Marxism, radical feminism), political party (Green, Labour, Liberal Democrat) or political stance (the importance of environmental protection, working class solidarity). Religious values might also frame the personal engagement of professionals – for example a belief in the afterlife or in the value of all living beings. While personal, political and religious values may well overlap and intertwine with societal and professional values, in talking about 'personal engagement' in social work we would prioritise the first three categories.

2. Relationship with service users

'Personal engagement' implies a particular kind of relationship between social professionals and service users. This relationship could be described as 'personal' if it involves a recognition on the part of the professional that they are engaging with the whole person, who needs to be met as a particular fellow human being. A personal relationship involves taking into consideration the circumstances, feelings and identity of the other person. This may entail empathy (appreciating the other's situation and feelings) and caring about the other person (that is, the other person matters). It may also entail being concerned for the overall good of service users, who matter collectively (Blum 1994, p. 109; Martin 2000, p. 74). A personal relationship may also be, or develop into, a closer relationship involving friendship, intimacy or sex, for example. Although in the global North this would be regarded as ethically unacceptable, and we might want to put such a relationship in the category of

the 'private', these kinds of relationships do happen and arguably come within the broad definition of 'personal relationships'.

There is a question about whether we would regard a social work relationship as personal if the service user does not reciprocate with an equally holistic, caring and empathic approach towards the social worker. Whilst this reciprocation sometimes happens, it is acknowledged that personal engagement in a professional context is necessarily asymmetrical – we do not require or expect service users to empathise with or care about their social workers. Equally we do not require social workers to reveal aspects of their private lives to service users – although this sometimes happens.

3. Motivations

For social workers' engagement with their work to be regarded as 'personal' we might expect a particular kind of motivation for doing the work to be present. For some the work may be regarded as a vocation or calling. It is not just a job or even a career, but part of a larger commitment to doing good in the world (Bellah, Masden, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton 1988). Recently I conducted a series of Socratic dialogues with social welfare professionals, some of which examined a question relating to the place of vocation in professional work. Commonly expressed motivations for doing social work that emerged from these dialogues included: the desire to help others; the satisfaction received from helping others; and a desire to change society/policy/practice (see also some of the social workers' stories recounted in Cree & Davis 2007; LeCroy 2002). However, personal motivation may also include a desire to have a job or career and indeed to earn a living.

4. Process

If social professionals are personally engaged in their work, then this implies a deeper level of commitment than simply doing a job or following a set of guidelines. The process of the work might engage the emotions in such a way that workers perform their roles with passion – this might involve anger at

injustice or enthusiasm for social change. It might also involve a degree of dedication to the work, manifested in the worker being prepared to give more than the job requires (working extra hours, putting in additional effort). The process of working may involve a closeness on the part of the worker to the people or issues being worked with – that is, a commitment to this particular person/family/group/issue. A personally engaged worker might also be prepared to challenge when aspects of the work are impeded and be critical of their own performance and that of others. The concept of 'professional pride' is useful in this context (Jansen, van den Brink, & Kole 2010) – that is, the sense of a job being well done, to the best of one's abilities and an acknowledgement by the professional of her or his own role in the achievement. Sennett's (2009) account of the work of the 'craftsman' (or 'craftsperson') is also very relevant in this context. Although traditionally 'craftspeople' (such as carpenters, jewellers or tailors) have been distinguished from professionals (such as lawyers, doctors or social workers), there is a very strong argument that professional work, like the process of craftwork, requires time, creativity and self-expression – it is an art as much as a scientific or technical exercise (see also Schön 1991, for the concept of professional artistry).

Elements of professional accountability

I will now consider what might be encompassed by the equally complex term 'professional accountability'. To be 'accountable' means that people are liable to be called upon give an account of their actions or demeanour. This might include describing who they are and what they have done or not done, as well as explaining and justifying their roles and/or actions.

The term 'accountability' is often used in relation to duties owed by people in specific roles. In this sense it is strongly associated with professionalism. Indeed, Tadd (1994, p. 88) describes accountability as 'the *sine qua non* of

any professional group'. Professionals take on jobs with specific responsibilities and have a duty to account for what they do – to describe, justify and explain their actions in terms of publically agreed standards and values. These standards and values may be defined by the profession itself and/or by the state in relation to the profession's public mandate. The term 'professional accountability' also embraces within its meaning 'public accountability', since part of what constitutes a profession is public recognition (Koehn 1994). In the same way as the 'private sphere' is present in our analysis of personal engagement, so the 'public sphere' is very much present in our analysis of professional accountability.

In so far as social work is a profession (that is, it is a publically recognised occupation with a socially mandated purpose and recognised standards of education and expertise), then accountability of its practitioners is a key element of professionalism (Banks 2009b; Holdsworth 1994). We might call this 'traditional accountability'. This contrasts with what I call the 'new accountability', which refers to the increasing tendency for social workers' conduct to be regulated and their working practices controlled by employers, professional and statutory bodies. In one sense this is a continuation of the bureaucratic element of the social work role. However, the new accountability entails not just undertaking work that can be justified in terms of recognised standards of practice (process), but also in terms of its benefits (outcomes or products). Arguably this focus on outcomes is still present in the context of the new public austerity – even if some of the standardised processes are reduced. In Figure 1, these features of the new accountability are in capital letters.

1. Standards/values

The guiding standards and values invoked in relation to professional accountability would obviously tend to be those commonly accepted in the profession, as outlined in professional codes of ethics and in any practice standards for qualified staff and students in education (for the international statements on ethics and global standards, see International Federation of Social Workers & International Association of Schools of Social Work 2004a; 2004b). In addition to standards and values developed by the profession, those developed by employers and national governments (especially statutory regulatory bodies) might also be invoked. The term 'standards' is often used alongside and sometimes interchangeably with 'values'. However, the two terms clearly have different connotations. A 'value' in the context of professional practice would generally be regarded as a fundamental belief about what is worthy or valuable. Values are usually held by people and hence we might think of them as internalised. The term 'standard' is frequently used to refer to an external benchmark against which success and failure can be measured and could be regarded as a threshold to be reached. Many codes of professional ethics refer to 'ethical standards', which are used in professional misconduct hearings and professional education and training. These standards are proliferating, especially those produced by employers and national government.

2. Outputs/outcomes

Within the prevailing ethos of public service work in the global North, a key accountability requirement for professionals is that they can demonstrate that their work has both measurable and beneficial outputs (what is actually produced or delivered) and outcomes (the overall effect of what is achieved or delivered). We would expect the work either to be of benefit to service users and/or their carers (for example, social workers successfully arrange services)

and/or for it to be socially beneficial (for example, social work contributes towards preventing crime). Increasingly workers and their employing agencies are being required to demonstrate their achievements, and hence to measure actual improvements in people's lives (for example, changes on a mental well-being scale) or in social statistics (for example, reductions in rates of youth offending). This can be characterised as part of new managerialist and new austerity approaches to social welfare, as already mentioned in the introduction to this article. While many of the attitudes and approaches are no longer 'new', and some aspects are changing in the context of welfare cuts and digital era governance (Dunleavy et al. 2006; Levy 2010), the stress on performance and outcomes remains. The requirements for measurability and socially beneficial outcomes are increasingly being stressed.

3. Justification

Another element of professional accountability is the ability and willingness of professionals to justify their behaviour and actions according to agreed standards or criteria. Justification involves giving reasons for action. This may be in terms of the ethical values and standards of the profession or employing agency (for example, preserving confidentiality of sensitive information about service users). In addition, or alternatively, justification may be in terms of effectiveness – what actions, interventions or approaches are likely to work well in achieving desired objectives or outcomes; or efficiency – what actions are likely to produce the most good for the least cost or effort. A concern with evidence-based practice is part of this trend (Webb 2001). Justification may also be given in terms of acting according to agreed protocols, procedures or guidelines (for example, procedures for investigating suspected child abuse). Arguably the trends towards a focus on efficiency, effectiveness and following defined protocols are all increasing.

4. Process

If the process of the work is to be carried out in a manner such that the practitioners are professionally accountable, then we might expect the treatment of service users and others to be in line with the principles in professional codes of ethics or codes of practice – for example, that treatment would be respectful and fair (see for example, British Association of Social Workers 2002; General Social Care Council 2002; National Association of Social Workers 2008). We might expect the process to be rational (that is, based on evidence and rational argument – rather than on a whim or an emotional mood swing). We would also expect the work to be competently performed – by someone who is qualified, knows what they are doing and can do it well. Whilst these aspects of the process of the work have always been important, increasingly the focus of attention is being paid to competence (or more recently, 'capability'), which can be defined and measured.

Exploring the relationship between personal engagement and professional accountability

Having identified and discussed some of the constituent elements of these two complex concepts, I will now return to the questions posed at the start of the article about the relationship between personal engagement and professional accountability.

[insert Figure 1 near here]

Figure 1 is a simplified graphic representation of the elements of personal engagement and professional accountability discussed earlier. It represents

the analysis of these concepts in the form of a figure depicting two separate non-overlapping concepts, each comprising discrete elements[1]. This diagram could easily be interpreted as presenting personal engagement and professional accountability as opposites. Personal engagement is depicted as being about closeness, while professional accountability is about distance. Similarly we might counterpose the passion of personal engagement with the reason of professional accountability; caring relationships with socially beneficial outcomes; giving help with being efficient. Does this mean that personal engagement and professional accountability are in opposition to each other – they are incompatible, mutually exclusive or contradictory? Of course, if taken to extremes they are incompatible. If we are always distant, we can never be close. If we are too passionate, then we have no space for reason. If we focus on caring relationships and the process of giving, we may forget about socially beneficial outcomes and efficiency.

However, more often social work practitioners are holding both these aspects of their work in tension and need to navigate a path between extremes. This may involve being passionate about the work, whilst also being fair; giving justification for actions in terms of an empathic relationship as well as in terms of effectiveness of outcomes; and knowing when and how to create a professional distance and when and how a professional closeness is appropriate. There is often a dialectical relationship between personal engagement and professional accountability – that is, a moving to and fro between one and the other. The 'boundaries' between the personal and the professional realm have always been a site of contestation and movement, as social work professionalized from acts of charity to organised social welfare. In different countries there have been different trajectories of development – and there are different ways of balancing and negotiating the personal and professional in social work. In different situations, different approaches are

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[1] Although Figure 1 is presented as a static conceptualisation, it should be regarded as a laying out of different elements, the position of which readers might contest, move around, debate and discuss. For example, one of the reviewers of the article suggested that being effective and efficient is a natural part of personal engagement; another that adequate personal engagement is necessary for professional accountability.

required. However, both personal engagement and professional accountability as depicted in Figure 1 are equally important in making social work what it is.

On the one hand, personal engagement is what makes the activities *social* work, rather than, for example, merely financial advice or technical assessment. The 'social' involves human relationships. Yet personal engagement on its own is inadequate – it may lead, for example, to helping people for practitioners' own satisfaction, engaging in a personal crusade or practitioners being, or appearing to be, over-friendly. On the other hand, professional accountability is what makes the activities undertaken by practitioners social *work*, rather than, for example, acts of charity, care for neighbours or citizens' action. Professional 'work' involves institutional structures. Yet professional accountability on its own is inadequate – it may lead, for example, to covering one's back (being defensive), a concern with doing the work according to a formula or depersonalising the work.

Some of the most common cases of professional misconduct relate to situations where the ability or commitment to negotiate the balance between personal engagement and professional accountability has been compromised. For example, the social worker who has a sexual relationship with a service user; or the social worker who processes people according to rules with no sensitivity to their particular circumstances.

The work of professional ethics: professional wisdom and 'ethics work'

Arguably the creative tension between personal engagement and professional accountability lies at the heart of social work and the good social worker needs the capacity and space to work with this. The relationship could be described as a dialectical one, where contradictory opposites (such as care and control) are held in tension. This involves the worker being aware of and recognising the nature and importance of personal engagement and professional accountability and undertaking a conscious process of working out what it is right to do in particular circumstances. I would argue that this work falls within the realm of professional ethics and that the study and

practice of professional ethics can be helpful in developing social workers who practice both with personal engagement and professional accountability. It is the work of professional ethics that holds the tension between personal engagement and professional accountability, as depicted visually in Figure 2.

Insert Figure 2 near here

However, despite its depiction in a separate box, it is important to recognise that professional ethics is not a neutral vantage point from which right action and good character can be judged. It is part of the everyday practice of social work and hence is itself constructed in and by practice (Banks 2009a). The growth of new accountability requirements in social work practice contributes to the construction of professional ethics as comprising codes, rules and procedures (Banks 2011). If employer-designed protocols, government-demanded outcomes and marketised measures of efficiency come to dominate the practice of social work, then professional ethics (as a part of social work) can itself be pulled too far into the new accountability paradigm - stretching to the right of Figure 3. We might characterise this as *the managerialisation of professional ethics*, as its focus moves more towards employer and government regulation, rather than maintaining the balance in the middle ground between professional accountability and personal engagement.

Insert Figure 3 near here

The perennial challenge for social workers in negotiating personal engagement and professional accountability has intensified and taken on new dimensions as they are required to be accountable in different and more embracing ways to employers and funders. It might be helpful to revisit the distinction made earlier between 'traditional accountability' and the 'new accountability'. For example, professional standards about social workers refraining from becoming over-friendly, refusing and/or reporting gifts from service users and not entering into sexual relationships are ways in which private gain and exploitation are outlawed from professional life. They are

constituents of what might be regarded as 'traditional professional accountability', which is part of the very notion of professionalism based on professional trust. These ways in which professional accountability requirements circumscribe aspects of personal engagement would usually be regarded as positive in the global North. However, highly prescriptive assessment forms and set dates and procedures for reviewing cases have been cited as having a negative impact on the strength of personal relationships between workers and service users and the quality of the process of the work (Banks 2004). These are part of what might be termed the 'new accountability', based to some degree on mistrust of professionals.

Professional wisdom

To navigate a path between personal engagement and professional accountability requires a capacity and disposition to make good judgements and the discretionary space to exercise and enact these judgements. Some theorists have characterised this disposition as 'professional wisdom', which is a specialised version of Aristotle's (350 BCE/1954, 1140a20-1141b21) concept of practical wisdom or *phronesis* in a professional context (Banks & Gallagher 2009, pp. 72-95; Bondi, Carr, Clark, & Clegg 2011; Clark, Bondi, Carr, & Clegg 2009). This is a complex concept, and it is not the purpose of this article to examine and criticise professional wisdom *per se* (for a more nuanced discussion see Bondi et al 2011). However, it is a useful concept in the context of this discussion, so I will offer a brief description, while referring the reader to other sources for further elaboration. Following Banks and Gallagher (2009, pp. 72-95), professional wisdom involves sensitivity to and the ability to perceive the ethically salient features of a situation; empathy with the feelings, values, desires and perspectives of the people involved and the ability to exercise moral imagination; the ability to reflect on and deliberate over what is the right course of action; and the ability to give reasons for actions.

Central to Aristotle's concept of practical wisdom is the cultivation of the virtues – that is, moral qualities or dispositions to act in ways that are

constitutive of human flourishing. In a social work context, the virtues of the professional practitioner might include being caring, just, trustworthy, respectful and courageous (Banks & Gallagher 2009). If we characterise these virtues in terms of Aristotle's concept of the 'mean' (Aristotle 350 BCE/1954, 1105b28-1109b26), then being caring, for example, involves finding a mean between indifference and over-bearing care; being courageous lies between foolhardiness and cowardice. What counts as being 'caring' or 'courageous' in a particular situation depends on the situation. Jumping into a deep, fast-moving river to try to save a drowning child might be regarded foolhardy if one cannot swim; but courageous if one can. Insisting on helping a person who is capable of walking on their own and refuses help might be regarded as over-bearing; not offering help to someone who is manifestly struggling and appeals for assistance might be regarded as indifference; whilst asking whether and what help is required and giving just the right amount might be regarded as caring.

While some philosophers have been critical of Aristotle's concept of the mean, it does have some useful features if it is not misunderstood or taken too literally. The term 'mean' might bring to mind mathematical calculations and the finding of an average value. But this is not what is meant here. Finding a 'mean' is a matter of discernment and fine judgement and may involve emotions and intuitions as well as rational calculation. Aristotle's mean is not an average, it is a judgement about what is right in a particular situation. He gives the example of judging the right amount of food for an athlete in training – while 10 pounds may be too much and two pounds too little, it does not follow that six pounds is the right amount. It might be too little for an experienced athlete, whilst too much for a beginner (Aristotle 350 BCE/1954, 1106a17-b9). Another critique of Aristotle's concept of the mean is that not all virtues can be characterised as means between two extremes (Carr 1991, p. 56; Slote 1997, p. 184). We do not have concepts of vices of excess and deficiency to match all the virtues. For example, if we take the virtue of honesty, while too little honesty amounts to the vice of dishonesty, how would we characterise too much honesty? However, whilst the doctrine of the mean is open to criticism and may inadequately characterise what it means to be a

virtuous person, it is nevertheless useful in drawing attention to the deliberative process of working out what is the right course of action in particular circumstances. It reminds us that ethical judgment is not a process of abstract rationality involving deduction from pre-existing ethical principles, nor of following employer-defined protocols, but of discernment and practical reasoning. This may involve an intuitive process, developed through experience and relying on moral perception and empathic understanding.

Ethics work

Elsewhere I have introduced, but not yet fully developed, the idea of 'ethics work' (Banks 2009a, 2010, 2012) as a way of conceptualising the process of practical reasoning in situations where issues of harm, benefits, rights and responsibilities arise. In one sense this is a translation of the philosophical concept of professional wisdom into more sociological terms, using the term 'work' in an analogous sense to its use in relation to 'emotion work' (Hochschild 1979, 1983; Rietti 2009) or 'identity work' (Aronson & Smith 2011; Watson 2007). Here 'work' relates to how people construct and perform identities or engender, manage and perform emotions. Often associated with social interactionism or social constructionism, it includes the moves people make psychologically, conversationally and bodily to perform or achieve a particular persona or state of mind. By 'ethics work' I mean the effort people put into seeing ethical aspects of situations, developing themselves as good practitioners, working out the right course of action and justifying who they are and what they have done. This 'work' is complex and can perhaps be discussed and explained by breaking it down into a number of over-lapping elements. What follows is a first tentative outline of what 'ethics work' might comprise and how this relates to the work of negotiating personal engagement and professional accountability.

1. *Ethical framing work* – involves identifying and focusing on the ethically salient ethical features of situations and placing oneself and the situations encountered in political and social contexts. It is essential that the work of framing a situation includes elements of personal engagement and

professional accountability, that the social worker sees herself in the picture and sees her professional self as having agency (that is, she does not frame herself as victim of bureaucracy or an innocent bystander, for example).

2. *Ethical role work* – includes identifying and performing one or several legitimate professional roles (for example, advocate, carer or assessor); negotiating roles with service users and other participants; shifting between roles; and taking a position in a situation (for example partial or impartial; close or distant). The roles are not mutually exclusive and may include those requiring more personal engagement and those more related to professional accountability.

3. *Ethical emotion work* – may entail putting effort into creating, maintaining and displaying emotions such as being caring, compassionate and empathic; judging when it is appropriate to display emotion; managing and suppressing emotions (such as distress, disgust, guilt or fear). Working on creating emotions is in the realm of personal engagement, but in professional work they are 'managed' within a framework of professional accountability (we may strive for a 'detached closeness' or 'caring fairness', for example).

4. *Ethical identity work* – may entail working on one's ethical self; choosing, creating, negotiating and maintaining an identity as, for example, an ethically good professional. Part of identity work is the negotiation of personal and professional identities.

5. *Ethical reason work* – includes making an effort to see all sides of a situation; taking account of different perspectives; assessing evidence; making ethical judgements and decisions; justifying judgments and decisions through giving reasons for actions and rehearsing ethical arguments.

6. *Ethical performance work* – all aspects of 'ethics work' involve performance in the sense of communicative interactions and bodily actions. But it may be useful to draw attention separately to this element of ethics work, which involves making visible aspects of this work to others and demonstrating oneself doing ethics work (which is one way of being accountable and could be regarded as doing 'accountability work').

'Ethics work', as conceptualised here, is part of everyday practice and does not just occur when social workers encounter ethical dilemmas or problems (such as a conflict of rights or a moral transgression). While much of the 'work' is intuitive, it is important for social workers to orientate themselves critically towards their tasks and roles and be aware of the 'ethical dimensions' (relating to harm, suffering, rights and responsibilities). The study of professional ethics, in so far as it develops capacities for critical ethical reflection (as opposed to learning rules and mechanical methods of making choices) is a vital component of social work education and professional development.

Concluding comments

This article has explored the meanings of 'personal engagement' and 'professional accountability' and their interrelationship in a social work context as part of an exercise in responding to the two questions posed at the start: Do standards of professional accountability interfere with the personal engagement of the social professional with user groups? Are personal engagement and professional accountability in opposition or do they reinforce each other? The answers, which have already been given during the course of the article, can now be summarised.

Standards of professional accountability, especially aspects of government and employer regulation, can interfere negatively with the degree and quality of personal engagement between social workers and the people with whom they work. Yet it is important that social workers are accountable as professionals to service users, their employers, governments and the general

public, that they do not show favouritism, exploit vulnerable people or engage in personal crusades. So, in so far as professional accountability interferes with exploitation by social workers and personal crusades of social workers, this is a positive feature. Negotiating the balance between personal engagement and professional accountability is one of the main tasks of professional ethics, conceived of as the exercise of professional wisdom in relation to matters of human well-being or flourishing.

Personal engagement and professional accountability can be opposed to each other, if taken to extremes. At the present time, in many European countries, accountability requirements introduced by governments and employers are tending to dominate and threaten the nature of the personal engagement between social workers and service users. However, they are both equally necessary facets of social work and should be regarded as complementary. The work of professional ethics ('ethics work') is the striving to get the right balance in each situation the social worker encounters and to hold the dialectical tension between the personal and professional, between closeness and distance, rationality and emotion. Although some aspects of ethics work seem intuitive (for example, framing work), to count as ethics work they do require the conscious making of an effort to see oneself (as a social worker with power, responsibility, skills and values) in the picture and to question one's own initial framing or the framing of others. In other words, ethics work requires critical reflexivity. It also requires a capacity to work with the contradictions that lie at the heart of social welfare and professional social work – between social control, caring and empowerment; and between personal engagement and professional accountability. If we ignore this, then the work is no longer *social* work as traditionally conceived.

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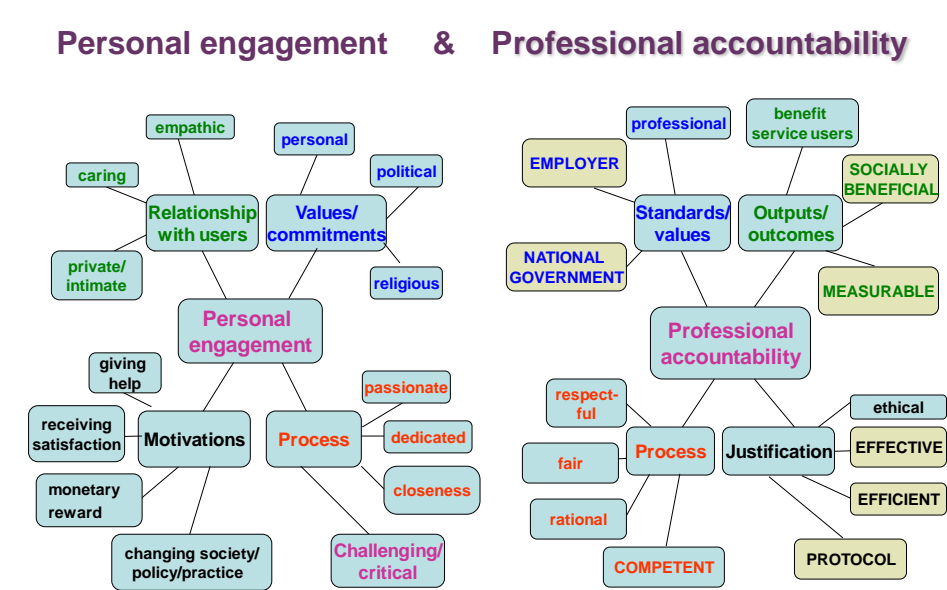**Figure 1: Elements of personal engagement and professional accountability**

Figure 2: Negotiating the relationship between personal engagement and professional accountability: The work of professional ethics
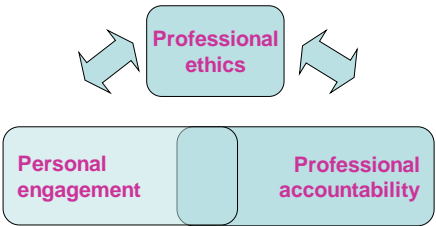
Figure 3: The work of professional ethics: holding the middle ground