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This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by the University or any other institution, except by way of background information and duly acknowledged in the thesis, and to the best of my knowledge and belief no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgement is made in the text of the thesis, nor does the thesis contain any material that infringes copyright.

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Sonya Stanford

1<sup>st</sup> November 2007

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1<sup>st</sup> November 2007

# Acknowledgements

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A common remark I have heard over the course of my postgraduate candidature is that doing research is a lonely process. However, feelings of aloneness were transitory for me. Instead of finding myself alone I have been embraced within a community of academic women and men offering support, kindness, generosity, friendship and many, many chances for bawdy humour and raucous laughing. Their strong belief in me has been a powerful force during times when my sense of self belief has been tenuous and circumstances difficult. Far from being lonely, I have instead found myself in the privileged space of having made friendships that are deep, sustaining, mutual, and enriching. I would like to thank each of these people here for their contribution to making the completion of this thesis possible.

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# Abstract

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This study explores how risk operates as a concept and practice in social workers' interventions. Concern has been expressed within the critical social work risk literature that risk operates as a morally conservative and repressive construct in social work practice within the context of neo-liberal risk society. This thesis explores whether the influence of risk is necessarily as totalising of our professional identities, and in turn our practices, as this literature would suggest. Thus the aim of the research has been to identify whether spaces exist within social workers' practice contexts that enable them to resist invitations into the moral conservatism of negative constructs of risk. My assumption has been that forearmed with this knowledge, as individual practitioners or collectively as a profession, we will have a greater capacity to 'speak back' to the morally conservative ethos of risk that pervades welfare discourses in neo-liberal risk society. To progress the aim of the study, I have asked the question 'How are ideas about risk constituted and integrated into social workers' interventions?'.

I conducted my explorations of the operations of risk in social work by considering how risk was spoken of by practitioners within reflective accounts of interventions they had implemented that were significant to them. The results demonstrate that risk operated as a complex and discursively persuasive concept within their reflections on practice. Most significantly, risk operated as a powerful constituent of client and practitioner risk identities. Risk was integral to how practitioners recognised their clients and selves, evident in their ascription of highly moralised and emotionally constituted 'at risk' and 'a risk' identities. Given the presence of co-existing, multiple risk identities within a single intervention, practitioners faced a choice about which risk identities they would respond to – their clients and/or their own. In taking a stand for clients, practitioners' accounts indicate that the proclivity towards defensive and morally timid practice could be resisted. Contemplation of ethical, moral and value imperatives and the re-contextualisation of ideas about risk for clients and practitioners assisted social workers in this endeavour. The implications of this finding for social work knowledge, practice and education are discussed, alongside ideas for future research.

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## Chapter 1

# Introduction

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If the natural world is ruled by fate and chance, and the technical world by rationality and entropy, the social world can only be characterised as existing in fear and trembling (Daniel Bell 1980, cited in Bauman 1995, p. 16).

## Introduction to the Chapter

This introductory chapter to my thesis provides an overview of how the operations of risk in social work became the focus of my research. I begin the chapter by stating that risk has become increasingly problematised (Castel 1994) as a concept and practice in the emergent, rapidly developing and persuasive critical social work risk literature (Craddock 2004; Kelly 2001; Houston & Griffiths 2000; Kemshall 2000, 2002; Parton, Thorpe & Wattam 1997; Webb 2006). While I note that this literature has provided a much needed injection of theoretical interest into the discursive attributes of risk and their significance for social work practice, I also state that there is a need for further empirical research into the topic. My study attends to this need by exploring how risk operates as a concept and practice in social workers' interventions.

Having set the background to the study, I state the study's focus, aim and the primary research question I have investigated. Given the elusiveness and contestability of the concept of risk (Adam & Van Loon 2000; Baldwin, Hutter & Rothstein n.d.; Croft 2001; Garland 2003; Houston & Griffiths 2000; Lupton 1999, 2004; Shaw & Shaw 2001; Stalker 2003), I dedicate additional space to clarifying the conceptualisation of risk that I have used in this study. This enables me to present a strong argument for the focus and content of the research. It also provides a context for locating the specific research question that has directed my investigation, that being 'How are ideas about risk constituted and integrated into social workers' interventions?'. The

final section of the chapter presents an outline of the structure and content of the thesis.

## **Background to the Study**

### **Why study risk in social work?**

There is little doubt that risk has been, and continues to be, a central preoccupation of social work practice. As our professional history attests, the focus of social work activities have often been directed towards the identification of and response to individuals and communities at risk of harm from the many forms of personal and social trauma that pervade our world. However, even the most cursory glance at the general social work literature reveals that risk is a much disputed concept and feature of practice within our discipline as in others. At the heart of these arguments are contestations over ontological and epistemological standpoints (that is, what is the nature of risk and how can we know it) and the political motivations and moral imperatives that are embedded within the structures and measures utilised to define and respond to risk (Culpitt 1999; Douglas 2003; Houston & Griffiths 2000; Kemshall 2002; Parton 1999, 2001; Shaw & Shaw 2001). Accordingly risk can be understood at a theoretical level as a site of considerable discursive power (Culpitt 1999; Kelly 2000, 2001; Sharland 2006; Søndergaard 2002; Warner 2006).

In this sense, ideas about risk can be understood as ‘manufactured’ (Adam & Van Loon 2000; Beck 2003, 2004; Beck & Willms 2004; Giddens 2003a, 2003b, 2003c) given that what or who is defined as ‘a risk’ or ‘at risk’ bears the markings of a complex interplay of competing knowledge claims, interests, politics, ideologies, technologies, emotions and moralities. Recognising risk as a site of competing definitions and practices (Adam & Van Loon 2000; Beck 2003, 2004; Lupton 1999, 2004) engenders a disquieting awareness that little can be taken-for-granted about how risk is conceptualised and practiced in social work (Shaw & Shaw 2001). Nonetheless, until quite recently the socio-cultural and political meanings and functions of risk in social work remained largely unquestioned (Stalker 2003). A concern for ‘good’ risk assessment and management had instead been the focus of

risk research and literature in social work (Craddock 2004; Gillingham 2006; Green 2004; Parton 1996, 2001; Shaw & Shaw 2001). This was particularly the case in the fields of practice of child protection, mental health and the care of older people (Kemshall 2002). However, disrupting the taken-for-granted status of risk as a concept and practice in social work has become a key feature of a more recent critical social work risk literature.

This literature indicates that the risk society thesis of Beck (2003, 2004) and Giddens (1994, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c), and Foucault's governmentality thesis (Culpitt 1999; Dean 1999; O'Malley 1996; Rose 1996a, 1996b, 2000) have invigorated social work's interest in the 'problematics' of risk (Kelly 2000, 2001; Parton 1999, 2001) within neo-liberal risk society (Culpitt 1999; Kelly 2000, 2001; Webb 2006). In combination with Douglas's (2003) cultural anthropological studies, this literature positions risk as a predominantly morally conservative and repressive social, political and cultural force in contemporary social work. It is argued that the moral conservatism of risk, borne out of the prudential ethos of neo-liberalism, has dramatically impacted upon contemporary directions in western welfare policy. Its influence has extended into the direct practice environments and micro aspects of social workers' interventions. Parton (1996, p. 98) suggests that social work's increasing preoccupation with risk speaks of 'important changes in both the way social workers think about and constitute their practices and the way that social work is itself thought about and thereby constituted more widely'. This adds credibility to the tenet of the critical social work risk literature that the progressive social justice agenda of our profession is in peril of being laid asunder. Hence, the determination, fortitude and commitment of practitioners to work for social change for disadvantaged and marginalised individuals, groups and communities is at risk of being overtaken by a 'politics of despair' (Mullaly 2001).

Arguments for the existence of the morally conservative influence of risk in social work are being more frequently expressed within the social work literature – and not without foundation. Risk is noted as operating with discursive effect in the service of silencing and controlling marginalised and dissenting individuals and groups (Culpitt 1999; Fox 1999; Kelly 2001; Parton 1996, 1999; Rose 1996a, 2000; Warner 2006), justifying the rationalisation and refusal of services to people in need (Green 2004;

Kemshall 2002; Mullaly 2001) and regulating the actions of practitioners (Craddock 2004; Kemshall 2002; Webb 2006). Risk, it is argued, is utilised to legitimise and promote the conservatism of the socio-economic policies and practices of neo-liberal governments couched within the rhetoric of security, independence and economic freedom (Culpitt 1999; Dean 1999; Green 2004; Kemshall 2002; Moffat 1999; O'Malley 1996; Parton 1999; Parton, Thorpe & Wattam, 1997; Rose 1996a, 1996b). The political and ethical ramifications of risk within this form of governance have perhaps unsurprisingly come to be spoken of in negative terms within the developing critical social work risk literature. This literature suggests that the repressive force of risk has become deeply embedded within our practice landscapes and in turn has come to dominate the way we think about ourselves and our clients (D'Cruz 2004a, 2004b; Goddard et al. 1999; Green 2004; Green & McClelland 2003; Houston & Griffiths 2000; Kemshall 2002; Mullaly 2001; Parton 1996, 1999, 2000, 2001; Parton & O'Byrne 2000; Parton, Thorpe & Wattam 1997; Warner 2006; Webb 2003, 2006). That is, many of our decisions about the actions we will take in our practice are reliant upon the extent to which our own and clients' actions are considered to foster or forestall risk. Our interventions are determined by the extent to which clients might be seen to be 'at risk' (Kelly 2000, 2001; Titterton 2006) or 'a risk' (Warner 2006) and how as practitioners we consider ourselves to be 'at risk' (Craddock 2004; Taylor 2005) or 'a risk' (Kemshall 2002). Risk, then, is positioned within this critical literature as operating as a primarily negative construct in social work practice and the community services sector more generally.

The critical social work risk literature illustrates that the operations of risk in social work, be they in the context of matters of the definition, substance or practices of risk, are not 'innocent' of power (Foucault 1980). However, I have wondered whether the conceptualisation of risk within this literature has become its own problem.

Embedded predominantly within a critical structuralist and poststructural theoretical paradigm (Lupton 2004), this literature has been criticised for constructing an overly deterministic and negative story of risk in social work (Sharland 2006; Titterton 2006; Warner 2006; Zinn 2006). Within the 'catastrophe' narrative, social workers are at best presented as having been unwittingly co-opted into the conservative 'politics of risk' – we are fearful, constrained by our environments, and unable to escape the totalising effects of risk. At worst we are positioned as unreflective co-conspirators of



these politics. Thus this pessimistic view of the constitutive effect of risk upon practitioners identifies its conservatism as an inevitable feature of our interventions. There is little opportunity within this proposition to entertain an alternative social work practice to respond to the challenges posed by the problematics of risk. Indeed such a view fails to account for a more positive reading of the constitutive effect of risk within social work where practitioners actively engage in risk taking and sharing to facilitate positive outcomes for clients and themselves (Alaszewski & Alaszewski 2002; Candlin 2002; Giddens 2003a, 2003d; Lupton 2004; Titterton 2006). Hence, problematising risk can itself be seen as problematic.

The critical social work risk literature has provided a conceptually coherent framework for understanding the contemporary context of social work within neo-liberal risk society. However, there is a lack of empirical engagement with how these theoretical arguments may or may not be relevant to the embodied aspects of social work practice. The discursive attributes of risk, though increasingly theorised, remain under-researched. While there is anecdotal evidence that social workers experience significant ethical and practical dilemmas in the face of the conservative political and moral impetus of risk, this lack of research means that the profession is yet to establish a strong link between recent theoretical developments and the micro aspects of its interventions. Without such investigation, the meanings and operations of risk that are theorised in the critical social work risk literature are subject to the claim that they have themselves become taken-for-granted assumptions.

This thesis goes some way to addressing the gap in our profession's knowledge base about how risk operates as a concept and practice in social workers' interventions. I have wondered if the influence of risk is necessarily as totalising of our professional identities, and in turn our practices, as has been suggested by the 'catastrophe story' of risk encapsulated within the critical social work risk literature. *Thus the aim of my research has been to identify the spaces that exist within our practice contexts that enable us to resist invitations into the moral conservatism of negative constructs of risk.* My assumption has been that forearmed with this knowledge, as individual practitioners or collectively as a profession, we will have a greater capacity to 'speak back' to the morally conservative ethos of risk that pervades welfare discourses in neo-liberal risk society. To progress the aim of my study, I have asked the question,

*‘How are ideas about risk constituted and integrated into social workers’ interventions?’.*

## **Making Risk an Object of Study**

It is startlingly apparent that there are a remarkable range of ‘entry points’ into how to conceptualise and theorise risk. Taxonomies, schemas, models and matrices abound within the numerous texts devoted to identifying the nature and utility of various risk perspectives (see, for example, Krinsky 1992; Rayner 1992; Renn 1992). One of the central debates that polarises the risk literature in social work, as in other disciplines, is the ontological and epistemological properties of risk. That is, it is questioned whether risk is a real, objective and quantifiable phenomena that exists independently of individual perception or whether it is a conceptual, subjective and qualitative phenomena that is constructed in specific social contexts and through social processes (Adam & Van Loon 2000; Kemshall 2002; Shaw & Shaw 2001; Slovic 1999). To add to this quandary, it is argued that many of the risks that are endemic to late modernity cannot be perceived by the senses (Beck 2000, 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2004). As Adam and Van Loon (2000, p. 2) state, ‘the materiality of technologically constituted hazards always includes the virtual domain of latency, invisibility and contingency’. Hence while the potentially hazardous effects of various ‘risks’ are real, they can only be spoken of in a temporal sense as possibilities.

The critical social work risk literature emphasises that the generation of risk knowledge is an inherently political process and that in turn the construct and uses of risk are political. Given the veracity and centrality of this ‘risk dispute’ to discussions of risk within the literature, assuming a clear and informed ontological and epistemological position in my conceptualisation of risk in this research has been important. The task has been to make risk an object of study so that consideration can be given to both its socio-cultural and political dimensions whilst also making it ‘real’ for practitioners to discuss.

## Conceptualising risk as a discursive construct

Risk is conceptualised in this study as a *discursive construct* in social work, thereby positioning this research within an idealist and constructivist-subjectivist paradigm (Crotty 1998). In a sense I have regarded risk as a language artefact. That is, I have taken the view that meanings of risk in social work are generated by how they are spoken of between individuals (such as practitioners, clients and administrators) and within the context of wider networks of power, such as within institutional contexts, including the legal system and health and welfare systems (Weedon 1997, p. 105; cf. Sarangi & Candlin 2003). Meanings of risk in social work can thus be understood as being in a constant process of discursive production (Weedon 1997, p. 105; cf. Sarangi & Candlin 2003) whilst simultaneously discursively producing ‘social reality’ (Healy 2000, p. 39). Hence for the purpose of this research I have assumed that risk predominantly acts as an idea or ‘way of thinking’ (Parton 1996, p. 98) that influences how the things that come to be associated with it (such as people and events) are recognised and responded to. This viewpoint has enabled me to link the conceptual dimensions of risk, that is, the idea of risk with how it is recognised and experienced in embodied aspects of social workers’ interventions.

Conceptualising risk as a discursive construct clarifies the affiliation of the study with poststructural theory. Poststructural theory emphasises the instability of meanings attributed to people, experiences and events (Agger 1991; Ashenden 2005; Healy 2000, 2005; Lather 1991; Weedon 1997). The constitution and attribution of meanings are regarded as products of historical, social, cultural, institutional and political influences. Thus this theoretical perspective disputes the notion of essentialised qualities being considered as inherent to people, experiences and events. Instead the naming, categorisation and attribution of value to people, experiences and events are understood as processes and products of power (Alvesson 2002; Healy 2000; Weedon 1997). Within this theoretical context risk can be understood as a concept that is subject to contextualised fluxes in meaning.

Various social theorists have noted that meanings of risk have changed over time (Beck 2002a, 2002b, 2003; Bernstein 1995; Douglas 2003; Ewald 1991; Giddens 2003c, 2003d; Hacking 1991; Luhmann 1993; Lupton 2004) as have the dominance

of different risk discourses (Kemshall 2002; Lupton 2004). Kemshall (2002) describes the most prominent of these risk discourses as the ‘risk as fate’ discourse which characterised pre-modern societies, the ‘risk as probability’ discourse of modernity, and the ‘risk as uncertainty’ discourse which has emerged as an important discourse in late/postmodern times. I wanted to capture this sense of the fluidity and nuances of meanings of risk within the context of social workers’ interventions. Hence a more discursive approach to the empirical study of risk has been a theoretically astute, though admittedly still contentious, approach for studying the operations of risk in social work. While such an approach is compatible with the theoretical dimensions of risk that are discussed in the critical social work risk literature, empirical research in social work, such as in the areas of risk assessment and management, are overwhelmingly reflective of more objectivist and realist conceptualisations of risk (Parton 1996, 2000; Webb 2006).

## **Implications for the study**

Viewing risk as a discursive construct had several implications for the development of the study. First, it enabled me to engage with risk as a multi-dimensional concept. This is important because the research is exploratory in nature and I wanted to investigate the possibility that risk might be ‘present’ in different ways in social workers’ practice. That is, risk might have been visible in organisational documents such as case notes or policy, personal feelings, practitioners’ world views, in relationships with clients and colleagues and so on. While it could be suggested that this scope for enquiry was too wide and indeed what I was engaging with was more than just a single risk phenomena, I did not intend to distil a unified, single layered concept of risk from my investigations. Instead, I operationalised risk as a multi-faceted concept to engage with how ideas about risk operate with potency and relevance in practitioners’ interventions. Conceptualising risk as a discursive construct suited the demands of such a task.

Second, conceptualising risk in these terms enabled me to be sensitive to risk operating as a positive and/or negative construct in social workers’ interventions. Most commonly risk is referred to as a negative construct in the social work risk literature and generally as ‘threats or dangers attributed to persons, technologies, or

nature' (Ericson & Doyle 2003, p. 2). In sum it is associated with the possibility of something bad happening. I was particularly interested in how social workers might be able to escape the totalising effects of negative conceptions of risk upon their practice. I wondered if the means by which this might happen could have been through more positive understandings of risk, involving practitioners 'taking risks' (Green 2004; Parton 2001; Titterton 2006). Thus a discursive focus to the conceptualisation of risk enabled the study to incorporate the varied meanings of risk in operation within social workers' interventions.

Third, positioning risk as a discursive construct enabled me to limit the scope of my project. The literature pertaining to risk and risk topics is vast and expanding. Being interested in the discursive attributes of risk clarified the need for a particular form of engagement with this literature and the literature that is pertinent to the study. Hence this thesis focuses predominantly upon the contributions of socio-cultural and political risk theories for understanding risk in social work. It has also meant that the literature I have engaged with is predominantly theoretical given my interest in how concepts of risk are constituted and integrated into social workers' general interventions. Furthermore, this research has not focused on specific risk practices such as risk assessment, perception, profiling and management. My research is interested in risk in more general terms as a feature of practice as opposed to it being a feature of particular fields of practice where assessment, profiling, perception and management are prominent.

Fourth, a discursive focus to the study of risk provided a clear pathway for determining an appropriate methodology and research methods for collecting and analysing my data. Drawing inspiration from Søndergaard's (2002, p. 187) suggestions of how to conduct poststructural empirical analysis, I conceived that 'the creation and manifestation' of the discursive construct of risk could be evidenced from how it was 'spoken' of in social workers' interventions (Søndergaard 2002, p. 188). Thus I conducted a series of in-depth interviews with social workers where they reflected upon interventions they had implemented. However, it is important to note that such a method was incredibly time-intensive and challenging. It required considerable conceptual dexterity on the part of the researcher to delineate 'signifiers' (Alvesson 2002; Crotty 1998; Healy 2000; Weedon 1997) of risk and draw these

together into a coherent interpretation of the operations of risk in social workers' interventions.

Finally, operationalising risk as a discursive construct provided a solid theoretical platform for linking the theory of risk with direct social work practice. While the concept of risk has proven elusive for those interested in it in a philosophical and theoretical sense, speaking of risk as a discursive construct legitimises a move away from 'arriving at a "truth" about the essence of a phenomenon' (Søndergaard 2002, p. 188) and instead supports a focus on the 'truth effects' of risk through an examination of practice (Culpitt 1999; Foucault 1980). This approach has been particularly useful in discourse analyses of risk (for example, see Culpitt 1999; Kelly 2000) and in Warner's (2006) study of the location and governance of risk in mental health. Thus social work interventions can be recognised as a site in which it is possible to witness the 'truth effects' of risk which constitute the subjectivities of clients and practitioners.

Risk, premised as operating with discursive power (Weedon 1997), supports the focus in this research upon clients and practitioners being *subjected to power* in the formation of their respective subjectivities and *subjects of power* in which they 'take up discursive practices as their own and negotiate them' (Søndergaard 2002, p. 189). As Juhlia et al. (2003, p. 16) state in their discussion of the construction of client identities in social work:

The reality of social work and the way in which it is continuously being constructed is present wherever it is spoken or written into being: when encountering clients, when speaking or writing of them...these practices become data which are used to interpret the processes of social reality in which multiple clienthoods are constructed.

Thus the poststructural theoretical standpoint adopted in my research permitted an examination of how the materiality of risk was spoken into existence by social workers in reflective accounts of their interventions. The possibilities of such an analysis were fully realised in the conduct of this research in the finding that risk operates as an embodied concept in social workers' interventions, its vehicle being the ascription of a number of client and practitioner 'risk identities'.

## Summary

Given that I conceptualised risk as a discursive construct, a concern with how risk operates in social workers' practice is the focus of this research. That is, in line with poststructural theory that considers the constitutive power of discourse, this study considers how ideas about risk operate within the context of social workers' interventions. As stated above, this thesis demonstrates that risk operated most significantly in the construction of client and social worker risk identities. The meaning, emotion and morality of risk are recognised as being central to how risk operates in practitioners' interventions. Hence the title of this thesis is, 'The operations of risk: the meaning, emotion and morality of risk identities in social work practice'.

## The Structure and Content of the Thesis

The structure and content of this thesis is as follows. The following two chapters are concerned with distinct bodies of socio-cultural risk theory and social work risk literature. Chapter 2 presents an overview of the main aspects of the risk society (Beck 2003, 2004; Giddens 2003a, 2003c) and governmentality (Barry, Osborne & Rose 1996; Culpitt 1999; Dean 1999; O'Malley 1996; Rose 1996a, 1996b, 2000) theses and Douglas's (2003) cultural/symbolic analysis of risk. I argue in this chapter that each risk theory has been integral to social work being able to develop a critical understanding of the nature and operations of risk within the social, political and cultural context of neo-liberal risk society. This presentation examines how each of these theories engages with debates regarding the nature and operations of risk within contemporary society. These matters are considered in further detail in Chapter 3. This chapter reviews the problematics of risk that have been raised within the critical social work risk literature in relation to knowledge, morality and ethics, and practices, in social work. The chapter concludes with my assessment of the limitations of the 'catastrophe' narrative of risk that dominates this perspective in the literature, particularly with regard to its limiting the moral agency of practitioners and constructing risk as a necessarily morally conservative influence upon social work practice. I then suggest an alternative research program for social work to disrupt the

taken-for-granted assumption that risk operates as a negative construct in the areas of social work knowledge, morality and ethics, and practice.

These ideas are used to support the aim, question, methodology and methods of my research which I have introduced in this introductory chapter and which I expand upon in Chapter 4. In view of my discussion in Chapter 1 of how I made risk an object of study in my research, I clarify in Chapter 4 the theoretical paradigm that was adopted and its implications for the study's methodology. I argue that a reflexive, iterative, qualitative research design was necessary to explore the discursive construct of risk in practitioners' accounts of their interventions. This methodology was considered the most appropriate way of rendering the presence and specific operations of risk visible within the research process. The methods of data collection and analysis are also discussed.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 comprise the data chapters of the thesis. Each chapter presents the results of the study and each is organised within its own discrete narrative. The results indicate that risk operates as a complex concept in social workers' interventions. Chapter 5 demonstrates that the concept of risk was spoken of as a negative and pervasive concept within the context of practitioners' reflections upon their interventions. This meaning of risk came to be embodied in various risk identities that were ascribed to clients and social workers. Practitioners characteristically spoke of their clients and themselves in terms of their being 'at risk' and/or 'a risk'. These identities then dominated how practitioners thought of their clients and themselves. This typology of identities, their constitutive emotions and their configurations within practitioners' interventions form the content of the chapter.

Chapter 6 extends the analysis of the presence of risk identities in social workers' interventions by demonstrating that they were also spoken of by social workers as moral identities. That is, risk identities can be understood as reflecting practitioners' views of their clients and themselves as 'good' or 'bad', and as 'innocent' or 'culpable'. Given that multiple and often conflicting moralised risk identities were apparent within practitioners' reflective narratives, this chapter demonstrates that practitioners were faced with risk identity dilemmas that were experienced as moral dilemmas. Essentially practitioners were faced with a moral choice about whether they would take a stand for themselves or their clients within their interventions.



Hence the potential for risk to act as a conservative influence upon social workers' practice is apparent within this data. An overview of the standpoints that practitioners assumed concludes the chapter. Chapter 7 explores the reference points social workers used to constitute a moral stand in response to their risk identity dilemmas. This chapter demonstrates how various reference points were assimilated by practitioners in their efforts to effect a resolution to the moral dilemmas posed by clients and their risk identities.

Chapters 8 and 9 are the discussion and conclusion chapters of my thesis respectively. Chapter 8 brings together the results from the three data chapters to delineate that risk operated in very specific ways in their interventions. This occurred primarily through the embodiment of risk in client and practitioner risk identities. I argue in this chapter that these risk identities operated as powerful signifiers of the meaning, emotion and morality of risk that were in evidence in social workers' discussions about their interventions. I note that this research indicates that while risk was a pervasive and constitutive force in practitioners' narratives, its morally conservative impetus was able to be resisted within the context of face-to-face encounters between clients and social workers. I thus conclude in Chapter 9 that my study has demonstrated that the relationship between 'self and other' – the practitioner and the client – can be recognised as a relationship of compassion and care even in the presence of fearsome risks. Drawing upon the reference points that proved useful in this exercise for practitioners who participated in the study I make a number of recommendations for social work knowledge, education and practice. In view of the limitations of the study I also make suggestions for future social work research.

## **Concluding Comments to the Chapter**

This introductory chapter to my thesis has identified theoretical and methodological principles for conceptualising and conducting my research into the operations of risk in social work. The chapter has addressed why a concern with the operations of risk is an important research issue in social work. I have also stated the aims of the research and the research question. Considerable detail has also been given to the conceptual framework that has guided how I made risk an object of study within the research.

My presentation of how risk has been theorised within socio-cultural and social work literature in the next two chapters further supports the approach of this study.

## Chapter 2

# Theorising the Nature and Operations of Risk

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Knowledge does not slowly detach itself from its empirical roots...it creates a progressive enslavement to its violence (Foucault 1984, cited in Culpitt 1999, p. 18).

## Introduction to the Chapter

This chapter provides a theoretical orientation for understanding the recent concern within the social work literature that risk operates as a morally conservative construct that has repressive effects in direct social work practice. In this literature it is argued that how risk is defined and operationalised in social work reflects the political dominance of neo-liberalism as an ethos of government operating within the social and cultural conditions of the risk society (Kelly 2000, 2001; Parton 1996, 1999; Warner 2006; Webb2006). Risk is regarded within this argument as a concept and set of practices that have been utilised to promote the conservative political and economic agenda of neo-liberal governments (Culpitt 1999; Rose 1996a, 1996b, 2000). It will be demonstrated throughout the course of Chapters 2 and 3 that the politicisation of risk within the critical social work risk literature contrasts sharply with other social work literature that regards risk in less overtly political terms. Risk is conceptualised within these other literature sources as a more discrete material entity. It is considered to have 'objective properties' that can be 'measured as the probability of well-defined adverse effects' (Renn 1992, p. 54). Hence the social work risk literature comprises polarised theories of the nature and operations of risk in social work practice.

I argue in this chapter that this division in the social work literature reflects the central preoccupation of a vast body of socio-cultural literature that similarly

philosophises the nature and operations of risk in oppositional terms within the contemporary era. While distinctive polarised viewpoints are evident within the socio-cultural literature (Adam & Van Loon 2000; Kemshall 2002; Lupton 2004; Shaw & Shaw 2001; Slovic 1999), subtleties of position are also evident between relatively commensurate theoretical positions. Cases in point are the comparable and yet divergent conceptualisations of risk contained within critical structuralist, postmodern/poststructuralist and functional structuralist theories of risk (Lupton 2004). The risk society thesis (Beck 2003, 2004; Giddens 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2003d), governmentality thesis (Culpitt 1999; Dean 1999; Rose 1996a, 1996b, 2000) and Douglas's (2003) cultural/symbolic analysis of risk respectively accord to each theoretical position. I claim that the polemics between, and distinctive arguments of, these literatures have become pivotal to the emergent critical social work risk literature that problematises the nature and operations of risk within the domains of social work knowledge, morals and ethics, and practices. The specifics of this critical analysis of how risk operates within these domains are the subject of the following chapter. This chapter then provides a theoretical background to the forthcoming review of the critical social work risk literature.

The chapter begins with a basic overview of the paradigmatic controversy that underpins disputes about the nature of risk. The chapter progresses to a presentation of how the nature and operations of risk are generally theorised within functional structuralist, critical structuralist and postmodern/poststructuralist risk theories. The chapter then progresses to a discussion of the salient aspects of these risk theories as they are contained within the risk society and governmentality theses and Douglas's cultural/symbolic analysis of risk. In this section I clarify that these risk theories reject a singularly realist ontology and objectivist epistemology of risk, foregrounding instead the social, political and cultural processes involved in the construction of ideas about risk. I conclude the chapter by affirming that these theories have been central to the development of the critical perspective of risk that has become a key feature of recently developed social work risk literature.

## Theorising the Nature and Operations of Risk

Theorising the nature and operations of risk within contemporary society has become an increasing preoccupation within academic literature. According to Garland (2003, p. 49) 'The idea of risk has come to appear indispensable for understanding our times'. Lupton (2004, pp. 13 and 14) explains that the centrality of risk to our thinking can be understood in the following terms:

To call something a 'risk' is to recognise its importance to our subjectivity and well being... Those phenomena that we single out and identify as 'risks', therefore, have an important ontological status in our understandings of selfhood and the social and material worlds.

The importance of understanding what risk is and does has been embraced by a diverse range of disciplines. Garland (2003) notes that risk is represented in multiple ways within their literature. He states:

Risk is a calculation. Risk is a commodity. Risk is a capital. Risk is a technique of government. Risk is objective and scientifically knowable. Risk is subjective and socially constructed. Risk is a problem, a threat, a source of insecurity. Risk is a pleasure, a thrill, a source of profit and freedom. Risk is the means whereby we colonize and control the future. 'Risk society' is our late modern world spinning out of control (Garland 2003, p. 49).

The diversity of views regarding the nature and operations of risk contained within Garland's (2003) summary intimate the deep divisions within and between discipline specific theories of risk. In the first section of the chapter I present an overview of the core debates that have been explored within socio-cultural literature. This is followed by a discussion of how these ideas have been integrated into functional structuralist, critical structuralist and postmodern/poststructural perspectives of the operations of risk.

### Theorising the nature of risk

Theorising risk incorporates at some point delineating what risk is. This definitional process centres upon questions regarding the 'nature', or in other words the ontology, of risk (Houston & Griffiths 2000). Discussions in the socio-cultural literature regarding the ontology of risk are often presented in polarised terms to reflect the

division between realist and idealist (also referred to as relativist) paradigmatic positions (Houston & Griffiths 2000; Shaw & Shaw 2001; Stalker 2003). Realist ontologies of risk accord to the view that risks are real – they exist independently of interpretative processes. On the basis of this viewpoint, various people, events and experiences can be regarded as independently comprising a risk in and of themselves. In contrast, idealist ontologies of risk assume that risks are a matter of ‘the mind’ (Crotty 1998); in other words, the recognition and naming of a risk as ‘a risk’ is a purely interpretive act. Hence, proponents of this alternative ontological paradigm argue that nothing is inherently a risk in itself. Instead, the naming and categorisation of risk is considered a subjective act.

Considerations of the nature of risk invariably relate to discussions of how it is possible to determine knowledge about risk. That is, questions are asked about the epistemology of risk (Houston & Griffiths 2001). In tandem with the ontological schism pertaining to the nature of risk, discussions regarding the epistemology of risk are similarly divided. The first position holds that knowledge about risk can be accessed through objectivist and quantifiable methods of inquiry, such as risk assessment schedules. The second position argues that knowledge about risk is constructed through the attribution of meaning. It is thus claimed the content and processes of attributing the meaning of risk to people or things is best determined by interpretive methods of inquiry, such as through discourse analysis (Adams 2001; D’Cruz 2004a, 2004b; Parton 2000; Sarangi & Candlin 2003; Warner 2006; Zinn 2006). While recent developments in the socio-cultural and social work literature suggest that attempts are being made to bridge these binarised conceptions of risk (for example, Houston 2001; Krinsky 1992; Renn 1992; Slovic 1992, 1999), it seems clear that the polarisation of the nature of risk is a key marker for orienting the differing perspectives of risk theories.

Common to functional structuralist, critical structuralist and poststructuralist risk theories is the view that our understanding about ‘what risk is’ is constructed in a dialectical relationship between people and the social world (Lupton 2004, p. 29). Accordingly, Lupton (2004, p. 29) makes the point that these socio-cultural and political theories of risk:

tend to argue that a risk is never fully objective or knowable outside of belief systems and moral positions: what we measure, identify and manage as risks are always constituted via pre-existing knowledges and discourse.

Thus whilst ontological and epistemological standpoints are on the one hand philosophical, they are also recognised in socio-cultural and political risk theories as reflecting the operations of power. As Adam and Van Loon (2000, p. 4) state, definitions of risk reflect the power and influence of those who come to participate in risk debates. Ewald (1991, p. 199) also makes this point, claiming:

Nothing is a risk in itself; there is no risk in reality. But on the other hand, anything can be a risk; it all depends on how one analyses the danger, considers the event.

Consequently, functional structuralist, critical structuralist and postmodern/poststructuralist risk theories tend to share a profound scepticism of more empirical approaches to risk that speak of risk in 'realist' terms as an 'objective fact' (Lupton 2004, pp. 25-26 ). Objectivist approaches tend not to ask 'what is risk' or 'what makes a risk a risk?'. The reality of risk is assumed. Common to the arguments of those theorists that are canvassed in this chapter is that such an approach ignores the political contexts within which ideas about risk are created and managed. However, there are also differences between how these social, political and cultural theories of risk conceptualise the operations of risk, which I will now briefly discuss.

## **Theorising the operations of risk**

Broadly speaking, functional structuralist perspectives theorise risk in terms of how it operates within certain cultural contexts to structure social organisation and relationships and contributes to social order and social solidarity (Douglas 2003; Lupton 2004; Rayner 1992; Scott 2000; Tansey 2004; Wynne 1992). This theoretical perspective considers how cultural values are instrumental in defining who and what is perceived as a risk. Thus risk is understood as a culturally defined concept (Renn, 1992, p. 72) that fulfils specific cultural purposes.

Commonly, functional structuralist accounts narrate risk as a particularly modern concept that has engendered a variety of social conditions or experiences. These include:

- an increased risk consciousness (Beck 2003, 2004; Beck & Willms 2004; Giddens 2003b; Lupton 2004);
- the undermining of trust in governments and officials (Beck 2003, 2004; Beck & Willms 2004; Giddens 2003c; Lupton 2004);
- the creation of cultures of blame (Douglas 2003; Parton 1996, 2001; Rayner 1992);
- the shared experience of anxiety and fear by individuals and communities of latent risks (Beck 2003, 2004; Giddens 2003a; Furedi 2003); and
- the dominance of calculative and technical approaches towards the measurement and management of risk in personal and social contexts (Beck 2004; Douglas 2003; Giddens 2003c; Lupton 2004).

Mary Douglas's (2003) cultural/symbolic analysis of risk is most commonly associated with this theoretical perspective. However, analyses from Beck (2003, 2004) and Giddens (2003a, 2003b, 2003c) of the cultural significance of reflexive modernisation in their risk society thesis (discussed later in this chapter) also accord with functional structuralist theory.

In contrast, critical structuralist and poststructuralist theories of risk emphasise the 'problematics' (Castel 1994) of risk (Culpitt 1999; Kelly 2000, 2001; Kendall & Wickham 2000). This means that risk is theorised to varying extents as a social and political construct that bespeaks the operations of institutional and discursive power (Beck 2003, 2004; Dean 1999; Parton 1999; Rose 1996a, 1996b, 2000). Risk is revealed as an essentially conservative construct (Culpitt 1999) that is mobilised as a concept with currency in the context of the political spectre of neo-liberalism (Dean 1999; Kelly 2000, 2001; O'Malley 1996; Rose 1996a, 1996b, 2000; Webb 2006). Hence, critical structuralist and poststructuralist theories of risk elucidate how risk operates as a rhetorical stratagem of advanced liberal democracies in the service of advancing certain interests and values over others, thus engendering a particular risk-based 'politics of recognition' (Culpitt 1999; Webb 2006) in macro and micro



contexts. Where these two theoretical positions diverge is the extent to which they purport that risk is a socially constructed concept, which in turn impacts upon their specific analyses of the social, political and cultural operations of risk. Critical structuralist risk theorists (such as Beck and Giddens writing about the risk society) are said to be ‘weak constructionists’ given that they claim that risks are real, though their effects are ‘mediated, perceived and responded to via social, cultural and political processes’ (Lupton 2004, p. 28). Conversely, postmodern risk theorists such as Bauman (1995, 1997), and poststructuralist risk theorists such as Rose (1996a, 1996b, 2000), Culpitt (1999), and Dean (1999) who champion the governmentality thesis, accord to a strong constructivist position.

In spite of their differences, the academic social work risk literature indicates that attempts have been made to synthesise all three theoretical perspectives to explicate the social, political and cultural contexts within which risk is constructed and operates within our profession. In particular, this literature takes a critical stance in relation to the nature and operations of risk within the domains of social work knowledge, morals and ethics, and practice. In order to more fully understand these arguments, as presented in the following chapter, I will consider the central tenets of the risk society and governmentality theses, and Douglas’s cultural/symbolic analysis of risk.

## **The Social Context for Understanding the Nature and Operations of Risk: The Risk Society Thesis**

Ulrich Beck is regarded as the author of the risk society thesis, although Anthony Giddens is also considered a pre-eminent theorist of this particular risk theory. Often the contributions of both theorists feature when the risk society is mentioned in the social work literature. The discussion that follows reflects this tradition, melding together that which is common to both theorists’ perspectives. In this overview I present several elements of their theory that have been integrated into the critical social work risk literature. They are presented here to signify the social context within which the nature and operations of risk can be understood.

## The nature of risk

As was mentioned in the preceding section, it has been suggested that Beck and Giddens share a weak constructionist view of the ontological nature and epistemological properties of risk (Lupton 1999, 2004). However, Mythen (2004) argues that Beck assumes an essentially realist stance. Beck (2003, p. 134) claims that he adopts both realist and constructivist positions to support his theory of risk. That is, he argues risk has real dimensions to it (for example, acts of terrorism exist) which are measurable (for example, by counting or estimating how many people are affected by an act of terrorism) as well as risk having constructed aspects to it (recognisable, for example, in the processes of identifying who a terrorist might be). Beck (2003, p. 134) states that his adoption of the dual perspectives of realism and constructivism reflects his pragmatic approach to the epistemology of risk as it enables him to engage with concrete and abstract dimensions of risk. He states, 'there is at the same time the immateriality of mediated and contested definitions of risk *and* [original italics] the materiality of risk as manufactured by experts and industries world-wide' (Beck 2003, p. 4). Giddens (2003c) adopts a similar position to Beck, arguing that we are thoroughly bounded by the dynamics of the institutionalised forces of radical modernity (discussed in the following section) which influences the way we engage with risk.

Risk is also generally spoken of as a negative construct within the risk society thesis. Beck (2004, p. 20) speaks of risk as the 'hazardous side effects' of modernity, where its '*destructive* [original italics] forces are...unleashed, forces before which the human imagination stands in awe'. Thus Beck's sociological analysis portrays late modern society as being on the brink of catastrophic disaster as a result of environmental, financial and terrorist risks. Beck (2000, 2002b) also claims that these risks have the potential to be mobilised with positive effect as a result of the forging of transnational and deterritorialised alliances in a united response to global risks. However, overwhelmingly risk is constructed by Beck as a negative force.

Whilst Giddens shares the view that late modern global risks are pervasive, latent and potentially catastrophic, he also promotes a more positive definition of risk as

opportunity, innovation, security and responsibility (Giddens 2003d, p. 63). In clarification, Giddens (2003d, pp. 63-64) states:

Opportunity and innovation are the positive side of risk. No one can escape risk, of course, but there is a basic difference between the passive experience of risk and the active exploration of risk environments. A positive engagement with risk is a necessary component of social and economic mobilization...Risk isn't exactly the same as danger. Risk refers to dangers we seek actively to confront and assess...We all need protection against risk, but also the capability to confront and take risks in a productive fashion.

Thus in recognition of the failures of the modern welfare state, Giddens (2003d) suggests we need to reorient our conceptualisation of welfare as 'positive welfare' which allows for the 'redistribution of possibilities' that support active risk-taking on the part of people who have created a moral hazard as a result of their choice to rely upon welfare support. This point of view is expanded upon in Giddens's (2003d) ideas of 'Third Way' social democracy, which was integral to New Labour's welfare reforms (Jordan & Jordan 2000; Kemshall 2002).

## **Distinguishing features of risk societies**

The key argument of the risk society thesis is that modern societies are organised according to the concept of risk (Beck 2003, 2004; Giddens 1994, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c). Beck (2003, 2004) notes that in contrast to class societies which focused upon the distribution of wealth and the elimination of scarcity, risk societies are structured according to the distribution of risks and the elimination of harm. This assertion is based upon the argument that all people are vulnerable to the global, high consequence risks of late modernity (Beck 2003, 2004; Giddens 2003a, 2003b, 2003c), though it is acknowledged that control over risks can, to a certain extent, be mitigated by power and capital (Beck 2003, 2004). However, Beck (2003, p. 36) emphasises that while 'poverty is hierarchic, smog is democratic'. In turn, it is argued that risk has a democratising effect upon people, given our shared vulnerability to, and anxiety from, risk (Beck 2002a, 2003, 2004; Beck & Willms 2004; Giddens 2003a, 2003c).

Beck (2003, 2004) and Giddens (1994, 2003a, 2003c) note that while danger has been prevalent in all societies, the concept of risk is a distinctly modern term, borne out of the desire of early modern society 'to make the unforeseeable consequences of its own decisions foreseeable, and to subdue their unwanted side effects through conscious preventative actions and institutional arrangements (Beck & Willms 2004, p. 111). Thus risks are recognised as being 'manufactured' (Beck 2003, 2004; Giddens 1994, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c) in early modern and late modern societies as a direct consequence of the creation of modern systems of political, economic, technological and industrial organisation and their attendant technologies of sovereignty, military power, capitalism and industrialisation (Giddens 2003c). Thus late modern risks are systemic risks (Beck 2003, 2004). However, it is also argued that late modern risks are qualitatively different from early modern risks by virtue of their high levels of consequence (such as global warming, nuclear war, and financial market crashes) and their place, space and time independence (as can be noted in the ramifications of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster) so that risks have become globalised (Beck 2004; Beck, Bonss & Lau 2003; Beck & Willms 2004; Giddens 2003a, 2003c). As a consequence Beck argues that the nature of late modern risks has engendered radicalised uncertainty. Accordingly, Beck (2000, 2002a, 2002b, 2004) claims that we are now living in a 'world risk society', which Giddens (2003b) refers to as our 'runaway world'.

## Sources of risk

According to Beck (Beck & Willms 2004), early modern risks supported probabilistic calculations, given the risks of the time could be perceived by the senses and could be identified within the 'structural and systemic presuppositions' (Beck, Bonss & Lau 2002, p. 4) of modernity, which comprised:

- the independent and territorial bounded nation state;
- structured individualisation. This refers to individualisation (that is, the requirement of individuals to make decisions about their life chances for which they are held responsible) being supported by structural mechanisms such as class and gender;
- the promise of a gainful employment society;

- the exploitation of nature; and
- increased scientisation and the functional differentiation between experts and lay persons (Beck, Bonss & Lau 2002, pp. 4-5).

Giddens (2003a, 2003b, 2003c) refers to the risks of this era as 'external risks'. He notes that the concept of external risk was integrated into insurance models, including the social insurance model of the modern welfare state (Giddens 2003b, 2003c). However, as a consequence of radicalised modernisation (Giddens 2003c), risks within late modernity are said to have mutated into 'systemic risks' (Beck 2003, 2004) that are temporally, spatially and socially unbounded (Beck 2002b, 2003, 2004; Giddens 2003c).

The structural elements that characterised early modernity, as noted above, are said to have been radically undermined by the following social processes of late modernity:

- globalisation, where territorial borders vanished thereby destabilising one of the core foundations of the concept of the nation state and, in turn, the economy;
- the intensification of individualisation, where the need to create 'reflexive biographies' has amplified the responsibility of individuals to make good decisions about their employment, education, health and relationships as opposed to focusing upon these domains as the responsibilities of government and industry;
- the transformation of gender roles, where there have been changes to how intimate relationships are experienced and how the labour market is constructed;
- flexible employment practices, thus undermining the possibility of full and gainful employment; and
- an acknowledgment of nature as a limited resource (Beck, Bonss & Lau 2002, pp. 6-7).

Consequently, when reckoning the possibility of these ‘manufactured’ risks, Giddens (2003c, p. 32) states we can only postulate ‘plausible risk scenarios’ as opposed to accurate predictions, as:

In circumstances of late modernity, many forms of risk do not admit a clear assessment, because of the mutable knowledge environment which frames them, and even risk assessments within relatively closed settings are only valid ‘until further notice’.

Hence the generation and use of knowledge about risk is a critical issue personally and institutionally in the risk societies of late modernity.

## **Risk and reflexivity**

The politics surrounding knowledge about risks in risk societies is particularly evident in Beck’s and Giddens’s analysis of the cultural significance of reflexive modernisation. Beck (1994, 2003, 2004) and Giddens (1994, 2003a, 2003c) claim that late modern societies are reflexive societies, given they are subject to the processes of ‘reflexive modernisation’. According to Beck, ‘simple modernisation becomes reflexive modernisation to the extent that it disenchants and then dissolves its own taken-for-granted premises’ (Beck, Bonss & Lau 2002, p. 3). That is, society looks to itself as its own problem, realising the rationalities, technologies and institutionalised practices of modernisation have engendered radical uncertainty and actually contributed to the existence of risk. Accordingly, reflexive modernisation:

leads to the undermining of every aspect of the nation-state: the welfare state; the power of the legal system; the national economy; the corporatist systems that connected one with the other; and the parliamentary democracy that governed the whole. A parallel process undermines the social institutions that buttressed this state and were supported by it in turn. The normal family, the normal career and the normal life history are all suddenly called into question and have to be renegotiated’ (Beck, Bonss & Lau 2002, p. 4).

Beck and Giddens argue that the intensification of reflexivity within modernity has engendered a constant questioning and critique of all aspects of life – the natural world, institutions, experts and officials, relationships and of our selves. Therefore, reflexivity has become embedded at an institutional and individual level (Beck 2003, 2004; Bryant & Jary 2001; Giddens 2003a, 2003c; Giddens & Pierson 1998).

With respect to the reflexivity of modernity, Giddens (2003a, p. 20) states that reflexivity is institutionalised through ‘the regularised use of knowledge about circumstances of social life as a constitutive element in its organisation and transformation’. By way of explanation, Giddens (2003a, p. 20) states that knowledge about ‘most aspects of social activity, and material relations with nature’ are susceptible to ‘chronic revision in the light of new information or knowledge’. In this respect reflexivity is constitutive of modern institutions whilst concomitantly undermining ‘the certainty of knowledge’ (Giddens 2003a, p. 21). With regard to individual reflexivity, Beck (2003, 2004) and Giddens (2003a, 2003c) argue that individuals are required to negotiate and construct their ‘reflexively mobilised’ identities (Giddens 2003a, p. 7) amidst the proliferation of knowledge about risks. Thus individuals are required to reflexively constitute and monitor their personal biographies (Lupton 2004) or ‘life plans’ (Giddens 2003a). Whereas institutional reflexivity calls the foundations of knowledge and progress into question, the reflexive self ‘calls itself into question. In the process of self confrontation individuals critically suspend their own certainty in questioning their identities and life-existence’ (Webb 2006, p. 35). Additionally, Beck (2003, 2004) claims individual reflexivity is institutionalised through the foundational elements of nation states in which systems of individual, as opposed to collective, rights and entitlements are embedded in the welfare state, legal system, economy and the ethos of democratic governments.

Giddens and Beck disagree about the relationship between reflexivity and risk. Giddens argues that reflexivity within modernity has increased sensitivity to the existence of risks. However, Beck claims that the greater number of risks that are inherent in modernity has engendered risk reflexivity (Lupton 2004, p. 81). Whatever the case, both theorists agree that the inescapability of the reflexive engagement with risk personally and systemically has highlighted the contingent and fallible nature of knowledge generated about, and institutional responses to, risks. Furthermore, individuals have been implicated as the engineers of their own failings, be they at an individual or global level. Thus Beck (2003, 2004) and Giddens (2003a, 2003c) claim that the intensification and distribution of risks, coupled with a reflexive awareness of the existence of risk and the limits of knowledge and expertise, have culminated in ever increasing levels of interpersonal and communal fear and anxiety. As Mythen

(2004, p. 138) explains, 'The cloak of anxiety which hangs over the risk society, leaves individuals in a state of permanent watchfulness. In short our minds become 'factories of fear'. Hence Furedi (2003) argues we are now living within a 'culture of fear'.

## **Risk and trust**

Trust is an important concept within the risk society thesis. According to Giddens (2003a, 2003c) trust is a necessary precondition for existence under the reflexive conditions of risk societies. In support of this theory, Giddens (2003c) claims that modern societies are characterised by the dislocation of time and space (that is, the consequences of actions transcend spatial and temporal barriers, such as in the long term repercussions of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster), and the infiltration of disembodied, abstract systems into all aspects of daily life. Abstract systems remove us from the immediacy of events but are nonetheless essential to our participation in modern life. They require us to trust in their capacities to work and keep us safe. Money, as a 'symbolic token', is the first of these abstract systems discussed by Giddens (2003c). 'Expert systems' are the second (Giddens 2003c). Expert systems are 'systems of technical accomplishment or professional expertise that organise large areas of the material and social environments in which we live today' (Giddens 2003c, p. 27). What this means at an individual level is that knowledge and control over the most fundamental aspects of our day-to-day lives have been increasingly removed from us, which in turn has required us to place greater faith in the technologies and people who operate within these expert systems. Social work is a case in point, as are more basic areas of life, such as the production of food. Thus social relationships between people have been radically altered through the 'distanciation' (Giddens 2003a, 2003c) of time and space and the ever increasing extension of human intervention into the natural and social worlds.

Within this context, trust becomes necessary for engendering 'ontological security' (Giddens 2003a, 2003c) so that we can act on the basis of taken-for-granted notions of continuity in our self identities 'and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action' (Giddens 2003c, p. 92). Giddens (2003c, p. 97) claims that this form of trust is of a 'persistent and recurrent kind', thus he constructs



trust as a deeply psychological phenomenon that enables us to bracket out ‘potential occurrences which, were the individual seriously to contemplate them, would produce a paralysis of the will, or feelings of engulfment’ (Giddens 2003a, p. 3). That is, trust forms an essential ‘protective cocoon’ (Giddens 2003a, p. 3) around individuals from the risks that they face in their intimate and social worlds.

However, whilst trust is fundamental to participation in even the most rudimentary aspects of individual and social life, Giddens (2003a, 2003c) cautions it cannot be taken for granted. Trust must be actively courted and negotiated given the contingent nature of knowledge engendered within reflexive modernity and our corresponding reflexive awareness of the existence of risk. Lay people’s scepticism in science and other expert systems (Beck 2004; Beck & Willms 2004) is a case in point of the ‘bargaining’ practices undertaken to engender trust. As Giddens (2003c, p. 131) pointedly remarks:

The baseline for analysis has to be the *inevitability* of living with dangers which are *remote* from the control not only of individuals, but also of large organisations, including states; and which are of *high intensity* and *life threatening* for millions of human beings and potentially for the whole of humanity (original emphasis).

Thus, trust presupposes awareness of risk in our relations with nature, each other and in terms of our individual selves. We rely upon trust to reconcile our anxiety about the contingent nature of knowledge and the risks of our daily existence (Lupton 2004, p. 78). So whilst trust is at one level an ontological disposition, it is also a calculation: we question, ‘Who can I trust, to what extent and with what possible effect?’.

## Summary

The risk society thesis of Beck and Giddens is a dense sociological account of how risk operates as a dominant structuring force in modern society. Beck and Giddens impress upon us that risk is inescapable and unavoidable. They also present risk as a complex notion, littered with paradox, which in turn defies binarised conceptualisations of its nature (Lupton 2004). Risk is material and immaterial (Adam & Van Loon 2000; Beck 2004), antecedent and consequential (Culpitt 1999), personal and public (Beck 2003, 2004; Giddens 2003a, 2003c), and real and

constructed (Beck 2003, 2004; Giddens, 2003a, 2003c). Hence the politics of knowledge about risk is a pervasively constant feature of Beck's and Giddens's writing about the social and cultural significance of risk societies. These politics are also expressed in critical terms in the governmentality literature which is discussed in the following section.

## **The Political Context for Understanding the Nature and Operations of Risk: Governmentality and Risk**

The governmentality thesis of Foucault (as cited by Barry, Osborne & Rose 1996; Burchell 1996) features as a prominent theoretical perspective in critical accounts of knowledge and practices within many disciplines and domains, health and welfare (including criminal justice) being two of the most common of these. Increasingly the governmentality literature considers how risk operates as a particular strategy of rule of advanced liberal governments which regulates the relationship between the state and citizens and the conduct of individuals more generally in both public and private spheres (Culpitt 1999; Dean 1999; Ewald 1991; Lupton 2004; O'Malley 1996; Rose 1996a, 1996b, 2000). In many instances, the critical aspects of the risk society thesis are incorporated into the governmentality literature. In common with the risk society thesis, the literature pertaining to this theory of risk is immense. Accordingly, I present here the main tenets of the governmental perspective of risk that are reflected in the social work risk literature. These aspects of the governmentality thesis signify the political nature and operations of risk.

### **Overview of the governmentality thesis**

Discussing Foucault (1981), Rose (1996) argues that a particular government 'mentality' – liberalism – became dominant in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This 'new' form of governmentality was characterised by a distinctive approach to the regulation and control of populations and individuals (Barry, Osborne & Rose 1996; Lupton 2004). This was achieved through 'economic government' that centralised and

operationalised the rationality of ‘the optimum performance of the economy at minimum economic *and socio-political cost* [original italic] (Burchell 1996, p. 26).

According to Rose (1996a, p. 42), then:

governmentality is to be analyzed in terms of the strategies, techniques and procedures through which different authorities seek to enact programmes of government in relation to the materials and forces to hand and the resistances and oppositions anticipated or encountered. Hence, this is not a matter of the implementation of idealized schema in the real by an act of will, but of the complex assemblage of diverse forces (legal, architectural, professional, administrative, financial, judgemental), techniques (notation, computation, calculation, examination, evaluation), devices (surveys and charts, systems of training, building forms) that promise to regulate decisions and actions of individuals, groups, organizations in relation to authoritative criteria.

These modern ‘technologies of governance’ (Rose 1996a, p. 42) have enabled liberal, and now advanced liberal governments, to ‘govern at a distance’ (Rose 1996a, p. 43) where the centre of rule is distanced from the means and effects of its rule.

‘Governing at a distance’ has been made possible through the deployment of technologies that are administered by experts and professionals, such as social workers (Rose 1996a), and through ‘technologies of the self’ (Burchell 1996) where individuals are encouraged to self-actualise as ‘subjects of choices and aspirations’ (Rose 1996, p. 41). Hence liberal and advanced liberal forms of governance reflect a particular economy of power in which power is dispersed ‘beyond points of privilege’ (Moffat 1999, p. 221). As Moffat (1999, p. 221) explains:

This new form of power was advantageous because it could be induced at the smallest element of the social body – at the point of microinterventions. For example, professionals could use it when intervening with their clients. Furthermore, economic and political costs were minimized, whereas the effectiveness of the exercise of power was enhanced; the exercise of power became more efficient and less wasteful.

‘Discipline’, as a technique of power, exemplifies the economies of this strategy of rule (Foucault 1977). Disciplinary power enables individuals to be regarded as objects that can be sorted, categorised and acted upon. Its economic utility is evident, given it ‘operates through minor procedures and modest methodologies’ (Moffat 1999, p. 221) such as client interviews. Normalisation features as the technique *par excellence* in disciplining subjects (O’Malley 1996). Normalisation creates and specifies ‘a

general norm in terms of which individual uniqueness can be recognized, characterized and then standardized' (O'Malley 1996, p. 189). However, governmental theorists emphasise that disciplinary power, though regulative, is not merely exercised against the populace. Disciplinary power also serves as a strategy of liberal government to recruit individuals as 'necessary (voluntary) *partner(s)* [original italics] or accomplices(s) of government' (Burchell 1996, p. 23). Accordingly, individuals act as regulators of their own behaviour in the pursuit of 'their own civility, wellbeing and advancement' (Rose 1996a, p. 40). As Hacking (1991, p. 2) laconically explains, 'Few of us fancy being pathological, so "most of us" try to make ourselves normal...'.

It is important to note that these practices are not indicative of modern government's withdrawal from the practice of governance. Instead it reflects how modern liberal governments, including neo-liberal governments, have reflexively sought alternative methods of rule that do not encroach upon the freedom of the market (Burchell 1996; Culpitt 1999; Dean 1999; Rose 1996a) whilst still attending to aspects of 'social government' (Rose 1996b). Under the conditions of neo-liberalism, the 'retreat from the State' (Barry, Osborne & Rose 1996, p. 11) has provoked a particular form of 'governmental activism' (Burchell 1996, p. 27) that has sought to 'extend the field within which a certain kind of economic freedom might be practised in the form of personal autonomy, enterprise and choice' (Barry, Osborne & Rose 1996, p. 10). Rose (2000 p. 324) notes that a new range of 'technologies of freedom' have been employed in organisational and personal contexts to achieve this end. By means of explanation Rose (2000, p. 324) clarifies:

as far as organizations are concerned, privatization, marketization, consumerization have been accompanied by the increased use of techniques of accountability such as centrally set but locally managed budgets, and the practices of evaluation and auditing. As far as individuals are concerned, one sees a revitalization of the demand that each person should be obliged to be prudent, responsible for their own destinies, actively calculating about their futures and providing for their own security and that of their families with the assistance of plurality of independent experts and profit-making businesses from private health insurance to private security firms.

## The use of knowledge about risk

The governmentality thesis argues that meanings of risk are constructed and practised as an 'art' of government (Barry, Osborne & Rose 1996, p. 11) within neo-liberal discourse. Within the governmentality thesis risk is portrayed as a rhetorical instrument of neo-liberal governance which is discursively constructed to support its particular mentality of rule. Accordingly 'risk' is characterised as a political and social construct and product (Adams 2001; D'Cruz 2004a, 2004b; Green 1997; Kelly 2000, 2001; Lupton 1999, 2004). Governmentality theorists dispute the realist paradigm that essentialises the 'nature of risk' (Barry, Osborne & Rose 1996; Lupton 1999, 2004) that is apparent in probabilistic risk discourses. Accordingly, the ontological and epistemological properties of risk are noted as being located within a constructivist/subjectivist paradigm in which the constitutive power of discourse in shaping social realities is foregrounded (Adams 2001; Chambon 1994, 1999a; Fook 2002; Healy 2000, 2005).

This perspective of 'what risk is' reflects Foucault's analysis of the necessary relationship between power and knowledge. Foucault (1980, p. 27) notes that:

Power and knowledge directly imply one another... there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.

Thus risk is regarded as having constitutive power to confer legitimacy to knowledge claims and identities (Culpitt 1999; Parton 1999). Consequently, Dean (1999, pp. 131-132) notes, the significance of risk can be recognised through what it gets attached to. Thus:

What is important about risk is not risk itself, but the forms of knowledge that make it thinkable from statistics, sociology and epidemiology to management and accounting, the techniques that discover it from the calculus of probabilities to the interview, the social technologies that govern it from risk screening, case management and social insurance to situational crime prevention and the political rationalities and programmes that deploy it from those that dreamt of a welfare state to those that imagine an advanced liberal society of prudential individuals and communities.

Therefore, an integral connection between epistemologies and practices of risk are elucidated within the governmentality thesis. Knowledge about the nature of risk must be understood within the context of the practices that are employed to give it meaning.

Within this context risk is produced as a calculable object used to ‘create systems of governance’ (Culpitt 1999, p. 27). A number of authors note that this calculative attitude towards risk became prominent as science and mathematics gained momentum as the dominant disciplines for creating and organising knowledge about the natural and social worlds during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Beck, 2003, 2004; Castel 1991; Douglas 2003; Ewald 1991; Giddens 2003a; Hacking 1991). Hacking (1991, p. 1) explains that:

A new type of law came into being, analogous to the laws of nature, but pertaining to people. These new laws were expressed in terms of probability. They carried with them the connotations of normalacy and of deviations from the norm. The cardinal concept of the psychology of the Enlightenment had been, simply, human nature. By the end of the nineteenth century, it was being replaced by something different: normal people.

Thus Hacking (1991, p. 4) notes that the calculus of probability became intrinsic to the ‘making up of people’, and stands as ‘*the* [original italics] philosophical success of the first half of the twentieth century’, evident in how ‘our public fears are endlessly debated in terms of probability’. Thus risk is a constituent of identity – people can be identified as high risk, low risk, at risk and a risk, which not only shapes the behaviours of people in relation to each other, but also in individuals’ personal management of themselves. Hence the construction of risk as a calculable object enables the identification of risk groups and populations, which in turn produces certain forms of knowledge and interventions (Lupton 2004, p. 87). Accordingly, Rose (1996a, p. 54) makes the point that calculative rationalities have become foundational to knowledge production, which has particular significance in the welfare arena. He observes that where once professions such as the ‘psy’ professions, which include social work, were once powerful in the production of knowledge, this power has been:

transferred to the calculative regimes of accounting and financial management... These certainly rely upon a claim to truth, but it is one that has a different character from that of the social human science: these

‘grey sciences’, these know-hows of enumeration, calculation, monitoring, evaluation, manage to be simultaneously modest and omniscient, limited yet apparently limitless in their application to problems as diverse as the appropriateness of the medical procedure and the viability of a university department (Rose 1996a, p. 54).

Dean (1999) develops this argument further, noting that it is important to acknowledge that diverse risk rationalities have been employed and deployed within the regime of neo-liberal governance. Dean (1999) makes the point that the heterogeneity of risk has been vital to the successes of these forms of governance to colonise disparate and distinct spaces and practices. Thus ‘the significance of risk does not lie with risk *itself* [original italics] but with what risk gets attached to’ (Dean 1999, p. 131). Hence Dean (1999, p. 145) observes that:

calculative rationalities such as those of risk have certain political polyvalence, that is, they can be invested with different sets of purposes depending on the political programmes and rationalities they come to be latched onto.

Thus in the context of neo-liberal welfarism, risk rationalities and technologies have been utilised in the construction of an ethos of prudentialism in which citizens (individually and collectively) are ‘responsibilised’ (Kelly 2001) for the prevention of, and response to, risk.

The calculative rationality of risk is in further evidence in the construction of the neo-liberal citizen as a ‘rational choice actor who calculates the benefits and costs of risks of acting in a certain way and then acts’ (Dean 1999, p. 145). Objectifying risk as a calculable entity renders it governable and controllable. Accordingly, those who become associated with risk (such as welfare clients) are similarly rendered calculable, governable and controllable. Thus practices of assessment and various forms of regulation, through practices of inclusion and exclusion, operate as the primary disciplining technologies of the government of risk (Rose 2000). Therefore risk operates as a specific ‘regime of truth’ (Foucault 1980) that casts the assertions of its logics of calculation, security and regulation within a framework of ‘*practicality, obviousness and common-sense*’ [original italics] (Mouffe 1995, cited in Culpitt 1999, p. 4). As Foucault (1980 p. 133) notes:

‘Truth’ is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. ‘Truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it.

Risk then is positioned within the governmentality literature as inducing the effects of truth in which the ‘rhetoric of common-sense defies any opposition as ‘unreasonable’ (Culpitt 1999, p. 4). As an effect of ‘truth’ then:

The dominant rhetoric about the perils of welfare dependency, arising out of the imperative of self-politicization, has exacerbated the ‘fear of the other’. The notion of risk has been used to support an anti-welfare rhetoric and to contextualise a form of neo-liberal individualism that is hostile to the legitimacy of the ‘other’. So much so that it could defensively frame any welfare dissensus as having the appearance of an anti-society (Culpitt 1999, p. 6).

Thus the production and use of ‘knowledge about risk’ is presented within the governmentality thesis as an innately political and moral artifact of government that enables mastery over time as well as the capacity to ‘discipline the future’ (Ewald 1991, p. 207).

## **Mentalities of rule, risk and welfare**

Security, particularly economic security, has become a chief concern of liberal government. The emergence of both the welfare state following the Second World War, and the post-welfare/post-social state of the 1980s (Jamrozik 2005; Leonard 1997; Rose 1996a), are generally accepted as reflections of government attempts to control for risks and respond to needs (Beck 2003, 2004; Beck & Willms 2004; Giddens 2003d; Jamrozik 2005; Jordan 1998; Kemshall 2004).

Rose (1996a, p. 48) argues that liberal government became concerned with governing social welfare as a means of reformulating ‘the relations between the political field and the management of economic and social affairs’. Various political authorities were thus inveighed with the responsibility for guaranteeing ‘both the freedom of the individual and the freedom of the capitalist enterprise’. In other words:



The State was to take responsibility for generating an array of technologies of government that would ‘social-ize’ both individual citizenship and economic life in the name of collective security (Rose 1996a, p. 48).

‘Social security’ was attended to through the operations of the welfare state which sought to temper the ‘unwanted side effects’ of increased industrialisation and capitalism, or in other words as an institutional response to reflexive modernisation (Beck 2003, 2004; Giddens 1994, 2003c). A social insurance model of welfare was implemented in which such risks were ‘pooled’ (Culpitt 1999; Dean 1999; Kemshall 2004; Jamrozik 2005; Jordan 1998). The pooling of risks within populations meant that experiences of individual hardship, such as ill health, unemployment and poverty, could be defined as social problems and hence the domain of the State. Welfare provision was thus universalised and for all intents and purposes operated as a strategy of nation-states to support economic growth whilst simultaneously promoting the collective needs and life chances of citizens (Kemshall 2004). Kelly (2001, p. 27) argues that this form of social insurance operated as an ‘inclusive’ technology of government ‘to socialise the regulation of the risks of a less reflexive modernity’.

In contrast, social work was fashioned as a particular form of welfare governance that was individualising and ‘responsibilising’ in its practice. The focus of social work was ‘problematic cases...judged as pathological in relation to social norms’ (Rose 1996a, p. 49). Here the operations of normalising judgements can be noted. However, Culpitt (1999, p. 65) argues that a focus on individuals alone would not have enabled risk to be discursively harnessed as an institutional stratagem of liberalism’s political will to ‘govern at a distance’. Thus Culpitt (1999) and Rose (1996a) note that families became specific targets of government. As Rose (199a, p. 49) explains:

The family, then, was to be instrumentalized as a *social machine* – both *made* social and utilized to *create* sociality – implanting the techniques of responsible citizenship under the tutelage of experts and in relation to a variety of sanctions and rewards. Complex assemblages would constitute the possibility of State departments, government offices and so forth acting as centre, by enabling their deliberation to be relayed into a whole variety of micro-locales within which the conduct of the citizen could be problematised and acted upon in terms of norms that calibrated personal normality in a way that was inextricably linked to its social consequences [original italics].

The organisation and provision of welfare then was premised upon a contractual relationship between the State and its citizenry – protection by the State was offered to individuals to enable them to conduct their lives responsibly, autonomously and ‘freely’ in the absence of overtly coercive and ‘present’ forms of government (Culpitt 1999).

In the wake of the ‘crisis’ of welfare in the 1970s and 1980s a marked transition occurred, from the socially focused welfare state of the post-war period to the commodified welfarism augmented by neo-liberalism (Kemshall, 2002; Leonard 1997; Lymbery 2004). Aligned with the risk society analysis of Beck and Giddens, governmentality theorists argue that ‘The universality of risk, as both social and individual threat’ (Culpitt 1999, p. 12) was successfully employed by neo-liberal governments to politicise fear amongst the populace of the catastrophe of welfare. Culpitt (1999, p. 48) remarks that:

notions of protection and care, which were allied with a general or social security against risk, have been destroyed. It is the shift in language that is significant: social security became welfare.

Within this context risk has been cast almost exclusively in economic as opposed to social terms and need has been re-moralised as indicative of individual failure (Culpitt 1999; Dean 1999; Fox 1999; Horlick-Jones 2003; Kemshall 2002; O’Malley 1996; Rose 1996a, 1996b, 2000). Culpitt (1999) thus observes that ‘Marketplace liberalism is so dominant that clever articulations of need are forced to “stumble over” the more urgent logic of costs and the apportioning of limited economic resources’. Hence a ‘risk-led’ as opposed to ‘needs-led’ focus of social government is said to dominate the orientation of contemporary social policy (Kemshall 2002, p. 40) and with it the charge of individuals to assume responsibility for preventing and managing risk. Accordingly the organisation of welfare services has changed alongside of the changed relations between government and professions such as social work (Dean 1999; Rose 1996a). Furthermore the practices of welfare professions, such as social work, are also said to have dramatically changed so that assessment, control and regulation of risk objects (that is, clients) has become social work’s ‘core business’. The changed landscape of social work practices is discussed in further detail in the next chapter.

## Neo-liberalism, risk and the moralisation of welfare clients

It has been suggested in this chapter that risk operates with disciplinary power within the context of neo-liberal government. It has also been noted how risk operates as a constituent of ‘good’ neo-liberal citizens who are constructed as individuals who actively ‘enterprise themselves’ (Rose 1996a, p. 57) by making rational choices to maximise their capacity to avoid or respond effectively to risks. Risk is privatised and citizens are held responsible for risk at a personal and community level. Prudential subjects are thus ‘rational subjects’ who are engaged in constant reflexive vigilance in the calculation and management of risk (Craddock 2004, p. 323). Hence Culpitt (1999, p. 13) notes that:

A perverse cycle exists where the more risky life seems, the more individuals are expected to manage and insure against that risk. The emergence of the more brutal aspects of risk, when allied intrinsically to individualism and random fate, are used as generative reasons for the obvious imperative of that very individualism.

Focussing on individual security has undermined collective responses to distress and need. Indeed, the obverse has become the case where the need of others has been redefined as dependency, and dependency has become scandalous (Culpitt, 1999, p. 139). Those people who have not actualised or enacted a subjectivity of self-reliance are recognised as culpable, deemed to be moral failures and in need of various forms of re-education to correct personal deficits. There is a distinct insidiousness to the logic of this form of ‘responsibilisation’: no matter the level or nature of disadvantage which people experience they are regarded as *active* agents in the exercise of their ‘re-moralisation’ and capacity for autonomy (Rose 2000).

According to Rose (1996a, p. 60):

this ethical a priori of active citizenship in an active society, this respecification of the ethics of personhood, is perhaps the most fundamental, and most generalizable, characteristic of these new rationalities of government...

Thus the subjectivities of citizens within the context of the risk-soaked rhetoric of advanced liberal government are to be understood as moral subjectivities. That is, the moral identities of individuals and groups are constituted through normative

judgements regarding the extent to which people are deemed to have accepted their responsibility to be autonomous. In the case of people within the spectre of welfare and criminal surveillance mechanisms, these normative judgements are cast predominantly in the pejorative (Culpitt 1999). As Rose (2000, p. 334) notes:

Within this new politics of conduct, the problems of problematic persons are reformulated as moral or ethical problems, that is to say, problems in the ways in which such persons understand and conduct themselves and their existence.

Framed in these terms, then, ‘ethical reconstruction’ (Rose 2000, p. 335) becomes a major objective of the panoply of interventions that risky individuals are subjected to. Hence, ‘The logics of risk inescapably locate the careers and identities of such tainted citizens within a regime of surveillance which actually constitutes them all as actually or potentially “risky” individuals’ (Rose 2000, p. 333). Accordingly, risk discourses operate as powerful constitutive forces in the construction of identities. However, it is also the case that while risk has become privatised within a politicised culture of reflexive individualism, risk discourse also has the effect of disembodiment ‘the subject’ through processes of enumeration and categorisation (Lupton 2004, p. 94). Thus risk-focused interventions are not ‘individualised’ in the sense that they herald a response to individual need. Instead the assessment and management of risk is girded within a system of rationalisation and standardisation according to broader knowledge regimes of population characteristics. Castel (1991, p. 288) claims ‘*there is no longer a subject* [original italics]...but factors, statistical correlations of heterogeneous elements’. Hence governmentality theorists and their supporters note the proliferation of ‘at risk’ and ‘a risk’ discourses that operate in the service of the control and regulation of various populations.

## Summary

The governmentality thesis provides a critical perspective of how risk operates within the political context of neo-liberalism. Concerned with the ‘conduct of conduct’ (Burchell 1996; Dean 1999), this analysis claims that risk is a concept that operates with significant discursive power in the operations of social government. Within this analysis, the neutrality and objective rationality of risk is debunked. Risk is identified as acting as a strategic operant of neo-liberal governance for constituting liberal

subjectivities as risk identities that are formulated within a moral ethos of prudentialism and responsabilisation. The politics of the production of knowledge about risk is thus recognised as having profound ramifications for all aspects of social organisation, particularly in regard to the regulation of conduct and relationships. This exposition of the moral and political functions of risk within contemporary society is also considered by Douglas (2003) in her analysis of the cultural and symbolic functions of risk, which comprises the final theory section of this chapter.

## **The Cultural Context for Understanding the Nature and Operations of Risk: The Cultural and Symbolic Functions of Risk**

Mary Douglas's work on risk is recognised as having made an important contribution to understanding the normative function of risk in contemporary society. Douglas theorises risk as a cultural construct for responding to danger. She argues that risk operates to delineate boundaries between the self and 'other', as a way to structure social groups, and as a response to deviancy (Lupton 2004; Tansey 2004). The most prominent aspects of her work that have been incorporated into the social work risk literature are her analysis of the forensic capacity of risk to systematically allocate blame, and her critique of the production and utilisation of risk knowledge. Accordingly, these two aspects of her theory of risk are briefly presented here to signify the cultural context within which ideas about risk are generated and operate.

### **The forensic power of risk**

According to Douglas (2003), risk has been culturally defined to mean danger in modern society. She claims that risk is an overtly moral and politically imbued social construct that functions with distinct social purpose. Whilst maintaining that experiences of danger and hazards are only too real (Douglas 2003, p. 29), Douglas impresses that 'ideas about risk' operate with a civic instrumentality that bespeak deeply embedded cultural ideas about 'pollution', 'danger', 'sin' and 'Otherness' (Lupton 2004). Thus Douglas shares in those aspects of Beck's and Giddens's theory

that emphasise the synergistic, dynamic and constitutive dimensions of risk. However, there are some key points of difference between Beck's and Giddens's sociology of risk and the cultural anthropological study of risk conducted by Douglas, which I will briefly attend to.

Whereas Beck and Giddens critically engage with modern notions of risk as events within individual and social contexts, Douglas emphasises the symbolic status of risk as a signal of danger within culturally institutionalised settings that defy historical categorisation (Lupton 2004). Furthermore, whereas Beck and Giddens, to varying degrees, highlight the disruptive nature and destructive potential of late modern risks, Douglas argues that the concept of risk operates with regulative power to establish and maintain social order (Douglas 2003). Douglas's analysis of risk considers how certain acts, individuals and groups come to be defined in terms of risk whilst others are not. Thus, where Beck and Giddens engage with the concept of risk as a consequence and adjunct of increased scientific and technological intervention, Douglas construes environmental and other 'risk oriented' debates in different terms. She claims they reflect cultural orderings of moral discourses that in turn are politically appropriated to suit the interests of individuals and groups (Douglas 2003; Lupton 2004; Tansey 2004). Consequently, Douglas engages with the perception of risk, as opposed to its 'social facts' (Beck 2004; Culpitt, 1999, p. 93).

In common with governmentality theorists, Douglas (2003) argues statements about risk are used to distribute modern notions of justice through the ascription of blame. Therefore, she claims, risk acts as a powerful forensic resource in modern societies. Within this context, Douglas (2003, p. 15-16) asserts that:

The idea of risk could have been custom-made. Its universalizing terminology, its abstractness, its power of condensation, its scientificity, its connection with objective analysis, make it perfect. Above all, its forensic uses fit the tool to the task of building a culture that supports a modern industrial society. Of the different types of blaming system that we can find in tribal society, the one we are in now is almost ready to treat every death as chargeable to someone's account, every accident as caused by someone's criminal negligence, every sickness a threatened prosecution. Whose fault? is the first question. Then, what action? Which means, what damages? what compensation? what restitution?

Whilst Douglas doesn't attribute risk as overtly acting in the service of a particular ideology, she emphatically maintains that:

in all places at all times the universe is moralized and politicized. Disasters that befoul the air and soil and poison the water are generally tuned to political account: someone already unpopular is going to be blamed for it (Douglas 2003, p. 5).

Furthermore, risk operates as a protective strategy. Douglas explains that in pre-modern societies danger and taboo acted as mechanisms for establishing social cohesion and order by marginalising certain behaviours and the persons who committed them. Thus emphasis was placed on the protection of the community from 'dangerous' individuals. However, in modern societies, Douglas argues, risk is used as a means of securing the protection of individuals who are vulnerable to others (Douglas 2003; Lupton 2004). She explains:

The dialogue about risk plays the role equivalent to taboo or sin, but the slope is tilted in the reverse direction, away from protecting the community and in favour of protecting the individual (Douglas 2003, p. 28).

Thus to be 'at risk' is considered the equivalent of being sinned against, which in turn has ramifications for holding individuals to account.

## **Methodological individualism and risk**

In common with the risk society and governmentality theses, Douglas is critical of the politics that underpin the production of knowledge about risk, and in turn, how this knowledge is used within the scientific paradigm. Douglas is scathing in her critique of the cultural innocence that dominates technical scientific models of risk assessment and perception, particularly in the domains of economics and psychology. At issue here is the claim that these disciplines have relied on two false beliefs. First, that technology enables more accurate knowledge about danger, and, second, that the 'polluting' hand of 'interests and ideology' (Douglas 2003, p. 11) can be excluded from the production of knowledge. Within the scientific paradigm, then, individual cognitive processes must be isolated from the subjective experiences of both the researcher and the researched to facilitate objective assessments and perceptions of risk (Douglas 2003).

Expanding on her anthropological theory of risk, Douglas (2003) states that there is an assumption that ‘moderns’ [sic] can know ‘real’ risks and ‘real’ dangers through the use of technologies that were unavailable to ‘primitives’ [sic]. Because of their reliance upon the inferior domains of superstition and folklore to establish causality, ‘primitives’ are framed as cognitively under-developed in comparison to ‘moderns’. However, risk is ‘de-moralised’ by science and technology – morality is considered to ‘contaminate’ and ‘pollute’ objectivity. Risk is thereby framed within this scientific argument as a calculative, as opposed to a moral or political, entity. Furthermore Douglas (2003, p. 24) notes that the objectivist scientific model defines risk as danger and thus associates it with only negative outcomes. In keeping with the scientific enterprise of risk, Douglas states that the ‘purity’ of this culturally innocent model demands that risk calculation be recognised as a specialist technology of experts. It is assumed lay people are not able to make the accurate, objective assessments of the ‘scientist’. The argument here, then, is that technological knowledge of the ‘real causes’ of these ‘real risks’ enables blame to be legitimately ascribed by experts and lay people.

Douglas stridently argues against the propositions of science. In a pointed refutation of the credibility of these arguments Douglas (2003, pp. 13-14) remarks:

Warm-blooded, passionate, inherently social beings though we think we are, humans are presented in this context as hedonic calculators calmly seeking to pursue private interests. We are said to be risk averse, but, alas, so ineffective in handling information that we are unintentional risk-takers; basically we are fools...Personally I doubt that we need to be explained to ourselves by professional risk psychologists. I do not doubt that danger is with us, and very real, but for heaven’s sake, how could we have survived on this planet if our thinking is so inherently flawed?

In defiance of the methodological individualism of this model, Douglas (2003) emphasises the emotive, aesthetic, moral, political and inter-subjective contexts that support definitions of risk. Without culture, she claims, there can be no understanding of the meaning of risk. And according to Douglas (2003), definitions of risk are intimately tied to their forensic functions within societies.



## Summary

Whilst this presentation of Douglas's contribution to understanding the cultural significance of risk has been brief it has illustrated the key aspects of her work that have been integrated into the social work risk literature. In common with the risk society and governmentality theses, Douglas's work is a resounding critical analysis of the operations of risk in modern society. Her cultural theory of risk illustrates how fear is mobilised as a creative force in the construction of beliefs and systems of justice, in the reinforcement of power relations and in efforts to control social boundaries. Douglas's theory clearly situates risk within a constructionist model as a moral and political construct mobilised for moral and political purposes.

## Concluding Comments to the Chapter

The risk society and governmentality theses and Douglas cultural/symbolic analysis of risk have been influential in the development of theory in the expanding academic literature of risk in social work. Indeed, it is clear these theories sit at the heart of the vast literature of many disciplines that are concerned with the nature and operations of risk in contemporary society. Thus while it may be debated whether or not we are now living in Beck's risk society (Scott 2000), there seems little dispute that risk has become central to the organisation of many aspects of life in both personal and public domains.

Each of the theoretical perspectives presented argues against a totally realist conception of risk. However, the extent to which risk can be assumed to comprise realist elements is disputed between them. Nonetheless, what is not in dispute by risk society, governmentality and cultural risk theorists is that risk operates as a political construct that actively and materially constitutes the living conditions of people. These theoretical perspectives clarify that defining and recognising 'what is a risk' cannot be separated from the operations of power, in various social, political or cultural contexts. Their critical argument of the nature and operations of risk has been embraced within the rapidly developing critical social work risk literature, which is the subject of the following chapter.

## Chapter 3

# A Critical Perspective of the Nature and Operations of Risk in Social Work

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‘Knowledge always lacks. Ambiguity always lurks’ (Douglas 2003, p. 9).

## Introduction to the Chapter

Recent attention given to risk as a product and practice of power (Culpitt 1999) within social work indicates that the risk society, governmentality and cultural/symbolic theories of risk have been integrated into the social work risk literature. This literature theorises risk by referencing the social conditions of the risk society, the political conditions of neo-liberalism and the cultural conditions of radical uncertainty that are engendered within the context of reflexive modernity (Green 2004; Kelly 2001; Webb 2006). The critical analysis of risk in social work positions it as a defining characteristic of contemporary social work practice (Green 2004; Houston & Griffiths 2000; Kemshall 2000, 2002; McDonald 2006; Parton 1996, 1999, 2000, 2001; Parton & O’Byrne 2000; Webb 2003, 2006). Writers who adopt this critical theoretical stance tend to problematise the nature and operations of risk. They claim that social work has been subjected to the disciplining force of neo-liberal rule with the effect that social work knowledge, morality and ethics, and practices have been redefined to reflect a modern day preoccupation with risk (Kemshall 2002; Parton 1999; Rose 1996a). Within this analysis, risk is said to have replaced need as the focus of social and economic policies and accordingly social control and regulation have overtaken former commitments to, and practices of, social care (Green 2004; Houston & Griffiths 2000; Kemshall 2002; Mullaly 2001; Parton 1999, 2001; Parton & O’Byrne 2000). Thus the emergent critical social work literature presents a pessimistic account of how risk operates to define the scope, aims

and foundations of contemporary social work knowledge, morals and ethics, and practices.

This chapter considers the substance of these claims by grouping together writers in social work whose theoretical affiliations reflect the critical risk theories presented in the preceding chapter. The presentation of this literature is structured according to how risk is theorised and commented upon in the areas of social work knowledge, morals and ethics, and practice. Each dimension is considered in turn alongside a statement regarding the core, risk-based practice dilemmas this literature signals for social work. At the end of the chapter I reflect upon the need for a future research agenda in social work that is able to empirically address these dilemmas. I argue that the ‘catastrophe narrative’ embedded within the critical social work risk literature depicts social workers as unable to escape from the politically and morally conservative and repressive ethos of neo-liberal rule within their practice. Thus the chapter concludes with a statement of the aims and research question that have directed this study of the operations of risk.

## **Critiquing Knowledge about the Nature and Operations of Risk in Social Work**

In the preceding chapter, I discussed how theorising risk involves consideration of the content and ramifications of various paradigms that explicate the ‘nature’ of risk. Within this discussion I stated that the paradigmatic controversies that centre upon the disputed nature of risk are often presented in polarised terms within the socio-cultural risk literature. The same can be said of risk literature in social work. A realist paradigm is evident in social work literature that considers risk as a calculable concept that can be assessed and profiled according to quantifiable measures. An idealist paradigm underpins the critical social work risk literature that focuses upon the destabilised status of knowledge about risk, lack of trust in expert opinion and a growing awareness of the incalculability of late modern risks (Kemshall 2002, p. 14). This literature politicises the construct of risk and the ‘effects of truth’ (Culpitt 1999) engendered by realist conceptions of risk. In this section I consider the main points of contest between these risk paradigms as they are discussed in the social work risk

literature. This illustrates that the disputed nature and operations of risk presents practitioners with a dilemma about how to respond theoretically and practically to risk in their interventions.

## **The realist paradigm of the nature and operations of risk in social work**

It is generally agreed that the realist paradigm of risk is the dominant model that is operationalised to guide contemporary social work practice (Green 2004; Houston & Griffiths 2000; Kemshall 2000, 2002; Lester 2004; Webb 2006). The sheer volume of literature that addresses the ‘actuaries of risk’ (Castel 1991; Ewald 1991; Webb 2006) in social work is a testament to this claim. Kemshall (2002, p. 13) argues that this actuarial model of risk is given expression within the ‘risk as probability discourse’. This discourse presents risk as meaning danger and hazards (Fraser, Richman & Galinsky 1999; Lupton 2004). Thus it is spoken of exclusively in the pejorative. Risk is also deemed to be a calculable object within this discourse (Dean 1999; Ewald 1991; Hacking 1991) and the ‘reality’ of risk is considered self-evident (Culpitt 1999; Kemshall 2002). Indeed, to argue against the reality and obviousness of risk is presented as a naïve and reckless endeavour that compromises the safety of others (Culpitt 1999; Houston 2001; Kemshall 2002). Such claims are evident in the social work literature, for example, within debates concerning the real or constructed ‘nature’ of child abuse (D’Cruz 2004a, 2004b; Houston 2001; Houston & Griffiths 2000; Parton, Thorpe & Wattam 1997). The logic of the argument is that certain activities are inherently risky, requiring a measured response on the part of policy makers and practitioners (Renn 1992). The same is also said of certain individuals (Dean 1999; Fox 1999; Kemshall 2002). That is, the probabilistic discourse of risk supports the view that certain people are more likely to experience risks or be a risk to others. For example, children and young people are often seen to be at risk by virtue of their age (Green 1997; Kelly 2001; Sharland 2006) and people with a mental illness are deemed to be either at risk or a risk by virtue of their symptomatology (Warner 2006).

Evidence of the sphere of influence of probabilistic thinking about risk in social work is apparent in the development of social work knowledge and practice. It sits at the heart of debates regarding the foundational sources of knowledge that are considered appropriate for guiding the development of social work theory and practice models (Parton 2001; Sheldon 2001; Webb 2001, 2006). According to Webb (2006, p. 126), the contemporary insurgence of an empirical focus upon the development of practice knowledge can be understood as ‘a response to growing fears of risk’, given that ‘empirical realism...reassuringly purports to offer certainty, facticity, predictability and stability’. He notes the rise of ‘empirical realism’ in social work as signifying:

the individualisation of practice interventions based on scientific criteria, with common sense precepts replacing depth interpretation and a preoccupation with unresolved desires...This shift also represents a closer link between applied and basic research and front-line practice... (Webb 2006, p. 121).

The rise of ‘acutarialism’ (Horlick-Jones 2003; Lymbery & Butler 2004; McDonald 2006; Webb 2006), short-term work (Culpitt 1999; Webb 2006), increased favour with ‘research based’ practice models such as Evidence Based Practice (McDonald 2006; Parton 2000; Webb 2001), as well as the ‘audit culture’ of human service organisations (Lymbery 2004; McDonald 2006; Webb 2006) can all be understood as reflecting realist conceptualisations of the ontological and epistemological properties of risk.

These developments in thinking about risk in social work have had a corresponding impact upon the technologies used within social work practice, particularly in the areas of case or care management, risk assessment and in the increased use of information and communication technologies (Culpitt 1999; Garland 2003; Rose 1996a; Webb 2006). It is argued that the probabilistic model of risk has the greatest likelihood of achieving accuracy in risk assessments, thus reducing the likelihood of social workers making mistakes in their practice (Green 2004; Lennings 2005; Munro 1999; Parton 2001; Parton, Thorpe & Wattam 1997; Tomison 2002; Warner 2003). Formal risk assessment measures are spoken of as increasing consistency and accountability in decision making (Goddard et al. 1999; Green 2004; Leschied et al. 2003; Lester 2004; Parton, Thorpe & Wattam 1997), and off-setting errors in human reasoning (Lennings 2005; Munro 1999). Nonetheless, it is recognised within this literature that solely relying upon technico-scientific practices is problematic in social

work (Firkins & Candlin 2006; Humphries 2003; Lennings 2005; Munro 1999; Shaw & Shaw 2001), though the resolution of how to achieve a balance between the two sources of practice knowledge appears unresolved. Thus reduction of the likelihood of harm occurring is stated as the goal of probabilistic assessments of risk (Houston 2001; Lennings 2005; Munro 1999), although efficient use of services is also cited (Kemshall 2000, 2002; Munro 1999). Controlling error to foster correct identification of risk is therefore a primary epistemological concern of the probabilistic model of risk in social work.

## **The critique of the realist paradigm in social work**

The realist risk paradigm has been critiqued in the social work literature on the basis that it empties risk of its political and moral significance and functions (Craddock 2004; Culpitt 1999; D'Cruz 2004a; 2004b; Dean 1999; Green 2004; Houston & Griffiths 2000; Kelly 2000; Parton 1996; Parton, Thorpe & Wattam 1997) (discussed later in this chapter). Writers comprising this critical perspective also assert that the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the probabilistic model of risk are invalid (Culpitt 1999; Gillingham 2006; Houston & Griffiths 2000; Kemshall 2000; Parton 2001). The claims made against the validity of the probabilistic model reflect the essence of the postmodern critique that meta-narratives of scientific rationality and economics have failed to progress social development (Bauman 1995, 1997), and Beck's (2003, 2004) and Giddens's (2003a, 2003b, 2003c) recognition of the incalculability of late modern risks.

Thus the quantification of risk is treated with immense scepticism within the burgeoning critical social work literature. This literature questions the validity of actuarial practices of risk assessment and management in social work in terms of:

- the temporal distortion of risk as a future-oriented as opposed to retrospective activity (Goddard et al. 1999; Green 2004; Kemshall 2000);
- the over-simplification of complex issues when attempting to establish causal explanations (Croft 2001; Goddard et al. 1999); and

- the disqualification of alternate sources of expertise, such as professional judgement and practice wisdom (Craddock 2004; Goddard et al. 1999; Green 2004; Kemshall 2000; Parton 2000, 2001; Webb 2001).

Drawing largely upon the critical perspective expressed within the risk society and governmentality theses, and Douglas's cultural/symbolic analysis of risk, these challenges to the realist paradigm of risk amount to a comprehensive critique and foundation for alternative conceptualisations of risk in social work that foreground the uncertainty of knowledge about risk. Accordingly, for those who have embraced alternative ontological and epistemological paradigms of risk, the probabilistic discourse of risk is itself considered to be a risk to people (Gillingham 2006; Goddard et al. 1999; Parton, Thorpe & Wattam 1997; Silver & Miller 2002). Its epistemological and value standpoints are considered by many to be inappropriate and undesirable as the sole basis for developing social work knowledge and welfare practices (Humphries 2003; Kemshall 2000; McDonald 2003; Parton 2000).

Croft (2001) contends that if the meaning of 'risk as uncertainty' was more fully embraced within the welfare sector, practitioners would be able to realise a greater range of future possibilities for welfare clients. She distinguishes contingent risk (that which is a future possibility) from actual risk ('that which has crystallised into something tangible') (Croft 2001, p. 743). Thus Croft (2001, p. 745) suggests that risk could be reconceptualised as '*a diachronic process during which the uncertainties of contingency may crystallise into consequences which may or may not give rise to further contingent conditions* [original italics]'. Thus she argues that a more contingent understanding of risk would enable practitioners to be more flexible and responsive to risk 'events' and 'consequences' as they emerge, effectively bypassing the necessity to pre-empt and control for 'risk' and hence control clients.

Parton (2001) offers a different perspective. He suggests that risk and uncertainty need to be held as two distinctly different entities and concepts within social work. Parton (2000, 2001) claims that much of the confusion that reigns in our profession in regard to risk is the result of the conflation of uncertainty with risk. His view is that if it could be accepted that social work knowledge is itself characteristically uncertain then the importance and value of professional judgement in decision making can be

recognised and supported (Parton 2001, p. 69). Parton believes this would avert the tendency to blame practitioners when things do not go as planned. Green (2004) makes a similar point. He states that 'irreducible uncertainty' prevails within the community services sector which in turn invokes the inevitability of error and the need for sound judgement. He claims that it is important to accept rather than deny that uncertainty characterises practice so that realistic outcomes and flexible, creative and professional responses to the risk-saturated environments of community care can be supported.

Despite such attempts to reconfigure an alternate epistemology and practice of risk, there have been few successes at 'speaking back' to the dominance of probabilistic models of risk. A notable exception is Turnell and Edwards's (1999) 'Signs of Safety' approach that has evolved from 'Solutions-focused' perspectives (DeJong & Berg 2002; Milner & O'Byrne 2002; O'Connell & Palmer 2004). Nonetheless those who problematise the probabilistic model of risk claim that its practices are currently afforded greater legitimacy within the human services sector. It is argued that in combination the increased scrutiny by the public and managers of social workers' decisions and an increasingly litigious mentality (Reamer 2000; Regehr et al. 2002) support the actuarial mindset that privileges a calculative attitude towards risk (McDonald 2006; Webb 2006). Within this context social workers are faced with the dilemma of how to comprehend the divide in knowledge about the nature of risk and how this knowledge operates within, and impacts upon, their practice. The politicisation of knowledge about risk within the critical social work risk literature may well have revealed how power operates in the construction and utilisation of such knowledge. However, it is also noted that presently there are few legitimate alternatives for taking this understanding into direct social work practice (Croft 2001; Shaw & Shaw 2001; Webb 2006).

## **Critiquing the Moral and Ethical Nature and Operations of Risk in Social Work**

In contrast to realist and objectivist paradigms of risk, morals and ethics are considered central, rather than peripheral or methodologically problematic, to how the



operations of risk are theorised and commented upon within the critical social work risk literature. Morality and ethics are a chief, though still relatively recent, concern of these writers. According to Ericson and Doyle (2003, p. 4), 'the rise of risk entails an attendant rise in the new moralities of responsibility and accountability at multiple levels of society: institutions, organisations, communities and individuals'. In the following section of the chapter I review how the political implications of the moral and ethical nature and operations of risk have been theorised within the defining context of neo-liberal risk society in the critical social work risk literature. This illustrates the moral dilemma which social workers are confronted with, given their role in creating and sustaining risk-based client subjectivities in risk assessment and other interventions. I then present some recent suggestions from within the critical social work risk literature of how social workers might 'speak back' to the conservative and repressive morality of neo-liberalism.

## **Moralising risk identities**

As was noted in the presentation of the governmentality thesis in the preceding chapter, risk has been theorised as being employed as a key conceptual and rhetorical tool to displace government commitment to welfare provision (Culpitt 1999; Kemshall 2002; Parton & O'Byrne 2000). Recapping this argument, risk is discursively positioned within neo-liberal rhetoric as meaning actual (Castel 1991; Ewald 1991) or potential (Culpitt 1999; Kemshall 2000; O'Malley 1996) threat, harm and danger. As Douglas (2003, p. 24) remarks, 'the word *risk* now means danger; *high risk* means a lot of danger'. Thus in relation to welfare debates, risk is employed as a 'semiology of catastrophe' (Culpitt 1999, p. 37; cf. Barry, Osborne & Rose 1996) to impress the seriousness and severity of the existing and looming financial crises of welfare (such as the ageing of populations and corresponding decline in birth rates in western countries). Fear is politicised within this rhetoric (Culpitt 1999; Furedi 2003) and harnessed to justify and promote the values of protectionism and prudentialism (Barry, Osborne & Rose 1996; Culpitt 1999; Green 2004; O'Malley 1996; Parton 1999; Rose 1996a, 1996b).

Within this context, risk becomes pivotal in the alignment between political and personal goals within an ethos of 'private enterprise, wealth and self-reliance' (Hewitt

1992, cited in Culpitt 1999, p. 15). The argument here is that the values of freedom, security and independence have been distorted within the political and economic rhetoric of neo-liberalism so that the 'suffering of Others' (Bauman 1995, 1997; Parton & O'Byrne 2000) no longer acts as a motivator of government response. Consequently a 'new morality' is fashioned, within which need is presented in pejorative terms as dependency (Culpitt 1999; Kemshall 2002). Welfare provision is rendered problematic at an individual and social level and is commodified in accordance with the imperatives of market sustainability and opportunity (Barry, Osborne & Rose 1996; Culpitt 1999; Kemshall 2002; Leonard 1997; Rose 1996a). Culpitt (1999, p. 147) pointedly remarks that:

The language of risk and its various epistemologies reflects defence against risk, not satisfaction of needs. The effect of this in terms of the discourses about welfare dependency is a grand 'emptying out' of the validity of social rights... Previously, the legitimisation of rights presupposed the welfare state. The nature of welfare discourse has totally changed. Now the perspectives on governance, in an age of risk, imply that the proper role of the state is not the meeting of needs, and the satisfaction of rights, but protection against risk.

This reconfiguration of welfare provision and social work practice through market-based interpretations of risk has had a profound impact upon how social work clients are discursively positioned within neo-liberal risk society. As Davies (1994, cited in Healy 2000, p. 46) states, 'We can only ever speak ourselves or be spoken into existence within the terms of available discourses...', thus welfare client subjectivities (identities) come to be constituted through references to neo-liberal discourses of risk that render need as a problem and hence those in need as similarly problematic. Reflecting an increasing interest in the construction of clienthood (Juhlia et. al. 2003; Taylor & White 2000; Warner 2006), consideration has recently been given to how client identities are constructed as risk-based identities. Clients are spoken of as 'at risk' of harm by others, or 'a risk' of harming others (for example, see Croft 2001; Fox 1999; Furedi 2003; Kelly 2000, 2001; Kemshall 2002; Krane & Davies 2000; Lupton 2004; McDonald 2006; Warner 2006). As Furedi (2003, p. 19) comments:

The emergence of the 'at risk' concept ruptures the traditional relationship between individual action and the probability of some hazard. To be at risk is no longer only about what you do – it is also about who you are. It becomes a fixed attribute of the individual...

Similarly to be 'a risk' can mean being cast as 'intractably risky' (Rose 2000, p. 333). In this instance individuals are seen as 'somehow faulty or incomplete, and [their] very nature thus seems to place them permanently beyond the limits of civility and its demands on subjectivity' (Rose 2000, p. 334). Thus risk identities are flawed identities, or to borrow White's (1995, p. 43) phrase, they are 'spoiled identities' and on this basis they are created as 'Others' (Bauman 1995, 1997, 2000; Culpitt 1999). To be 'at risk' or 'a risk' is indicative of a moral lapse or failure to operate as a responsible, knowledgeable and rational individual (Burchell 1996; Culpitt 1999; Hannah-Moffat 1999). This construct of acceptable personhood is presented as necessary within neo-liberal welfare discourses to secure against risk at an individual and social level. Thus individuals and communities are 'responsibilised' for risk, whether they are the protagonist or 'victim' of actual or future harm (Hannah-Moffat 1999; Kelly 2000, 2001; O'Malley 1996; Rose 1996b, 2000).

## **Constructing moralised client risk identities in social work**

Social work is directly implicated in the construction of these risk identities. Our assessments and interventions actively construct clients as objects of risk (Fox 1999; Green 1997; Krane & Davies 2000; Parton 1999) and the 'locus of risk' (Warner 2006). The task of social workers is to 'remoralise' clients so that they accept responsibility for themselves so that they can actualise as independent, productive citizens (Culpitt 1999; Kemshall 2004; Rose 1996a, 2000). As an object of risk, they are not recognised according to their humanity but as a constellation of risk factors to be studied, measured and corrected (Dean 1999; Green 1997; Houston & Griffiths 2000; Kelly 2001; Moffat 1999; Parton 1999; Rose 2000). Service provision then is dependent upon the enumeration of risk factors (Kemshall 2002). As an object of high risk, clients are subject to a range of disciplining practices that act to reform, control and contain the potentiality of harm to or by them (Dean 1999; Lupton 2004; Moffat 1999; Parton 1999; Rose 1996a, 1996b, 2000; Warner 2006). As an object of low risk, services can be denied (Green 2004; Kemshall 2002) in spite of apparent need. In either case, the consequence for clients is that they are invited to see themselves and recognised by others in terms of a deficit model of self for which they are charged with the responsibility for resolving.

Craft and Willis (2005) pointedly demonstrate in their study of the trajectory between child protection and the juvenile justice system for children in care that the creation and reinforcement of negative identities of clients by social workers has devastating immediate and long-term consequences. Warner's (2006) study of the location and governance of risk in mental health yielded a similar result. Warner (2006, para. 29) warns that:

The implications of locating risk in 'dangerous individuals' compared with locating it in specific symptoms of mental illness or in the wider social context in which individuals may find themselves are major. In simple terms, the 'dangerous individual' will be subject to quite different forms of constraint and surveillance – such as via the criminal justice system – compared with the one who is identified as 'safe' but for the risks located in their active psychotic symptoms when unwell.

Thus the emergent critical narrative of the operations of risk in social work indicates the connection between client identities and the interventions that are implemented by social workers. These connections bespeak the morally conservative and repressive ethos of neo-liberal risk society. The dilemma which social workers face in this context is that the 'new moralities' of neo-liberal risk society are regarded as inescapable features of social work practice (Parton & O'Byrne 2000; Parton, Thorpe & Wattam 1997; Webb 2006). The challenge for us as social workers, then, is how we can act with moral and ethical integrity in our interventions within this context.

## **Speaking back to risk in neo-liberal risk society**

The pervasiveness of the conservative political and moral philosophy and practices of neo-liberalism that have come to shape contemporary social work in the risk society might easily be seen to have engendered a 'politics of despair' (Mullaly 2001) within our profession. As Lymbery and Butler (2004, p. 1) remark:

many social work practitioners and students...experience a gap between the ideals that informed their entry into the profession – for example, a commitment to social justice and to making a difference in people's lives – and the realities of practice with which they are confronted. Practitioners are struggling to survive (let alone thrive) as they experience externally imposed changes to their work that move them away from their personal and professional values.

It has been argued that the intellectual critique of 'post' theories of the emancipatory ideals and values of social work has further served to undermine the profession's confidence to confront and appropriately respond to the grim realities of neo-conservative, 'post-welfarist' rule (Hugman 2001; Mullaly 2001). Undoubtedly, the profession and the organisations social workers work in face significant challenges in this context, as Green (2004, p. 4) explains:

How the ethical agency and its workers balance these competing demands and how they define the relative significance of the client's present against the future are critical choices which will have a significant impact on the way a service defines what it considers to be the priorities for intervention. This process presents complex political and ethical dilemmas for agencies with respect to client rights to services which are risk taking, responsive and committed to their duty of care, while at the same time being protective of workers and the community. These are policy and practice issues of considerable complexity. Unfortunately most risk frameworks provide little assistance in their resolution, or do not even recognise their existence.

However, Parton and O'Byrne (2000), McBeath and Webb (2002) and Webb (2006) suggest that the uncertainty that prevails within the conditions of late modernity can be utilised by social workers as a valuable form of response to the political and moral conservatism that is endemic to neo-liberal risk society.

Parton and O'Byrne (2000) claim that social work is primarily a moral activity. However, they note that their notion of morality within constructivist social work is a very particular one that is 'relevant to the uncertain times in which we live and the inherent ambiguity which we see as lying at the core of social work' (Parton & O'Byrne 2000, p. 178). Drawing upon the work of Bauman (1995, 1997, 2000), Parton and Byrne (2000) discuss the importance of reconceptualising morality as moral responsibility. According to Bauman (1997, p. 3), 'Moral life is a life of continuous uncertainty'. In this life we are constantly faced with the responsibility and burden of choice of how to act in regard to 'Others'. This is particularly the case within the conditions of the risk society where the distance between deeds and their outcomes is immense, defying rational calculation. He claims that modernist ethical laws, based upon the principles of universalisation and reason, have resoundingly failed in their attempt to eliminate uncertainty, ensure 'right' decisions are made and progress the social good. However, rather than view this failure pessimistically, Bauman (1995, 1997) suggests the contingency and indeterminacy of our choices

provides us with an opportunity to be more conscious in our considerations of how our actions might impact on 'Others'. He claims that:

it is precisely because of the demise of the allegedly unified and ostensibly unique ethical code, that the 'regulative ideal' of moral responsibility may rise into full flight (Bauman 1997, p. 7).

Therefore Bauman (1995, 1997) suggests that ambivalence and the burden of choice are simply inescapable within postmodern society. Essentially, he argues, we need to accept this and 'deal with it'. What this also means is that we need to 're-personalise' and re-engage with the 'emotion of morality' that is akin to compassion (Fox 2006; von Dietze & Orb 2000). Thus the primary question for us becomes 'How can I act in response to the suffering and "unspoken demands" of the "Other" and thus act with the intent of being-for the "Other"?' (Bauman 1997, 2000).

Parton and O'Byrne (2000, p. 44) similarly claim that notions of ambiguity, indeterminacy and uncertainty are at the core of social work and should be built upon to open up the potential for creative and novel ways of thinking and responding to risk. Rather than viewing the uncertainty generated within the cultural context of reflexive modernisation as problematic, Parton and O'Byrne suggest it provides an opportunity for more considered, reflective and moral practice. However, they caution that in refusing to 'hide behind the rules we are fully exposed to the anguish of responsibility and the consequences of our choices' (Parton & O'Byrne 2000, p. 180). Consequently:

Logic, reason and ethics are brought down from their absolute, pre-existent heights into the creative, contextual web of day-to-day action and decision making. It suggests that we shift from a conception of truth as discovery to a conception of truth as process, or put another way, we should focus on the how rather than the what of truth or virtue (Parton & O'Byrne 2000, p. 182).

Thus Parton and O'Byrne (2000, p. 182) claim that:

morality and responsibility are implied on each and every occasion we think and act. It is a concern with the question of the moral responsibility for the Other...which...has from the beginning been at the heart of social work.

In a similar argument, McBeath and Webb (2002, p. 1024) state that there is a need to 'develop an ethics of social work that is compatible with the facts of complexity and risk'. They note that reliance upon utilitarian and Kantian ethics, in combination with the defensive attitude toward decision making in social services, has diminished the possibility for moral agency within social work. Thus in common with Bauman (1995, 1997) and Parton and O'Byrne (2000), McBeath and Webb (2002, p. 1020) suggest it is important to reinstate the view of 'persons-as-subjective-agents' so that a situated and contextualised morality can be instilled in an effort to do 'good' social work. However, in a point of departure from Parton and O'Byrne (2000), Webb (2006, p. 201) argues 'it is time for social work to embrace a core ethical framework' in the service of defining 'the ethical good of social work'. He optimistically proposes that 'In some very important respects social work can turn the neo-liberal economic doctrine on its head by emphasising care, compassion, solidarity and shared values' (Webb 2006, p. 11).

More recently, Webb (2006) has argued that the moral identity of social workers is 'constituted in and through the taking of moral stances'. Following C. Taylor's (1989, cited in Webb 2006) lead, Webb (2006, p. 204) states that what is important in this endeavour 'is how we orient ourselves in relation to the good, and the way in which we negotiate and move in the ethical space we inevitably find ourselves in as human agents'. Webb (2006) claims that for social workers to become ethically 'strong evaluators' in the face of the self-interested ethics of neo-liberal risk society, we need to aspire to being a particular kind of moral person. In this endeavour, Webb (2006) claims five ethical perspectives are central to a 'practice of value'. These are presented briefly below.

### **An ethics of care**

Webb (2006, p. 210) notes that 'the value of the care relationship lies in its potential for compassionate ethical reciprocity'. An ethics of care is mostly associated with feminist ethics (Banks 2006; Hugman 2003; Meagher & Parton 2004), in which care is conceived as an 'attribute of relation' based upon connection as opposed to care being cast as an inherent virtue (Banks 2006, p. 59). Webb (2006, p. 216) argues that an ethic of care has great significance in the context of front-line practice.

## **An ethics of recognition**

The ethics of recognition emphasises human interconnectedness (Webb 2006) and inter-subjectivity (Culpitt 1999). The argument of this ethical perspective is that our sense of self, and experiences of ourselves in society, are founded upon how we are 'recognised' by others. Lack of respect for persons fosters 'damaged recognition' which in turn, it is argued, legitimises and perpetuates social inequality (Culpitt 1999; Webb 2006). As Honneth (1995, cited in Culpitt 1999, p. 126) explains, the struggles of history have not been struggles of preservation, but a 'struggle for the establishment of relations of mutual recognition'. Culpitt (1999, p. 126) notes that neo-liberalism 'is preoccupied with the preservation of personal autonomy, not recognition of legitimate difference', and in this regard neo-liberalism perpetuates self-interest over respect for others. Much of social work addresses the pain of misrecognition and the social inequalities and ills that emanate from it. Webb (2006, p. 218) claims that the relational nature of social work means that we are able to directly facilitate acceptance, support and encouragement in acts of 'solidaristic acceptance and ethical concern'.

## **Virtue ethics**

A number of authors suggest that Aristotelian virtue ethics, which include the virtues of justice, reflection, perception, judgement, bravery, prudence, liberality and temperance, support the construction of moral identities that enable social workers to act with greater moral purpose and effect (Clark 2006; McBeath & Webb 2002; Mangini 2000). The focus here is upon producing 'good' social workers who will make 'good' decisions because they are 'good' people. Thus, 'The individual's character and judgement are the stable reference point' (Webb 2006, p. 220), which is considered important given that neo-liberal risk society is plagued with uncertainty and is oriented towards self-interest.

## **Generating social capital**

Social capital refers to the 'norms and networks that enable people to work collectively to resolve problems and achieve common goals' (Stone 2000, cited in Healy & Hampshire 2002, p. 227). It enables the creation of social cohesion. Webb's



(2006, p. 222) argument is that social capital ‘depends on bonds of trust, reciprocity and obligation’ which generate a sense of solidarity. Thus, social capital ‘helps ameliorate the effects of the privatisation of risk and the morality of low expectation’ (Webb 2006, p. 222) by transforming the self-interested and privatised agendas endemic to late modern living into communal living.

### **Life planning for risk, uncertainty and insecurity**

Webb (2006) reaffirms in this final dimension of his ‘practice of value’, that ‘face-work’ or direct service delivery by front-line staff is an important medium for helping people plan for and face the ‘fateful moments’ (Giddens 2000a) of their lives. The emphasis here is once again upon the value of creating relationships of trust and cooperation that ‘bind human beings together and furnish people with a sustainable self in the face of neo-liberal risk society’ (Webb 2006, p. 232).

According to Webb, then, ethics is an important area of strength in social work; cultivated towards a practice of developing relationships based upon care, recognition and values, our profession could stand in strong opposition to the erosive power of the new moralities of neo-liberal risk society.

## **Critiquing the Nature and Operations of Risk Practices in Social Work**

As has been discussed, the critical risk literature in social work argues that the social, political and cultural climate of neo-liberal risk society is heralded by the ‘risk orthodoxies’ (Kemshall 2004) of constraint, repression and control. Within this context clients and practitioners are conjointly ‘disciplined’ towards an awareness of and concern for risk and away from dependency (Culpitt 1999, p. 39). Subsequently, it is argued, the current mandate of social work is to assess, manage and control risk, as opposed to addressing issues of need (Parton & O’Byrne 2000; Waterson 1999). This redirection of focus sits at the heart of the critical perspective of how risk operates as a politically and morally constitutive force in social work. In this section of the chapter I canvas the critical analysis of the operations of neo-liberal risk

mentalities upon the practice environments and interventions of social workers. This review intimates a key practice dilemma for social workers, that being how to transcend the imperative of control within their interventions that is engendered by the conservative ideology of neo-liberal risk society.

## **Defining the purpose of social work in neo-liberal risk society**

The essence of the narrative of the critical social work risk literature is that social work has become subject to the constraining and ‘disciplining’ influence of managerial principles and practices whilst simultaneously acting as a key source of ‘governance at a distance’ (Kemshall 2002; Parton 1999; Rose 1996a). It is argued that the mentality of neo-liberalism in combination with the malleability of the socially constructed nature of risk have infiltrated the ethos of welfare services with the policies and practices of ‘corporate managerialism’ and ‘economic rationalism’ (Barnes & Hugman 2002; Horlick-Jones 2003; Hugman 2001; Jamrozik 2005; Kemshall 2002; Leonard 1997; Morley 2004). In this context risk can be seen as having been strategically defined and rhetorically deployed as a key concept to facilitate the market-oriented goals of neo-liberalism within social work.

The central concern of writers who argue a critical perspective regarding the politics of neo-liberal risk society is that risk has overtaken need as the primary focus of social work (Green 2004; Houston & Griffiths 2000; Kemshall 2000, 2002; Leonard 1997; Moffat 1999; Mullaly 2001; Parton 1999, 2001; Parton & O’Byrne 2000; Waterson 1999). Without exception, this literature claims that a neo-conservative ethos now pervades the rationality and organisation of ‘social care’ and that this has become a defining context for:

- managing social work as a profession (Hugman 2001; Kemshall 2002; Lymbery 2004; Mullaly 2001; Parton 1999, 2000, 2001);
- practicing in terms of direct interventions (Dean 1999; Kemshall 2000, 2002; Parton 1999; Parton & O’Byrne 2000; Rose 1996a);

- implementing professional ethics and values (Charles & Butler 2004; Green 2004; McBeath & Webb 2002; Mullaly 2001; Rossiter, Prilleltensky & Walsh-Bowers 2000); and
- developing relationships between social workers and clients (Charles & Butler 2004; Culpitt 1999; Green 2004; Lymbery 2004; Mullaly 2001; Parton 1999; Parton & O'Byrne 2000; Rose 1996a, 1996b).

Within this literature, risk is spoken of as having profoundly disrupted the 'progressive politics' of social work (Mullaly 2001), to the extent that the nature and goals of our profession have been radically displaced (Hugman 2001; Leonard 1997; Lymbery & Butler 2004). As Mullaly (2001, p. 306) observes:

Caught in a social service system that is under-funded, understaffed, overloaded with demand and operated along industrial production lines, many social workers find themselves trapped between the economic-rationalist efficiency goals of their agencies and the well-being of service users.

Thus the radicalised nature of modernisation, increased individualisation, heightened reflexivity and the systemic nature of late modern risks (Beck 2003, 2004; Giddens 2003a, 2003c) are recognised by writers of this narrative as having had a negative impact upon social work and those we work with. As Parton, Thorpe and Wattam (1997, p. 233) comment:

Not only can changes in social work be seen to reflect these wider and rapid social and economic transformations, but the nature of social work is such that it is intimately implicated and involved.

It is also argued in this literature that the conservative influence of risk as an instrument of neo-liberal rule in risk societies has far-reaching effects upon the lives of individuals, communities and practitioners and upon the domain of social policy. This is in evidence in all aspects of the welfare system, including:

- the reduced provision of, and accessibility to, universal social and health care services (Culpitt 1999; Davis & Garrett 2004; Green 2004; Green & McClelland 2003; Kemshall 2002; Lupton 2004; Lymbery 2004);

- increasingly devolved responsibility to communities and individuals for social care and order (Green 2004; Kelly 2001; O'Malley 1996; Rose 1996a, 1996b, 2000);
- restricted entitlements to income support (Culpitt 1999; Jamrozik 2005);
- an increased emphasis upon efficiency and effectiveness targets in the coordination and delivery of human services (Charles & Butler 2004; Green 2004; Hugman 2001; Kemshall 2000; Mullaly 2001; Parton 1999; Parton & O'Byrne 2000; Waterson 1999);
- greater demands for professional accountability (Green 2004; Parton 2001; Parton, Thorpe & Wattam 1997; Rose 1996a); and
- attempts to standardise practice interventions (Dean 1999; Green 2004; Houston & Griffiths 2000; McBeath & Webb 2002; Mullaly 2001; Parton 2001; Parton, Thorpe & Wattam 1997).

Hence risk is constructed within the critical social work literature as a repressive social, political and cultural 'problematic' (Parton 1999).

## **Controlling practitioners and welfare clients**

It is suggested the mentality of neo-liberal risk society has been instrumental in the trend toward 'short termism' in social work interventions (Green 2004; Webb 2006) and the increased use of case management in the place of case work (Culpitt 1999; Dean 1999; Webb 2006). As a consequence, opportunities for developing positive relationships based upon trust between social workers and clients, and between practitioners, are undermined. It is argued that this distancing in relationships is further exacerbated by the increased use of formalised and routinised assessments – the focus of which, it is claimed, is the 'appropriate' targeting of services as opposed to genuine efforts to alleviate suffering (Charles & Butler 2004; Kemshall 2004). According to Kemshall (2004, p. 128), risk assessment acts as a form of gatekeeping and diverts practitioners' skills and time away from meaningful long term work with individuals, families and communities. Instead, practitioners are charged with the primary responsibility of controlling risk and in doing so, it is argued, they control their clients (Green 2004). Therefore through the personalisation of risk, individual's

problems, as opposed to systemic and structural issues, become the targets of interventions. Adding to this grim narrative, Kemshall (2004, p. 129) states:

Interventions tend towards the didactic, premised on appropriate information giving, instruction, sanctions, enforcement and inducement to make the 'correct choice'. Those who fail to do so run the risk of having their eligibility reassessed or are confronted with compulsory correction or exclusion (for example, prison or mental health detention).

Hence, Kemshall notes that technique wins out over clinical judgement in 'what counts' as good practice.

As a defining context, then, it is argued that neo-liberal risk society positions practitioners in the unenviable position of experiencing both the regulative effects of being governed 'at a distance' whilst at the same time acting as agents of governance 'at a distance' in the regulation of welfare clients (Craddock 2004; Kelly 2000, 2001; Rose 1996a, 2000; Webb 2006). Writers within the critical social work risk literature claim that social work practice has been reconstructed as a set of administrative tasks within which social workers are required to account for their actions according to the 'logic of risk minimisation' (Rose 1996b, p. 349). Therefore, according to Parton and O'Byrne (2000, p. 1) social work has become 'very defensive, overly proceduralised and narrowly concerned with assessing, managing and insuring against risk'. Parton and O'Byrne (2000, p. 8) continue:

It is as if social workers are deployed to process needs in an essentially bureaucratic way and slot human misery into categories of risk and vulnerability...social work has become legalised and proceduralised where manuals, guidelines and lines of accountability are carried out in a functional way almost to the exclusion of any creativity or skill in dealing with human relationships.

Hence Rose (1996a, p. 349) states that the role of practitioners is to:

calculate and reduce the risk of their professional conduct, instruct the subjects of their authority in the riskiness of the practices and procedures in which they are engaged and manage their clients in the light of the imperative to reduce the risk they may pose to others...

Thus various authors note that:

- increased use of formalised and standardised risk assessment instruments (Craddock 2004; Parton 1996; Parton, Thorpe & Wattam 1997; Webb 2006);

- the establishment of risk systems within departments and organisations (McDonald 2006; Webb 2006);
- increased auditing of decision making (Charles & Butler 2004; Lymbery 2004; McDonald 2006; Mullaly 2001; Parton 1996, 2001); and
- greater reliance upon information technology and communication systems (Garland 2003; Webb 2006);

have had the effect of exacerbating a focus upon risk, as opposed to need, in practice as well as exerting control over practitioners and clients.

## **Fear and risk**

Calculative regimes of audit and risk assessment are central to the rationality of regulation and security (Culpitt 1999; Ewald 1991; O'Malley 1996; Rose 1996a, 2000), and in combination with a growing trend toward case management (Culpitt 1999; Webb 2006), they form a triangulated methodology that vitalises the legitimacy of holding clients and social workers responsible when things go wrong. Thus Craddock (2004, p. 325), speaking of risk assessment in child protection, states:

Risk assessments do not simply assess their object; they render users visible to audit. Ideally, what child protection workers assess are not social work values of relationship but audit values of numeration and completeness, complete in the sense of fidelity to those techniques that auditors deem important – and measurable. It is not simply parents and children who are being governed from a distance but child protection workers too.

Therefore not only are assessments used to identify which clients might be 'at risk' and hence eligible or ineligible for services, social workers themselves feel at risk of being blamed for making poor decisions (Craddock 2004; Gillingham 2006; Goddard et al. 1999; Parton 1996, 2001; Regehr et al. 2002). Accordingly, Taylor (2005) notes in his study of risk concepts used by staff providing long-term care for older people that they felt fearful and vulnerable. They spoke of themselves as feeling 'at risk' of being blamed in their work place. In a related sense, Smith, McMahon and Nursten (2003) report that fear of disapproval and rejection by seniors and managers was one of five reported fears of employees in social service departments (see also Smith,

Nursten & McMahon 2004). This form of fear was strongly related to workers being concerned that they would be blamed or held to account for their own or others' actions. Hence the critical social work literature claims social workers have become more defensive as practitioners adopt a 'safety first' stance in their approach to practice.

According to Green (2004) and Titterton (2006), social work has failed to embrace a more positive meaning of risk as generative of change and opportunities through purposeful risk taking. Titterton (2006) states that risk has been central to 'welfare dilemmas', given practitioners are often faced with making difficult decisions in climates of uncertainty in which rights and responsibilities appear to conflict. Banks and Williams (2005) seem to make a similar point in their presentation of findings from their study of how social workers construct ethical issues, dilemmas and problems. Interestingly, two of the three examples presented in their paper revolve around the ethical difficulties practitioners encountered when they felt their practice was constrained by risk assessing instruments and schedules used in their organisations. Parton (1999) notes that taking risks in social care can widen and increase opportunities for empowerment, inclusion and diversity. Alaszewski and Alaszewski (2002) make a similar point. Adding his voice to this argument Green (2004) states that risk taking is important when working in complex situations. Furthermore he claims:

An ethical service is a risk taking service in which its workers are supported to take risks...Risk minimisation and risk taking must be seen as equally legitimate...Therefore policies on risk taking are just as significant as those on risk minimisation (Green 2004, p. 11).

However, given that the welfare sector is dominated by a 'culture of blame' (Parton 1996), it is argued that fear, the undermining of trust and the need to control have overtaken and undermined the creative impetus and courage required to take risks in practice.

## Summary

The critical risk literature in social work highlights that risk operates within the context of neo-liberal risk society to:

- reinforce realist assumptions about the nature of risk and actuarial responses to risk (Parton 2000; Parton & O’Byrne 2000; Webb 2006);
- configure need as dependency (Culpitt 1999; Kemshall 2002; Leonard 1997);
- establish ethical and moral imperatives for supporting readings of risk in terms of individual agency and responsibility (Culpitt 1999; O’Malley 1996; White 2003);
- ascribe and reinforce ‘risk-based’ subjectivities (Parton 1999; Lupton 2004; Moffat 1999; Rose 2000); and
- necessitate practices of surveillance, regulation and control of clients and social workers (Dean 1999; Moffat 1999; Parton 1999, 2001; Rose 1996a, 1996b, 2000).

Furthermore, risk is presented as operating with discursive power in the construction of professional identities and practices. In turn the nature of social work is directed away from a politics of action, and an ethic of care (Banks 2006; Hugman 2003) and recognition (Culpitt 1999; Webb 2006), and towards a politics of economic security and an ethic of prudentialism (Culpitt 1999; Jamrozik 2005; Kemshall 2000, 2002; O’Malley 1996; Parton 1999; Parton & O’Byrne 2000). It is argued that the emphasis on risk calculations, increased surveillance of workers’ decisions and outcomes, and increased demands for efficient service delivery models indicate that it will be sometime yet before more reflexive, contingent and heuristic models of social work will be embraced in the risk-saturated environment of practitioners (Webb 2006).



## **Missing Perspectives of the Nature and Operations of Risk in the Critical Social Work Risk Literature**

The value of the critical narrative of the nature and operations of risk in social work is that it ‘troubles’ (Søndergaard 2002) the presumption that risk is socially, politically and culturally ‘innocent’ within our discipline. This alternate narration of risk clarifies that it operates as a powerful discursive construct in the production of client and practitioner identities and in the ‘production’ of social work more generally. The ubiquity of the constitutive force of risk as a rhetorical instrument of neo-liberalism clarifies the extent to which social work knowledge, morals and ethics, and practices have been colonised by its discursive power. However, several gaps exist within this literature. These are a lack of empirical research into the discursive nature and operations of risk, a lack of understanding of how social workers enact their moral agency when attending to matters related to risk in their interventions, and few suggestions for how social workers can ‘speak back’ to the moral conservatism engendered by the rhetoric of risk within neo-liberal risk society.

### **Lack of empirical research relating to the discursive nature and operations of risk in social work**

With few exceptions (D’Cruz 2004a, 2004b; Sharland 2006; Taylor 2005; Warner 2006) the significance of the discursive attributes of risk to embodied aspects of social work practice has yet to become a focus of empirical study. Reflections by practitioners of how concepts of risk shape their practices at the local site of their interventions are generally missing from the social work risk literature. While social work’s theoretical understanding of risk has been developed in the critical social work risk literature, there are few studies based upon concrete data that consider how ideas about risk are experienced in the micro aspects of social work practice.

Perhaps the im/material nature of risk (Adam & Van Loon 2000) has been an obstacle to making the concept of risk an object of study in social work within an alternative epistemological paradigm to objectivism. Locating oneself in a constructivist

framework to research risk would seem a fairly 'radical' act in view of the dominance of the realist/objectivist paradigm in risk research. Notable recent contributions to this 'brave' endeavour is research by D'Cruz (2004a, 2004b) who explores the social construction of child abuse, Taylor (2005), who has recently studied the risk paradigms employees use in their work with older people in long-term care and Warner's (2006) study of the 'locus of risk' in mental health social work. Another explanation for the lack of research into the constructed dimensions of ideas about risk may be that it is a 'new' topic in the social work literature. In either case, I suggest there is a need for social work research that links the theoretical analyses of the problematics of risk contained within the critical social work risk literature with direct social work interventions.

## **The missing agency of social workers in creating meanings of, and responding to, risk**

Review of the literature suggests that social workers are presented as primarily disenfranchised, passive and/or victimised within the majority of the critical social work risk literature. This viewpoint has five ramifications. First, the ethical agency of social workers in the construction of meanings of risk is negated. While the critical social work literature has begun to consider how risk impacts discursively in the construction of client identities, Juhlia et al. (2003) note that this area of research is only in its infancy and the link between research and practitioners' ethical identities is even less apparent. A second related consequence is that risk is positioned within the literature as a form of power and an object that exists outside of social work and over which social workers have little control. Third, the localised meanings of risk generated by practitioners are unaccounted for. Fourth, the moral implications of how concepts of risk are utilised by social workers in their interventions, such as their consequences for clients, are de-emphasised. And fifth, how social workers actively resist the social, political and cultural conservatism of risk is disregarded.

Appropriating Sharland's (2006, para 36) comment, then, 'Neither the life politics of reflexive individualisation, nor the determinism of social structuralism, nor the regulatory thrust of governmentality, is sufficient to explain the complex interplay of agency, structure and power involved' in social work. Therefore, a research agenda wishing to disrupt this totalising viewpoint would question:

- By what means, at the site of social work interventions, does risk come to assume certain meanings and in turn act as a form of risk knowledge?
- By what means, at the site of social work interventions, does risk act as a source of discursive influence in the construction of social work morals and ethics?
- By what means, at the site of social work interventions, does risk act as a source of discursive influence in the construction of social work practices?

These questions thus suggest the need for research that considers, first, how risk is constituted as a concept in social workers' interventions and, second, how these conceptualisations of risk become integrated into social workers' interventions.

## **Alternative stories of the nature and operations of risk in social work practice**

Review of the critical social work risk literature would suggest that its narrative of the operations of risk in social work is a 'catastrophe narrative'. The inescapability of the political and moral conservatism of the operations of risk is a dominant storyline within this literature. Risk is presented as a negative, as opposed to positive, construct which is endemic, as opposed to situational, to the practice of social work.

Furthermore risk and need are theorised as being in opposition to each other within the context of the politics of neo-liberal risk society. As a consequence, little attention is given to how social workers might attend to both need and risk in practical terms in their day-to-day interventions. Speaking of risk in such totalising ways results in 'what risk gets attached to' (Dean 1999) similarly being spoken of in totalising ways, most significantly in terms of social work practices and client identities and futures. Thus Green (2004, p. 9) notes that few practical options are presented in the literature for social workers to respond to the problematic dimensions of risk.

This suggests a need for research that investigates how social workers are active agents, as opposed to passive subjects, in negotiating or resisting the conservative morality of 'risk orthodoxies'. The work of Parton and O'Byrne (2000), McBeath and Webb (2002) and Webb (2006) gives support to the viability of such a research

agenda. Accordingly, two questions can be raised that attempt to disrupt fixed ideas about the inevitable problematic of risk in social work practice:

- How do social workers, at the site of their interventions, engage with and respond to the social, political and cultural contexts that feature within their practice environments? and
- How do social workers, at the site of their interventions, enact their ethical agency in their negotiation of the constitutive power of risk upon their practice?

These questions add another dimension to a future research agenda in social work which considers examples of practice that tell an alternative story about the operations of risk in social work.

## **Concluding Comments to the Chapter**

This chapter has considered how the politics of risk are narrated within the emergent critical social work risk literature. It has been noted that the concept of risk has only recently become a topic of analytic interest in social work. While risk may always have been a part of our profession, it has only recently attracted critical attention within social work (Green 2004; Parton 1996; Stalker 2003; Webb 2006). It would seem that neo-liberal risk society has come to define our practice context to the extent that our discipline has finally been forced to ‘take notice’ of risk. Consequently, in this chapter I have integrated and synthesised a diverse range of writings to produce a coherent critical narrative of the main concerns expressed in the welfare literature of the nature and operations of risk in social work.

The final section of this chapter has considered the limitations of the critical narrative of risk in social work. In this section I have argued that as a ‘catastrophe narrative’, this literature limits a conception of an alternative story of the operations of risk in social work or of the possibility of social workers ‘speaking back’ to the repressive and conservative ethos of neo-liberal welfare discourses. Indeed, I have claimed that such a view fails to account for a more positive reading of the constitutive effect of risk within social work where practitioners actively engage in risk taking and sharing to facilitate positive outcomes for clients. Several writers have noted that a more

positive view of risk is required to invigorate the ethical impetus of social work (Alaszewski & Alaszewski 2002; Green 2004; Parton 1999; Titterton 2006). My research has therefore sought to establish whether the influence of risk is necessarily as totalising of our professional identities, and in turn our practices, as has been suggested by the 'catastrophe story' of risk encapsulated within the critical social work risk literature.

I have suggested there are five research questions that emerge from these points of focus for social work research:

- By what means, at the site of social work interventions, does risk come to assume certain meanings and in turn act as a form of risk knowledge?
- By what means, at the site of social work interventions, does risk act as a source of discursive influence in the construction of social work morals and ethics?
- By what means, at the site of social work interventions, does risk act as a source of discursive influence in the construction of social work practices?
- How do social workers, at the site of their interventions, engage with and respond to the social, political and cultural contexts that feature within their practice environments? and
- How do social workers, at the site of their interventions, enact their agency in their negotiation of the constitutive power of risk upon their practice?

Drawing the themes of the literature together alongside the directions for research set by these questions, this chapter supports the conceptual and methodological focus of this research upon the operations of risk in social work practice. The aim of this research – to identify the spaces that exist within our practice contexts that enable practitioners to resist invitations into the moral conservatism of negative constructs of risk – is similarly supported. Accordingly, this research has questioned how ideas about risk are constituted and integrated into social workers' interventions. The following chapter presents the theoretical framework that was used for developing the methodological focus of the study and the methods that were used for data collection and analysis.

## Chapter 4

# Research Theory and Processes: Speaking of Risk in Social Work Practice

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[We must] appreciate the power of redescribing, the power of language to make new and different things possible and important – an appreciation which becomes possible only when one's aim becomes an expanding repertoire of alternative descriptions rather than The One Right Description (Richard Rorty n.d., cited in Gergen 2002, p. 62).

Shattered beings are best presented by bits and pieces (Rainer Maria Rilke n.d., cited in Bauman 1993, p. 1).

## Introduction to the Chapter

As noted from the preceding chapter, there are few examples of empirical research that have investigated how the macro theories of risk outlined in Chapter 2, and the problematics of risk raised in the critical social work risk literature discussed in Chapter 3, have relevance for the micro aspects of social work practice. My research has sought to address this oversight by investigating *how ideas about risk are constituted and integrated into social workers' interventions*. In keeping with the emphasis of this literature upon the social, political and cultural dimensions of risk, a theoretical methodology congruent with constructivist and subjectivist epistemologies was necessary. Thus I argue in this chapter for a poststructuralist theoretical methodology to study the operations of risk in social work. Within this theoretical context the discursive attributes of risk became the focus for conceptualising the concept of risk in the study (as discussed in Chapter 1) and informed the methodological approach taken to engage with its embodied dimensions in social workers' interventions.

The chapter begins with a brief overview of the main principles of poststructural theory. This discussion includes a review of the key debates that poststructuralism has sparked within social work and social research. After reviewing these controversies I reflect upon recent attempts to apply poststructural methodologies to the study of risk. This provides a platform from which I am able to discuss how poststructural theory has been incorporated into this study. In particular I note that the analytic medium for determining the methodological focus of the study has been a concern for how risk is 'spoken into existence' (Søndergaard 2002) in social work practice. I argue for adopting a reflexive, iterative, qualitative research design and then present detailed information on how data was collected and analysed.

## **Theoretical Approach of the Study**

A key concern expressed within the literature reviewed in Chapter 3 is that the ontological and epistemological conceptualisation of risk within realist paradigms is problematic for social work knowledge, morals and ethics, and practice. The argument of this literature is that realist interpretations of the nature of risk ignore its social, political and cultural dimensions and ramifications. What emerges from the analysis of this literature is the need for a methodological approach of inquiry that is able to engage with the socially constituted 'nature' of risk. My argument in this first section of the chapter is that poststructural theory supports such an approach.

## **Poststructural theory**

A diverse literature addresses the theoretical foundations of poststructuralism. It is well noted that writers who comprise this 'movement' attempt to elude categorisation of their theoretical perspectives and any one writer may be referred to as both a postmodernist and poststructuralist (Agger 1991; Alvesson 2002; Crotty 1998). Unsurprisingly, distinctions between 'what is postmodernism?' and 'what is poststructuralism?' are not always clear, as many writers within each perspective share similar theoretical concerns about knowledge and power (Agger 1991; Alvesson 2002; Crotty 1998; Healy 2000, 2005). Consequently the terms are often used interchangeably or subsumed under the broad and inclusive heading of 'post'

theory (Healy 2005). Agger (1991) attempts a distinction between postmodernism and poststructuralism in the following terms:

poststructuralism...is a theory of knowledge and language, whereas  
postmodernism...is a theory of society, culture, and history.

Healy (2005, p. 197) also states that postmodernists recognise that ‘the truths of modernity once made sense, but no longer do so’. In addition, she claims poststructuralists are interested in the politics of language and identity. In view of these somewhat tentative though workable distinctions between the two theories, I will refer specifically to poststructural theory as the orienting theoretical framework of this study.

Poststructuralism brings together the ideas of a number of theorists whose shared concern, though expressed and investigated variously, is the instability of meanings which are constructed in discourses (Healy 2000). Originating in the structural linguistics of de Saussure (Ashenden 2005; Healy 2000) this perspective departs ‘from notions of “essential” meanings or beliefs in a fixed, singular, logical order’ (Featherstone & Fawcett 1995, cited in Healy 2000, p. 39) with the consequence that positivism is ‘abandoned’ (Crotty 1998). Instead it is asserted that language creates understanding about the world. Language is organised into discourses which render our experience of the world and our sense of being in the world intelligible to ourselves and to others. As Parton (1999, p. 106) explains, a focus on discourse:

gives weight to the linguistically constituted character of reality. This does not mean that discourses are ‘mere words’. Discourses are structures of knowledge, claims, and practices through which we understand, explain, and decide things. In constituting agents, they also define obligations and determine the distribution of responsibilities and authorities for different categories of people...They are frameworks or grids of social organization that make some social actions possible while precluding others.

This has several ontological and epistemological implications. First and foremost it disrupts any essentialist notions of qualities being fixed to an entity, idea or experience (Crotty 1998; Fook 2002; Lather 1991; Wearing 1996; Weedon 1997). Instead, our understandings of the world, and our sense of self in the world, are



understood as historically and contextually situated circular interpretive exercises where we attempt to establish relationships between qualities and ‘things’. Derrida describes this process as ‘an infinite regress of signification’ (Crotty 1998, p. 205). As Healy (2000, p. 39) explains:

meaning is constructed through discourses, which are always historically and contextually situated, and in any one context a number of discourses operate thus making possible competing interpretations of entities.

Thus claims to truth can only be understood as partial representations (Haraway 1991; Mauthner & Doucet 2003; Weedon 1997).

This being the case, the inscription of some meanings or discourses over others as ‘truth’ reflects the operations of power (Alvesson 2002; Healy 2000). Foucault (1980) regards power and knowledge as inseparable, as he considers each implies the other. As Foucault (1980, p. 93) notes:

There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association. We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth.

By way of further explanation, Kress (1985, p. 52) notes, ‘language is entwined in social power in a number of ways: it indexes power, expresses power, and language is involved wherever there is contention over and challenge to power’. Hence language can be understood as a site of political struggle where competing ‘voices’ vie for the legitimacy of their truth claims, authority and status (Weedon 1997, p. 24).

In this struggle for ascendancy of knowledge claims, various exclusions take place in relation to the social organisation of ideas, resources and people (Culpitt 1999).

Hence discourse is constitutive of the material conditions of lived experience (Agger 1991; Gergen 2002; Healy 2000; Kendall & Wickham 2000; Parton 1999;

Søndergaard 2002). Discourses inscribe systems of differentiation, often through polarised categorisations of all aspects of life, be they systems of thought, a form of action, a type of emotion or an identity (Fook 2002; Gergen 2002; Scott 1988). These categorisations are cast in opposition to each other (Scott 1988) and are used to support practices of ‘ordering’ the natural and social world (Crook 1999).

Simultaneously and perhaps paradoxically ‘the coherence of discourse depends on the suppression of differences...thus neglecting the differences within each category and the commonalities across them’ (Healy 2000, p. 40). Thus discourses can operate with ‘totalising’ effects (White 1995).

This understanding of discourse as socially, culturally and historically contingent has important ramifications for an understanding of identity. Subjectivity is also cast as contingent, meaning there is no ‘pre-social identity or essence’ (Healy 2000, p. 45). The way someone understands themselves and is understood by others is said to be constituted through discourse and context (Davies 1997; Fook 2002; Moffat 1999; S ndergaard 2002; Wearing 1996; Weedon 1997). As Davies (1991, cited in Healy 2000, p. 45) states:

our patterns of desire that we took to be fundamental indicators of our essential selves (such as the desire for freedom or autonomy or moral rightness) signify little more than the discourses, and the subject positions made available within them, to which we may have access.

Thus discourse and the subject positions within them are understood as ‘precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think and speak’ (Weedon 1997, p. 33). Subjectivity can therefore be understood as a form of embodied discourse where it is possible to identify ‘the multiple imprints that institutions make on our bodies’ (Chambon 1999a, p. 59). Accordingly, how ‘subjects’ are formed is of particular interest to Foucaultian theorists. As Foucault (1980, p. 97) argues:

we should try to discover how it is that subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts, etc. We should try to grasp subjection in its material instance as a constitution of subjects.

What is important from a Foucaultian perspective is that an examination of the constitution of subjects through discourse should rely upon the concrete operations of discourses. That is, discourses should be investigated for their effects – what they produce – as opposed to trying to discover their hidden meaning or ‘truth’ (Healy 2000; Irving 1999; Kendall & Wickham 2000). Healy (2000, p. 41) notes that ‘it is in these operations, in the practical effects of discourse, that the form and limits of

discourse are exposed'. Thus how knowledge comes to assume the status of truth and acts with discursive power in matters of 'subjection' (Søndergaard 2002) becomes a focus for empirical poststructural research (Fine et al. 2000; Kendall & Wickham 2000; Soobrayan 2003).

## **Poststructuralism, social work and social research**

Poststructuralism has become increasingly influential paradigmatically, theoretically and in terms of practice in social work and social research. Perhaps recognition by poststructural scholars and practitioners alike of the potential for researching and producing 'transgressive counter discourses' (Irving 1999) has supported its growing influence in these domains. Irving (1999, p. 43) says an agenda for transgressive counter discourses involves:

an endless questioning of the systems of thought in which we are located and hence an opening up of realms of freedom accomplished through speaking the truths of the multiplicities that traverse the self.

According to Healy (2000, p. 6) this can occur in social work through:

interrogating and diversifying approaches to progressive change rather than abandoning these ideals altogether...poststructuralism denotes approaches to social change that are anti-dogmatic, pragmatic, flexible and contextually sensitive and that require activists to adopt a critically self-reflexive attitude towards the effects of their emancipatory ideals. If there can be said to be an aim of poststructural emancipatory politics it is towards the creation of conditions for ongoing dialogue and contestation.

However, significant controversy surrounds the appropriateness of adopting poststructuralism as a theoretical framework in social work practice. In spite of Healy's and other writers' high recommendation of its analytic value and transformative potential for our discipline (Chambon 1999a; Irving 1994, 1999; John 1994; Milner & O'Byrne 2002; Moffat 1999; Pease 2002; Pease & Fook 1999; Rossiter, Prilleltensky & Walsh-Bowers 2000; Saleeby 2006a, 2006b), a number of authors have made contrary claims (for example, Ife 1997, 1999; Piele & McCouat 1997; Solas 2002; Trainor 2002). For these authors the ontological, epistemological, political and moral relativism of poststructuralism is considered problematic for

social work as it undermines the profession's progressive ideological politics and weakens moral justifications for action. By way of explanation, McDonald (2006, p. 79) states that 'post' theory:

constitutes an epistemological challenge, in that it calls into question the profession's knowledge base. It is also an ontological challenge if such a thing can be said to exist in relation to a profession. By this I mean that the notions that social workers might have about themselves as, for example, advocates and change agents are destabilized.

Debates regarding the legitimacy and value of poststructuralism for social research also rage. There are clear synergies between the politics of poststructural theory and social research, particularly (though not exclusively) in qualitative, interpretivist research paradigms (Lincoln & Guba 2000; Schwandt 2000). The main focus of these paradigms is how matters of truth, ethics and politics converge in the construction of meaning (Soobrayan 2003). As Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005, p. 2) state:

Qualitative research aims to elicit the contextualised nature of experience and action, and attempts to generate analyses that are detailed, 'thick', and integrative (in the sense of relating individual events and interpretations to larger meaning systems and patterns).

Theoretical research paradigms, particularly standpoint perspectives such as feminism, ethnic and queer theories (Denzin & Lincoln 2000) have to varying degrees been influenced by poststructuralism and postmodernism. More broadly, poststructuralism has been integrated into social constructionist and subjectivist epistemological paradigms (Crotty 1998; Schwandt 2000).

The extent of the influence of 'post theory' thinking in qualitative research is reflected in Denzin and Lincoln's (2000) summary of the historical context of contemporary research. They state that at present:

We occupy a historical moment marked by multivocality, contested meanings, paradigmatic controversies, and new textual forms. This is an age of emancipation, freedom from the confines of a single regime of truth, emancipation from seeing the world in one colour (Denzin & Lincoln 2000, p. 189).

However, Schwandt (2000) makes the point that the ‘interpretive turn’ engendered by ‘post’ theories sets particular challenges for qualitative researchers with regard to their being able to speak about the plausibility of their interpretations, the goals of their research and, in related terms, the ethical and moral relations between researcher and the objects and subjects of their research. In addition, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) note that there are clear tensions between positivist, post-positivist, standpoint, constructivist and participatory paradigms. These contestations extend to debates regarding the foundational or anti-foundational nature of knowledge, the extent to which paradigms should be seen as discrete or fluid and how issues of representation can be addressed in research. Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005, p. 24) state that criticism has also been levelled at postmodern and poststructural research on the basis that its usefulness for knowledge building has not been proven, its methods of inquiry are suspect, and its theory and language are impenetrable.

Social work research is increasingly engaging with interpretivist paradigms that have been influenced by post theory (Alston & Bowles 2003; Shaw & Gould 2001). Hence a concern for what counts as truth, and how such truths operate with discursive effect with regard to their ethical and political consequences for clients and practitioners, has become a recent and important research agenda in social work (Fook 1999, 2001, 2002; Fook & Napier 2000; Juhila et al. 2003; Rossiter, Prilleltensky & Walsh-Bowers 2000; Taylor & White 2000). Although it remains a contentious field of research, an already substantial literature continues to grow as researchers and practitioners engage with the complexities, opportunities and challenges posed by poststructuralism for studying and understanding the ‘social reality’ of clients and practitioners.

## **Poststructural approaches to the study of risk in social work**

The applicability of poststructuralism as a theoretical orientation in social work risk research has been recognised by researchers who empirically study the problematics of risk. This has particularly been the case for researchers interested in the governmentality of risk in social work. These researchers typically focus upon how

the discursive attributes of risk are constitutive of policy (for example, Corby 2003), practices (for example, Holland 1999; Lester 2004; Parton, Thorpe & Wattam 1997) and identities (for example, Sharland 2006; Warner 2006). More broadly, a constructivist approach is increasingly evident as social work researchers engage in empirical studies that consider the meaning of risk within various contexts (for example, Taylor 2005), how such meanings are created (for example, D'Cruz 2004a, 2004b) and how they are used in the generation of professional knowledge and practice (for example, Kemshall 2000; Parton, Thorpe & Wattam 1997). There are also a number of links between this kind of research and research that more broadly considers the 'subjectification' of groups of people such as social workers and/or their clients (for example, Craft & Willis 2005; Juhlia 2003; Juhlia et al. 2003; Moffat 1999; Taylor & White 2000; Watkins 2006; White 2003). Taylor and White's (2000) work is particularly instructive on this matter. They consider how performances of various conversational and textual strategies, alongside invocations of dominant discourses, are used in health and welfare settings to create and sustain professional and client identities. Their analysis indicates that 'words and language have powerful consequences' (Taylor & White 2000, p. vii) and reflect how knowledge is both created and used in practice settings.

My research builds upon this emergent field of poststructural and constructivist inquiries into the study of risk in social work. The nexus of social work knowledge, morals and ethics, practice and risk were the original concerns of the study and poststructuralism provided a coherent theoretical framework for conceiving of them in research terms. Adopting a poststructural approach thus had important implications for how the study was conceived and implemented. Although some argue a pragmatic approach is more appropriate to inquiries into the multi-layered and multiple dimensioned realms of human understanding (Patton 2002; Shaw & Gould 2001), I believed a theoretical approach was appropriate for this study. As I discuss in Chapter 1, having regard for the depth and breadth of the ontological and epistemological disputes that dominate discussions of risk in the social work literature meant that I had recognised the importance of being clear and consistent in my overarching theoretical framework. The methodological implications of having adopted a poststructuralist paradigmatic approach for the study will now be discussed.

## Methodological Implications of a Poststructuralist Paradigm for the Study

Consistent with poststructural theory, I adopted Parton's (1996, p. 98) view that the construct of risk can be understood as a way of thinking about the world. Thus I assume in this research that risk acts as an idea that influences how the things that come to be associated with it (such as events and people) are recognised (Dean 1999). I conceived of risk as a discursive construct for the purposes of this study. Given the basic premise of poststructuralism that 'All forms of poststructuralism assume that meaning is constituted within language...' (Weedon 1997, p. 22), I thus understood risk to be something that is 'spoken into existence' (Søndergaard 2002, p. 189).

### Troubling risk

This way of thinking about risk was inspired by Søndergaard's (2002) suggestions for focusing poststructural empirical inquiries. Søndergaard (2002, p. 196) argues that the concept of 'alienation' as a deconstructive technique enables 'the researcher to transgress the cultures she/he studies and so come to know them against the grain of their own discursive constitution'. Alienation in this sense corresponds with the concept of '*Verfremdung*' involving 'troubling' 'taken-for-granted discursive practices and categories' (Søndergaard 2002, p. 196). Identifying risk as a discursive practice and category in social work rendered it available to practices of alienation throughout the study.

The epistemological interest of positioning risk in these terms is that *how* risk is spoken into existence becomes a viable and valuable focus for research. The emphasis on 'how' is important and deliberate. It situates risk as operating within an ongoing cycle of signification (Crotty 1998; Healy 2000) in which it acts with constitutive power to shape phenomena whilst simultaneously being subject to the processes that constitute it. Thus 'how utterances work' (Potter 1996, cited in Schwandt 2000, p. 197) becomes a focus for empirical analysis. Hence the contingent, dynamic, and embodied dimensions of risk in social workers' practice became my interest. Accordingly I explored how the 'idea of risk' as a way of

thinking and as a discursive construct operated in social workers' practice. Specifically, my research questions how ideas about risk are constituted and integrated in social workers' interventions.

## **Identifying the research site: speaking of risk**

Naturalised meanings of risk were destabilised in this study of the operations of risk in social workers' practice by asking 'How is risk spoken into existence?'. Thus focusing on 'risk talk' was necessary to conduct the research. As can be ascertained from the discussion of poststructural theory in the preceding section of this chapter, positioning risk as a form of talk was not undertaken as a flippant, semantic whimsy. As noted by Weedon (1997, p. 24), language is intensely political. With particular reference to welfare work, Taylor and White (2000, p. 93) impress the point that:

talk is not simply a resource (a neutral medium for supplying information) but a topic worthy of study in its own right. By problematizing talk we also problematize the client/professional relationship more effectively. We bring into focus the issue of 'moral adequacy', in particular the ways in which agencies expect clients to behave, and the ways in which clients 'do' (and resist doing, or failed to do) 'moral adequacy'. By analysing talk we can make better sense of welfare work.

Within this context a site in which risk talk was in operation needed to be identified for the study. Reflective accounts by social workers of their interventions were considered to be such a site. The credibility of this site for the research was that reflective accounts are indicative of practitioners' 'active processes of meaning making' (Taylor & White 2000, p. vi; cf. Fook 1996; Fook & Napier 2000). Furthermore, using these accounts as data presences the voice of practitioners in theory generated about their practices. In order for practitioners' voices to be heard in research plentiful direct quotes need to be incorporated into any writing of their accounts (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005). Having thus determined the site of the research, a methodological approach to the investigation needed to be determined.



## Identifying a methodological approach

A qualitative methodological approach was considered appropriate for this study. At a conceptual level, qualitative research is ‘concerned with understanding human behaviour from the informant’s perspective’ and ‘assumes [a] dynamic and negotiated reality’ (Minichiello et al. 1995, p. 10). As ‘a set of interpretive practices’ (Denzin & Lincoln 2000, p. 6), qualitative analysis thus provides ‘insight into how people make sense of their experience’ (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005, p. 5). Qualitative research is inductive, ‘moving from specific observations or interactions to general ideas and theories’ (Alston & Bowles 2003, pp. 9-10) and is often used in exploratory research (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005, p. 5). Cresswell (1998, pp. 17-18) argues that qualitative methods should be used when:

- the research question is concerned with the ‘how’ or ‘what’ of a phenomenon;
- the study is exploratory and theories need to be developed;
- a detailed view of the topic is required;
- an understanding of individuals or phenomena need to be understood within specific contexts;
- the researcher is interested in writing in the literary style where they use the pronoun ‘I’, perhaps to engage in a storytelling form of narration;
- there is sufficient time and resources available to commit to extensive data collection and analysis;
- ‘audiences are receptive to qualitative research’; and
- the researcher’s role is that of ‘an *active learner* [original italics] who can tell the story from the participants’ view rather than as an “expert” who passes judgement on participants’.

Each of these conditions was met within the context of this study. A qualitative approach thus reflects the ontological, epistemological and theoretical concerns of my research alongside its exploratory nature.

Several qualitative methodologies were considered in the design of my research. First, narrative analysis was considered. According to Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005,

p. 125) narrative analysis ‘emphasises the narrative, or story-based, nature of human understanding’. Narratives have a:

configuring plot, an overall structure within which the constituent parts make sense...the plot is constructed out of these parts, out of a succession of events, and the power of the story derives from understanding this sequence of events (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005, p. 129).

This form of analysis considers how narrative plots or storylines and the characterisations of the subject positions made possible within them ‘are saturated with cultural meaning’ (Søndergaard 2002, p. 191). This understanding of storylines and characterisations assisted me in data analysis and informed my consideration of the implications of the results of my study. However, I did not conduct a narrative analysis of the operations of risk in social workers’ practice. My interpretive focus was more tentative than I thought narrative analysis would allow. I was concerned that narrative analysis would be too prescriptive a methodology for my purposes. It would impose its own structure and interpretive focus onto the data. I was also unsure if risk was going to be spoken of at all in social workers’ reflective accounts of their interventions. As discussed earlier, empirical research into the problematics of risk in social work has to date been specific to fields of practice, such as child protection and mental health. My research takes a broader focus, questioning whether social workers’ practice is being shaped in a more general sense by the ubiquitous influence of risk (Parton 1996).

The second methodological approach considered for my study was discourse analysis. Quoting Marvasti (2004), Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005, p. 261) state that discourse analysis ‘can be defined as “a way of writing or speaking that constructs a particular type of knowledge with practical and rhetorical implications”’. The discursive focus of my study has clear synergies with this methodological approach. However, this study of the operations of risk was not strictly a discourse analysis. My study did not consider the operations of a specific risk discourse in social work. I was concerned that a discourse analysis might result in an overly-interpretive and deterministic reading of the operations of risk in social workers’ practice. Zinn (2006, p. 13) notes that discourse analyses of risk have been critiqued on the basis of their inability to explain ‘differences in individual responses’. Zinn (2006, p. 13) states that ‘While the approach focuses on the institutional constitution of the subject, individual responses

to institutional ascriptions are regularly underexposed'. I identified this as a concern in my review of the critical social work risk literature in Chapter 3. I argued in this chapter (pp. 81 - 83) that there is a need for research that considers how social workers, at the site of their interventions, are able to negotiate the constitutive power of risk in their practice. I was not convinced that a discourse analysis approach would have enabled this focus. Thus I was concerned that this methodology might overtake the data (though I accept it could conversely have given it form).

Given my more tentative approach to the exploration of the operations of risk in social work I favoured a more open-ended and general methodological approach. An iterative-generative research design (Bishop et al. 2002), which utilised the inductive process of constructivist grounded theory methodology as described by Charmaz (2000), was therefore adopted for the study. The attraction of this approach was that it 'fosters the researcher's viewing the data afresh, again and again, as he or she develops new ideas' (Charmaz 2000, p. 526). The process is iterative and generative on the basis that fieldwork and analysis occur simultaneously, sparking new ideas that lead to further fieldwork and analysis. This requires considerable flexibility on the part of the researcher as well as the capacity to 'trust the process'. The spirit of this form of inquiry was well matched to the manner in which I had approached my research. Accordingly the design of my study evolved into a symbiotic process of fieldwork and analysis over an extended period of time, as I explored if and how risk was spoken of in social workers' reflections on their interventions.

## **Integrating methodology and methods**

### **Data collection method**

Within the context of this methodological approach a method of data collection needed to be chosen which could facilitate an in-depth understanding of the meanings attached to the ideas being researched as they progressively emerged. Two options were considered for achieving this: a text analysis of written reflections of practitioners' interventions, and/or face-to-face interviews with practitioners where they spoke directly to an interviewer about their interventions. The second option was favoured over the first primarily because of the time and effort that would be required

by practitioners to complete the writing exercise. I thought this would be a disincentive to participation.

Interviewing is a common data collection method in qualitative research generally (Minichiello et al. 1995), and alongside textual analysis in its various forms is favoured by poststructural and postmodern researchers (Fontana & Fey 2000). In interviewing, the 'text of talk' (Gubrium & Holstein 2003) becomes the focus for analysing the constitutive elements of discourse upon knowledge and identity. Thus it was decided to conduct a series of in-depth interviews (Minichiello et al. 1995) with practitioners where I incrementally examined the presence, substance and processes that constituted risk in social workers' articulations of their interventions. Fook's (1996, 2002) critical reflective approach to practice-based research was used to guide how the interviews were conducted. This approach can also be understood as an iterative-generative methodology (Moffat et al. 2005) relying upon processes of reflectivity and reflexivity (Fook 1999, 2002). Accordingly this approach to interviewing was congruent with the poststructural paradigm of the study.

### **Data analysis method**

Minichiello et al. (1995, p. 247) state that the 'aim of data analysis is to find meaning in the information collected. Data analysis is the process of systemically arranging and presenting information in order to search for ideas'. However, data analysis appears to also be one of the most contentious stages in the interpretive process in poststructural research. Perhaps one reason is that as researchers it is the moment that we are unambiguously involved in solid practices of constructing the 'truth' or knowledge about a phenomenon. Of course the whole research process involves us in the production of truth (Mauthner & Doucet 2003; Soobrayan 2003). Since the 'discovery' of reflexivity during the 'postmodern turn' (Alvesson 2002; Lincoln & Guba 2000) we have been invited to acknowledge and reflexively monitor how our positionality interplays with the generation of research questions, methods and data (Charmaz 2000; Fook 1999; Lincoln & Guba 2000; Mauthner & Doucet 2003; Soobrayan 2003). However, in making sense of data, attending to the postmodern and poststructural critiques of the production of knowledge has become a significant challenge for researchers. As Alvesson (2002, p. 1) quoting Rosenau (1992) states,

‘The challenges post-modernism poses seem endless. It rejects knowledge claims, obscures all versions of truths, and dismisses policy recommendations’. Commenting specifically upon data analysis, Alvesson (2002, pp. 2-3) argues:

In many forms of qualitative study...the assumption is that data, carefully processed, can guide the researcher to understand specific phenomena and develop theory...This great faith in data and empirical inquiry as a cornerstone in knowledge development has been challenged by a multitude of intellectual streams during recent years.

There is a sense then that data analysis in the postmodern age presents a no win situation for social researchers – we are in the double bind of being damned if we do and damned if we don’t address methodological rigour in analysis.

This dilemma troubled me as I considered how I would analyse my data. I was one of those researchers who were caught in this double bind. To disregard methodological processes of rigour in analysis in favour of the ‘hypersceptical understandings’ (Alvesson 2002, p. 15) of postmodernism and poststructuralism would leave my research open to questions over its credibility and relevance. To follow a methodological process of discovery, in which the data was able to ‘speak for itself’ made me vulnerable to regressing to essentialised notions of social reality and single versions of truth (Angen 2000; Charmaz 2000). My sense of dilemma was exacerbated by the lack of direction available in research texts on how to resolve these matters in practice. While I had taken to heart Patton’s (2002, p. 432-433) observation that ‘No abstract processes of analysis, no matter how eloquently named and finely described, can substitute for the skill, knowledge, experience, creativity, diligence, and work of the qualitative analyst’, I was still uncertain how to progress in real terms. Discourse analysis and narrative analysis provide instruction about how to conduct these forms of research. However, poststructural research in a more general sense is yet to see the translation of its philosophical critique into ‘the action-related principles and ideas on how to produce and make sense of empirical material’ (Alvesson 2002, p. 4).

To resolve this impasse I began to envisage the two stages of data analysis that would comprise my study from a ‘reflexively pragmatic’ (Alvesson 2002) view. By means of clarification of the term, Alvesson (2002, p. 15) notes that:

Reflexivity means a bridging of the gap between epistemological concerns and method, trying to combine more philosophically informed aspects with what one is doing on the field. Pragmatism means a balancing of endless reflexivity and radical scepticism with a sense of direction and accomplishment of results. Pragmatism here means that one is not too concerned about the philosophical and methodological imperfections of doing social inquiry. All truth claims are problematic, yes. It is still worth trying to give our best shots on how to understand social issues, and empirical work can be valuable here, at least if one can avoid all the problems involved.

Being reflexively pragmatic in this research meant that I decided upon an analytical medium for ‘entering’ the data that was consistent with my concern for risk as a discursive construct. This medium was to ask the general question of my data, ‘How is risk being spoken of in social workers’ reflective accounts of their interventions?’. My reflexive engagement with the question centred upon my continuously asking myself, and encouraging my research supervisors to ask, the following:

- Can I hear the voices of the participants or is it my theorising that is dominant?
- How do I respond to hearing risk spoken in these ways? What insights does my response yield about the data?
- What ethical issues arise for participants and me from my understanding risk in these ways? How can I address these?
- Am I enforcing a pattern upon how risk is being spoken of, or are patterns present?
- What am I not hearing? What does not seem obvious to me?
- What doesn’t ‘fit’ with my ideas and what does this suggest?

These questions guided the practice of my analysis. However, they also guided me towards achieving an ethical stance in relation to the management, analysis and reporting of the data (Angen 2000; Lincoln & Guba 2000; Soobrayan 2003).

Having adopted this focus, a reflexive process of coding could begin, as described by Charmaz (2000) in her account of constructivist grounded theory. While grounded theory has been criticised for being overly positivistic and reliant upon objectivist

methods, Charmaz (2000, p. 510) argues that ‘we can adopt grounded theory strategies without embracing the positivist leanings of earlier proponents of grounded theory’. Charmaz (2000, p. 510) continues:

The power of grounded theory lies in its tools for understanding empirical worlds. We can reclaim these tools from their positivist underpinnings to form a revised, more open-ended practice of grounded theory that stresses its emergent, constructivist elements. We can use grounded theory methods as flexible, heuristic strategies rather than as formulaic procedures.

Accordingly, constructivist grounded theory techniques were utilised in data analysis.

## Summary

A poststructural theoretical framework offered me a valid conceptual structure for the study. It supported the conceptualisation of risk as a discursive construct within the research and the focus upon the operations of risk in social work practice.

Accordingly the research question of ‘how are ideas about risk constituted and integrated into social workers’ interventions?’ brought together the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of risk. These two aspects of ‘social reality’ are increasingly the focus of qualitative research (Gubrium & Holstein 2003, p. 215). Considering how risk was spoken of within social workers’ reflections on their interventions provided a concrete link between the idea and practices of risk. Having a regard for the ‘partial, provisional and perspectival nature of knowledge’ (Mauthner & Doucet 2003, p. 416) suggested the need for a methodological approach that would be sensitive to the emergence of new ideas from fieldwork and analysis and allow for an in-depth understanding of meanings. This iterative methodological process was mirrored in the reflective and reflexive methods adopted to guide the conduct and analysis of interviews. A poststructuralist paradigm (Cresswell 1998; Lincoln & Guba 2000) provided a coherent framework for operationalising the theory and processes of this research. It was considered the most appropriate means of achieving the study’s aim, that being to identify the spaces that exist within social workers’ practice contexts which enable practitioners to resist invitations into the moral conservatism of negative constructs of risk.

## Data Collection and Analysis

This section of the chapter presents details about the methods that were used to generate data for the research. The section begins with an overview of the contexts in which the research took place and a presentation of the research design. This is followed by a discussion of the sampling method, the ethical issues that needed to be addressed in the design of the research, and the processes used to conduct and analyse interviews.

### The context of the research

This research was conducted in Tasmania, Australia. The geography and demography of the state, alongside my professional history, were key contexts for shaping this research. Practitioners from around Tasmania were invited to participate in the study and the sample was derived from each of the four major population centres. This required a considerable amount of travel on my part. Approximately 3750 kilometres were travelled over the duration of the study. The distances involved in accessing participants had practical consequences for the study's design. It contributed to determining the small sample size, given the time and economic resources that were required for travelling. It also meant that fieldwork tended to be conducted in 'blocks' so that practitioners living in a defined geographical area could be seen over one or two days thus limiting the amount of repeated travel I did to the same area.

Nonetheless, as the kilometres travelled indicate, few 'short cuts' were taken in the process of accessing the study's sample. My willingness to travel beyond the bounds of where I live in the northern region of the state to speak directly to participants engendered a great deal of goodwill amongst potential and actual participants. People appreciated that they could participate in the study without having to travel and that they were not excluded from participation on the basis of where they were geographically based. These issues of access and participation have significance for those of us living in Tasmania.

Being a small community of practitioners, challenges were faced in guaranteeing anonymity to research participants. Social workers are generally well known to each other in Tasmania and few clues are required to identify people. Naming a geographic



area, the type of work done or even indicating speech patterns could have been identifying in the research. However, my being known to others was useful in recruiting people to participate in the study. As a member of the Tasmanian social work community and as a social work academic, practitioners directly knew me or knew of me by word of mouth. Established relationships and associations with people undoubtedly impacted upon the willingness of people to participate in the study and the quality of the research data. Hence while each context posed pragmatic constraints upon the design of the research with regard to limiting the sample size, it also afforded valuable opportunities, particularly with regard to the willingness of people to speak in detail with me about their experiences.

## **Research design**

Reflecting the methodological issues discussed in the preceding section, the research was designed according to a two-staged approach to data collection and analysis. Adapting Fook's (1996, 2002) critical reflective approach, I asked practitioners to discuss with me an intervention they had implemented that was significant to them. For the purpose of this research an intervention was a deliberate act taken by a practitioner in response to their judgement that the action was necessary or justified. The breadth given to what counted as an intervention in this research was deliberate. The aim was to cast the field of social work practice as widely as possible to determine if ideas about risk were present in generic social work practice. It didn't have to be a critical incident; it just needed to be something that was meaningful to them. For all but one practitioner (who described an intervention with colleagues) this involved their work with a client.

In asking practitioners to talk with me about their intervention a retrospective account of practice was produced. Banks and Williams (2005, p. 1007) note that 'These situated accounts necessarily are versions constructed for a specific occasion and recipient' – that is, the interviewer. Accordingly they should not be 'presented or analysed...as unproblematic reflections of "what really happened"'. Like all such retrospections, their formulation is at least partly determined by the situation of their production...'. Thus the focus of my questioning and analysis was on reflective

accounts of practice as opposed to establishing the ‘truth’ of what actually happened in practice.

As a means of generating deeper understandings of the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of risk, practitioners were interviewed twice about a single intervention they had conducted. In the first stage of data collection the goal was to establish if risk was being spoken of as present in social workers’ reflections of their interventions. If this was the case then the goal of data analysis was to produce tentative understandings of general ways in which it was being spoken of by practitioners. The goal of the second stage of data collection was to contradict and/or confirm and/or develop my understanding about practitioners’ ideas about risk in their interventions. The goal of the second stage of data analysis was to produce a detailed understanding of how risk was spoken of by practitioners in their reflections, combining their comments from both interviews.

## **The participants**

### **Sample size**

The sample comprised 18 social workers from across Tasmania. As noted above, geography was a consideration in determining the sample size. However, the primary consideration was the need to have a core group of practitioners who could spend considerable time with me to explore their understandings about risk in their practice. In keeping with the iterative design of the research, I planned to meet with each practitioner at least twice to discuss their interventions. This amounted to a total of 36 long, in-depth interviews being completed. Each interview took between two and four hours, so each practitioner participated in four to eight hours of interviewing. This was a considerable investment of their time and energy, and many participants had to see me outside of their work hours. In total 88 hours of interviewing was recorded. Within the context of in-depth and repeated interviews, the sample size was adequate to ‘support the desired analyses’ (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005, p. 49). Utilising a smaller sample enabled me to obtain a large amount of extremely detailed and personal data about what social workers were thinking about, feeling and responding to in their interventions.

## Sample method

Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005, p. 44) state that:

The objective of sampling in qualitative research is fundamentally different from that in quantitative research...Sampling in qualitative research is not concerned with ensuring that the findings can be statistically generalised to the whole population. Rather, sampling in qualitative research is purposive. The aim is to describe the processes involved in a phenomenon, rather than its distribution.

As mentioned above, the sampling frame (Babbie 2002; Grinnell 1999; Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005) of the study was broad. To be a participant in the study, practitioners needed to be eligible for membership with the AASW and to be currently residing in Tasmania. Participants also needed to have worked in the welfare industry. They could have been employed on a permanent or casual basis, full-time or part-time in social work or other roles. However, a stratified purposive sampling method (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005, p. 47) or quota sampling method (Alston & Bowles 2003, p. 89) was also used. The sample was stratified according to years of practice experience. Before proceeding with the research I had wondered if risk might mean different things and be experienced differently by practitioners depending on their years of experience in the field. Furthermore, I wanted to pay heed to the importance of context in supporting how meanings of risk are generated.

The sample was stratified according to the following criteria:

- less than two years' practice experience working in the welfare industry since obtaining a social work qualification;
- between two and four years' practice experience working in the welfare industry since obtaining a social work qualification; and
- greater than five years' practice experience working in the welfare industry since obtaining a social work qualification.

Six participants were sought for each group, comprising at least two men in each group.

To begin the recruitment phase of the study, 150 Letters of Invitation (see Appendix 1) and an Information Sheet (see Appendix 2) were sent to social workers around the state. This figure was chosen on the basis that it could yield a 10 – 15% response rate that would enable me to obtain the required sample size. The names of potential participants were taken from a database of practitioners used by the School of Sociology and Social Work. The database was greater than 150. Reducing it to this figure was achieved by using every second name on the database until 150 names had been collated. Potential participants were asked to telephone or email if they wished to express their interest in participating.

The response was overwhelming. Fifty-two practitioners contacted me by telephone or email during the recruitment phase. Of these, 13 decided that they would not be able to participate due to time constraints. Several practitioners also contacted me after the deadline for expressing an interest had passed. Most respondents were from the north and north western regions of the state, possibly because I know more practitioners in these regions than in the south. The names and contact details of potential participants were compiled into a data base.

Given that I had a greater number of participants than I required by the end of the recruitment phase I needed to select participants. To do this I divided the sample pool into the three stratified sub-groups according to years of practice experience. I identified the male social workers in each group and randomly selected two names per group. This ensured the quota of males for the sample was obtained. The remaining female social workers in each group were then randomly selected. Having identified the sample, I contacted people who had been selected by telephone and email and organised a time for their first interviews. I also contacted practitioners who had not been selected by telephone and email, many of whom expressed a desire to participate in later stages of the research if it was required.

## **Ethical issues**

Alston and Bowles (2002, p. 21) note that ‘ethics is a vital part of every research project’. Alongside standpoint theories, a key contribution of postmodern and

poststructural theory in social research has been its systematic dismantling of the view that research is and should be an ethically and politically neutral exercise (D'Cruz & Jones 2004; Fine et al. 2000; Lincoln & Guba 2000; Schwandt 2000; Soobrayan 2003). Positionality, emotion, morality and politics are regarded as vital components of the research context that must be considered to establish 'ethical validation' (Angen 2000). Within this context, Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005) argue that ethics need to be addressed in two ways. First, research ethics must be attended to in procedural terms by obtaining ethics approval from relevant authorities. Second, the researcher must engage in reflective and reflexive practices about their positionality and politics throughout the duration of the research. Both of these stratum of research ethics were incorporated into this study.

Before implementing the study, I was required to gain ethics approval from the University of Tasmania's Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee. In the process I had to identify the potential for harm to occur to participants. As the study unfolded other nuanced understandings of the ethical ramifications of the research became apparent. Most of these understandings came to light through reflecting upon my research practices. They are discussed here alongside of the steps taken to address them.

### **Anonymity and confidentiality**

Participants were at risk of being identified in the reporting of the study. As mentioned above, Tasmania is a small state and practitioners are well known to each other. Complete anonymity was not possible for participants as I would know each participant by sight given I would be doing in-depth face-to-face interviews. In addition, although I would transcribe the majority of interviews, I had funding to help me to complete this task due to illness. Furthermore, when practitioners spoke with me about their interventions they referred to other people. Care needed to be taken to ensure their anonymity as well. To address these concerns I took the following measures:

1. Identifiable information such as names, ages, position titles, work places and location were omitted from transcribed material and the reported results. The

only identifiable information retained has been social workers' comments about their experiences as new graduates in their workplaces.

2. Pseudonyms were given to all people who featured in practitioners' stories. They have been used in the recording and reporting of findings.
3. Data was collapsed into themes, highly unusual information was not reported and complete stories have not been included.
4. All research data have been kept in secure locations.
5. My commitment to confidentiality and the anonymity of participants was outlined in the Information Sheet given to participants.
6. Participants were asked to make a commitment to maintain the anonymity of people they spoke about in their interventions. This undertaking formed Clause 9 of the Consent Form (Appendix 3).
7. Professional transcribers were asked to make a commitment to not discuss the details of the transcripts with anyone other than the researcher. They were also asked to take measures to ensure the information was secure while it was in their possession.
8. I regularly attended supervision sessions with my research supervisors and submitted written work to them. The potential for participants to be identified in my work were discussed and addressed.
9. Participants were also told of the limits of confidentiality in the research process. If I had cause to believe that there was a risk of their intending to harm, or that they had already harmed, someone I would need to report this. Accordingly, I asked that participants kept this in mind as they decided what they would tell me in the research interviews.

### **Emotional and physical harm**

Participants could have become upset while talking about their interventions.

Participants were asked to speak about an intervention they had implemented that was significant to them. For many participants these interventions were significant to them because of the feelings they stirred. I was also concerned participants might feel embarrassed or uncomfortable if they became upset. Furthermore I thought there was

the potential for practitioners to feel as though I was judging or evaluating their practice. Fook (2001) expressed a similar concern in her study, conducted with Napier and Ryan (2000), which investigated the development of professional expertise. Given discussion in the social work risk literature of the predominance of the 'culture of blame' (Parton 1996, 2001; Green 2004) within social work services, I was keen to avoid this potential. A related issue was that I did not want to trivialise the materiality that practitioners accorded to their ideas about risk. While I had adopted a constructivist and subjectivist understanding of risk, I did not want practitioners to sense that I had minimised the 'reality' of their understandings and experiences. Finally, I was concerned practitioners could feel fatigued, given the long interview process.

To address these concerns I took the following measures:

1. I conducted each of the interviews. I thought I was an appropriate interviewer because of my training and experience.
2. I was committed to acting with integrity as an empathetic interviewer (Fontana & Fey 2000). I was clear that the aim of my research was to identify the spaces in practice situations where social workers can resist the conservative potential of negative constructs of risk. However, while I am somewhat embarrassed to confess this, I had anticipated that practitioners would more often than not speak about their reluctance to confront the conservative influence of risk. I had expected a 'catastrophe narrative'. To assist me to achieve my aim of being an empathetic interviewer I spoke openly about my thoughts and assumptions in supervision sessions and postgraduate meetings. I maintained a journal over the duration of the study. I challenged myself to remain open to the surprises of the data. Asking how risk was being spoken of during data analysis assisted me in this endeavour.
3. I took great pains to clarify to practitioners that I was not evaluating their practice. I spoke with each participant about this at the beginning of each interview and it was also stated in the Information Sheet. While my commitment to this was constant, it was a more difficult goal to achieve than I had anticipated. While I was able to conduct myself in a non-judgemental way during the interviews, I later found myself wanting to applaud the actions of some whilst questioning the actions of others. To interrupt this, I journalled

my thoughts after each interview. I looked through these reflections to determine where I was making judgemental statements and then planned to act differently. I also took advice from my research supervisors when they thought I had begun to make judgements, particularly in data analysis and the writing up of results.

4. In a related sense, I did not directly question the efficacy of practitioners' work or thinking in the interviews. Instead I asked practitioners how they arrived at their understandings about their situations, or what enabled them to act in the ways that they did. Thus I tracked the processes of meaning-making and action rather than questioning why they thought their actions were correct. This avoided an intimating judgement and validated the 'reality' of their perceptions.
5. Participants were reassured that they would not incur any penalty or disadvantage if they decided not to take part in the research, or withdrew from the research at any point.
6. Participants were told explicitly that the research would be used to produce a thesis, journal publications and conference presentations.
7. If participants had any concerns about my conduct they were invited to contact my supervisors or other university staff.
8. Participants were asked to name the time of day that would suit them to be interviewed.
9. Participants were told that they could interrupt the interview at any stage and have a break. They could also stop their interviews if they felt tired.
10. The space between the first and second interviews was negotiated to suit the needs of participants.

## **Interviews**

In-depth interviews were the data source for this study. Minichiello et al. (1995, p. 68), quoting Taylor and Bogdan (1984), state that in-depth interviews are:



repeated face-to-face encounters between the researcher and informants directed toward understanding informants' perspectives on their lives, experiences or situations as expressed in their own words.

The repeated nature of in-depth interviewing was important in this study. It enabled me to establish rapport and trust with participants which facilitated their being able to talk in an open manner about the significant intervention they had implemented. However, aside from supporting the collection of quality data, the repeated nature of the interviews generated an empathetic relationship between me and the practitioners. This was an important ethical goal to achieve in its own right. It limited the potential for negative judgements on my part, created an intimate environment to share strong emotions and allowed things to be spoken of that had not previously been spoken. This enabled the interviews to have a transformative effect upon the practitioners. Many participants said that their participation had left them with new insights about their work, they felt 'unburdened', they had been able to resolve matters for themselves and they had gained new ideas about how they could reflect upon their practices in the future. In addition the repeated nature of the interviews ensured my familiarity with practitioners' stories which enhanced the depth of understanding about the operations of risk that emerged during data analysis.

### **The interview schedules**

Two interview schedules were used throughout the course of data collection. The goal of the first interview was to establish whether risk was present in social workers' reflective accounts of their interventions. I deliberately omitted asking questions about risk. I wanted this data (if it was there) to emerge from the participants, as opposed to it being imposed by me as a meaning of their practice. Banks and Williams (2005) used a similar process in their study of social welfare practitioners' constructions of ethical issues, problems and dilemmas. Thus my aim in the interview was to elicit a detailed description of an intervention and to track the key decision-making moments that occurred throughout the history of the intervention.

The first stage of data collection relied upon the use of an open-ended, semi-structured interview schedule (Minichiello et al. 1995) that was comprised of three core questions. These were:

- What is the significant intervention you would like to discuss?
- How did you come to an understanding about what you would do?
- What is important that I understand about the meaning of this story for you?

The remainder of the interview relied upon the use of recursive questions (Minichiello et al. 1995). Prompts were noted on the interview schedule and used if necessary (see Appendix 4). Basic reflective listening skills were employed, such as use of empathy, paraphrasing, summary statements, and reflections of meaning and feeling (Bolton 1987). I asked practitioners what they were thinking, feeling and responding to during each decision-making moment. Thus the process of constructing the retrospective account of the intervention was the primary focus of this first stage of data collection.

In many respects this first interview reflected Fook's (1996, 2002) model of critical reflection involving critical deconstruction. Integrating these ideas into the recursive nature of the interview meant that I listened for:

- the main themes or patterns that emerged in the descriptions that practitioners gave about their interventions;
- terms, phrases and patterns of communication that were frequently repeated;
- labels and categorisations and evidence of binarised opposites;
- who the players in the story were;
- perspectives that were represented and those that were missing;
- interpretations and explanations that practitioners gave;
- how explanations were represented;
- the influence of personal and external contextual factors such as gender, political affiliations, social group affiliations, cultural considerations, type of work being done, years of practice experience and place of work;
- the knowledge and assumptions that were used, such as practice theory, value and belief systems, paradigms, formal theory, moral and ethical codes, policy and legislation;

- roles or positions that this knowledge and these assumptions supported;
- who stood to gain or lose from holding these ideas; and
- the practices, systems or structures that were upheld by these assumptions.

I was not asking participants to critically deconstruct their practice with a view to reconstruction (Fook 2002). It was more a case of my gathering this information to reinscribe a deconstructive focus of risk in my analysis of the interview material. That is, I was going to ask how is risk being spoken of in each of these layers of critical reflection. This meant that I asked questions in the interviews such as, ‘How is it that you came to care so much about your client?’; ‘What seemed important to you at the time? How come?’; ‘What was it like being faced with this?’; ‘How were you able to do that when you were so fearful?’; and ‘Did you consider other ways of dealing with this?’.

The second stage of data collection relied upon a more structured in-depth interview process (Minichiello et al. 1995, p. 63) similar to Shaw and Gould’s (2001, p. 144) description of a ‘problem-centred interview’. Following analysis of the data obtained from the first interviews, I determined that risk was being spoken of in social workers’ reflective accounts of their interventions. I also thought that ideas about risk were being spoken of in particular ways. To check whether my analysis was correct and to elicit further information I constructed a second interview schedule (see Appendix 5). This comprised of several key areas of questioning:

- the meaning of risk;
- how ideas about risk impacted upon practitioners’ thoughts about clients;
- how ideas about risk impacted upon practitioners’ thoughts about themselves;
- how these ideas impacted upon the decisions that were made;
- how ideas about risk related to practitioners’ moral judgements about what they should do;
- how ideas about risk impacted upon practitioners’ ideas about change; and
- how practitioners were able to make sense of the place of risk in their interventions.

While I saw myself as guiding the construction of a story in the first interview, my role and presence in the second interview was more deliberate. I established the parameters for the discussion by creating the interview schedule which I sent to participants before we met for the second interview. I believed this interview would involve practitioners in a deeper level of analysis than their first interviews and I wanted them to feel prepared rather than overwhelmed. In anticipation of our meeting practitioners spent considerable time preparing for the interview, writing copious notes about how they had 'reflected upon their reflections' in light of the questions on the second interview schedule. Our discussions in this second interview then were extremely focused as I drew out the refined understandings practitioners had about the presence and operations of risk in their interventions.

### **Interview processes**

Two pilot interviews were conducted before formally commencing data collection. These interviews were conducted with experienced social workers that I knew and who met the basic criteria for participation. The process of interviewing was the same as that planned for initial data collection and analysis. Both interviews were invaluable as a form of training for the data collection period as well as serving to highlight procedural matters. These interviews clarified:

- the emotional content of the interview for practitioners and myself;
- the need for me to be gentle in the way I asked questions;
- that I needed to situate recursive questioning in the contexts of reflections upon meaning, content and feeling;
- the importance of remaining focused upon practitioners' decision-making pathways in terms of the decisions that were made, what influenced their decisions and the consequences of decisions for practitioners;
- the importance of attending to the language used by practitioners;
- the value of taking notes throughout the interview;
- the importance of a staged approach to data collection and analysis;
- that I was using clear and straightforward language; and
- that the process was a valuable exercise for practitioners.

After completing the interviews I discussed the experience with my research supervisors and made the necessary adjustments and inclusions to the first interview schedule and plan.

Interviews were conducted between March and November 2004. After selecting participants, I contacted them by email and telephone to verify that they were still willing to participate in the research. This being the case, a date, time and location for the first interview was decided. While a small number of practitioners were able to meet during work hours in their work places, the majority of practitioners preferred to meet in their homes or if in Launceston, at the University of Tasmania. Meeting away from work premises promoted the anonymity of research participants. No matter the location or time of day, I met people with my interview schedules, tape recorder to record the interviews, note book and pen, a box of tissues and a box of chocolates. Usually practitioners offered me hot drinks and providing the chocolates was something I could offer in return. If we met at the University I would take flowers into the room that I was using to make the environment more comfortable. I would also offer various refreshments. On one occasion I was invited to meet with a practitioner over dinner in her home. Time was taken before the interviews proceeded for me and participants to become reacquainted if we already knew each other or to become acquainted if we were meeting for the first time.

At the first interview I checked that people had read the Information Sheet and asked if they had any questions, which I answered. I reiterated the care I would take with them, particularly with regard to their anonymity and the confidentiality of their information, that I would be sensitive to any distress they might experience and that I would not be judging their interventions. I then asked participants what they would need from me to feel comfortable while talking to me about their interventions. This amounted to establishing a form of 'contract' between us, common to that used in interpersonal interviewing (DeJong & Berg 2002; Milner & O'Byrne 2002).

During this preamble to the interview, participants often expressed doubts that their stories would be good enough or that they would not have enough to say about their work. Recognising this as an opportunity to clarify that I would not be judging

participants' actions, I responded by saying that any information they were willing to share would be appreciated and valuable. I re-stated that their practice was not being evaluated and that I recognised that practitioners work in difficult and ambiguous situations. Perhaps my years of practice experience added to the genuineness of this statement being recognised by participants, as invariably the interview progressed. An Informed Consent form was then distributed. On this form, participants were asked if they were aware of the conditions of their participation in the research. They were asked to tick the appropriate box on the form if they gave permission for their interviews to be transcribed by somebody other than myself. They were also asked to indicate if they would like a copy of the final results chapters. With this formality completed, the interview began by me asking the first question from the interview schedule.

Some practitioners came to this first interview having already thought about the intervention they would speak about. For others it was not as clear, so time was given to support people in their choice of intervention to discuss. It was thus important not to be too concerned about the time the interview took, other than in terms of the limits imposed by practitioners. Having a second interview planned meant that if we did run out of time and something wasn't spoken it could be addressed in the follow-up interview. Each interview lasted on average two hours, with some lasting as long as four. Given the length of these interviews regular breaks were taken which provided an opportunity to gather our thoughts and to continue the process of relationship building. However, such breaks also helped provide space from the intense emotion that often accompanied the telling of practitioners' stories. Practitioners expressed their fears, doubts, anger and intense sorrow about the circumstances surrounding their clients, colleagues and own lives. These emotions also had their effect upon me and it was not uncommon, both for me and participants to draw a tissue from the box I carried with me.

The second interview followed a similar process to the first. The difference was that the interview was more structured, though there was considerable room for practitioners to discuss topics and issues that were relevant to them. After re-contacting participants and making a date and time to meet as well as establishing the location of the interview, the second interview schedule was sent by post to them. The

second interviews were generally no more than two hours in duration. Overwhelmingly the responses of participants in these interviews confirmed my initial theorising of the data generated from the first interviews. My understandings were extended as practitioners offered more focused insights about the meaning and operations of risk in their interventions. At the completion of the interview I thanked participants for their generosity of time, insight and candour. I re-contacted participants on occasion during the remainder of the research process, first to invite them to choose a pseudonym and then on several other occasions to inform them how the research had progressed.

## **Data analysis**

There were two primary phases of data analysis, each corresponding to the staged approach taken to interviewing. However, to speak of it in these terms belies the recursive process that characterised how the data was transformed to more abstract concepts and theories consistent with a constructivist grounded methodology approach (Charmaz 2000). While there were two historical moments that defined the implementation of two different methods of data analysis for the interviews, the process of analysis itself was gradual, reflective, incremental and conceptually complex. It was also time intensive. In this section of the chapter I present an ordered account of this process that ‘troubled’ (Søndergaard 2002) how risk was spoken of in social workers’ reflective accounts of their interventions.

### **First interviews**

The audiotapes of all the first interviews were transcribed verbatim into Word documents. This amounted to 712 pages of data. Identifying information was deleted and pseudonyms were given to participants. Throughout the interviews I had taken detailed notes about what was being spoken about in the interview. This served three purposes:

- it provided a backup in the event that the tape recorder failed;

- it produced something concrete during the interview that participants and I could look at as we attempted to make sense of various aspects of their stories; and
- it provided an immediate data source that could be used in the generation of ideas to progress the research that was not reliant upon the completion of a transcript.

Transcription was a slow and difficult process during this stage of the study. Illness impeded completion of transcribing in a timely manner. Eventually I was able to enlist some help in completing the task. However, having the notes from the interviews alongside the tapes and the gradual compilation of completed transcripts meant that I could progress the first stage of data analysis.

This first stage of analysis was essentially a thematic analysis (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005). In this process I 'listened to the data' (Rubin & Rubin 1995) to determine whether risk was being spoken of in the interviews. My initial impressions during the interviews and reading my notes afterwards had suggested to me that it was. However, I thought it was important to listen more attentively and systematically for indicators of its presence. This occurred by my developing an open coding system for the multiple ways I heard risk being spoken of. These codes were kept within a handwritten coding book (due to problems with being able to type), and recorded as general themes and concepts (Minichiello et al. 1995). This process involved listening for:

- repeated words, phrases and concepts;
- use of the word 'risk' or similar words and phrases such as 'danger', 'harm' and 'out there';
- events or occasions that stirred strong emotions of all kinds in the participants and/or myself;
- particularly descriptive, elegiac and eloquent passages of speech;
- contexts which were spoken of as being important to practitioners;
- times when practitioners spoke of feeling uncertain or troubled by a situation; and



- the interplay of what was being spoken with how it was being spoken.

Having completed this analysis within each interview, open codes were collated and compared between interviews during the process of axial coding. Similarities and differences between codes ascribed to each interview were noted. In this review core categories began to be established according to meanings, events and processes that appeared to be associated with risk. Tapes and notes were listened to and read once again to check that these categories could be heard in the data. At this point data analysis stopped.

It was clear that risk was being spoken of and in very particular ways in the interviews, particularly with regard to how clients and practitioners were identified as being ‘at risk’ or ‘a risk’. Nonetheless I was still not certain about the intricate detail of how ideas of risk came together in social workers’ interventions. I had some initial thoughts which I wrote in my journal, but in the spirit of reflexive pragmatism (Alvesson 2002) and constructivist grounded methodology (Charmaz 2000) I did not want to impose these thoughts upon the data without checking their relevance with practitioners. Therefore I used the core categories that had been identified in the first stage of data analysis to construct the second interview schedule.

## **Second interviews**

After completing the second interviews with practitioners the second stage of data analysis commenced. This analysis was comprehensive. The second phase incorporated the data generated from both interviews, comprising 1213 pages of completed verbatim transcripts taken from audio tapes that had been entered into separate Word documents. I went into this second phase of data analysis with a clear analytic focus. Whilst I still asked how risk was being spoken of within the transcripts, the data was further ‘troubled’ (Søndergaard 2002) by asking:

- How is the materiality of risk spoken into existence by social workers? and
- How do social workers take up the discursive practices of risk as their own and how do they negotiate them?

At this point I decided to use NVIVO, a computer assisted qualitative data analysis program, as a means of managing the large amount of data that had been generated from the interviews. I created 18 'cases' in NVIVO, one for each practitioner. I then transported their two interviews into their 'case'. Coding then began by coding line by line according to a combination of the headings used from the second interview schedule, the guidelines used for coding in the first stage of analysis outlined above and spontaneous thoughts. These codes were of two types: descriptive (what the narrative was about) and interpretive (what the narrative suggested). This generated multiple 'free nodes' or open coding categories. At the completion of this process relationships between 'free nodes' were identified and the coding system was refined. Descriptive coding tended to be replaced by interpretive codes at this stage as relationships and patterns in the data began to be identified. The move to selective coding took place by considering the applicability and lack of applicability of codes across all cases. Once this task was complete documents were printed of the data entered against each of 12 core categories and their subsidiary themes. Throughout the process I completed a coding journal where I hand-wrote ideas that occurred to me as I coded. I also used the journal to record my reflections about the coding process.

At this point in analysis I began to feel a loss of connection with the stories as a whole. Practitioners' reflective accounts seemed too fragmented in these excerpts for me to have a sense of the complete versions of their stories and a sense of the embodied people behind them. During the interviews I had thought that I had developed an empathetic understanding with people about the circumstances of their interventions and I began to feel the loss of a similar empathetic connection in data analysis. To rectify this situation I decided to work with both the computer generated analyses as well as hard copies of complete transcripts. This enabled data analysis to progress to a deeper level of understanding about the operations of risk and this is when the move to more abstract conceptualisations of the data took place.

Using the analysis that had been generated with NVIVO, complete transcripts were read again to delineate the moments in which practitioners:

- spoke about risk in particular ways;

- referred to risk;
- spoke about risk in association with an event or circumstance;
- spoke about risk in association with people, including themselves; and
- drew conclusions about their interventions.

Notes and final codes (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005, p. 271) were recorded in the margins of the hard copies of transcripts. Having completed the task, three conceptual matrices were developed for exploring the relationships between meanings of risk, client and practitioner identities and practice dilemmas. Considerable time was spent refining the concepts attendant to these matrices so that patterns in the data, as well as variations, could be accounted for. The data belonging to each matrix that had been divided into sections were compiled into three bound books. Wide margins in the 'final' product of the analysed data allowed further refinement of each category to occur as the writing up of results progressed. These three matrices comprised the theoretical framework for presenting the results of the study in the three data chapters of this thesis and they have been incorporated in tables in each of these chapters.

Finally, the writing process was also important to the achievement of an end result in the analysis. This process allowed for detailed feedback from, and discussion with, my research supervisors. I presented my findings at local and international conferences which generated considerable interest and ideas about the research. Two articles (Stanford 2007a, 2007b) were also submitted, serving to sharpen the focus of the arguments of the research.

## **Concluding Comments to the Chapter**

This chapter has discussed the theoretical paradigmatic framework that was used to support my position as the researcher in the study and the study's design. Within this context the research focus of the operations of the risk in social work has been supported as a legitimate research topic. In addition the research question 'How are ideas about risk constituted and integrated into social workers' interventions?' has also been demonstrated to be theoretically relevant. Its value in supporting social

work knowledge about risk had previously been established in Chapter 3. However the theoretical rigour of the question gains further credibility in view of the arguments developed in this chapter. Furthermore, the aim of the research to identify how practitioners are able to resist invitations into the moral conservatism of negative constructs of risk can be understood as having practical and theoretical relevance. It positions this research in opposition to the totalising assumption that social work is necessarily subject to the moral and political conservatism of risk embedded in contemporary risk discourses. It also clarifies my moral and political commitment as a researcher to the generation of a 'practical philosophy' (Lincoln & Guba 2000, p. 179) that is potentially transgressive in social work (Irving 1999).

The methodological and method implications of the theoretical paradigm of the research have also been clearly delineated. The chapter demonstrates the synergy between the philosophical and practical aspects of the study, suggesting the congruence of the study's theory and practice. Within this context the research design and the methods used for data collection and analysis can be understood as being predicated upon a desire to achieve theoretical, methodological, interpretative, evaluative and reflexive rigour (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005, pp. 38 – 44). Conducting repeated interviews with a small number of participants has allowed depth in understanding the operations of risk in social work practice. The following chapter presents the first of three findings chapters that have resulted from the methods used in data collection and analysis.

## Chapter 5

# Embodying Risk: Constituting Risk Identities in Social Workers' Interventions

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### Introduction to the Chapter

The question which this research has asked is 'How are ideas about risk constituted and integrated into social workers' interventions?'. This is the first of three results chapters that presents data in answer to this question. In this first chapter I present one of the pivotal findings of this research, being that ideas about risk were closely intertwined with how social workers spoke about their clients, colleagues and themselves. For the majority of the practitioners who participated in this study, risk operated as an embodied concept. Clients and colleagues were recognised as being 'at risk' and/or 'a risk' and practitioners similarly spoke of themselves as 'at risk' and/or 'a risk'.

To begin the chapter, I provide a brief overview of the meaning and qualities that social workers attributed to risk as they recounted their interventions. In this section risk is presented as having been constructed by practitioners as a wholly negative concept that was 'real' and inescapable. These conceptualisations of risk provide a defining conceptual context for locating how ideas about risk became embodied in the ascription of client, colleague and practitioner risk identities.

The chapter then progresses to an outline of the typology of risk identities that were present within social workers' reflective accounts of their interventions. I present a detailed description of each of these identities, relying heavily upon quotes from practitioners' narratives. This serves to illustrate how risk identities operated as a very powerful source of recognition in social workers' interventions. Following this presentation, I sort the data in order to demonstrate that multiple risk identities were spoken of by practitioners within a single reflective account of their interventions.

Within this context, the meanings of risk as seeming everywhere and being a negative concept clearly resonate as a defining context for how social workers storied their interventions.

The final section of the chapter presents alternative conceptualisations of risk than those presented elsewhere in the chapter. Søndergaard (2002, p. 198) suggests that depth in analysis is supported by ‘troubling’ data to identify ‘ruptures in discourses’. With this in mind I have identified a ‘maverick’ storyline from one practitioner who spoke against the presence of risk in his intervention, as well as two other practitioners who had alternative ideas about the meaning and influence of risk in their practice. The chapter concludes with an integration of the meanings and operations of risk spoken by practitioners, as a synthesis of how ideas about risk were constituted and integrated into social workers’ interventions.

## **Meanings and Qualities Attributed to Risk in Social Workers’ Interventions**

As will become evident in the course of this chapter, all but one social worker (Craig) recognised risk as a definitive factor in operation within the context of their practice situations. For these practitioners risk was unquestioningly present. It was spoken of as an intrinsic and inescapable feature of the situations that social workers were involved in. Thus risk was ascribed the interdependent qualities of being ‘real’, ‘everywhere’ and ‘negative’.

The reality of risk was evident in both what was said and how it was said by practitioners. For example, explicit statements of the reality of risk were contained in responses such as:

*it was a real life death and risk. That was, to me, that was enormous from the word go my understanding of that risk to the mum and therefore to the child’s life (Frances).*

*risk walks by that child every day (Josephine).*

*the risk to him was extreme and encapsulating (Kaitlin).*

*I guess one of the ways you could think of him was as evil personified (Moir).*

The reality of risk then was reinforced by how practitioners spoke of it as being intrinsic to people and to events. In this sense risk was spoken of as being ubiquitous, or to use Narelle's phrase, 'risk was everywhere'. Narelle clarified this expression, saying:

*a lot of the time I don't think you are even aware – you are not sort of consciously thinking about risk but it...is always there. It is just a matter of scraping the surface...it is obviously there. It is complex.*

Frances provided similar insight into how risk was an integral feature of her work with Julianna, who was considered to be 'a risk' to her baby daughter. However, Frances was also acutely aware and sensitive to how Julianna was 'at risk' both in terms of the effects of having been severely abused throughout her own life, and as a result of her 'wilting under the Departmental gaze'. Frances had been struck by the symbolism of a broken TV screen and a 'bashed in' washing machine that were situated outside Julianna's home. Frances recalled:

*I was very aware of the risk. I think the image of the broken, shattered TV with a great big glass that was an inch thick was with me and it symbolised, I think the risk...that image was really powerful in the work and it reminded me and it spoke to me about risk to the child, that is what the child protection whole system...is centred around theoretically and in all sorts of ways really...*

Thus risk was recognised by the social workers in this study as a pervasive force that was unquestioningly present in their interventions.

For Moira, risk existed as an all-encompassing entity that had infiltrated all spaces. Consequently Moira saw herself and others as being constantly 'at risk'. Risk had come to colour her worldview. Moira remarked that:

*There are no designated areas in this world where people can be safe and it's almost as if you have to be on the lookout and be wary of people all the time and I thought that's a sad way to have to be and was a sad way for me to have to think about it.*

Overwhelmingly, then, risk was spoken of by social workers in this study in primarily negative terms. This was evident in the terminology that was used to reference the meaning of risk within each account. Risk was commonly spoken of as meaning:

- a threat (Joseph, Mark, Sebastian, Zoe);
- physical, sexual, and emotional harm, abuse or violence towards self or others (Frances, Geraldine, Graham, Jenny, Josephine, Kaitlin, Linda, Maggie, Mark, Moira, Narelle, Peter, Petra, Sebastian, Zoe);
- danger (Geraldine, Graham, Maggie); and
- a negative consequence (Elaine, Joseph, Mark, Petra).

Zoe spoke of risk as meaning threat in very clear terms:

*It came to me that the feeling of being at risk...is really similar to feeling under threat or being threatened and I thought, well what is that about? To be threatened by consequence...it is a feeling that I am being watched, I am under threat. Something is going to happen...*

Equating risk with harm or violence was common to many of the stories that practitioners told. Jenny's account of her work with a young woman she was working with is typical of how the relationship between risk and harm were spoken of by social workers. Jenny reflected that:

*The biggest risk at the time was maybe the child harming themselves because they were presenting self-harming behaviours plus also the child...harming the family members because when she used to get really angry she would lash out at them and be fairly physically aggressive.*

Similarly, Josephine spoke of the young boy she was working with in the following terms:

*there was always a risk to the actual child's wellbeing and safety and that was always going to be a risk because it was a case where there was a lot of violence inside the home then it was always his actual wellbeing was always at risk...*



The specific meaning of risk as danger is evident in Geraldine's accounts of how she was regarded by her organisation. According to Geraldine:

*Their comments that clients would be frightened suggested they thought they might be in danger. That the clients would think they were in danger. I was the risk to clients.*

Finally, risk was spoken more generally as the possibility of negative consequences eventuating for clients, practitioners or others. Elaine's story indicated that she believed that recurring notifications and investigations of child neglect within a family were placing the parents and the family in general 'at risk'. In this example the negative consequences that were envisaged by Elaine were a result of her organisation's interventions. As Elaine explained:

*The biggest risk was definitely this family having this whole thing blow up on them and having their children removed and getting kicked out of their house and all that kind of stuff...I thought the more times they were investigated the more disempowered they became which I don't think is a good way to be. It would leave them not able to protect themselves from other...agencies.*

Ascriptions of negative characteristics to risk were also thoroughly embedded within the milieu of social workers' practice contexts. This was most evident in how the social workers within this study spoke of their mandatory obligation to report child abuse and neglect. This was the case for social workers working within statutory and non-statutory agencies. As Petra explained:

*we are mandatory reporters as well by law to refer that young person or at least make a report that they are at risk of abuse. Or danger in some way. So if a young person's story includes some element where it feels to us that that young person may be at risk in a physical sense or, you know, quite emotionally traumatised or whatever, by a parent or other, then we are obliged to notify as a mandatory reporter.*

Meanings of risk as a negative concept were thus supported at a systemic level, which served to reinforce practitioners' negative conceptualisations about risk.

The reality of the ubiquitous existence of risk and it being seen as a negative concept were undisputed in these practitioners' reflective accounts. The discursive power of these qualities of risk was fully recognised in how they were linked to the identities of

people. That is, these meanings and qualities of risk became definitive of how practitioners recognised their clients, colleagues and themselves. This is the focus of the next section of this chapter.

## **Ascribing Risk Identities in Social Workers' Interventions**

Risk was spoken of as an embodied concept within practitioners' reflections of their interventions. Clients, colleagues and practitioners were spoken of as embodiments of risk. This was evident in how practitioners spoke of their clients, colleagues and themselves according to various risk-based identities. Risk operated as a tangible concept in social workers' interventions on the basis of the ascription of these risk identities.

The dominant identities that emerged within this study were of two main types: 'Client Risk Identities' and 'Practitioner Risk Identities'. Within each of these broad category types two further categories were identified, being 'Client at Risk' and 'Client a Risk' and 'Practitioner at Risk' and 'Practitioner a Risk' identities. While colleagues and family members were all referred to in social workers' stories, their presence was not central to their narratives. Practitioners' relationships with clients were the pivotal issues. The exception to this was Joseph. Joseph spoke of an intervention he had implemented in response to a situation that happened with some colleagues. However, the process of ascribing risk identities to himself and colleagues was the same as for other practitioners. Rather than establish a separate category scheme for Joseph, I have included his data about his colleagues within the heading of client 'a risk' identity and his own as practitioner 'at risk'.

Each of these identities comprised of a number of sub-identities. These are summarised in Table 1 with the names of practitioners who ascribed these identities to their clients, colleagues and themselves. A discussion of each identity type follows this table.

**Table 1: Client and Practitioner Risk Identities**

Client Risk Identities		Practitioner Risk Identities	
Client at Risk	Client a Risk	Practitioner at Risk	Practitioner a Risk
<b>1. Vulnerable Client</b> Elaine, Frances, Josephine, Kaitlin, Linda, Mark, Narelle, Petra, Sebastian, Zoe  <b>2. Abused Client</b> Frances, Josephine, Kaitlin, Linda, Maggie, Mark, Narelle, Peter, Petra, Sebastian  <b>3. Unsafe Client</b> Frances, Graham, Jenny, Josephine, Kaitlin, Narelle, Peter  <b>4. Discriminated Client</b> Geraldine, Moira, Narelle, Sebastian	<b>1. Violent/Neglectful Client</b> Elaine, Frances, Graham, Jenny, Joseph (colleagues), Josephine, Maggie, Moira, Narelle, Peter, Zoe  <b>2. Problem Client</b> Graham, Jenny, Mark	<b>1. Vulnerable Practitioner</b> Frances, Geraldine, Graham, Joseph, Kaitlin, Mark, Moira, Narelle, Petra, Sebastian, Zoe  <b>2. Compromised Practitioner</b> Elaine, Geraldine, Joseph, Maggie, Moira, Narelle, Peter, Petra  <b>3. Judged Practitioner</b> Elaine, Geraldine, Josephine, Mark, Sebastian, Zoe  <b>4. Vexed Practitioner</b> Graham, Jenny	<b>1. Ineffective Practitioner</b> Elaine, Linda, Maggie  <b>2. Persecutory Practitioner</b> Kaitlin  <b>3. Overzealous Practitioner</b> Josephine, Kaitlin  <b>4. Discriminatory Practitioner</b> Moira  <b>5. Dangerous Practitioner</b> Geraldine

## Client 'at risk' identities

The reflective accounts of social workers of their interventions demonstrate they genuinely felt concern, empathy and compassion for their clients. While the specific stories of clients are not discussed in this thesis, it is still possible to surmise from the extracts that are presented that the circumstances of clients' lives were fraught with incredible hardships and injustices. Perhaps it is not surprising then that clients were viewed by practitioners in terms of the extent to which they were 'at risk'. These 'at

risk' identities were created by social workers. That is, social workers' reflective narratives of their interventions indicate that they identified their clients as being 'at risk', as opposed to them relying upon other people's, or means of, assessment. Specifically, clients were spoken of as 'vulnerable', 'unsafe', 'abused' and 'discriminated'.

### **The vulnerable client**

The 'vulnerable client' was a powerful characterisation of an 'at risk' identity in the stories of Elaine, Frances, Josephine, Kaitlin, Linda, Mark, Narelle, Petra, Sebastian and Zoe. The genuineness of the care and concern of these practitioners for their clients was evident in their reflective accounts. The tragedy of the lives of their clients also echoed with a profound resonance. For example, Frances spoke with me about her work with Julianna, whose one-year-old child, Ellen, had been removed from her care. Frances was working with Julianna to try and establish some concrete measures that would support her to parent Ellen. However, attempts were being made to place Ellen on an extended order. Frances had worked with Julianna on previous occasions, so she knew her history and struggles. The following extracts exemplify how Frances spoke of Julianna in terms of her vulnerability and hence risk:

*Julianna was so very, very, very vulnerable. Like, she rings up people saying that she is going to kill herself when she gets in a bad patch and she does it regularly...This is a young woman who measures herself constantly and fails dismally. She knows that she hasn't got a friend in the world. She knows she is one of the most lonely people in the world. She measures herself against these very real yardsticks.*

*I thought that another place that risk was very, very much involved in my thinking and my actions was that, and it really was...the effect of the gaze...the Departmental gaze on this young mum. Julianna was so very, very, very vulnerable...So...here she is really wilting under the effect of many, many things: her depression, her childhood, all the stuff that I knew about her and now the Departmental gaze and I think there was an enormous risk to her and I was really conscious of this then. There was an enormous risk to her of that Departmental gaze and how it had played out and I became aware of it...right in the beginning of that process.*

Being vulnerable to the scrutiny and power of investigative agencies was also spoken by Elaine. Elaine recounted her work with a family she was required to visit after a complaint was made following several previous investigations for child neglect. The family were not given prior warning of her visit, so that a more accurate assessment of the 'true' circumstances of their living conditions could be ascertained. What struck Elaine in this intervention was the sense of resignation that was felt by the parents. Elaine spoke of the vulnerability and risk of the parents in the following terms:

*the look on their faces was like, you know, 'Oh here we go again' sort of thing. And I just thought I'd never thought the service was about playing a part in making people feel like they have no power or that there are other people out there that can sort of turn up on your door and you have to do pretty much whatever they say.*

*it was pretty much about disempowerment for me. Just, they were so, they just sat there while I was going through their house...I guess it made me feel sorry for them. It made me think that I would absolutely hate to be in their position for whatever reason. They were resigned to it.*

*I think just within themselves, you know, to have people go through your house and look at your stuff and be judging the way you keep your home. I am guessing mentally, that wouldn't be fantastic. That would be very bad for their self-esteem, I would imagine their self-worth. So that would have been the biggest risk that I saw for the client.*

Kaitlin spoke with enormous affection of a young boy she was working with. According to Kaitlin this little boy was being subjected to severe forms of physical and emotional abuse as well as neglect within his family. Kaitlin had formed a strong relationship with this child and his vulnerability touched her deeply. In reflecting on how she regarded this child, Kaitlin spoke of him thus:

*what touched me about him was that he was so, just so not loved. Oh it makes me feel really teary to even say that. He was so not loved. Nobody loved him. Absolutely nobody loved this child and he's adorable. He's just beautiful. Beautiful. Look, one of the most amazing things was...I'd been working with him a few months or something and he was outside one day and he was picking dandelions and putting them in his bag. A worker who saw him said, 'What are you doing?' 'I'm picking these for Kaitlin for when I see her next.' So I saw him on the Monday and he comes in with this bag full of dead dandelions and the smile just went from ear to ear as he gave me this beautiful, beautiful gift of the beautiful*

*yellow flowers that he'd picked for me and I was so touched by that. What touched me so much was you have so little love in your life yet you can so willingly give love. You still have the capacity to recognise love. And I'm talking about love in a universal sense here. You still are open enough to feel love and you're more than open enough to give love. How can you do that when you have never ever been loved? How can that happen? And I was just so in awe of this child – at his heart and his capacity to love...So that's what touched me the most – the fact that he was totally unloved and I think every child is loveable. Every child, well it's one of our basic needs to be loved...Yeah it was like nobody loved him.*

For Kaitlin then, the construction of the vulnerability of this child as not being loved supported his being ascribed an 'at risk' identity.

### **The abused client**

'Vulnerable clients' were often 'abused clients'. Frances, Josephine, Kaitlin, Linda, Maggie, Mark, Narelle, Peter, Petra and Sebastian spoke of how the clients they worked with had experienced in isolation, or in combination, physical, sexual and emotional abuse in the past or within the current contexts of their interventions with practitioners. Within these accounts, then, the 'at risk' identity of clients was intricately related to them having suffered some form of abuse within their life histories. For example, Josephine spoke about her work with a young boy who had been referred to her primarily on the basis of his aggressive behaviour. However, in her reflective account Josephine spoke mostly about his having experienced and witnessed violence within his home, which is captured in the following statement:

*there was a lot of violence inside the home...his actual wellbeing was always 'at risk' and since the last time I spoke to you there was a particularly nasty incident where the step-dad threatened to kill him and the other children...*

Kaitlin spoke of her young client in similar ways. She recounted a significant moment in which the nature of the abuse of the young boy she was working with became apparent to her. Kaitlin recollected:

*I encouraged them [the parents] to take the younger boy for a paediatrician's appointment which we did. So I actually took them in there so he would get to be there. The paediatrician tried to get him up on the table and he was scared and he went to go to his father and his father moved his body out of the way. So I was the one who picked him*

*up and put him on the table and held his hand and all of that sort of thing. I'd arranged for a guidance assessment during that interview with the father. He was asked, you know, 'What are the positive things about your son?' And he thought for five minutes and couldn't think of one thing that was positive about his son. So it was becoming clearer and clearer about the emotional abuse that this child was experiencing and the deprivation on so many levels...*

The 'abused client' identity is further illustrated by Linda's story of her work with an adult woman who had been physically and sexually abused as a child. Linda had been working with her for quite some time as she made steps to recover from the disabling effects of the abuse she had suffered. In the course of this work the client had attempted suicide. In speaking of this woman, Linda said:

*She's had a history of systematic physical and sexual abuse for a long period of time in her childhood. And the more she was coming to terms [with the abuse], the more she was being confronted with memories, the more the self-harming was increasing...there's a history to her kind of being overwhelmed by this stuff and in turn that overwhelms me...it's almost like I saw her and sort of saw the problem...as totally crushing her...*

While Linda was committed to envisaging a positive future for this woman, the effects of the abuse at times seemed overwhelming for the client and Linda also wondered about the capacity of someone to be able to overcome the effects of such awful abuse. Linda wondered if this client's suicide would have signified that the abuse she had suffered had 'marked' her forever. As Linda explained:

*You know she had a long history of abuse and...I was questioning will she get through this?...So that was there. Can you be really scarred forever and does death mean that? That you're scarred forever? So I was really looking at risk and suicide within a sexual assault context.*

As Linda's story indicates, the 'abused client' 'at risk' identity had a powerful impact upon how practitioners recognised their clients.

### **The unsafe client**

Clients were also constructed as being 'unsafe' by Frances, Graham, Jenny, Josephine, Kaitlin, Narelle and Peter in terms of their physical and emotional well-

being. This was particularly striking in Graham's account of an adult male he was working with who had a mental illness, was homeless and lived, though was not housed, in a remote and isolated area. Graham was attempting to find accommodation for this man. During periods when the client's illness was exacerbated his behaviour would become quite extreme. Given he did not like taking medication the effects of the illness were often apparent to others. As a consequence of the illness Graham saw him as being unsafe in many regards. In speaking of this client, Graham noted that:

*There were a lot of people who found him...to be quite spooky and there were people who were not aggressive towards him but they were, you know, very non-welcoming, so he was being bullied a bit...So I guess we were there just to check on his needs as far as that was concerned and make sure that he was OK...because of his mental health situation we had some really big concerns for his safety...he wasn't welcome...So that's another concern to think here's this guy without any family and without any support or any emotional support, not friendship and he's on his own in a tent with these two dogs and wet, cold...*

Peter also feared for the safety of a client who was living in a remote area that he was attempting to house. In Peter's story an adult male client had said that he was being physically abused by his female partner and that he would 'take it on and then...he'd burst...and fight back'. Peter explained that he advocated for this client to be housed on the basis of his being 'at risk' of further abuse:

*I said, 'Given that he's a male, that he finds it very difficult to talk about being a victim of domestic violence, it took two – three interventions or interactions before he disclosed the full story to me, I think he's probably at high risk. Not necessarily of high risk of being hurt more than he has been, but high risk of continuing to live in a very volatile situation'.*

Consequently the 'unsafe client identity' resembles the 'vulnerable client identity' as both identities reflect social workers' concerns that clients had been or could have been harmed in some way.

### **The discriminated client**

Geraldine, Moira, Narelle and Sebastian were cognisant of their clients' identities in terms of their potential or actual experience of discrimination. In turn, their experience or susceptibility to discrimination positioned them as 'at risk'. For



Geraldine, Narelle and Sebastian, this discrimination was linked to the sexual and gender identities of their clients. As Sebastian noted of a young gay man that he was working with, 'This person is already oppressed as a young gay man. He is oppressed as a young man and then as a gay young man...'. This sentiment was also apparent in Narelle's explanation of the 'at risk' identity she had ascribed to the transgendered client with whom she was working:

*She is 'at risk' of isolation. You know, the whole violence, abuse, walking down the street – all of that sort of stuff. Being called a freak, not having access to resources. Not being treated fairly in the legal system. Also if she says she was a victim of violence and she went to, say, the police, and she got a police officer who was a bit of a wanker, she could have just been laughed at.*

Geraldine's story further illustrates how 'discriminated clients' were 'at risk' clients. Geraldine was acutely aware of the discrimination that lesbian clients within her service were experiencing. Geraldine wanted to tell clients, through some means, that she was a lesbian. Geraldine thought this would be important for lesbian clients, who she believed experienced discrimination as a result of the dominance of hetero-sexual identities in the workplace. In speaking of clients as discriminated, Geraldine said that:

*I knew that many gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans-sexual people were not having their needs met through social workers, because social workers did have a lot of assumptions about what they needed...what this means is that these people don't access services...and you don't come out to the worker because you're afraid of her judgements...So you avoid services 'cause you'd rather not have a judgement than deal with the issues with those people. And so you go looking for someone who does understand the issues and it means going and checking people out and walking away and checking another one out and walking away. It's a lot of work. And it involves putting yourself at risk. At risk of being abused, in effect. And so I knew all that...so a lesbian comes into the agency, she won't come out because she thinks, she assumes that the worker's heterosexual and most people do assume that workers are heterosexual.*

For Moira, discrimination was spoken of in different terms than to Geraldine, Narelle and Sebastian. Moira viewed her client as potentially being discriminated against by her as a result of her not wanting to work with him. She knew that he had been physically violent towards a female client she had seen. In speaking of his 'discriminated client' identity, Moira clarified:

*The risk to him was that I wouldn't provide him with the service that I guess anybody deserves to be provided with regardless of whether they have been violent or not; and holding those principles and ethics of social work that are dear to my heart; and not wanting to discriminate against him and deny him the service that anybody should get if they didn't have that knowledge that I had about him.*

Thus Moira's story demonstrates that client 'at risk' identities can conflict with other knowledge and client risk identities, which is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

## **Client 'a risk' identities**

The personification of clients (and colleagues, as in Joseph's case) as 'a risk' was the foundation for practitioners ascribing clients (and colleagues) with an 'a risk' identity. In common with the construction of 'at risk' client identities, the 'a risk' client identity enabled risk to become embodied at the site of persons. 'A risk' client identities defined who clients were. Two 'a risk' client identities were apparent in practitioners' stories – being 'the violent' client and 'the problematic' client.

### **The violent/neglectful client**

Overwhelmingly, the most often ascribed 'a risk' client identity that was evident in social workers' interventions was the 'violent and/or neglectful client' (Elaine, Frances, Graham, Jenny, Joseph [colleagues], Josephine, Maggie, Moira, Narelle, Peter and Zoe). 'Violent clients' were most often spoken of in terms of their latent potential to be physically or emotionally violent towards practitioners and/or others. For example, it came to Narelle's attention that the transgendered client she was working with had not only been physically assaulted herself, but had also been physically abusive towards others. Narelle became concerned that the client might become aggressive towards her within and outside of her workplace when she told the client she couldn't keep working with her. In speaking of this 'a risk' identity Narelle said:

*I had read she could be quite violent...I thought she might fly off the handle...What would happen if I ran into her...what would happen if I came across her...So I was a bit worried about, oh God, what if I am at a*

*party and she is there and I have told her that I couldn't help her? What would she do? Would she come up and punch me?*

Moira was in a similar position to Narelle. Moira was fearful that the client she was working with might become violent towards her on the basis of her not wanting to work with him and/or as a consequence of her having supported his female partner who had been physically assaulted by him. As Moira explained:

*So he was an extremely violent man. And he pulled out a copy of a restraining order and he wanted me to have a look at it, and he's basically accusing his partner of telling lies about him and he's virtually throwing this at me and saying, 'Look. Have a look at this...'*

*actually sitting in a room and being confronted with a perpetrator of violence and knowing that the way that the violence – that I knew what he had subjected this woman to, was going to affect the way that I viewed him as a person. And I think as a social worker it's a really hard thing to say and really hard thing to acknowledge because you know that you want to think, 'Yes. People are capable of change. He is not a walking monster, you know'. I didn't want to think about him like that. But I was scared of him.*

Thus Narelle's and Moira's stories illustrate the presence of fear within constructions of 'violent client identities'. It is apparent that this identity had a profound impact upon these social workers and, in turn, was instrumental in how they positioned themselves in relation to their clients.

Graham also spoke of how the client he was working with had a reputation within his community and across a number of services as being violent. This was made evident to Graham in his first contact with the client. He was asked to accompany another worker to visit the client. Graham explained, 'I was going along because the worker was fearful of her own safety'. As Graham became more involved with the client he began to hear more stories of him having been violent. The consequence of his having been identified as being 'a risk' was that he was denied access to emergency accommodation services. As Graham explained in the case of one service:

*Because he'd previously been there...and pulled the TV off the wall and now that he was back, they didn't want him back. I think that basically was what it was.*

The identity of this man being ‘violent’ and thus ‘a risk’ was also emphasised on another occasion to Graham. This ‘violent client identity’ was ascribed through the retelling of another incident between the client and another worker. In this instance Graham said:

*It was explained to me by the previous worker that he could become violent if he thought he wasn't getting his own way or if he thought that he was being challenged in an inappropriate manner. Especially around medication...we had a visiting professional there who just happened to be there when he came to visit and he didn't know who she was and she started asking questions and everything was OK until she got on to the medication part of it. And he threatened to pull her down the stairs and he walked across the road and started throwing rocks at the building. She did then take an order out on him to say that he was violent and people needed to be careful with him...*

Graham's example demonstrates the profound impact of an ‘a risk’ client identity. A ‘violent client identity’ precluded recognition of the client in any other terms and became historically embedded within narratives about him within Graham's and other organisations.

A young person that Jenny was seeing was spoken of as a ‘violent client’, although in this instance Jenny did not fear the client would be violent towards her. This young woman had a history of self-harming, suicide attempts and dramatic mood swings. She was also on medication. What Jenny found striking about this young woman was her capacity for violence and her seeming lack of recognition of the seriousness of her behaviour. In speaking of her ‘violent client identity’, Jenny said:

*a lot of the behaviour is around being aggressive and violent and things like that...We are talking about a young person who will threaten to cut grandma's throat and she will be giggling and smiling as she is talking about it...And I find it really difficult to engage in some way when they're laughing. And she does, like, she threatens to cut gran's throat. She threatens to cut up her brothers and sisters and she argues and fights with mum all the time.*

A final example of a ‘violent client identity’ is presented in Maggie's story. Maggie was working with an adult man who had been convicted of a sexual offence. Maggie did not fear for her own safety in her work with him. Instead she spoke of how he was

‘a risk’ to the children he had assaulted and to other children he might come in to contact with. In speaking of him, Maggie explained:

*It is the risk of turning him out there. It is a risk...to those young children. It is the risk to the children out there that a person like him poses and the flak that we will cop if he re-offended...he is very damaged.*

Maggie was very concerned that this client would re-offend and she saw herself as being charged with the responsibility to prevent this from occurring. Thus in common with the other practice examples presented here, Maggie’s story demonstrates how ‘violent client identities’ presented challenges to social workers in terms of how they should respond to them. This was further complicated if these clients were also recognised as having an ‘at risk’ client identity which is discussed later in this chapter.

### **The problem client**

The second ‘a risk’ client identity in evidence in the stories of social workers’ interventions was the ‘problem client’ identity. In addition to speaking of their clients as having a ‘violent client’ identity, Graham and Jenny also spoke of them as ‘problem clients’. The client that Graham was working with was getting a bad name within and outside of his service. In part, this ‘problem client’ identity was connected to him being seen as a ‘violent client’. However, the identity of ‘problem client’ was also based on how he was seen to be a problem to workers in their attempts to provide him with accommodation options. The agency could not house him and as a consequence he was living in a tent. He would return to the agency over and over again asking them to help him. As Graham recounted, ‘I’m getting a phone call from our Secretary saying, “He’s back. He’s on his way back...”, and I thought, “Oh no”’. Jenny similarly spoke of how the young woman she was working with had developed a ‘problem client’ identity within a network of services. As Jenny explained:

*Mum calls the police and the police go, ‘Oh not her again’, because she is so well known. Mum will take her to the hospital and they will tell her to go away.*

The presence of this problematic client identity was also evident in how Jenny spoke about this client and her family, saying:

*These sort of families don't take responsibility for their actions...They expect that everyone in the world will come and fix everything for them...I have a message and it has sat on my desk now for three days to ring this young person. If I do I will get sucked in again.*

Mark also ascribed a 'problem client' identity to the young man named Geoffrey he was working with, as he thought he might somehow 'set me up'. In speaking of Geoffrey, Mark stated:

*Well there's a client, it's a bit of a problematic client for me at the moment...I suppose he's a pretty challenging client...he sends me emails all the time...insisting that we get together...he was very, very demanding...*

This young man had made a complaint against another worker and Mark was concerned that he could do the same to him. Mark reflected that:

*I've had to be a little bit careful there...Careful that I might say something that might not be understood or might be misinterpreted and maybe that could be used against me.*

Consequently Mark was quite wary of Geoffrey and was undecided about whether he should continue working with him. Thus in common with 'violent client' identities, the construction of 'problem client' identities by social workers created challenges for how they would respond to their client's situations and needs. This is discussed in the following chapter. This challenge was further exacerbated by the presence of practitioner 'risk identities', which are presented in the following section.

## **Practitioner 'at risk' identities**

Social workers spoke of themselves as being 'at risk' within their interventions. Risk in this context was used to refer to how social workers saw themselves 'at risk' of some form of negative consequence or harm as a result of their interactions with clients, or from external sources such as from the organisations they were working within. These identities were pivotal to the narratives of how social workers spoke about and identified themselves. These narratives reflected the identities of the 'vulnerable', 'compromised', 'judged' and 'vexed' practitioner.

## The vulnerable practitioner

The 'vulnerable practitioner' was a common identity amongst social workers who participated in this study. This practitioner 'at risk' identity was associated with social workers feeling vulnerable in terms of their physical or emotional safety (Frances, Joseph, Mark, Moira, Narelle, Sebastian Zoe), being sanctioned or penalised for their actions (Geraldine, Kaitlin, Mark, Moira, Petra, Zoe) and as a result of the emotional demands of the interventions they were involved in (Geraldine, Graham, Kaitlin).

Sebastian was fearful after he and the young gay man (Trevor) he was working with were threatened with physical and sexual violence during an anonymous phone call. Somehow the caller knew that Sebastian had been helping Trevor. Very serious threats were made against them by this unknown male caller. In explaining his reaction to these threats, Sebastian said he was 'very scared. I think that was the first time I'd felt, it would've been the first time I'd felt fear in the work like that on that level'. The threat of this assault had a dramatic impact upon Sebastian. In speaking of the vulnerability it engendered, Sebastian said:

*I guess on a personal level it threw me...I guess that sense of vulnerability is always there, was always there in terms of being on your own...being in a kind of what could potentially be a very hostile environment...to be working in and keeping a low profile and being aware of that. But it sort of brought it home that particular incident for me on a personal level too and it sort of made me question, 'Is this for me?'*

Moira also spoke of her vulnerability in the situation where she realised her client was the partner of another client she had been working with and that he had been violent towards her. Quite simply Moira said she was 'just scared. I think I felt vulnerable...vulnerable to him. Vulnerable to the possibilities of what could happen...'. When Moira realised who this man was she said:

*I started physically feeling quite ill about it. Yeah, just like feeling like a horrible feeling in the pit of your stomach and all I wanted to do was get out of there and not have to help him really and not have to talk to him...It's the fear that this man will find out who I am and will put two and two together and think this woman has provided my ex-partner with a service and is helping her to work against me and all those sort of things...I was thinking all sorts of things. I was thinking why was he wanting my name?...And I just felt extremely uncomfortable. I thought I had put myself at risk and I would remain at risk from him you know because he could recognise me out in the street...I hoped that nothing*

*would ever come of it. It worried me because I thought, I even went to the extent of thinking this is the time to have my phone number taken out of the phone book...have a private number, so I called Telstra and had that organised and thought the old phone book has my name in it and somebody could find the address and come to my house and it was a form of, I don't know, of paranoia.*

Zoe also commented upon the extent to which she believed she was 'at risk' in terms of her physical safety when she investigated an allegation of child physical abuse. When first arriving at the parents' home, Zoe and her co-worker interviewed the child's mother. The mother warned them that if they wanted to remove her child from her care they would 'have to do it with the police'. Her male partner then came home and he was 'standing there quite aggressive...and a face with like thunder...the father...was very angry...'. When reflecting on how risk was present in the situation, Zoe claimed:

*I was experiencing risk of my safety, physical safety in the house particularly when we went back the second time and the father was home. We were quite prepared...we had the mobile in our hand to call the police and we parked really close so that we could get in the car and leave. It was kind of a bit of an adrenalin rush as well when you think that you are going to get the shit kicked out of you because we had to be prepared for that because of what the mother had said about the father and what he had said about us and things like that. So we were quite prepared to be in danger.*

Mark and Josephine spoke of how they felt vulnerable to physical assaults as a result of the clients they sometimes worked with. Mark spoke of how he saw himself 'at risk' in the following terms:

*One of the things that just occurred to me was that a lot of the work that I do is with men who use abuse and violence in their lives...I am afraid of some of the men that I work with. And I am. I know I am. God that's a horrible thought. I get scared of them sometimes, but I say I don't but I do. I do. That's a scary thought.*

Echoing the sentiment that 'risk is everywhere', Josephine said, 'In a small community...violent perpetrators are very easily going to recognise you and recognise your family'.



The 'vulnerable practitioner' also felt 'at risk' because of fearing reprisals as a result of the interventions they implemented. This was evident from the stories that social workers told about how they thought their own or other organisations might take actions against them. For example, Moira thought her organisation would not understand that she did not want to work with the male client she knew to be violent. Moira spoke of herself as:

*vulnerable as far as my position in the organisation went and not feeling that I could really, I guess I thought at the time that they wouldn't be terribly tolerant of the situation that I thought I found myself in if I went to speak to my direct manager.*

However, the most extreme example of this form of vulnerability was recounted in Geraldine's story about how she effectively lost her job on the basis of her refusing to sign a document saying that she would not disclose to clients that she was a lesbian. As Geraldine explained:

*I don't think I have explained how much that hurt. Like to lose your job is bad enough but to lose your job because you are a lesbian and I think one of the things that hurt most was that they actually thought they were doing the right thing.*

In speaking of its impact upon her, Geraldine tearfully recalled, 'I am still emotional, but I was suicidal for six months'. Geraldine stated that she believed social workers who were lesbians were vulnerable on the basis of the profusion of homophobic attitudes towards lesbians within workplaces. In explaining this, Geraldine said that:

*Well I think that social workers are actually more vulnerable than clients in situations because they [clients] only have to go, 'She says that she is a lesbian', and that worker is in so much trouble.*

Thus Geraldine's story demonstrates the power of risk identities in terms of their consequences for people. In Geraldine's case the assimilation of 'lesbian' and 'risk' identified Geraldine as a target for extreme measures within her organisation. Thus Geraldine was 'at risk' within her organisation as a result of her being ascribed an 'a risk' identity in regard to her practice of telling clients that she was a lesbian.

The final characterisation of the 'vulnerable practitioner' identity were practitioners who felt 'at risk' from the emotional impact of their work with clients. In speaking of themselves in these terms social workers identified themselves as 'stressed', 'burnt

out' or unable to 'cope'. This is dramatically captured in Kaitlin's account of how she was affected by the little boy she had been working with who had been physically and emotionally abused and neglected. Kaitlin recollected:

*I kept seeing these children's eyes in front of my eyes. You know these haunted eyes...and I thought, 'My God what's all this about? All these kids' eyes I can see'...and what it came down to was it was one pair of eyes and it was this little fella's eyes that I was seeing in front of my eyes. Just this haunted look that he had. You know that empty haunted look and they just kept floating, floating in front of my eyes and so that was a good understanding to me of how that had impacted upon me...that's when I thought I'm giving up social work. So I think part of the risk to me and how I was experiencing risk was that I became very emotionally attached to him and the stress levels that I experienced...I was seeing his eyes floating in front of my eyes...*

Similarly, Graham noted that he felt his 'emotional health' was 'at risk' as a result of his efforts to assist the man he was working with who had a mental illness and was homeless. Graham suggested that he could no longer 'cope' with him, which is evident from the following statement:

*There was one other person who was trying to look after him but they kept ringing us saying it was too much for them. They couldn't cope. So we were thinking, 'Well, how can we cope?'*

Thus the 'vulnerable practitioner' risk identity indicates the presence of actual or potential experiences of physical and emotional harm to social workers in the course of their work. While the materiality of the harms that were experienced are spoken most clearly by Geraldine and Kaitlin, it is apparent that for the remaining social workers their 'at risk' identities were fuelled primarily by fear, being the fear of what could happen.

### **The compromised practitioner**

The narrative of the 'compromised practitioner' was apparent in a number of stories. Practitioners positioned themselves as 'at risk' within the context of these accounts in terms of how they thought they could be 'used' by clients or colleagues (Joseph, Peter) and/or that their personal and/or professional integrity was in jeopardy (Elaine, Geraldine, Joseph, Maggie, Moira, Narelle, Peter, Petra).

The sense of feeling used was spoken by Peter as he recollected his efforts to help a male client who had said he was being physically assaulted by his female partner and who needed help to find alternative accommodation. In speaking of how he was 'at risk' within the situation, Peter said:

*I felt compromised. Yeah, at risk of being used by the client and he was a together, intelligent bloke and he was stuck in a very difficult place. There's no question about that. But I must admit I have thought whether he recognised to make this happen I need people like this on my side to act on my behalf and say these types of things to make this happen you know...to be used in a successful way is probably exactly what social work is, but it's the first time really I've really felt like that. Like it's just where I asked the question, 'How much was I used this time?'*

By means of another example, Joseph spoke of feeling 'at risk' within his team when a number of colleagues banded together in their attempt to convince him to agree with a decision they had made. Joseph spoke of this situation in terms of how his vulnerability to the 'wilfulness' of others meant that he could be used to achieve other people's agendas. In his attempt to clarify the significance of this moment, Joseph explained:

*What I have come to see is that the wilfulness in that group of workers, the wilfulness that came out of believing for all kinds of reasons that something needed to be done...I gave into...deferred to the energy of the wilful nature of their request...The risk for me is that there is a wilful component in there that is directed at me because I can give you something that you are particularly after...*

Thus Joseph notes how his 'fear of wilfulness', personal history and the attempts by workers to 'roll' him could have undermined the organisation's decision-making process. Within this narrative, then, Joseph identified how his fear of wilfulness placed him 'at risk' of being used.

Joseph's account also illustrates how social workers spoke of themselves in terms of feeling that their personal and/or professional integrity was 'at risk'. As Joseph further explained:

*I haven't deliberately set out to muck anyone up and I don't believe that has happened...[it] was a start to hitting my head, you know, 'What's going on? You just made a call where you...allowed yourself to be rolled over. That is not what you are about'...And so I just made a call to do something which might be a right call 'cause I trust the workers...but my*

*process, it was a bit questionable...where I gave into the wilfulness because I read their energy...as wanting to roll me.*

Petra's sense of seeing herself as compromised was related to how she felt constrained by organisational protocols in her wanting to support a young girl who had been sexually and physically abused by her mother's partner. In speaking of the tension between what she ought to do according to her organisation and what she ended up doing, Petra said:

*there was this requirement that we are meant to refer...which is potentially going to take a long time, weeks in fact, and because this young person was inclined to go back home...even though she had chosen to leave the home at this instant, she was inclined to go back with the mum....I opted to go against what would be considered the required thing for me to do...I was clearly going against what was the required process...So if you're looking for elements of risk they're huge. There seemed to be, to me anyway, a number in that particular scenario with my professional role, the impact it may have on me if I didn't go through with what I was seemingly obliged to do...*

Geraldine and Elaine's accounts are further evidence of how social workers positioned themselves as 'at risk' as result of tensions that arose from contradictions between the requirements of agencies and their own perspectives and viewpoints. For example, when Geraldine was asked to sign a document in which a stated condition of her employment was that she would not tell clients she was a lesbian, she realised that:

*apart from the risk of losing my job there was also a risk to my integrity...to my integrity as a person that I wasn't prepared to back out on that journey of accepting myself and as a principle of social justice that I saw for myself.*

Similarly Elaine was reluctant to take part in an unannounced home visit. As Elaine explained, she felt 'at risk' in the sense that:

*the job...just didn't sit right with me...so I saw that as a risk as well because I would never want to be in a position where I...walked in there and looked at that family and not given two hoots...In that particular circumstance, I would never want it to feel OK to see someone being disempowered. So at that point I thought, 'Do I really have to do this?'*

Thus the 'compromised worker' identity was characterised by the presence of doubt, fear and conflicts between organisational and personal/professional ethics.

### **The judged practitioner**

The 'judged practitioner' was an 'at risk' identity which was apparent within the stories of Elaine, Geraldine, Josephine, Mark, Sebastian, and Zoe. Being judged related to the extent to which these social workers felt as though they were being watched by others (Elaine, Josephine) and in terms of negative judgements that could be made about their practice (Geraldine, Mark, Sebastian, Zoe). The sense of being watched was particularly strong for Josephine as a consequence of her job being a newly created position, and she had a sense that people were watching her to see if she could demonstrate the viability of the position. In speaking of feeling as though she was being watched, Josephine explained:

*The family have an agenda. They are watching me. The organisation has an agenda and they are watching me. The police have a different agenda. My own organisation. And they are all watching very closely and they are all being very supportive in that. However, it is still, that is at the fore. So it is terrifying.*

This feeling of being watched was also felt by Elaine. Elaine had an acute sense of how she was being judged in her work as a result of being a new social work graduate as well as a new worker in her organisation. Elaine stated:

*I guess I was feeling evaluated every day while I was there because I was the new worker and all that sort of stuff. But certainly at that particular time I thought all eyes were on me.*

Mark was acutely sensitive to the possibility of being judged by Geoffrey, the male client he was working with. As mentioned previously, Geoffrey had 'sacked' a former worker. Geoffrey was also extremely critical of the help he had received from other professionals. Consequently, Mark spoke of himself as being 'at risk' in the following terms:

*So there are risks around...the judgement. I wonder knowing what he's done to other people, I wonder, you know, when it is going to happen to me.*

In addition, Mark feared for his professional reputation if he was judged in negative terms by Geoffrey. Geoffrey was being seen by another professional and Mark saw the potential for the two professions to be played off against the other. In speaking of the risk this posed to Mark, he stated:

*This is why it's risky for me in many ways. I said to him, 'Look, I think if you are seeing another worker you maybe should consider continuing with that worker. Because...he said, 'I'm here because I want to see how you might be different to the person I'm already seeing'. And I thought, 'Oh shit'. And so I thought, 'Look, tread carefully here because I don't particularly want to be upsetting another worker or him going back and saying, 'I've found this person that's really good and you're useless'...So these are some of the risks that are involved with this young man. Especially when he'd been working with a worker who could throw a spanner in the works and has...particular ideas about what should be done about it and how this man can be fixed...and I know that he's the sort of person that would talk about these things quite openly in public. He's not backward in talking about his own life and things that he does...I think too the more I look back at it I also didn't want to be judged by this other person in terms of my own, by the other worker in terms of my own practice and I didn't want Geoffrey to be telling him that he was seeing me...I suppose I felt like I didn't want to be judged by this other professional.*

The potential to be judged by people was a sad consequence for Sebastian of the threats that were made during the abusive phone call that Trevor received. One of the things the male caller had said to Trevor was, 'I've seen you with your ...counsellor...Don't trust this person. Don't trust him'. Consequently, Sebastian was worried that Trevor would lose his trust in him and that other people who might hear of this story would also think negatively of him. In speaking of this, Sebastian clarified:

*There was this pride in me that what would people think about me based on what this man had said about not trusting this person?...I kind of worried about other people's perceptions. I guess it's that whole thing about what does it say about me or what, that's not right, because I know it doesn't say anything about me. I knew that was more about what would other people think it says about me as a person and as a worker.*

Zoe's fear of being judged related to how her decision to leave a child with his parents in spite of substantive evidence of physical abuse might be criticised by

others in the present or future. Zoe explained that workers like herself were often ‘at risk’ of criticism of their practices:

*It is a small network and things get spread incredibly quickly about, like, ‘This worker is crap’ or ‘This worker has got a big mouth’ and ‘This worker is such and such’...Things spread very quickly, negative things spread quickly and positive things less so...*

In the context of this investigation, Zoe identified herself ‘at risk’ in immediate and future terms and thus had to employ a number of strategies to protect herself from negative judgements. In speaking of herself as ‘at risk’, Zoe stated that:

*it was key to the decision how I thought others would see me or see my practice particularly in regard to...people who would read the file in the future – if there was another notification made and how they read this file note...it happens where something bad happens so you shift the blame. This happens in a management level as well...You kind of write a file note about your discussions...You are kind of putting the blame on some imaginary person...So even though you are worried what people think about you and your practice, that is, how you get rid of that feeling. You justify it to yourself...it helps you cope...Otherwise you would go really nuts...*

Thus it is apparent the identity of ‘judged worker’ was in part constituted by social workers fearing what others might think of them and their practice.

### **The vexed practitioner**

The ‘vexed practitioner’ was an ‘at risk’ identity that was in operation within Graham’s and Jenny’s accounts. Both of these practitioners positioned themselves as being ‘at risk’ within their work with their clients. Graham’s and Jenny’s stories illustrate their sense of exasperation in their work and the seeming futility of their interventions in responding to the complex and demanding needs of each of their clients. For example, Graham recounted that:

*there were...two or three of us who worked with this chap at different times, and we would all just look at each other afterwards and just, ‘Where do you go from here?’. You could make suggestions and offer support, but – and he would seem to accept that and then come back half an hour later and say, ‘No. I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want to do that now. I want to do this’...so it can be quite frustrating.*

The lack of progress in resolving this man's difficulties regarding his accommodation began to take their toll on Graham and in turn he began to identify the client as a 'problem client' and positioned himself as being 'at risk' from him. In speaking these two identities into existence, Graham recollected that:

*I used to enjoy visiting him and we used to have some great discussions. But then it just got to the point where his illness began to become a little worse because of whatever reason, his paranoia, and I just found it so frustrating at times. It used to make me really angry so towards the end I was – I think I was getting little bit burnt out. I mean everyday he was coming in with another situation and it was the same old situation, and he'd get so far with that part of it and all of a sudden he would jump back three or four years...Yeah, so I started becoming very impatient I think and very frustrated to the point where I was actively making sure I just wasn't around if he was coming in. I'd think, 'Oh no, I just can't handle this again. And tell him I'm with a client or tell him I'm out'...Yes, because I just felt that I was just being totally overcome by his situation.*

Jenny also felt like she had gone as far as she could with the young woman she was working with, who threatened violence against family members, had attempted suicide on a number of occasions and who laughed during her times with Jenny. In speaking of this client as 'a problem', Jenny's identity as a 'vexed practitioner' is clearly apparent. Jenny reflected that:

*I was getting angry and I was getting frustrated...I think I just needed to nail it up. Some days I get so pissed off with clients. I think, 'Bugger you. I am just going to tell you what I am thinking because I am sick to death of you just not giving me the full story or treating me like – yes'. I have days like that and she kind of caught me on one of those days.*

Therefore the 'vexed practitioner' 'at risk' identity was often spoken of in association with practitioners describing their feelings of frustration, stress and anger.

## **Practitioner 'a risk' identities**

Six practitioners spoke of themselves as being 'a risk' to clients – Elaine, Kaitlin, Josephine, Linda, Maggie and Moira. Within their narratives, the characterisations of 'ineffective', 'persecutory', 'overzealous' and 'discriminatory' practitioner risk identities have been identified. Geraldine was identified as 'a risk' to clients by the



organisation she worked in. Within Geraldine's account the ascription of her as a 'dangerous worker' is evident.

### **The ineffective practitioner**

Elaine, Linda and Moira spoke of how they questioned their competence and ability to respond to their clients. In this respect, these social workers questioned whether they might have put their clients or others 'at risk' as a result of not having implemented effective interventions. In Elaine's case, she felt as though her inexperience had put her client 'at risk' when she conducted an unannounced home visit. She said:

*I guess most of my decision was based on what other people were telling me but that only because I had never worked with this family before 'cause I'd only been in the job for five minutes...If I had a choice I wouldn't have.*

Linda spoke of her work with a woman who had been subjected to ritualised sexual abuse over a significant period of time. The client had been self-harming, and this was escalating. Linda was seeing the woman during the time that the self-harming was escalating. Then the client made a major suicide attempt. Consequently, Linda questioned if she had somehow failed the client by not helping to connect her to a more enabling story of herself. In speaking of being 'a risk' to the client, Linda asked herself:

*Could I have done something else? What if she did die, then where would I be...the kind of evaluations...of what I was doing, you know, about myself in the role and...maybe I'm not skilled enough to do this, you know, that sort of crept in at one stage. You know that thing between psychologists and psychiatrists and social workers – maybe they do know something after all that I don't, that can help in that particular time of a person's life...I immediately went to what I didn't do and what didn't I do, and how that could be linked to something negative rather than all the possibilities it actually could have given here...So immediately thinking that there was some kind of lack there. That was the first point of call.*

Maggie was also concerned how her interventions might create risk for people. Maggie felt overwhelmed by her lack of knowledge about how to work effectively with a sex offender and she was quite certain that the client would re-offend. Maggie

was anxious to prevent this, but felt out of her depth in responding to the situation. In speaking of herself as ‘a risk’, Maggie asked:

*What do you do with someone like him when you are me? What sort of interventions? What do you talk to him about...I am just – I have been really nervous about working with this person because there are obviously huge concerns, but no-one is doing – what can we do with him? What are we going to do with this person? There is no-one that has the skills to manage a client like this. I don't have the skills to...I just feel like I am putting a whole lot of people at risk, but I don't really know what to do with the person ...*

Therefore, Elaine, Linda and Maggie spoke of themselves as ‘ineffective practitioners’ on the basis that they thought they had put others ‘at risk’.

### **The persecutory practitioner**

Kaitlin stated that she was tempted to use her professional power inappropriately with the father of the little boy she was working with. In speaking of her involvement with the family, Kaitlin recounted how the father of this young boy became increasingly hostile towards her involvement and she felt extremely ‘tempted to misuse my professional power to persecute him’ and believed she had ‘started to go there’. To support this positioning of herself as ‘a risk’ in this regard, Kaitlin explained:

*What I knew...was that I have incredible strength, incredible strength and I have a very strong mind and I used it to resist the temptation to try and just tear this guy apart basically. I knew I could because I knew I had the intelligence to do it, which is not to say that he wasn't intelligent because he was. But I had the education and I had other things that he didn't have available to him and I know I could've done it....wow, it was so tempting. I used to have to bite my tongue to not do it. So I knew from then like I had this issue and it wasn't only with him...I knew very clearly...I could very easily go down that line of persecution. Very easily. So I became very aware that I've got to be very, very careful when I am working with angry violent men who are perpetrating abuse, particularly abuse of children, because I can come down that line so quickly. So that's what I'm talking about in relation to this father. I knew that in one sense I could've chewed him up.*

Kaitlin thus identified herself as ‘a risk’ to the young boy’s father. Kaitlin was aware that this ‘a risk’ identity, if enacted, could have a detrimental impact upon her relationship with the father and in turn limit her influence to secure the safety of the child within the family.

## **The overzealous practitioner**

Kaitlin and Josephine were sensitive to how their respective practices with their young clients could have put them 'at risk' of further abuse by family members. Kaitlin realised this when she recalled that her client's behaviour towards her changed as her relationship with his father capitulated. Consequently, Kaitlin asked him:

*'When you go home does your dad ask if you've seen me?' And he said, 'Yes'. And I said, 'Is it really, really, really hard for you?' And he said, 'Yes', and he started crying. I said, 'So is it easier for you not to see me?' And he said, 'Yes'.*

This disclosure placed Kaitlin in a difficult position, as she was extremely concerned for his safety and wellbeing and thus wanted to continue to support and monitor him within his family. However, Kaitlin reflected that the acknowledgement by the child that he was experiencing hardship as a consequence of him seeing her:

*made me much more aware of his vulnerability and how I could actually contribute to his vulnerability and just by virtue of my presence and me thinking that this child has a right to have an adult intervene and advocate. I could take that ground but what I was doing was actually increasing the potential of a real harm to him by doing that.*

Josephine spoke of her work with her young client in similar terms. Josephine realised that if she went to court to advocate for the child he could have experienced some form of retaliation. Josephine recalled that:

*it is a reality that he might get killed. It is not just words...the ramifications on him were potentially huge...it is a real risk because the reality is that there may be repercussions...*

Being 'a risk' to their clients was thus recognised as an unintended consequence of Kaitlin's and Josephine's action.

## **The discriminatory practitioner**

Moirira felt incredibly conflicted when she realised the client she was seeing was the partner of a woman she had been helping who had been physically assaulted by him. As has been discussed above, Moirira was fearful of this man. However, she was also cognisant of his right to receive a service from her agency, and how this would have

happened without question if she didn't have this other knowledge of him. As Moria explained:

*I would have found that very difficult to continue working with him knowing those things about him. And it probably would have coloured the way that I provided a service to him which is, you know, unfair to him...*

Thus in common with the other social workers who spoke of themselves as 'a risk' to clients, Moira recognised how she could place her client 'at risk' through her interventions.

### **The dangerous practitioner**

In point of difference to the self-ascribed 'a risk' practitioner identities mentioned above, Geraldine was ascribed an 'a risk' worker identity by others. Geraldine was spoken of as a 'dangerous practitioner' by her organisation. Geraldine tearfully recalled that:

*They saw me as dangerous for clients. That's how they described me or thought of me...they did say women would be frightened of me...And it hurt to be told that women would be frightened of me. It felt like they were saying 'you're dangerous' which by implication if you're frightened of somebody you think they were dangerous to you...*

As discussed in previous sections of this chapter, the impact of the ascription of this 'a risk' worker identity had devastating consequences for Geraldine. However, her organisation was uncompromising in its view that if Geraldine was to disclose that she was a lesbian to clients she would be placing them 'at risk'. As Geraldine clarified:

*I was the risk to clients. I was talking about my personal sexual issues, that is what they said, with clients...I was talking about my own personal sexual issues with clients just because I said I was a lesbian or wanted to. I didn't actually even say it. And what did they think I was? That's what hurt so much, that they did think I was perverted. That you would want to say that – oh, that still makes me feel sick in the stomach...I didn't realise that before, that they [the workplace] only saw it as being about somehow being associated with, only with sex, with a way of just dismissing or making it perverted. That hurt. That hurt a lot. I saw myself as hurt. I saw myself as really different.*

Geraldine thus experienced the totalising effect of this ‘at risk’ identity within her workplace. The influence of the heterosexist assumptions that were made about her and the agency’s clients in the construction of this identity are starkly present in Geraldine’s narrative. The power of this identity was such that it overtook the positive relationships that Geraldine had previously shared with her work colleagues and friends.

## Multiple Client and Practitioner Risk Identities in Social Workers’ Interventions

The ascription of risk identities to clients and practitioners that has been presented in this chapter demonstrates the complexity involved in how ideas about risk were constituted and integrated into social workers’ practice. The depth of this complexity becomes more evident in Table 2, which assimilates all of the risk identities that were spoken into existence by each practitioner within their reflective narratives of their interventions.

**Table 2: Co-existing Multiple Risk Identities**

	Client Risk Identity		Practitioner Risk Identities	
	Client ‘at risk’	Client ‘a risk’	Practitioner ‘at risk’	Practitioner ‘a risk’
Elaine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violent/Neglectful</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compromised</li> <li>• Judged</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ineffective</li> </ul>
Frances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerable</li> <li>• Abused</li> <li>• Unsafe</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violent/Neglectful</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerable</li> </ul>	
Geraldine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discriminated</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerable</li> <li>• Compromised</li> <li>• Judged</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dangerous</li> </ul>
Graham	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unsafe</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violent/Neglectful</li> <li>• Problem</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerable</li> <li>• Vexed</li> </ul>	
Jenny	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unsafe</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violent/Neglectful</li> <li>• Problem</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vexed</li> </ul>	
Joseph		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violent/Neglectful (colleagues)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compromised</li> </ul>	
Josephine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerable</li> <li>• Abused</li> <li>• Unsafe</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violent/Neglectful</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Judged</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overzealous</li> </ul>

Kaitlin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerable</li> <li>• Abused</li> <li>• Unsafe</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Persecutory</li> <li>• Overzealous</li> </ul>
Linda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerable</li> <li>• Abused</li> </ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ineffective</li> </ul>
Maggie	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Abused</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violent/Neglectful</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compromised</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ineffective</li> </ul>
Mark	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerable</li> <li>• Abused</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problem</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerable</li> <li>• Judged</li> </ul>	
Moirra	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discriminated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violent/Neglectful</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerable</li> <li>• Compromised</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discriminatory</li> </ul>
Narelle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerable</li> <li>• Abused</li> <li>• Unsafe</li> <li>• Discriminated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violent/Neglectful</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerable</li> <li>• Compromised</li> </ul>	
Peter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Abused</li> <li>• Unsafe</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violent/Neglectful</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compromised</li> </ul>	
Petra	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerable</li> <li>• Abused</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerable</li> <li>• Compromised</li> </ul>	
Sebastian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerable</li> <li>• Abused</li> <li>• Discriminated</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerable</li> <li>• Judged</li> </ul>	
Zoe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violent/Neglectful</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerable</li> <li>• Judged</li> </ul>	

Table 2 clarifies that, with the exception of Joseph, all clients were ascribed an ‘at risk’ identity within social workers’ reflections of their interventions. Joseph, who had spoken about an intervention with colleagues, did not identify his colleagues as ‘at risk’ in any way. Table 2 also demonstrates that clients were often ascribed multiple risk identities within each risk identity category. This table also indicates that some clients were spoken of as having both ‘at risk’ and ‘a risk’ identities within practitioners’ reflective narratives of their interventions. Narelle succinctly explained this situation in her intervention in the following terms:

*There were two types of risk that were going on there. Initially there was the risk of the client – the client’s risk and I saw her as being at risk from violence because I immediately saw her as a victim and that was because of a whole number of things, mainly because she was transgendered, I think, and a woman. Then it was revealed that she is a perp [perpetrator] and so that is when the risk changed and I saw myself at risk.*

This is an important finding, as it alludes to a tension between ‘a risk’ and ‘at risk’ identities. While the stories that have been presented thus far indicate that there is a measure of compatibility within the sub-identity categories that constitute ‘at risk’ and ‘a risk’ client identities, this is not the case *between* these broad identity

categories. As will become clear in the following chapter, varying degrees of tension and conflict existed between client ‘at risk’ and client ‘a risk’ identities. Social workers were required to make a decision about which, if either, identity would be emphasised within their interventions.

This conflict was exacerbated by the presence of practitioner risk identities, which are also assimilated in Table 2. An important finding here is that in all but one instance these practitioner risk identities were reflexively constructed by social workers themselves. That is, social workers either identified themselves as ‘at risk’ from clients and others or ‘a risk’ to clients and others. Thus the interdependence between practitioner and client risk identities can be noted. The exception to the reflexive construction of a practitioner risk identity was Geraldine, who was ascribed an ‘a risk’ identity by her organisation. The way that Geraldine speaks of this identity contrasts sharply with other practitioners, particularly the other social workers who spoke of themselves as ‘a risk’. In Geraldine’s case, the identity of ‘dangerous practitioner’ operated with significant power in localising her as the embodiment of risk. The other exception that can be noted in Table 2 is Linda, who is the only social worker who did not ascribe herself an ‘at risk’ practitioner identity. Instead Linda spoke of herself as ‘a risk’ to the ‘at risk’ client she was working with.

Further insight into the complexity of how risk operated in practitioners’ interventions is in the recognition of the multiple risk identities that practitioners spoke of in relation to themselves. This complexity is most visible in Elaine, Geraldine, Josephine, Kaitlin, Maggie and Moira’s reflective accounts in which they positioned themselves as simultaneously ‘at risk’ and ‘a risk’. Thus, as was the case for client risk identities, tension existed among practitioner risk identities. This tension is also explored in greater detail in the following chapter.

Accordingly, Table 2 illustrates that multiple client and practitioner risk identities were simultaneously in operation in many of the interventions spoken of by social workers. The configurations of these co-existing, multiple risk identities are summarised below in Table 3.

**Table 3: Configurations of Client and Practitioner Risk Identities**

Configurations of Client and Practitioner Risk Identities					
1. Colleagues a risk  2. Practitioner at risk   Joseph	1. Client/ colleagues at risk  2. Practitioner at risk  Petra, Sebastian	1. Client at risk  2. Practitioner a risk  Linda	1. Client at risk  2. Client a risk  3. Practitioner at risk  Frances, Graham, Jenny, Mark, Narelle, Peter, Zoe	1. Client at risk  2. Practitioner at risk  3. Practitioner a risk  Geraldine, Kaitlin,	1. Client at risk  2. Client a risk  3. Practitioner at risk  4. Practitioner a risk  Elaine, Josephine, Maggie, Moira

This table hints at the tensions that were manifest among client and practitioner risk identities in social workers' interventions. As is discussed in the following chapter, these risk identities were often in competition with each other, and in many situations social workers had to make a choice regarding which, if any, of these risk identities would be emphasised within their interventions. Thus Table 3 indicates that the integration into practice of ideas about risk that had been constituted in social workers' interventions was a complicated process.

## Extending an Understanding of Risk in Social Workers' Interventions

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Craig was the sole practitioner who did not narrate a 'risk story' in his reflective account of his significant intervention. In addition, two other practitioners (Linda and Peter) offered additional, alternative ways of understanding risk in their interventions. The contributions of these three practitioners for extending an understanding of the meanings and qualities attributed to risk and its significance in the construction of client and practitioner identities is reviewed in this final section of this chapter.



## Extending an understanding of meanings and qualities attributed to risk

Risk was spoken of as being everywhere and as a negative construct by Linda and Peter. However, in addition, these two social workers emphasised the importance of time in their conceptualisations of risk. Peter had spoken about the concerns he had for a male client who said he had been physically assaulted by his female partner and whom the client had also physically assaulted. In the course of his work with this client, Peter realised that this client had faced a big decision in choosing whether or not to leave his partner and find alternative accommodation. Peter spoke of this client's circumstances as exemplifying the difficulties in having to make choices when risks existed in both the immediate and future contexts of client's lives. In explaining this concept of risk, Peter said:

*Sometimes I think we cannot take a short term risk, of current risk right now...because the short term, perceived risk might actually be more risky in the long term and vice versa...I think our clients have got a very present risk, right here, right now and also have that longer term [risk] and I think there's a connection between the long term and short term.*

Thus Peter understood that clients faced different kinds of risk that were defined by time. Accordingly, Peter emphasised the temporal quality of risk.

While Linda also emphasised the temporality of risk, she conceptualised this in different terms to Peter. Upon receiving the questions that I would be asking her in the second interview, Linda reflected some more about her intervention with a woman who had been physically and sexually abused as a child and who had recently made a suicide attempt. To use Linda's words she had, 'unpacked what it all meant'. After doing this reflective exercise Linda realised that her conceptualisation of risk as a 'negative construct' had been unhelpful in this intervention. In the space of time since we had met, Linda had reconceptualised risk as 'ongoing'. Linda phrased this as 'the person is not out of the woods yet'. To clarify this point, Linda said:

*I think I see that...there is time associated with risk and quite a bit of time. Not a couple of hours, like months or weeks, depending on how much the person is struggling with it...risk is not just one-off or two-off, you know, it's like a block of time...*

Thus Linda had begun to construct an alternative conceptualisation of risk in which she had integrated the significance of time as a defining aspect of ongoing risk. In this respect, Linda had begun to extend her understanding of the meaning of risk.

Craig spoke of risk in very different terms to the other social workers who participated in this study. Craig spoke about his work with a young adolescent woman who was described to him as 'a little bit anxious and a little bit depressed' and that she experienced 'visitations, voices, experiences, that weren't hers...it was like out of body experiences. Like other people coming into her body, her head'. She was also having terrible nightmares. When asked about whether risk was present in his intervention with this young woman, Craig said that while he thought there was, 'risk involved for the young person...[and] the risk for me emotionally is another risk', he had, 'never thought of it [the risk to himself] as a risk'. Instead, Craig conceptualised his work in terms of his working to reduce 'the odds' that he thought were stacked against his client. In elaborating this point, Craig explained:

*It's what you're prepared, in gambling terms, what you're prepared to stake you know, it's the wager, it's the bet. And the odds are stacked, the odds are always stacked, and it's about reducing that...how I sort of saw it, the odds are stacked. If I can reduce the odds in a way, that's cool, then I'll do it and I'll wear the consequences.*

Thus Craig emphasised the significance of 'choice' as an organising concept in his intervention. Acknowledging that he had choices in how he intervened meant that Craig was cognisant of there being numerous options for how he might respond to the needs of this young woman. As Craig said:

*the degree of choice is that I can probably choose out of one of a million things at the time and my choice would be based on how I feel, how I assess the situation.*

Thus whilst Craig spoke of risk as being present for the client, he did not speak of it as a relevant concept in his practice.

An emphasis on choice and his acceptance of his need to accept responsibility for the outcomes of his choices meant that Craig did not think that risk could enter into the situation for himself. This was because Craig was guided by a principle of 'harm

reduction or harm minimisation' in making his practice choices. This was different from risk. Craig conceptualised risk as a conscious act of doing harm, which Craig referred to as 'gross risks'. Gross risks included 'abusing somebody, or treating them unethically'. According to Craig, these kinds of risks:

*don't even enter it [the professional setting] with me...I don't operate like that...I don't operate from a position where I would think that abusing somebody or being dishonest is part of how I work with them. It's like I keep it out because I don't want it.*

Consequently, risk was not conceptualised as an integrated aspect of Craig's intervention with the client he was working with. Essentially, Craig spoke against the possibility of risk in his practice given his stance against harming others in his work and choosing instead to 'advance the odds' in favour of the client. Thus Craig's story stands as a radical disjuncture to the conceptualisations of risk that are presented earlier in this chapter.

## **Extending an understanding of client and practitioner risk identities**

The alternative conceptualisations of risk that were spoken by Craig, Linda and Peter influenced their thinking about clients' and their own risk identities. Peter indicated that he thought that the short and long term nature of risk was constitutive of the formation of 'at risk' client identities. Peter's reasoning was that clients fear the unknown consequences of the future and thus choose to stay in the familiar environments of the present. Thus in the case of domestic violence, Peter said that clients remain 'at risk' of being 'unsafe' and 'abused'. In expanding upon this point, Peter stated:

*sometimes I think that these two risks, the risk of the current situation...and then the perceived risk for change that inhibits people...I think that while people stay in domestic violence...people recognise that where they are, it is risky, right, I could get a smack under the ear tonight, but moving out in a way is a far more risky and this risk...outweighs that one.*

Thus Peter noted that the 'at risk' client identities of being 'unsafe' and 'abused' were sustained by a client's fear of the risks they might encounter in their unknown futures.

Linda's conceptualisation of risk as 'ongoing' did not mean that she thought clients were continuously 'at risk' for the rest of their lives. She believed that clients could heal and risk would dissipate. However, in reflecting about how she conceptualised risk in her practice, Linda realised that the temporal dimension of risk had become integrated into her understanding of the healing process in her subsequent interventions with her client. Within this framework, being 'at risk' was seen as a natural state by Linda for the woman she was working with who had been so terribly abused. It was simply going to take time. Being 'at risk', then, did not need to be seen as problematic in this sense. As Linda explained:

*I think I have been looking at risk as maybe a symptom and that is not necessarily helpful when it comes to risk...Risk is ongoing...I thought, well, I make the assumption that it takes time for a person not to be at risk to themselves. And that with insight, self-knowledge and alternatives they can build this up as a force over time to conquer or extinguish the risk. Then risk suddenly disappears from the story.*

The integration of this concept of risk into Linda's practice changed the way Linda's 'risk beliefs effected my view of the client'. Having an 'at risk' client identity was naturalised in a sense. An acceptance of the time it would take to heal meant that an 'at risk' client identity did not need to be recognised by Linda as a problematic identity.

Craig spoke against the ascription of an 'at risk' client identity in his work. While he acknowledged that the young woman he was working with could be seen to be 'at risk' in one sense, he did not construct an identity for her that was mediated by the concept of risk. Instead, Craig spoke of this young woman as being 'the expert of her own life'. This was a perspective that Craig said typified his work with all his clients. Within this framework there was little space to acknowledge a risk identity. Instead, Craig explained:

*I think [clients are] already in touch with who they are, but I think they're in touch with a bit of them that has somehow blocked out the other bits of them. I'm in touch with the part of me that's depressed, suicidal, psychotic, behaviour damaged, traumatised, whatever other labels are put around. However, somebody thinking and feeling like that, and it's almost, I don't like to use the word 'never', but it's almost never true. It's only true for little bits.*

Thus the concept of risk had not been integrated into Craig's intervention. Indeed, he had actively denied its relevance within his framework of practice.

The alternative conceptualisations of risk that were spoken by Linda and Craig were evident in how they spoke of themselves in their practice. In Linda's example the realisation that her client was 'not out of the woods yet' meant that Linda did not have to continue to ascribe a practitioner risk identity to herself as an 'ineffective practitioner'. Accepting that the client would take time to heal meant that Linda didn't have to position herself as needing an immediate solution for the client. As Linda explained:

*I think I attached with the risk a sense of prescribed time...and...I think the risk in it made me want to kind of get a sense of control about her, or pathology or prescription...I kind of turned it around...Like the static side of risk is thinking like you've got to get in there...but when you unpack that you can just hope that they can challenge it in whatever way and consult with them. So I kind of went, hoping is more linked with consulting and prescribing is more linked with those unhelpful ideas that tell you what they should be doing...that narrow, unhealthy risk stuff made me prescribe for her, my job was to keep her alive to avoid this worst consequence, you know...*

Thus Linda was able to let herself 'off the hook' in her work with this woman. Consequently, Linda had integrated her reconceptualised understanding of risk into her practice through a story of 'hope' for the client. In this alternative practice story, the practitioner risk identity that Linda had spoken about had lost its relevance and power.

Given that Craig had not centred risk as an important concept in his practice, a practitioner risk identity was perhaps unsurprisingly absent from Craig's reflections about his intervention. Craig recognised that he could have felt scared about working with a young woman who could be seen to be experiencing a psychosis. As Craig said:

*Things always lose their scare. I often get nervous and a bit scared when I first hear some stuff because, you know, underneath – fuck! But that's just my own head stuff. Then a couple of minutes, you're five to ten minutes into a conversation, it just disappears.*

In explaining how he had integrated these ideas into his practice, Craig explained:

*There's no mystique around psychosis. It's just somebody who is in pain from something and they want it to stop or they want something else. I think it's just the same process of conversation and discussion. At times it might be on a really different plane of reality...but it's still the same sort of process, so it just loses any of that sort of negative type mystique fairly quickly. Yeah, so there's no scare involved for me at all around that stuff...Apart from the beginning, when you first hear, 'Geeze the woman's hearing voices. Oh God', you know. Then I started talking with her and there's this very scared, terrified young girl who is just like anybody else...*

Accordingly Craig's resistance to the place of risk and fear in his practice meant that he constructed an alternative understanding of his role in his work. He actively took steps to avoid being 'a risk' to clients and his emphasis on accepting the consequences of his practice choices and to normalise feelings of fear meant that he did not position himself as 'at risk' in his work.

## **Integrating ideas about risk in social workers' interventions**

Craig, Linda and Peter's stories provide another layer of understanding to the question of how ideas about risk are constituted and integrated into social workers' interventions. In addition to understanding risk to be a pervasive and negative force in social workers' practice, Linda and Peter's narratives indicate the importance of time in generating an understanding about what risk is and what risk does. The ongoing dimension of risk that Linda spoke of resonates with social workers who spoke of risk as being everywhere. These practitioners also spoke of the presence of risk over time, such as in Josephine's statement that '*risk walks by that child every day*'. Thus the conceptualisation of risk as everywhere integrates the ideas that risk is present in social workers' practice, it is dispersed across their relationships with clients and colleagues, and it is also dispersed across time.

Overwhelmingly risk was spoken of by practitioners as a negative construct in their practice. Risk meant threat, harm, abuse, violence and negative consequences. Craig's discussion about 'gross risk' resonates with these ideas. However, in Linda's re-

conceptualisation of the significance of time, risk is disrupted as a negative lens for viewing the client or herself. Instead, Linda reconnects risk with hope, given that risk is reconceptualised as a natural part of the healing process. Thus in addition to the negative construct of risk, Linda's account offers an understanding of risk as 'a natural consequence of being harmed'.

Linda's, Peter's and Craig's conceptualisations of risk also offer another layer of depth to understanding how risk is integrated into social work practice. Linda and Peter demonstrate that risk identities can lose their power as problematic and totalising identities. Thus in addition to social workers speaking of risk as being integrated into practice through the ascription of multiple risk identities, Linda's and Peter's reflections add that these risk identities can be seen as contingent upon time and can change. They are not fixed identities nor do they speak the whole story of who clients are. Craig's reflection about his practice is a powerful reminder of this. Craig's story demonstrates that risk can be absent from social work interventions. It is not necessarily a dominant concept upon which identities and practices must be based. Thus while risk can be a dominant feature of social work interventions, as was discussed by many of the participants in this study, Craig's story indicates it is not inherent to social work interventions. It is possible for social workers to discursively position themselves in other ways to risk.

## **Concluding Comments to the Chapter**

In this chapter I have indicated that, in all but one instance, social workers conceptualised risk as a 'reality' of their practice. In addition it was considered by them to be ubiquitous and each practitioner spoke of risk primarily as a negative concept. Risk was spoken of as a pervasive and persistent force within clients' and practitioners' lives. Constructed in these terms the negative presence of risk was rarely questioned by practitioners. Instead it was considered inherent to events and to people. My study indicates that this dominant conceptualisation of risk was integrated into social workers' practice through their ascribing 'risk identities' to clients, colleagues and themselves. Risk became embodied for practitioners in this process. More often than not fear was a formidable presence in how social workers spoke

about client 'a risk' and their own 'at risk' identities. Conversely, feelings of compassion were expressed when many practitioners spoke of their clients' 'at risk' identities. I have also indicated that co-existing, multiple risk identities were spoken of as being in operation within the context of each practitioners' intervention. That is, clients were often spoken of as being 'at risk' and/or as 'a risk' by social workers, who in turn spoke of themselves as being 'at risk' and/or 'a risk'. I have indicated that a degree of tension existed between these co-existing risk identities. The following chapter explores this tension and conflict in the context of how these risk identity conflicts presented social workers with moral dilemmas in their intervention choices.



## Chapter 6

# The Moral Dilemmas of Risk Identities in Social Workers' Interventions

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## Introduction to the Chapter

Each of the stories captured within this study were initially told as narratives of practice situations that were significant to social workers. Primarily these stories told a tale of the dilemmas that social workers faced in their practice. My study suggests that these dilemmas arose, at least in part, when practitioners were confronted with the presence of, and conflict between, co-existing, multiple client and practitioner risk identities. Building upon the results of the preceding chapter, I demonstrate that the source of the dilemmas most often confronting practitioners was their questioning their practice in response to the 'moralisation' of these identities. Practitioners 'moralised' client, colleague and their own risk identities by attributing a moral value to them in terms of their being 'good' or 'bad', 'innocent' or 'blameworthy'. Having spoken of clients and/or themselves in these terms, social workers then engaged with the difficult task of reconciling the moral tensions and conflicts that were attendant to each of these identities.

I will show in this chapter that one of the critical issues that arose for practitioners was that practitioners felt conflicted about which risk identities they should respond to in their interventions – their client's or their own? This was particularly the case when clients and practitioners were regarded as both being 'at risk'. The other critical issue that arose for social workers was that 'at risk' and 'a risk' identities, be they in relation to themselves or clients, implied specific types of practice. 'At risk' identities required social workers to implement interventions directed towards advocating for and protecting people whereas 'a risk' identities required social workers to implement interventions that attempted to control or contain people's behaviour. Essentially, then, practitioners were faced with a choice of either taking a stand 'for' or 'against' clients and/or taking a stand 'for' or 'against' themselves. The stance that social

workers came to adopt within their interventions thus reflected how they reconciled the moral tensions between the risk identities that were in operation within their practice situations.

The outline of the chapter is as follows. I begin by presenting how social workers moralised clients' and their own risk identities. Here I explore how social workers spoke of the moral adequacy of 'at risk' and 'a risk' identities. I then argue that these moralised risk identities presented practitioners with a particular kind of practice dilemma, that being whether they would take a stand for or against their clients and/or for or against themselves. Practitioners' reflective accounts demonstrate that this practice dilemma was experienced by them, not as a professional or organisational issue, but as a personal moral dilemma and its resolution proved a struggle for each of them. The chapter concludes with an exploration of the stances that social workers enacted within their interventions.

## **Moralising Risk Identities in Social Workers' Interventions**

Tension between the co-existing, multiple, risk identities in operation within social workers' practice situations was common to all but Joseph's, Linda's and Zoe's narratives. These practitioners did not indicate a conflict *between* the risk identities that they had spoken of. Joseph felt 'at risk' from his work colleagues, thus positioning his colleagues as 'a risk' to him. Linda thought she was 'a risk' to her 'at risk' client. Thus there was a certain synchronicity between the risk identities that they had recognised. Zoe did not see herself primarily as 'at risk' from her 'a risk' client. Thus there was not a direct relationship between the client's and her own risk identities. However, the other practitioners within this study each experienced various forms of discordance between the client and worker risk identities that were evident within their practice contexts. That is, clients could be 'a risk' and 'at risk' (Frances, Graham, Jenny, Josephine, Maggie, Mark, Moira, Narelle and Peter). Social workers could be 'a risk' and 'at risk' (Elaine, Geraldine, Josephine, Kaitlin, Maggie and Moira). Clients and practitioners could both be 'at risk' (Elaine, Frances, Graham, Jenny, Josephine, Kaitlin, Maggie, Mark, Moira, Narelle, Peter, Petra and Sebastian).

Clients and social workers could both be ‘a risk’ (Josephine, Maggie and Moira). Thus a time came for each of these practitioners where their practice deliberations reflected their asking, ‘Which of these identities is the stronger or correct version of who we are? Which version of these selves do I respond to in my practice?’. Joseph, Linda and Zoe, though not struggling with the first of these questions, nonetheless, also seemed conflicted within themselves regarding the stance they would take in their practice, given the risk identities that were present for them.

Practitioners’ reflective accounts indicate that the tensions and conflicts surrounding risk identities were ostensibly related to moralising clients’ and their own risk identities. In moralising risk identities, practitioners made statements about the moral adequacy of clients, colleagues and themselves. The moralisation of client and practitioner risk identities was evident within social workers’ practice accounts in how they spoke of ‘at risk’ identities as indicative of the ‘goodness’ of people and ‘a risk’ identities as indicative of the ‘badness’ of people. ‘At risk’ clients were largely presented as guileless and without fault whereas ‘a risk’ clients were predominantly spoken of as being blameworthy in some way. A similar distinctive qualitative difference in the moral characterisation of ‘at risk’ and ‘a risk’ practitioner identities was also evident. In the crudest of terms, these moralised practitioner identities most often reflected a view of the ‘good’ social worker who could be or was wronged by others and the ‘well intentioned’ social worker who had acted in a misguided fashion. The particular ways in which these client and practitioner risk identities were moralised will now be discussed.

## **Moralising ‘at risk’ client identities**

‘At risk’ clients were mostly spoken of as being virtuous or innocent people who had been victimised in some way (Elaine, Frances, Geraldine, Graham, Josephine, Kaitlin, Linda, Maggie, Mark, Narelle, Peter, Petra and Sebastian). For example in speaking of Julianna’s ‘at risk’ client identity, Frances said:

*She was one of the most lonely, isolated, sad little people...At Christmas time – you know those little crystal birds? I gave her one because she reminded me of a beautiful little delicate bird about to fly. And it was so beautiful though that she had to put it in a cupboard and not look at it. When I met her years later...she told me she had destroyed it.*

Josephine also described her young client's 'at risk' identity in similar terms. After meeting him for the first time, Josephine described him as:

*He was just delightful. This kid was absolutely delightful...he was very, very caring and very human and just a delight to work with. He really was just a delight and I wondered just how long it had been for him to be with an adult in a space where he could be a delight and kind of showcase some of the stuff that he knew about the world which was pretty impressive.*

Sebastian also spoke of his client, Trevor, in positive terms. Sebastian reflected that:

*Trevor was this wonderful young man who, you know, he just wore it and he needed to do that for him and, you know, I was just fully supporting him in that and he really just had this quest of wanting to be this strong individual...that he wanted to be this almost – well I'm thinking of him as kind of like a lamp almost, sort of beaming out. And that's wonderful...*

In contrast, Jenny and Moira did not identify their client's 'at risk' identities in these particular moralised terms. Jenny's client's 'at risk' identity was spoken of in response to her having self-harmed and attempted suicide. However, Jenny did not position her as 'victimised' or 'innocent'. Instead this behaviour was spoken of as 'problematic' and indicative of a lack of responsibility on the part of the client and her family. As Jenny said:

*I am sure she is needy. I am sure the whole family is needy, but I really want to say that it is not my problem – at the end of the day I can do nothing really...This is just a dysfunctional family and that is how hard you have to be at times.*

Moira spoke of her client as being 'at risk' of being discriminated against by her because she did not want to work with him. In speaking of him in these terms, his 'at risk' identity was ascribed on the basis of his being a 'victim of chance' – it was a 'chance' occurrence that Moira, who knew about his abusive behaviour, was the worker he saw when he first made contact with the service. Thus Moira did not see him as 'innocent'. Rather he had been 'found out'. As Moira noted:

*People have conflicts of interests all the time that they are not even aware of and if he hadn't had the same name as this woman or she had never mentioned his name to me I would never have known and may have continued working with him long term until maybe he told me a bit more about the circumstances of his life and I would have put two and two together.*

Thus Jenny and Moira attributed a negative moral value to their clients' 'at risk' identities.

## Moralising 'a risk' client identities

'A risk' client identities were mostly cast in less favourable terms by social workers within this study (Graham, Jenny, Joseph [colleagues], Maggie, Mark, Moira and Narelle). In their moralising of this identity social workers spoke of their clients as being problematic in some respect – they were violent and difficult to work with – and there was a sense that these clients were tainted in some way. For example, Mark spoke of his 'a risk' client as manipulative. Mark stated that the client:

*was also trying to manipulate me in some ways in terms of his relationship with his partner...I think all the abuses he'd been through in his life had shaped his life in such a way that he believed that's the way he had to behave with everybody I think, you know? It was getting everybody offside...he got so many people offside and anywhere he went, he was getting people offside because he was so demanding and so critical...*

Jenny also attributed negative qualities to the young client she was working with. She remarked:

*she has got that sort of personality where she just sits and laughs and giggles when you talk to her and that used to drive me absolutely berserk. Her mum did that too and I think that is a genetic personality giggly trait in that family...I don't understand why people can – I mean, why people can just sit down and laugh about it. I actually said, 'I can't stand it. I can't stand you giggling. This is such an important issue that you can't'. I can't think what she did now...oh, probably bashed up mum or did something like that.*

Frances, Josephine, Peter and Zoe did not impute that their 'a risk' clients were 'at fault'. In a sense, these practitioners were quite 'forgiving' of their client's actual or alleged inappropriate behaviour. For example Zoe, who initially saw the client (being two parents) as 'bad' due to a long history of notifications against them for assaulting their child, changed her mind upon meeting them. The parents had been in care as children and had told Zoe that they were struggling to manage the extreme behaviour of their child. In speaking of the client, Zoe said:

*during discussion with the family they would talk about holidays that they'd been on and what they'd done with their child, you know, bike riding and all this stuff and what they'd been through over the years. And they'd given us so much, they'd given us everything like an admission that they'd hurt the child and...I realised how dangerous it would be to remove...The harm that had been done to the family, like the parents in the past and the impact on them if we did that to their children would be very harmful.*

Thus while this group of social workers recognised their clients were 'a risk' and viewed their alleged or actual behaviour as inappropriate or wrong, they also entertained the idea that their client's behaviour could be understood in other terms. Most often this related to their seeing their clients as also being 'at risk' in some way. In entertaining this characterisation of their clients, social workers redeemed the moral virtue of their clients – they were 'victims' and hence not 'at fault'.

## **Moralising 'at risk' practitioner identities**

In common with 'at risk' clients, social workers who spoke of themselves as 'at risk' primarily positioned themselves as having been or potentially being victimised or injured in some way through no fault of their own. For example, Kaitlin spoke of herself as having come close to 'burn out' in her work with her young client who had been severely abused. However, in speaking of herself in these terms Kaitlin argued that she had done the 'right thing' in becoming emotionally attached to the young boy she was working with, even though she consequentially felt emotionally vulnerable and thus 'at risk'. In this regard Kaitlin presented herself in quite heroic terms. As Kaitlin explained:

*I don't know how I could have done it without being emotionally involved...I don't hold my professional self aside from my personal self...I can't operate like that but then I think in terms of risk to self as a social worker – there is a higher level of accountability...We tend to put much more energy in and much more of yourself into your interventions and I think there is a definite price to pay for that and I think the price is the risk of burnout...So even with the benefit of hindsight and having some time distance from it in terms of reflection, I know I would still do the same thing...*

This heroic characterisation of practitioners was common amongst many social workers who saw themselves as ‘at risk’ in some way (Frances, Geraldine, Josephine, Kaitlin, Maggie, Moira, Narelle, Peter, Petra, Sebastian and Zoe).

Social workers also alluded to the moral righteousness of their ‘at risk’ identities when they explained how their colleagues and or management within their organisations failed or were unlikely to support them in their work (Geraldine, Graham, Joseph, Kaitlin, Maggie, Moira and Zoe). For example, Graham was troubled about how to help a client who was homeless and who had a diagnosed mental illness. In exploring options for this client, Graham spoke of how he was pressured by management to account for the cost of his attempts to resolve his client’s homelessness. Graham stated:

*It’s just trying to make decisions of not only what is best for them, it’s also our boss comes to us and says to us, ‘Well, how much is this going to cost us?’. So we can put somebody up in a unit, a holiday unit or a motel hotel unit and then he says, ‘Well this is costing us \$400 this week. What are we getting in return?’. And then I think, is it all about dollars? Surely it should be about people, but no, it comes down to the dollar factor again.*

Maggie also spoke of how her attempts to work in a positive way with her client who had been found guilty of a sexual offence were thwarted by colleagues who undermined her. As Maggie explained:

*I am probably one of the few people...that actually takes that stance that everyone has some intrinsic worth – you know, there are the mad, the bad and the sad but there are very few bad ones – for want of a better description. There are more people who fit into the other two categories...I find it really frustrating that in your own team, people actually turn on you and say, ‘What are you going to do with that asshole? He is no good. He will do it again’. Instead of saying, ‘Well, I can do this part’. Everyone just goes, you know, closing ranks and leaves you very alone...*

Accordingly, practitioners who spoke of themselves as ‘at risk’ positioned themselves as doing or attempting to do ‘good’ but in doing so they encountered personal and professional hardship.

## Moralising 'a risk' practitioner identities

'A risk' practitioner identities were also presented as faultless in certain regards. Those social workers who reflexively constructed an 'a risk' identity presented themselves as facing a hard decision in their work, given that their interventions could have negative results for clients (Elaine, Linda, Josephine, Kaitlin, Maggie and Moira). In speaking of themselves in these terms social workers spoke of how they acted with the 'best of intentions', thereby reclaiming a morally sound basis for their practice. For example, Elaine reflected:

*What did I want to do? I wanted to get out of there, like I just didn't, I thought, well, I felt at that point in time I felt like it wasn't a choice for me anymore. I felt like, well, I've got to do this now because I'm here. And there's kind of an expectation that I'm gonna do this. I sort of wanted to be able to, you know, look through the door and go, 'Yep, that all looks all fine to me', and then go because I didn't want to...I just, when they all stood outside and said, you know, 'In you go', and they all did that, they all came outside and sat on the front step...And at that point I thought, 'Do I really have to do this?'.*

Linda also spoke of how her feeling of incompleteness in her work with a client who had attempted suicide could be understood as her having lost focus in her work because of the demands of the workplace at the time. As Linda explained:

*It's like it was a loose end I didn't tie up neatly...it was untied because of – for a number of reasons. Like we'd gone over time and I was tired, I had two other people to see, I'd already seen two other people in the morning, all that kind of stuff, yeah, the realities of that all came into play...I kind of have an obligation to do the best I can. And sometimes when you know you see a lot of people and you hear a lot of stories like I lose sight of that obligation.*

Thus while there was an acceptance within their stories that their actions were 'wrong' or inappropriate in some way, these social workers also attempted to mitigate their culpability by emphasising the difficult circumstances they faced within their practice contexts.

Geraldine was an exception to this form of moralising of an 'a risk' worker identity. Geraldine was ascribed an 'a risk' identity by her workplace. Thus in considering the morality of this identity, Geraldine spoke of it as an unjust action taken against her in



which fault had been attributed to her that did not exist. In trying to make sense of the basis of her organisation's stance against her, Geraldine reflected that:

*I just had this gut feeling that it wasn't my fault...the more I thought about it the more I realised I was right...So I still tried all the other things you know, well maybe we could put something on the admission form, or maybe we could take some photos or maybe we could put out a pamphlet out for lesbian women, maybe I could wear a tee-shirt. But they refused point blank every one of them. So it wasn't actually only about me saying I was a lesbian. It was about letting anybody know that there was a lesbian at the place.*

For Geraldine, then, there were no mitigating circumstances to account for her organisation's positioning of her as 'a risk'. The attribution of an 'a risk' identity was simply a 'wrong' that had been done to her and in this she saw herself as victimised.

## **The Moral Dilemmas of Risk Identities in Social Workers' Interventions**

In moralising their own and clients' risk identities social workers attempted to reconcile the tensions that existed between and surrounding their own and clients' risk identities. That is, social workers attempted to resolve which of the risk identities in operation within their practice narratives they would respond to within their interventions – those versions of clients and themselves as 'good' or 'innocent' or those versions of clients and themselves as 'bad' or 'at fault'. Accordingly, the practice dilemmas social workers encountered in deciding which identities they would respond to within their interventions can be understood as moral dilemmas.

### **The moral dilemmas of risk identities: a site of struggle in social workers' interventions**

Decisions regarding how social workers would respond to the moralised risk identities of their clients, colleagues and selves were a source of great consternation for them. Seldom were these decisions made without considerable anguish on behalf of the practitioners involved. These decision-making moments were sites in which the fears, anxieties, doubts and heartache of practitioners coalesced with their determined

efforts to make sense of what would be the ‘right’ or moral thing for them to do for their clients and/or themselves. This process often involved social workers in the seemingly constant activity of self reflection. As Jenny explained:

*You are constantly weighing – you are constantly thinking – should I do this? Do I need to do this? What is best? What is not best? What is the better outcome?*

Geraldine’s difficulty in deciding whether to sign a non-disclosure clause in her employment contract is also evidence of the emotional intensity of this reflective process. Geraldine recounted that:

*I went home and I bashed myself around the head – why would you want to frighten clients? And I examined everything that I could imagine that I could have been responsible for...because I really, really wanted to do the right thing and I wasn’t sure because it was only a gut feeling that they couldn’t do that.*

Reconciling themselves with the moral implications of their practice decisions then was an important, though difficult, process for practitioners.

Doubt was a formidable force that accompanied social workers in their deliberations about how to construe a moral response to the risk identities that were in operation in their practice situations. Most often practitioners doubted the motivations underpinning their practice choices (Elaine, Geraldine, Graham, Kaitlin, Linda, Mark, Moira, Narelle, Peter, Petra, Sebastian and Zoe). In these instances, social workers struggled with whether their planned or enacted interventions were a response to their own or their client’s risk identities. That is, social workers questioned whether they were acting out of a sense of self-interest or their clients’ interests. This sense of doubt is exemplified in Kaitlin’s reflection where she remarked:

*I doubted myself all the time. I continually questioned my decision making and particularly my intentions and my own agenda – you know – around, what is my agenda here? I had to be very, very clear all the time so it was a continual process of, ‘Hang on. What is behind all this? What is your reason for doing this? What is your motivation? Is it about yourself wanting to – my desire to protect this child or is it really in his best interest?’.*

Similarly, Peter noted of his intervention with a male client who was both the ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’ of domestic assaults that:

*I had a bit of a question mark about how I acted for myself in the reflection of it. But that's okay – you know those competing stories were something that happened inside me. Like I started to ask questions about is this guy telling me the truth when one of the primary things that we do with a client is believe them.*

Thus questioning the integrity of their positions regarding clients and their own risk identities was often fundamental to social workers' processes for reconciling the practice dilemmas presented by risk identities.

Not surprisingly, then, the moments in which social workers were confronted with the moral dilemmas of their practice were significant junctures in the histories of their interventions and the re-telling of these tales was accompanied by a truly palpable sense of drama. Frances' story exemplifies this. Frances spoke of the crucial moment in her work with Julianna in which she re-established contact with her following the removal of her small child from her care. Frances recounted this visit in the following terms:

*I was coming down the driveway – and what I saw was two units co-joined, and there was this unit was all garden and open windows and light coming in – and there was this unit with all the venetian blinds were shut, no garden – oh, well a tiny bit of garden, that is right, but just all shut up and closed in...When I walked down the driveway I walked into the garage off the closed up flat and there was – and I remember her rages and had been told about them by the worker – I have never seen this before. There was a TV that had had – a big old-fashioned TV that had its big glass thing bashed in...and the glass is that thick – two inches or so thick – an inch and a half right, jagged, right – sitting in the garage on the way to the front door...with great jagged edges and glass like that sitting there looking at me. And I turned around and there was an old washing machine that had been bashed in. It was just really powerful...it was just incredible and I said, 'Fuck', and banged on the door, thinking, 'Come on, Frances. This is a young woman that you have worked hard over the years to get through all of this...'*

Frances spoke of this visit as a critical juncture in her work with Julianna because she was presented with conflicting images of her – as a vulnerable, isolated and sad woman (that is, 'at risk' and 'innocent') and as a woman of fury and destruction (that is, 'a risk' and 'at fault') as evidenced by the damaged property and bleak surrounds of the unit. What Frances did next was intricately related to how she reconciled the tensions between these two seemingly opposing risk identities. They would influence whether she would advocate for Julianna to be able to parent her child or work

towards limiting her contact with her by supporting the granting of an extended order for the child. That is, in common with the other practitioners who participated in this study, Frances faced a choice about whether she would take a stand for or against the client in her intervention.

### **Three moral dilemmas posed by risk identities in social workers' interventions**

The moral dilemmas of practice that were attendant to the multiple, co-existing risk identities of clients and social workers were starkly apparent in how practitioners spoke of their deliberations about the moral stance they would take within their interventions. Primarily these deliberations took three main forms. First, where the client was both 'at risk' (good) and 'a risk' (bad), social workers indicated that they faced a choice about whether they would take a stand for or against the client in their interventions (Frances, Graham, Jenny, Josephine, Maggie, Mark, Moira, Narelle and Peter). Frances's story is a case in point. Peter also had to make this decision with regard to his client whom he saw as both a 'victim' and 'perpetrator' of domestic assaults. This decision was difficult for Peter. In considering which of these ideas about the client he would recognise within his intervention, Peter said:

*I really felt for this bloke. You know he was really struggling and yet he's known as somebody who has broken his wife's jaw and he told me that...and there's a part of me that says, 'You're a victim too'. And it's like, it's complicated you know. It was just such a complicated – you're the victim and you're the perpetrator and I guess I – you know – he seemed like such a nice fellow who really opened up to me and I recognised that – upon reflection that doing the interventions that I did with him where influenced by me liking him – not liking him, but – feeling an affiliation with this person.*

Second, where the social worker was both 'at risk' (innocent) and 'a risk' (at fault), social workers stated that they faced a choice about whether they would take a stand for or against themselves in their interventions (Elaine, Geraldine, Josephine, Kaitlin, Maggie and Moira). Geraldine's situation exemplifies this kind of decision. Geraldine reflected that the dilemma about whether she should see herself as 'a risk' to clients or 'at risk' from her organisation caused her considerable anguish:

*I went over and over it – maybe I am a bad social worker because I want to say I'm a lesbian. Maybe it was about my personal issues...And I, like, you'd sort of get sucked into thinking, you know, you owe it to yourself and your clients and everybody else to have a look and make sure that you aren't a bad social worker because you say you're a lesbian. But every time I came up with – if I can't say I'm a lesbian it means there's something bad about being a lesbian and there's nothing bad about being a lesbian.*

Third, where clients and practitioners were both seen to be primarily 'at risk', social workers spoke of how they were faced with a choice about whether they would take a stand for the client or themselves (Elaine, Frances, Graham, Jenny, Josephine, Kaitlin, Maggie, Mark, Moira, Narelle, Peter, Petra, Sebastian and Zoe). Kaitlin was faced with this choice when the young boy she was working with came to see her one day when he was extremely upset. Kaitlin recollected this incident in the following way:

*I remember one day he was so, so, so sad and I said to him, 'Would you like a hug?'...and he nodded his head so I picked him up and put him on my lap and he just had these big tears falling out and I just hugged him – hugged him and rocked him for about half an hour but the whole time I was being aware – what was going through my mind was – am I crossing a boundary here? What if somebody actually walked in this door right now – that places me in a really vulnerable situation. What is their view of this going to be? Does it hold me up to scrutiny? So the whole time I was hugging him I had all of these thoughts going through my mind...it was a constant thought within me and I felt this – and that opened up a whole lot of questions like: Why should it be? I know on the one hand what it should be. It is for protecting children. When I was hugging this child, I felt very uncomfortable. I did feel uncomfortable. Now the uncomfortability was my head – have you crossed this boundary? Is this OK? What if somebody actually came in? So there was a part that was considering myself in that as well. How would this be seen if somebody came in on this because it was in a room with the door closed? How would this be seen? The other part of me was going – this kid needs a hug...it was a definite struggle. It was a real struggle.*

Thus Kaitlin was faced with a decision about whether she would take a stand for the client and continue to hug the child, or take a stand for herself and find other ways of comforting him where she was not professionally vulnerable.

As mentioned previously, Joseph, Linda and Zoe did not face tensions *between* the risk identities in operation with their practice contexts. Nonetheless these three practitioners still questioned whether they would take a stand for themselves and/or their clients (or colleagues, in Joseph's case) given the presence of multiple risk identities. Table 4 encapsulates the specific practice, risk identity and moral dilemmas that were evident in each social worker's story. This table illustrates the connections between the difficult decisions social workers had to make in regard to their intervention pathways, the risk identity conflicts and tensions that were present within their practice dilemmas and the moral nature of these dilemmas for them.

**Table 4: Client and Practitioner Risk Identities and Dilemmas**

Practitioner	Client Risk Identities	Practitioner Risk Identities	Practice Dilemmas	Risk Identity Dilemmas	Moral Dilemmas
Elaine	At Risk A Risk	At Risk A Risk	Should I conduct an unannounced home visit?	How do I reconcile the client's and my risk identities?	How can I take a stand for both of us?
Frances	At Risk A Risk	At Risk	Will I argue for or against an extended order of Julianna's child?	Do I respond to the client's 'at risk' or 'a risk' identity?  How do I reconcile the client's and my risk identities?	Do I take a stand for or against the client?
Geraldine	At Risk	At Risk A Risk	Will I sign an employment contract containing a non-disclosure clause?	Do I respond to my 'at risk' or 'a risk' identity?	Do I take a stand for or against myself?
Graham	At Risk A Risk	At Risk	Will I send a client to another area without having secured housing for him?	Do I respond to the client's 'at risk' or 'a risk' identity?  How do I reconcile the client's and my risk identities?	Do I take a stand for or against the client?  Do I take a stand for or against myself?
Jenny	At Risk A Risk	At Risk	Will I 'actively' support the client?	Do I respond to the client's 'at risk' or 'a risk' identity?  How do I reconcile the client's and my risk identities?	Do I take a stand for or against the client?  Do I take a stand for or against myself?

Joseph	Colleagues A Risk	At Risk	Will I assert myself with my work colleagues?	How do I reconcile my colleagues' and my risk identities?	Do I take a stand for myself?
Josephine	At Risk A Risk	At Risk A Risk	Will I work with the client?  Will I take steps to secure a restraining order against the client's father?	Do I respond to the client's 'at risk' or 'a risk' identity?  How do I reconcile the client's and my risk identities?	Do I take a stand for the client or myself?
Kaitlin	At Risk	At Risk A Risk	Will I continue to work with the client?  Will I hug the client when he is upset?	How do I reconcile the client's and my risk identities?	Do I take a stand for the client or myself?
Linda	At Risk	A Risk	Do I give in to the belief that the client cannot heal?	How do I reconcile the client's and my risk identities?	How can I take a stand for the client and myself?
Maggie	At Risk A Risk	At Risk A Risk	Should I act in controlling or supportive ways towards the client?	Do I respond to the client's 'at risk' or 'a risk' identity?  Do I respond to my 'at risk' or 'a risk' identity?  How do I reconcile the client's and my risk identities?	Do I take a stand for or against the client?
Mark	At Risk A Risk	At Risk	Will I work with the client?  Will I write a letter to support a complaint by the client against another worker?	Do I respond to the client's 'at risk' or 'a risk' identity?  How do I reconcile the client's and my risk identities?	Do I take a stand for the client or myself?
Moira	At Risk A Risk	At Risk A Risk	Will I provide services to the client?	Do I respond to the client's 'at risk' or 'a risk' identity?  Do I respond to my 'at risk' or 'a risk' identity?  How do I reconcile the client's and my risk identities?	How can I take a stand for the client and myself?

Narelle	At Risk A Risk	At Risk	Will I support the client to apply for a restraining order?	Do I respond to the client's 'at risk' or 'a risk' identity?  How do I reconcile the client's and my risk identities?	Do I take a stand for the client or myself?
Peter	At Risk A Risk	At Risk	Will I provide all the information I have about the client's situation?	Do I respond to the client's 'at risk' or 'a risk' identity?  How do I reconcile the client's and my risk identities?	Do I take a stand for or against the client?
Petra	At Risk	At Risk	Will I go against organisational protocols?	Will I respond to the client's or my 'at risk' identity?	Do I take a stand for the client or myself?
Sebastian	At Risk	At Risk	Will I continue to work with the client or refer him on to another worker?	Will I respond to the client's or my 'at risk' identity?	Do I take a stand for the client or myself?
Zoe	At Risk A Risk	At Risk	Do I remove or leave a child in the care of the client?	How do I reconcile the client's and my risk identities?	Do I take a stand for or against the client?  How can I take a stand for myself?

In view of these practice, risk identity and moral dilemmas, social workers' reflective narratives indicate that they were ultimately faced with a choice about whether they would take a stand 'for' or 'against' clients. The outcomes of these deliberations are discussed in the following section.

## Taking a Moral Stand in Social Workers' Interventions

Social workers' interventions indicate that they took one of three stances in relation to the moral dilemmas that were attendant to their own and client's risk identities. These were:



1. Interventions where the social workers' actions were directed towards taking a stand for their clients but not towards taking a stand for themselves (Frances, Josephine, Kaitlin, Linda, Peter, Petra and Sebastian);
2. Interventions where the social workers' actions were directed towards taking a stand for their clients and themselves (Geraldine, Mark, Moira, Narelle and Zoe); and
3. Interventions where the social workers' actions were directed towards taking a stand against clients/colleagues and taking a stand for themselves (Jenny and Joseph).

These stances are apparent in the specific interventions that social workers implemented, and are presented in Table 5. This table illustrates that for all but three social workers (Elaine, Graham and Maggie) the implementation of practitioners' interventions signalled a resolution of the moral dilemmas that were attendant to the tensions and conflicts between risk identities. However, Elaine, Graham and Maggie were unable to reconcile the moral stance of their interventions. In the end, these practitioners believed their interventions had placed their clients and/or others 'at risk' and hence they saw themselves as being 'a risk' to clients.

**Table 5: Social Workers' Interventions**

Practitioners	Stand Taken	Interventions Implemented
Elaine	Unreconciled	Conducted an unannounced home visit but did not believe it was the right thing to do.
Frances	For the Client	Advocated against an extended order of Julianna's child and organised support for her to be able to parent her child.
Geraldine	For the Client and Self	Did not sign the employment contract and lost her job.
Graham	Unreconciled	Sent the client to another area without having secured housing for him but had misgivings for having done so.
Jenny	Against the Client	Did not respond to client's call after being hospitalised after a suicide attempt.
Joseph	For Self	Spoke with his colleagues in a team meeting about them using their wilfulness against him.

Josephine	For the Client	Worked with the client.  Spoke to the client about his wishes and then decided to go to court to secure a restraining order against the client's father.
Kaitlin	For the Client	Decided to stop seeing the child.  Continued to hug the child.
Linda	For the Client	Determined to make positive use of each moment of each session.
Maggie	Unreconciled	Immobilised by doubt about how to respond to the client.
Mark	For the Client and Self	Worked with the client but set clear boundaries.  Did not write the letter to support client's complaint against another worker.
Moirra	For the Client and Self	Organised for another worker to work with the client.
Narelle	For the Client and Self	Organised to meet the client without telling colleagues. Planned to meet the client in a public area.
Peter	For the Client	Did not provide the information about the abusive behaviour of the client to another organisation.
Petra	For the Client	Did not refer the client as required by organisational protocols.
Sebastian	For the Client	Continued working with client but met him in a more private setting.
Zoe	For the Client and Self	Did not remove the child from the care of the client and kept detailed case notes of the decision making process.

The resolution or irresolution of these practice stances by social workers will now be discussed.

## Taking a moral stand for clients

In speaking of themselves as taking a stand for clients, social workers indicated that they had resolved to respond to the 'at risk' identities of clients as opposed to their own 'at risk' (Frances, Josephine, Kaitlin, Peter, Petra and Sebastian) or 'a risk' (Linda) identities. For example, Peter indicated that he had emphasised his client's 'at risk' identity over his own, stating:

*that decision was acting on behalf of the client but it wasn't actually being true to who I am...You make so many choices as a social worker and because we're interacting with another person they obviously have a huge influence on the choices you make and then you're cognitively and consciously working in the best interest of this person, then you put a lot of yourself aside...*

Thus there was a sense within these social workers' narratives of seeing themselves as having acted in a self-sacrificing manner within their interventions. Accordingly, for many of these workers (Josephine, Kaitlin, Peter, Petra and Sebastian) their actions were noted by them as working 'against' their own interests in some way.

It was also clear that although these practitioners had initially struggled with the moral dilemmas of their practice, upon resolving to privilege their client's 'at risk' identities over their own risk identities the moral ambiguity of their situations dissipated. For example, in speaking of her decision not to advocate for an extended order of Julianna's child, Frances reflected:

*I positioned myself far more with the mum – some of Julianna's issues – than with the Department's. That is what I did...the Department can say until they are blue in the face that you can still get your child back, but if they are going for an extended order...why would they do that? They argue they do that for the stability of the child and I think there is a dominant discursive practice in that of punishing mum at play. That is what I was taking a stand against...I feel quite clear that the outcome of that intervention has not endangered this child in the slightest, but what it has done is refuted the whole thrust that was happening in this young woman's life of silencing her...I didn't feel like I was doing a wrong – I felt like I was doing a very ethical thing the whole way through.*

In a similar vein Linda spoke of the clarity she eventually was able to gain in her work with her client. Linda explained that:

*I saw her and sort of saw the problem...as totally crushing her and I was going 'No. I can't. I can't be a part of sitting in the lack of hope or sitting in the despair. I can't do that. I was clear...I clearly had that in my mind when I was working with her...It's obvious...that she really is feeling totally overwhelmed by it and really scared for her own safety and – so building up her resources to deal with that. To combat that, that was kind of, that was what my intervention was about.*

Thus these practitioners were resolute that their practice decision to take a stand for their clients within their interventions was a morally sound choice. As Petra summarised:

*The risk to the client, which to me is the moral consideration, overrode the other one, the systematic or personal risk. So to me that was the right thing to do. Yes. It just overrode it.*

## **Taking a moral stand for clients and for self**

Taking a stand for clients and self was a complex matter for Mark, Moira, Narelle and Zoe. These practitioners' interventions addressed their recognition that their clients were both 'at risk' and 'a risk'. Clients were both 'good' and 'bad'. These practitioners stated that their resolution to take a stand for clients was done so primarily upon the basis of attending to the 'at risk', as opposed to 'a risk', identities of their clients. However, in addition, Mark's, Moira's and Narelle's stand for themselves in their interventions was attributed to their responding to their clients' 'a risk' identities. Thus these four practitioners' practice decisions to take a stand for clients and themselves in their interventions was motivated by their recognition of their clients' and their own 'at risk' identities. Mark's explanation of his decision to continue working with his client (Geoffrey) whilst maintaining clear boundaries around what he was and wasn't prepared to do for him, which included not writing a letter to support his client's complaint against another worker, illustrates this point. Mark explained:

*I was clear about some of the boundaries. I'd say I would do this for you but I'm not going to do this for you. I'll arrange, I'll talk to the appropriate people about getting this information to you but I'm not going to do all of this for you...so he probably got a sense of my boundaries in the sense that I wasn't prepared to allow him to manipulate or shape the way I was working with him...I keep using the word 'manipulate', but in a sense I felt manipulated in many ways...But if someone is trying to manipulate someone else I always think that it can be seen – it can be reframed. It's not necessarily manipulation. There's a reason for these things. And if this young man has been abused in so many ways and pushed around and found himself on the streets and having to engage in prostitution and all these things, well that's what he's learned...But...I suppose what I'm saying is I wasn't going to be pushed around by him.*

However, Mark was clear that his intervention with Geoffrey needed to reflect his taking a stand for him as well, and in this Mark attended to his client's 'at risk' as identity. Mark stated that:

*I was thinking if I took a stand on this, before I took the stand I thought I'm really putting myself on the line here but then I decided to take a stand...we're not sitting on the fence, we're taking a stand when we're advocating for someone against oppression. And the same with Geoffrey in many ways. Like I'm working with him like an advocate for him, I suppose, in terms of trying to make sense of the effects of abuse on his life and trying to make his journey and life more understandable to him and to move forward.*

Thus the decision of these social workers to take a stand for their clients within their interventions reflects their capacity to attend to their client's 'at risk' ('good' client) identity whilst simultaneously attending to their 'a risk' ('bad' client) identities.

Geraldine's stance of not signing the non-disclosure clause of her employment contract was a painful and traumatic experience. In taking a stand for herself and clients Geraldine believed she was able to maintain a sense of personal and professional integrity. However, she also suffered emotionally and ended up losing her job. As Geraldine tearfully explained:

*I was suicidal for three months, but one of the things I'm really proud about me is that I did that. That I actually stood up and said, 'No. That's not OK. I'm not colluding in that sort of discrimination'...It was hard, though. And it is one of the things that I am proud about myself that I did do that even though it hurt so much and it still hurts [cries].*

Thus for Geraldine, taking a stand for clients and herself was not without negative consequences. Furthermore it is also apparent that Geraldine was the sole practitioner amongst those who participated in the study whose sense of being 'at risk' of some form of harm within their practice situations was realised.

## **Taking a moral stand against a client/colleagues and for self**

Jenny and Joseph spoke about the stances they took in their interventions as being a response to their 'at risk' identities. Jenny's intervention was centred upon her view

that her client's 'at risk' and 'a risk' identities were both problematic identities. In addition, Jenny maintained that her sense of herself as 'at risk' in her work due to being tired and not being able to achieve a sense of success with her client directly impacted upon her decision not to actively intervene when the client was in crisis. In making this decision Jenny positioned herself in opposition to the client and accordingly her intervention is indicative of taking a stand against the client and for herself. In speaking of her intervention Jenny explained:

*She went into hospital – an adult psych unit – she made a visit up there after self-harming and threatened to kill mum. The police picked her up and put her into there but I haven't even reacted to that at all. I would end up not doing a great deal anyway because I can't engage with that stuff...I wanted to see if she could make some sort of link to the seriousness of her behaviour because that is why I get frustrated because I have gone on and told her time and time again that she can't just go around and threaten people or whatever for a trivial reason – because you are desperate for a cigarette – so I was just hoping that she would make the link but she didn't...I can't stand it.*

Thus in not being able to 'stand it' Jenny's intervention signifies her attribution of a primarily negative moral value to her client which in turn supported her decision to take a stand against her young client.

Joseph positioned his colleagues as 'a risk' to him by virtue of their wilfulness. In positioning them in these terms Joseph moralised their risk identity in negative terms. Within this context Joseph saw himself as victimised. Joseph's intervention then was to take a stand for himself by speaking about his sense of risk from his colleagues in a staff meeting. By doing this Joseph stated that he was taking responsibility for himself. As Joseph explained:

*We actually talked about it as a team and got to the stage...we got to a stage of agreements that we would acknowledge feelings in these [situations]...because I had to put it on the table with these guys...that if they came at me with this as an agenda, and this woman in particular...I had to talk about my own risk...*

In taking this stand Joseph positioned himself in opposition to his colleagues – they were 'a risk' to him. According to Joseph, the positive outcome of this intervention was that his colleagues could now identify when other staff members were attempting

to do a 'wilful number on them'. Thus the oppositional stance that Joseph took in his intervention from being 'at risk' from wilfulness was maintained within the team.

## **The unreconciled moral stance of social workers' interventions**

A fourth group of practitioners (Elaine, Graham and Maggie) remained unreconciled with their interventions. These three social workers remained deeply troubled about the moral implications of their interventions for clients and others. They remained unresolved about the moral stand they had taken in their interventions. In part this was because they were unable to reconcile which of their clients' and own risk identities they should have responded to.

Graham explained that his decision to send his client to another area without having secured housing for him had not 'sat well' with him. His client had asked Graham to help him move even though he knew that he was likely to be without accommodation of any kind for an indeterminate period of time. The client also had been diagnosed with a severe mental illness and though prescribed medication did not take it. Graham explained that he felt incredibly frustrated and overwhelmed by the client's problems so that in the end Graham thought:

*all we could do was comply with his wishes and drop him somewhere in the hope that there would be more services available to him than what we had.*

However, Graham had deep regrets about his decision. As he explained:

*It was awful. I remember saying to somebody outside later, 'Oh, this doesn't sit well. I'm not happy about it', you know? As they drove off in the car I thought, 'Oh gosh. You're sending a person out, all we are creating is more suffering for this person'...I wasn't happy with the decision.*

Thus Graham was uncertain about the moral implications of his intervention. Hence he wondered if his actions intimated that he had been 'a risk' to the client.

Elaine reflected a similar sense of disquiet regarding the moral implications of her intervention to conduct an unannounced home visit when allegations of neglect were made against her client. According to Elaine, repetitive allegations had been made which, while initially confirmed, were later found to be without substance. In deciding to do the home visit Elaine had wanted to take a stand for the client and demonstrate once and for all that these allegations were simply unfounded. However, Elaine remarked, 'I had doubts about it. Definitely'. Her doubts were confirmed by her client's abject response. Elaine explained:

*I wasn't thinking about disempowering the people but I wasn't thinking about empowering them either. I was just thinking about doing something for them which isn't very empowering at all but at the same time it felt right because I thought this family obviously has trouble sticking up for themselves so I will go and do it for them...it's weird, isn't it, how you think about some things one way and then it doesn't happen the other way.*

Thus while Elaine had intended to take a stand for her client she believed she had compromised the moral integrity of this aim and accordingly had acted in a way that suggested she was 'a risk' to her client.

The dilemmas of the competing identities of her client's and her own 'at risk' and 'a risk' identities seemed unresolvable to Maggie and as a consequence Maggie had become immobilised in her practice. In speaking of her anguish over her intervention with this client, Maggie said:

*I haven't done anything with him. I don't think he has a mental illness. I don't think he should be put on medication to lessen his libido or something. I read all that sort of stuff yesterday and I thought – you know – I can't do that 'just in case'....But how can I come down on him like a ton of bricks about something he hasn't done? It is easy when [clients] do muck up in a way. When that time comes, it is easy to – 'we talked about this and this is very serious.' That is really easy...but when you are putting a person out that might hurt another human being, that is when it gets much more tricky...I don't rest easy with that knowledge as you put them out the door...But I sense a need...So it is a dilemma.*

Thus Maggie remained conflicted about the moral stance she should take in her work with this client. She was unsure whether she should take a stand for or against him. In the process, Maggie doubted the integrity of her action to 'do nothing'. Maggie believed she was still 'a risk' to her client and others.



## Concluding Comments to the Chapter

In this chapter I have illustrated that social workers attributed moral values to their clients' and their own risk identities. Thus not only were clients and practitioners recognised in terms of their being 'at risk' or 'a risk', they were also recognised according to considerations of the moral adequacy of these identities. Each practitioner recognised that their client's and their own risk identities posed specific moral dilemmas for them in their practice. Determining which risk identities they would respond to was not a straightforward matter by any of their accounts. Nonetheless, in spite of the moral quandaries attendant to the presence of multiple, co-existing risk identities, most social workers indicated that they were able to resolve their dilemmas and could determine which moralised risk identities they would respond to in their interventions. Still, three practitioners remained unreconciled about their interventions. Elaine, Graham and Maggie questioned whether their actions had contributed to their client's being subject to further risk. Accordingly these practitioners questioned if they had become 'a risk' to their clients. Thus in addition to the insight gleaned about the operations of risk from the preceding chapter, this chapter has demonstrated that risk was constituted and integrated as a deeply moral concept in social workers' interventions and required a moral response from them: to take a stand for and/or against their clients and/or themselves.

Social workers referred to five primary reference points for orienting the moral stand of their interventions. Each of these reference points was spoken of as having played an important role in supporting social workers' attempts to reconcile the tensions attendant to the risk identities that were in operation in their practice situations. How these reference points were constitutive of the moral stance that social workers assumed in their interventions is the focus of the following and final results chapter.

## Chapter 7

# Constituting a Moral Response to the Dilemmas of Risk Identities in Social Workers' Interventions

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## Introduction to the Chapter

Social workers' practice narratives reverberated as an intensely reflective and personal process of moral deliberation. As noted in Chapter 6, doing the 'right' thing was extremely important to practitioners in their response to the moral dilemmas posed by the tensions and conflicts accompanying the presence of co-existing multiple risk identities. Seemingly, then, doing the 'right', moral or ethical thing in their interventions equated with social workers feeling assured that they had done 'good practice'. Conversely, being unable to reconcile the morality or ethics of their interventions equated with social workers feeling deeply troubled about their intervention choices. Thus social workers' practice narratives indicate that they were concerned to not only reconcile the moral dilemmas of their practice situations, but to resolve their identity as moral agents within their interventions. That is, social workers were concerned to present themselves within their practice stories as having acted with integrity when enacting their responses to the tensions surrounding their own and client's risk identities; that there were 'good' reasons for why they acted as they did. This seemed to be the case irrespective of whether practitioners were able to fully reconcile their final stand within their interventions in relation to their client's and own risk identities. Thus while the preceding chapter addressed practitioners questioning, 'What will I do, given the moral dilemmas of my practice?', this chapter engages with social workers' reflections upon the question 'Why did I take the stand I assumed in my intervention in relation to the client's and my risk identities and how does it reflect upon me as a moral subject in my work?'.

The significance of this question becomes apparent in view of practitioners having reported that they felt incredibly fearful within their practice situations. As discussed in Chapter 5 fear was a prevalent emotional response in social workers' reflective accounts. This was especially the case when practitioners spoke about clients as 'a risk' and themselves as 'at risk'. Risk was also spoken of in Chapter 5 as a negative construct. Thus it could be argued that fear and this negative conceptualisation of risk had the potential to act as a conservative force within social workers' deliberations about how they would respond to the moral dilemmas posed by risk identity conflicts. That is, practitioners could have acted out of a sense of self-interest and ensured their own 'safety' within their interventions, and a small number of practitioners did this. Alternatively they could have become transfixed by fear, particularly the fear of doing the 'wrong' thing, which also occurred. However, a greater number of practitioners' interventions were grounded in them taking a stand for their clients in some way. The reflective narratives of these practitioners signified their sense of having achieved a moral resolution to their risk identity dilemmas and in turn they appeared reconciled with their moral identities as social workers. Accordingly, this chapter identifies what practitioners identified as important to them when confronted by the pervasive force of fear and a determined will to enact a moral response to their risk identity dilemmas.

This chapter comprises of a presentation of the five primary reference points that social workers used to orientate their stand in their interventions. This presentation includes an examination of the substance of each reference point and how these reference points directed attention towards a stronger or lesser regard for social workers' and clients' 'at risk' and 'a risk' identities. The chapter concludes with a review of how these reference points were assimilated by practitioners in the stances they adopted in their interventions.

## **Reference Points for Constituting a Moral Stand in Social Workers' Interventions**

Social workers' reflections on the veracity of their responses to the moral dilemmas attendant to their risk identity dilemmas reveal that their interventions comprised a

complex interplay of emotion, conscience and context. Five primary reference points, singularly and in combination, were used by social workers as a ‘moral compass’ to guide their practice, being: ethics, morals, and values; re-contextualised meanings and qualities attributed to risk; the situated contexts of practitioners; social workers’ beliefs in the possibility of change for clients; and theoretical and practice frameworks. These reference points were spoken within social workers’ narratives as justifications for their actions. They formulated the basis of their ‘good reasons’ for doing what they did, and in so doing, provided a framework for social workers to speak about their moral agency in their interventions. These reference points and their composite dimensions are presented in Table 6 below. This table provides an overview of how many practitioners within each practice standpoint, and in total, referred to the various dimensions of each reference point. Total numbers are greater than the total number of participants, as practitioners on occasion referred to more than one dimension of each primary reference point.

**Table 6: Numbers of Practitioners who Referred to Each Reference Point in their Reflections of their Interventions**

Reference Points		Total n=17	Stand for Client n=7	Stand for Client and Self n=5	Stand Against Client/ Colleagues and Self n=2	Unreconciled n=3
<b>Ethics, Morals and Values n=44</b>	The moral emotions of compassion and empathy	13	6	4	0	3
	Sense of responsibility and obligation	11	4	4	1	2
	Professional ethics and values	10	4	4	1	1
	Personal morals and values	10	6	4	0	0

<b>Re-Contextualised Meanings and Qualities of Risk</b>  n=22	The 'reality' of risk	11	6	3	0	2
	The degree of risk	11	5	5	1	0
<b>Situated Contexts of Practitioners</b>  n=19	Organisational contexts	12	4	4	2	2
	Personal contexts	7	2	2	2	1
<b>Belief in the Possibility of Change for Clients</b>  n=10	Possibility of change	7	5	2	0	0
	Impossibility of change	2	0	0	1	1
	Uncertainty of change	1	0	0	0	1
<b>Theoretical and Practice Frameworks</b>  n=9	Theoretical framework	4	4	3	1	0
	Practice framework	5	4	0	1	0

This table clearly demonstrates that 'ethics, morals and values' were prominent in practitioners' reflections. The remaining four reference points were referred to less regularly, particularly practitioners' beliefs about the possibility for change for their clients and their theoretical and practice frameworks. Each reference point will now be addressed in detail.

## Ethics, morals and values

Given the moral significance of their risk identity dilemmas, it is perhaps unsurprising that the most commonly-referred-to reference point that orientated the direction of social workers' interventions was 'ethics, morals and values'. This was particularly the case for those social workers who determined to take a stand for their clients but not for themselves and those social workers whose interventions reflected their taking a stand for clients and themselves. In particular social workers spoke of the influence of the moral emotions of compassion and empathy, their sense of

responsibility and obligation, professional ethics and values, and their personal moral and value perspectives.

Table 7 presents the practitioners and their number who referred to each of the dimensions of ‘ethics, morals and values’ as a reference point in their interventions. The last column summarises how these dimensions served to emphasise and de-emphasise client and social worker risk identities within practitioners’ interventions. Once again total numbers are greater than the total number of participants, as practitioners on occasion referred to more than one dimension of ‘ethics, morals and values’. The table is followed by a detailed presentation of how ‘ethics, morals and values’ were constitutive of the moral stand which social workers assumed in their interventions in regard to their client’s and own risk identities.

**Table 7: Practitioners who Referred to Ethics, Morals and Values as a Reference Point for their Interventions**

<b>Ethics, Morals and Values</b>  <b>n=44</b>	<b>Stand for Client</b>  <b>n=20</b>	<b>Stand for Self and Client</b>  <b>n=16</b>	<b>Stand against Client/ Colleague and for Self</b>  <b>n=2</b>	<b>Unreconciled</b>  <b>n=6</b>	<b>Influence upon Client and Worker Risk Identities</b>
<b>Compassion and Empathy</b>  <b>n=13</b>	Frances Josephine Kaitlin Peter Petra Sebastian	Mark Moir Narelle Zoe		Elaine Graham Maggie	Emphasised client ‘at risk’ identity.
<b>Sense of Responsibility and Obligation</b>  <b>n=11</b>	Josephine Kaitlin Linda Peter	Geraldine Mark Moir Zoe	Joseph	Elaine Maggie	Emphasised client ‘at risk’ identity.

<b>Professional Ethics and Values</b>  n=10	Kaitlin Linda Peter Sebastian	Geraldine Mark Moir Zoe	Jenny	Maggie	Emphasised client 'at risk' identity.
<b>Personal Morals and Values</b>  n=10	Frances Josephine Kaitlin Linda Peter Sebastian	Geraldine Mark Moir Narelle			Emphasised client 'at risk' identity.

## Compassion and empathy

Thirteen of the 17 practitioners who were confronted by the challenges of risk identity dilemmas spoke of compassion and empathy as a personally meaningful emotional and reflective response to their client's situations. Compassion and empathy in this instance then acted as a 'moral emotion'. When practitioners engaged in a compassionate and empathetic stance, their attention was directed towards their client's 'at risk' identities.

For many practitioners the circumstances of their client's lives had a profound emotional impact upon them. Accordingly these practitioners often spoke of their clients in positive terms and/or expressed a deep-seated sentiment towards them. For example, Frances said of her work with Julianna, 'It was lots of hard work and I came to really care about her'. Kaitlin also expressed feelings of care. Kaitlin said of her feelings for the young boy she was working with, who had been physically and emotionally abused and neglected, that:

*I get really emotional when I even think about that poor little fellow. As a human being and at a heart level I could not walk away regardless of the consequences. I could not walk away from this child...and I know I showed that child love and acknowledgement and affection...*

Similarly Zoe recalled how her decision not to remove a child from the care of his parents was influenced by her sense of compassion for the parents. Zoe recalled:

*It got to my heart strings so much that I felt that I really – I said – I think I said it to my colleagues, ‘I really don’t want to remove this kid. I really don’t want to’, and that wasn’t based on the head stuff. That was purely based on in here stuff [points to heart] – that humanity for people – for parents and for the mum and for the child as well.*

Given this emotional connection, social workers were often quick to anger at the injustices that their clients had faced or were experiencing. For example, Josephine said that she was really angry that other professionals saw her young client in a negative light and had essentially ascribed a ‘problem identity’ to him. As Josephine explained:

*I get angry that he is kind of persecuted at school and other places. I have read some of the case notes and they think he is – and yes, he has broken windows of the phone boxes and he has pissed off with other kid’s property, but by God he is a hurting kid...*

Sebastian was also angry at how an anonymous person’s abusive phone call undermined the work that he and Trevor had done together. He stated:

*I was just so bloody mad, just so fucking angry with this, that this person could do this and that I’d worked with this person and I’d seen this person just, you know, in terms of their own sense of self just bring it together for themselves so beautifully and just go places in terms of who Trevor was in terms of his own identity and his own confidence and self respect...The anger was very powerful. I don’t think I’ve ever been that angry with someone. Someone I don’t know.*

Thus compassion and empathy were integral to how these social workers positioned themselves in relation to their clients. As Elaine explained, her ability to empathise with her client’s circumstances generally was fundamental to her work, and certainly came to the fore in her reflections about the impact of her unannounced home visit:

*I guess I am always thinking of the other person and probably not that much of myself, if you get what I mean. I think that I am able to empathise with people. I can put myself in their shoes, certainly not in all cases but as close to it, if you get what I mean...if you place that back on yourself you think, ‘Well if this is me and this person was coming in and doing that, how would I feel? Would I be feeling disempowered or would I be feeling OK about that?’. And I suppose it is kind of like reflecting on yourself, reflecting on someone else...*



However, compassion and empathy did not always facilitate a straightforward response from practitioners in their interventions. It appears that compassion and empathy accentuated the moral dilemmas faced by some practitioners (Graham, Maggie and Narelle) whose clients had been identified as being both 'at risk' and 'a risk'. While these practitioners could appreciate the hardships faced by their clients and felt quite deeply about their circumstances, they were also conflicted about how they should morally align themselves with them, given their clients were also considered to have done something wrong. The turmoil arising from this situation was captured in Narelle's comments where she said:

*that sort of brought up the whole sort of thinking of who is a victim and who is at risk and all that sort of stuff. So it is a really big question, I think. I think we could spend a lot of time just on that...she is a perp but she is still a victim because she is in a minority group and she is a victim of patriarchy. So you know, how far do you go? Do you know what I mean? It is such a huge... because she is transgendered and she is always going to be at risk but because she is a violent person, I was at risk as well so we were both at risk. I was at risk from her...*

It is also important to note the absence of compassion and empathy as a dominant theme in the narratives of those social workers who took a stand against their client/colleagues and for themselves. Jenny's and Joseph's practice narratives were noteworthy for their lack of reflection upon their emotional engagement with their client and colleagues. For example, Jenny reflected that she could have responded to her young client's recent suicide attempt by going to see her in hospital. However, Jenny noted:

*That would be my immediate reaction until I need to stop and think, 'Hang on', and just reflect on that...I weighed it up against the whole situation...and at the end of the day I think, 'Tough. I am sorry. I am one person in one little agency and it is not my problem'.*

Thus the reflective narratives of practitioners who took a stand for their clients and against themselves, and practitioners who took a stand for their clients and themselves, indicate that compassion and empathy prompted and supported them to emphasise their client's 'at risk' identities in their interventions. In turn, the focus of their responses was directed outwards towards their clients, as opposed to inwards towards attending to themselves and their 'at risk' practitioner identities. Furthermore, it legitimated the moral rectitude of social worker's actions. However,

while feelings of compassion and empathy for clients was enabling for many practitioners in terms of how they might respond to their client's 'at risk' identities, it served to confound how Elaine, Graham, Maggie and Narelle would respond to their clients. For these social workers it appears that their feelings of fear and the sentiment of compassion were experienced in equal measure so that the tensions between their own and their clients' risk identities compounded. Thus compassion and empathy alone were not able to provide these practitioners with a resolution to the moral dilemmas of their practice.

### **Sense of responsibility and obligation**

'A sense of responsibility and obligation' towards clients was also an important reference point for orientating the direction of social workers' interventions. The passages in their narratives where 'responsibility and obligation' were mentioned indicate that these practitioners had a heartfelt commitment to their clients and their 'cause'. Thus this commitment appears to have emanated from practitioners' compassionate engagement. Hence these social workers spoke of their sense of responsibility and obligation as a moral response to their client's suffering as opposed to deriving from a sense of professional duty. For many practitioners accepting that they had a moral responsibility to their clients was instrumental to taking a stand for their clients in their interventions. This point is exemplified in Kaitlin's reflection about her practice with her young client who had been physically and emotionally abused and neglected. Kaitlin remarked that:

*To me the risk to the client was real. It was happening and I believed I was doing the right thing and I still believe that and I believed that I had a moral responsibility to protect him. So that is, I guess, what fuelled me to continue, to go on...I believe that morally all adults have a responsibility to protect children in our society. So outside of social work, outside of the profession, I believe I have a moral obligation to do that in any case. So I guess what that did was I thought I was right in what I was doing.*

Similarly Linda noted that her efforts to reconnect with a story of hope in her work with her client following a suicide attempt were grounded in the belief that she had a moral obligation to meet her client's need. In turn this inspired her to do all that she could for her client. Linda said she could remember thinking:

*I gotta do the best here, to the best of my capability...I'm one small part of this woman's life and that's enough of a part in terms of a circle, but I've got to not do just a little bit in that circle, but reach my limits as much as I can...It's almost like I even...it probably sounds a bit weird but I took my job really, really seriously in that hour...I was thinking, 'I have an obligation here and yeah, sure it's only one small part, but it, it can have an effect, it can have power. I have a certain amount of power and influence in this situation and I've got to utilise and facilitate that as best as I professionally, humanly can...And I can't stop the world from making people cruel to each other or sanctioning violence or anything like that but I can do something in this little hour of my day. So that kind of clarified, made more concrete my obligation rather than I've got to change the world and all that you know [laughs].*

In contrast, Joseph and Maggie spoke of responsibility and obligation in different terms to these practitioners. Joseph, whose intervention was indicative of his having taken a stand for himself, spoke about his response to the fear of the 'wilfulness' of others as indicative of having taken personal responsibility for his own actions. Joseph explained that his decision to confront his team mates who were 'doing a number' on him was sound because:

*There's been an exchange between us and it might well be your wilfulness but now instead of just copping it and submitting to it I will now want to decide whether it's mine or whether it's yours and if it's yours I have gotta give it back.*

Thus, while Joseph spoke of responsibility as a moral stand, in a point of difference to other practitioners whose sense of responsibility and obligation directed them towards emphasising their client's 'at risk' identities, Joseph's 'at risk' practitioner identity was highlighted and his colleagues 'a risk' identity re-emphasised within his practice narrative.

Maggie's perspective of responsibility and obligation was complicated. It had the effect of reinforcing several of the risk identities in operation in her work with a person convicted of child sex offences. On the one hand Maggie felt protective of the client as he needed to be given a chance and Maggie thought she was responsible for facilitating this. However, Maggie also felt obligated to protect children from him. As Maggie explained:

*they [colleagues] treat this person like the enemy, which I can understand and accept that he is...but it almost turns into – you almost become his protector, or that is how I feel. Like I feel like I am warding off all the shots that are going towards him...but this fellow – the harm he apparently has done and has the potential to do is very scary and you almost take on that responsibility because I haven't got a clue what to do with him...I feel responsible if he re-offended.*

Thus Maggie remained in a double bind about how to attend to the client's 'at risk' and 'a risk' identities, as well as her own 'a risk' identity. It appears, then, that Joseph's and Maggie's expressions of responsibility and obligation were also connected to their feelings of fear. However, for the other practitioners mentioned here their reflections indicate that their sense of responsibility and obligation directed them towards an emphasis of their clients 'at risk' identities in their interventions.

### **Professional ethics and values**

Regard for the purpose of social work, the profession's core values and social workers' ethical responsibilities as stated in the AASW Code of Ethics (2000) were evident in 10 practitioners' reflections about the moral impetus and legitimacy of their interventions. These encoded aspects of practice resonated strongly as grounding influences for many practitioners. Accordingly social workers spoke with a strong sense of certainty about their intervention choices when referencing the constitutive effect of professional ethics and values upon their practice. For example, Mark explained that he decided to assume an advocacy role with his client in spite of feeling fearful of him and thus was able to take a stand for him. Mark reflected that:

*I was thinking if I took a stand on this, before I took the stand I thought I'm really putting myself on the line here, but then I decided to take a stand and advocate for him... We – we're not sitting on the fence; we're taking a stand when we're advocating for someone against oppression...It's the nature of a lot of our work in social work, working with abuses in life and oppression.*

Mark and Sebastian noted that this advocacy role in social work necessarily positioned social workers as 'at risk' within their work. Thus Sebastian explained that placing oneself 'at risk' as a practitioner simply needed to be seen as an inherent part of the social work role. Sebastian explained:

*social work is a very much a risk-taking job...Particularly in the advocacy role because I think we are invited to take a clear stance on the situation...Yeah so when it becomes advocacy work and when it becomes work advocating for people who are already at risk I think there is a whole realm of risk there – risk to you as a worker...but you have to, you couldn't do that work. You couldn't do that if you didn't put yourself at risk. So there is for me part of the social work role is very much that almost owning that vulnerability I guess and taking that on board and working with that. That you're going to put yourself in lots of different situations where you are going to be really vulnerable and that's OK 'cause it's a choice – that we are choosing to do, yeah, for a purpose.*

The constitutive influence of professional ethics and values upon social workers' practice was also evident in Geraldine's reflections about her decision not to sign the non-disclosure policy in her work place. Geraldine noted that she believed her organisation's requirement of her not to discuss her sexuality with clients was antithetical to the social work value of human dignity and worth. Geraldine commented that:

*Social workers are for me about working for social justice and they have an obligation to work towards social justice and look at different types of discrimination they are imposing on people...I have a human right to self identity and not have other people's definitions imposed on me and that's what they wanted to do. They wanted to impose their heterosexual definition on me. I had to be assumed to be heterosexual like all of them and that was them imposing their definition on me. So I don't think their stance was ethical, in fact I think it was very unethical especially considering the diverse range of clients who had equal rights to access the service.*

Accordingly, then, most practitioners privileged their client's 'at risk' identities in some way when they referred to professional ethics and values. This was the case even for Maggie who said her social work values told her that she had to 'give this person a chance, even if it meant stuffing up'. However, an exception to this rule was Jenny's decision not to intervene when her 'at risk' and 'a risk' client attempted suicide. Jenny reasoned she could justify her non-response on the grounds that the client was 'self determining'. This view seemed to allay Jenny's dilemma as to whether she should have done more for her client, commenting that:

*I think, at the end of the day, morally and ethically I would have done the right thing and I feel very settled and secure in that because I used client self-determination. I can say, 'You still provided a certain amount but it has been up to the family and up to the young person to take that and do*

*what they want with it'. A part of me also says, 'You can't spoon-feed people all the time. They need to grow and nurture themselves. You can give them a push along, but I think they need to do something'. And I think some families need to take responsibility for themselves...*

Thus professional ethics and values had the effect of decreasing social workers' sense of their being 'at risk' in their practice. Apparently their sense of fear was mitigated by their commitment to and understanding of their professions' ethical standards.

### **Personal morals and values**

Nearly all social workers who took a stand for clients and not for themselves and a stand for clients and themselves in their interventions reflected upon the influence of their personal moral and value frameworks upon their interventions. These belief systems mostly created surety for practitioners about how to respond to the tensions between their own and their clients' risk identities – they attended to their clients' 'at risk' identities in some measure. For example Petra said:

*there was, I realised in hindsight, it was not from a social work perspective that I made that decision. It was my own sense of what I believed would be most useful for that young person...it was quite clear and it feels quite clear to me what I needed to do – where I come from.*

Personal values and morals were also important to Moira as she pondered upon what would be the 'right' thing to do with her client whom she knew to have been physically violent towards his partner. Moira explained that her sense of moral agency as a practitioner was important to how she conceived of her decision to refer him to another worker within the organisation. Moira stated that:

*I think it is a core belief about what I think is right and wrong or ethical or unethical for me to do as a worker and I know that if I had done something unethical or something that I thought was morally not OK like shown him the door, I probably wouldn't have been able to. I can't even conceive that as being a part of who I would like to be as a worker...I think that the risk needs to be acknowledged and not ignored and you have to do something about it and there were several courses that I could take and I took the one I thought was right at the time...philosophically I couldn't support a victim/survivor and the person who was perpetrating violence at the same time.*

And Narelle explained how her personal moral framework was an important reference point for her deciding to help her client even though it was against agency protocol. Narelle said:

*I still did as much as I could and I didn't tell the other workers this...So there was still that part of me that wanted to help her but I knew as a professional that I wasn't supposed to but as an individual I could still do this which is maybe resisting a little bit to those formal policies. And I did feel bad because I hate going back on my word.*

Peter was an exception amongst this group of practitioners. While Peter believed that the outcome of his interventions was good for his client and in this respect his practice was 'good', he had a small, but persistent lingering sense of disquiet about having not shared all the information he had about his client when advocating on his behalf for him to access public housing. Peter thought he had compromised his personal value system by not being totally honest with other agencies about his client. Peter said:

*I realised that I was acting on behalf and being really supportive, for my client and that's my primary goal but by the same token I recognise that I didn't – may not have told the whole truth...if I'd told the whole truth of it, it probably wouldn't have happened...and sort of that decision was acting on behalf of the client, but it wasn't actually being true to who I am.*

Nonetheless it is apparent that social workers' personal moral and value frameworks primarily helped to support them implement interventions that were attuned to their client's 'at risk' identities.

## **Re-contextualised meanings and qualities of risk**

As mentioned in Chapter 5, risk was spoken of in largely de-contextualised terms by practitioners as they ascribed risk identities to clients and themselves – it was everywhere and it was only spoken of in negative terms. While risk was spoken of as an embodied concept, generally speaking there was little critical distinction made about the nature and extent of risk as it pertained to clients and practitioners.

However, in reflecting upon how they had responded to the moral dilemmas of risk identities within their interventions, a significant cohort of practitioners spoke of how

they re-contextualised their initial ideas about the ‘reality’ of risk and reassessed the degree to which it was present for clients and themselves. Table 8 presents the practitioners and their number who referred to ‘re-contextualised meanings and qualities of risk’ as a reference point for their interventions. The last column summarises how these ideas served to emphasise and de-emphasise client and worker risk identities within social workers’ interventions. Total numbers are greater than the total number of participants in places, as practitioners on occasion referred to more than one dimension of thinking about risk. The table is followed by a detailed presentation of how this reference point was constitutive of the moral stand that social workers assumed in their interventions in regard to their client’s and own risk identities.

**Table 8: Practitioners who Referred to Re-contextualised Meanings and Qualities of Risk as a Reference Point for their Interventions**

Re-contextualised Meanings and Qualities of Risk  n=22	Stand for Client  n=11	Stand for Self and Client  n=8	Stand against Client/ Colleague and for Self  n=1	Unreconciled  n=2	Influence upon Client and Worker Risk Identities
The ‘reality’ of risk  n=11	Frances Kaitlin Linda Peter Petra Sebastian	Geraldine Moir Zoe		Graham Maggie	Emphasised client ‘at risk’ identity and decreased emphasis on worker ‘at risk’ identity.
The degree of risk  n=11	Frances Kaitlin Peter Petra Sebastian	Geraldine Mark Moir Narelle Zoe	Jenny		Emphasised client ‘at risk’ identity and decreased emphasis on worker ‘at risk’ identity.



## The 'reality' of risk

Reconsidering the contexts within which risk identities had been ascribed to clients and social workers was important to the resolution of practitioners' risk identity dilemmas. The reflective narratives of these social workers suggest that at some point they asked themselves, 'How real is the risk we face or pose?'. What seems important about the asking of this question is that it prompted social workers to reconsider how the risk identities of their clients and selves had been constructed. For example, the 'a risk' identities of Frances's, Moira's, Peter's and Zoe's clients were destabilised when they asked themselves this question. As Frances explained, her thoughts about the client's 'a risk' identity changed after hearing about how she had reacted to her child being removed from her care. The client was being prevented from having access to her child partly on the basis of the neglectful state of her unit. However, Frances recounted:

*She told me the story of her [child] being taken into care and she said, 'I have trashed the place since Ellen was taken from me. I was OK before that'. So she said that and I wrote it down – 'I trashed the place since Ellen was taken from me. I was OK before that'. To me this was very significant.*

Having gained this insight Frances was able to place a context around Julianna's behaviour that had supported the ascription of her 'a risk' identity. In turn Frances began to doubt the validity of this identity. Thus by re-contextualising their client's 'a risk' identities Frances, Moira, Peter, and Zoe were able to re-engage with their client's 'at risk' identities, and concomitantly disengage with being pre-occupied with their 'at risk' practitioner identities.

Clients' 'at risk' identities were also reaffirmed in a number of cases (Kaitlin, Peter, Petra and Sebastian) when practitioners reflected upon the 'reality of the risk' their clients faced. Kaitlin provided a very vivid account of how her reassessment of her young client's circumstances reaffirmed his 'at risk' identity. Kaitlin spoke about her thoughts about risk in the following terms:

*My ideas about how risk applied to my client in this particular intervention, the risk to him was continued abuse and violence at all levels – emotional, physical, psychological and spiritual – and what I was sort of witnessing in him, I think, was a death of him, of his soul.*

However, considering the contextual aspects of her client's 'at risk' and 'a risk' identities proved a fruitless exercise for Maggie – she simply couldn't make a solid judgement about him. His identity, be he 'at risk' and 'a risk', was an enigma for her.

Geraldine's reflections about her 'at risk' identity as a practitioner remained intact after considering the 'reality' of the situation she was confronting. In her case there were no mitigating factors that would undermine the negative consequences of any of the positions she could have adopted within her situation. As Geraldine explained:

*signing the policy I knew that I would lose my job if I didn't sign it. They [the organisation] told me that. So there was the risk of losing my job. There was also a risk to my integrity if I did sign, to my integrity as a person that I wasn't prepared to go back on that journey of being accepting of myself and as principles of social justice that I saw for myself. By signing it I would have kept my job, but to me that was, it was like giving myself an irrational message that I was somehow bad or perverted because I wanted to say I was a lesbian. And I wasn't prepared to do that.*

Geraldine didn't sign the non-disclosure clause. She lost her job and was suicidal for three months afterwards. However, she reflected that she was proud of her actions in spite of the havoc that was wreaked upon her personally and professionally by her practice stance.

On the whole (the exceptions being Geraldine and Maggie), practitioners' reflections of the 'reality of risk' tended to reaffirm their client's 'at risk' identities and destabilised their client's 'a risk' and their own 'at risk' identities. Thus re-contextualising risk provided practitioners with a reasoned approach to resolving the moral dilemmas of risk identity conflicts in their practice.

### **The degree of risk**

Commonly, risk identity conflicts and the moral dilemmas attendant to them derived from both clients and social workers being ascribed 'at risk' identities within the one practice situation. Thus there was a question around whose 'at risk' identity would be attended to – the client's or the social worker's? One means of addressing this conflict was for practitioners to reflect upon the degree of risk which they and their

clients faced. That is, social workers conducted a comparative assessment of who was at greater risk in their practice situations – clients or themselves and/or others. Practitioners who engaged in this process, whose interventions reflected taking a stand for their clients but not for themselves, noted that they thought their client's level of risk was greater or more extreme than their own. Accordingly these social workers de-emphasised their own, and privileged their clients', 'at risk' identities within their interventions. For example, when reflecting upon her sense of being 'at risk' in her work with Julianna, Frances said:

*the risk to me seems rather small in comparison and I sort of thought about that and I thought, 'Well I don't think I felt that much at risk'...so if there was any risk to me it would have been that somebody would have got upset with me...so it wasn't much of a risk to me to take this stand.*

Kaitlin said of her decision to continue hugging her young client when he was crying that:

*It was like the child's need for love from me over-rode that this may not be appropriate or whatever...the risk was much more associated with the client than with myself. There was much more risk that he was experiencing and what I thought I ought to do was driven by a professional code of ethics so I didn't have a doubt either morally or ethically that I was doing the right thing...because to keep him safe over-rode the risk to myself at all times.*

Similarly Petra realised that her concerns about how she might be disciplined by her organisation if she did not follow agency protocol in her intervention were not as great a concern when compared to what would happen to her client if she did. Petra remarked:

*In balance there was a young person's life and well-being at stake. I am older and I have a degree and I have a job, a partner. I have a house, money, all those things and in balance she had none of those, least of all experience, confidence, any of that, and this to me was very minimal in comparison to where it was for her.*

This comparative assessment did not yield such a clear result for those social workers whose interventions reflected having taken a stand for clients and themselves. Each of the practitioners grouped as having taken this practice stand judged their clients and their own 'at risk' identities to be commensurate with the other, though qualitatively

different. As Narelle said of her client's and own 'at risk' identities, 'she is transgendered [and] she is always going to be at risk, but because she is a violent person I was at risk as well so we were both at risk'. Similarly Zoe noted that when she was determining whether to remove a child from the care of his parents she reported to her supervisor that:

*it was going to be really difficult and really hard for the family and us if we removed this child. So we entered into discussion with her [supervisor] about if the risk of removing was higher than the risk of leaving the child there.*

Jenny, whose intervention intimated that she took a stand against her client and for herself, noted that her practice was influenced by her consideration of whether her young client's level of risk was greater or less than other clients on her caseload. Jenny commented that in making her decision not to respond to a suicide attempt by the client she thought:

*you have to weigh against the organisation, your case load – other people and case loads and all that sort of stuff. It comes down to structures that are placed around you. I mean, I could get my teeth right into this family and really try and assist them and move them and whatever but then I have got clients who are really suicidal, depressed, anxious, so why shouldn't I give my time to that as well? I really have to weigh up what is the best use of time.*

Accordingly, Jenny's comparative risk assessment acted as an impetus for de-emphasising her young client's 'at risk' identity. Thus it can be seen that re-considering the degree of risk faced by clients and social workers engendered a rationalised and pragmatic response by practitioners to the moral dilemmas incumbent to their risk identity dilemmas.

## **The situated contexts of practitioners**

The organisational and personal contexts of practitioners also acted as reference points for directing the focus of their interventions. Table 9 demonstrates that the situated contexts of practitioners were spoken of within practitioners' reflective narratives in fairly even numbers across each practice stance, though in far less numbers overall compared to 'ethics, morals and values'. The table denotes the numbers and names of practitioners whose practice narratives indicate that the

personal and professional dimensions of their lives oriented the moral stand they occupied in relation to their client's and own risk identities in their interventions.

**Table 9: Practitioners who Referred to their Situated Contexts as a Reference Point for their Interventions**

Situated Contexts of Practitioners  n=19	Stand for Client  n=6	Stand for Self and Client  n=6	Stand against Client/ Colleague and for Self  n=4	Unreconciled  n=3	Influence upon Client and Worker Risk Identities
<b>Organisational Contexts</b>  n=12	Kaitlin Josephine Petra Sebastian	Geraldine Moir Narelle Zoe	Jenny Joseph	Graham Maggie	In some instances mediated worker 'at risk' identity. In others exacerbated it. Emphasised client 'at risk' identity in some cases.
<b>Personal Contexts</b>  n=7	Peter Sebastian	Geraldine Moir	Jenny Joseph	Elaine	Emphasised worker 'at risk' identity.

## Organisational contexts

The informal and formal aspects of social workers' organisational settings provided an important context for supporting or undermining which risk identities were emphasised within their interventions. Josephine, Petra and Sebastian said that their sense of being 'at risk' in their work was mediated by their organisational contexts. For example, Josephine mentioned that she felt like she could act with confidence in her work with her young client because of the willingness of her colleagues to share information and debrief with her. Josephine said 'this is hugely important so I don't act alone'. Sebastian said the inspiration he drew from his workplace helped to combat his feeling of being 'at risk' after being threatened during an anonymous phone call. Sebastian remarked:

*this job is really, really needed and is so important...and this whole role in social work is so critical right now...It was kind of...cutting edge stuff. That sustained me as well and it was kind of, it had an element of inspiration about it.*

Petra, who had acted against agency protocol as a means of supporting her ‘at risk’ client, said that the ‘grey areas’ in her organisation’s policies provided her with a ‘safety net’ so that her sense of being ‘at risk’ was diminished. Petra explained that:

*professionally...there is some room to move...there are grey areas and people don’t always fall neatly into these categories and decisions have to be made about complex contributing issues and social workers...have training and qualifications to take responsibility and weigh up those balances...*

In contrast, Kaitlin and Moira said their organisational contexts served to increase their sense of being ‘at risk’ in their practice. Kaitlin said her organisation had clear guidelines about physical contact with children, given the growing concern of professional misconduct or the possibility of being accused of such. In turn this impacted on her sense of being ‘at risk’ when she hugged her client when he was distraught. In Moira’s instance the informal culture of her organisation to ‘not ask for help’ amplified the sense of risk she felt when she did not want to work with a client who had physically assaulted another client. Moira explained:

*I felt vulnerable as far as my position in the organisation...I guess I thought at the time that they wouldn’t be terribly tolerant of the situation that I thought I found myself in...It is subtle, kind of unwritten policy that you get told that this is the way you have to practice...I guess it is taken as a given that you will deal with whatever people tell you. Whatever situation they are in, and I thought other people had been in awful situations where people had gotten really angry at them and the workers had been in tears, and I guess that I don’t think that they got a lot of sympathy from people...So it wasn’t terribly supportive in that respect, not as far as the team went.*

Finally, Graham, Jenny, Narelle, and Maggie spoke of how their organisational settings limited their ability to respond to their client’s ‘at risk’ identities. For Graham and Maggie, lack of resources within and outside of the organisation were considered an impediment to their being able to address their respective clients’ needs. In addition Graham noted that his organisation required him to demonstrate that his

intervention with a homeless man was ‘value for money’. In Narelle’s instance her agency’s criteria for eligibility for service restricted her ability to respond to her transgendered client’s request for help. And Jenny noted that having a high caseload meant that she had to ‘weigh up’ which clients would receive service from her. Thus organisational contexts either exacerbated or mediated the fear that was attendant to social workers’ ‘at risk’ identities. Furthermore in a number of instances organisational contexts frustrated social workers’ attempts to respond to their client’s ‘at risk’ identities and in this respect inflamed the moral dilemmas they faced within their practice situations.

### Personal contexts

The most commonly-referred-to personal context that social workers mentioned when speaking about their ‘at risk’ and ‘a risk’ identities was their status as a new graduate (Elaine, Peter, Moira and Sebastian). This was particularly acute for Elaine who mentioned that her decision to do an unannounced home visit was prompted by her thinking that she should defer to the advice given to her by more experienced workers. Elaine recalled that how she thought about herself at that the time:

*had to do with the fact that I’d been in the job for five minutes and you certainly feel, oh well, I felt that should, not do as I was told – that sounds silly – but I should follow other people’s advice until I found my own feet. And I was able to sort of make better decisions on what I know...And then there’s that whole, you know, that student on prac thing that you don’t give yourself enough credit to be able to maybe somehow muddle your way through it yourself. If I had a choice I wouldn’t have...But like I said because other people had sort of said this is probably the best thing to do, this probably is what you need to do.*

Similarly Moira explained that she realised that:

*being a fairly new worker in that area, it did impact on what I felt at the time. I am not now saying that I have a wealth of experience behind me by any means but I think that that little bit of extra experience that I have in the field would enable me perhaps to behave in a different manner now and perceive the risk as perhaps not being so high as I did then.*

Geraldine, Narelle and Sebastian said their ‘non-hetero’ sexualities were significant in terms of how they engaged with their ‘non-hetero’ clients’ ‘at risk’ identities. For

Jenny, being ‘tired’ and ‘worn out’ in her work, along with a penchant for wanting to ‘fix things’ and feeling dispirited when she was not able to ‘fix’ her client, contributed to emphasising her ‘at risk’ practitioner identity. And Joseph acknowledged that his reaction and subsequent intervention to his colleagues’ ‘wilfulness’ was grounded in a long and tumultuous personal history. For Joseph, then, ‘the personal and the professional [were] intimately connected’ and ‘could not be separated.’

## **Belief in the possibility of change for clients**

Social workers’ belief in the possibility of change for clients was strongly aligned with the hope that things could be different for their clients. While expressions of hope and the belief in an alternative future for clients were only expressed by several workers, interestingly it was a common narrative amongst those practitioners who took a stand for clients in their interventions. This is clear from Table 10 which illustrates the numbers and names of practitioners who mentioned how their belief in the possibility or impossibility of change was a meaningful reference point for them. This table illustrates that a belief in the possibility of change for clients engendered actions directed towards clients’ ‘at risk’ identities. Thus where there was hope there was action. In the absence of hope, the withdrawal of service can be noted. And where there was uncertainty about the possibility of change, the indeterminacy of practitioners’ responses is apparent.



**Table 10: Practitioners who Referred to their Beliefs in the Possibility of Change for Clients as a Reference Point for their Interventions**

Belief in the Possibility of Change for Clients  n=10	Stand for Client  n=5	Stand for Self & Client  n=2	Stand against Client/ Colleague and for Self  n=1	Unreconciled  n=2	Influence upon Client and Worker Risk Identities
Possibility of change  n=7	Frances Josephine  Linda  Peter  Petra	Geraldine  Zoe			Emphasised client 'at risk' identity.
Impossibility of change  n=2			Jenny	Graham	Emphasised client 'a risk' identity.
Uncertainty of change  n=1				Maggie	Uncertain which identity to emphasise.

### Possibility of change

A belief in the possibility of change for clients directed social workers to focus upon their client's 'at risk' identities. In keeping with their positive feelings towards their clients, these practitioners expressed a belief that change was possible for them. Change was spoken of in terms of clients having the potential to realise 'alternative, strengths-based' identities (Frances, Josephine, Linda, Peter, Petra and Zoe), to live lives outside of the influence of problems (Frances, Linda and Peter) and the capacity to incorporate new information into their lives (Geraldine). For each of these social workers, then, their moral commitment to address their clients' 'at risk' identities was embedded within stories of hope. The power of hope as a motivator towards working for change in client's lives was given forceful expression in Frances's recollections of her practice with Julianna. Frances described her work with Julianna as:

*the sort of work where you plough on...in the belief that if you keep ploughing on you keep storying – alternative stories – and that would give her something one day, but you don't see the results now. It was that sort of work. It was lots of hard work...this young woman has, I know, so*

*much beauty inside her and a different kind of strength that can be found that I had worked really hard to locate and get in touch with, without any amazing stories of success, but that I just insisted on believing in.*

Belief in the possibility of change for clients, then, was a core component of many of these social workers' practice frameworks. For example, Josephine emphasised that her work with her young client who was both 'at risk' and 'a risk' was guided by:

*a belief in the capacity for goodness in people, regardless of what you have heard...it is absolutely pointless me going and working with a kid that is all that those reports were. I mean it is pointless. I am not going to be able to make any difference so there has to be something else and it is that belief that there is another story and that is about the goodness in people.*

Thus, as Zoe surmised of her decision to leave a child with his parents after allegations of physical abuse had been substantiated, 'It was a risk giving change a chance'. Accordingly, belief in the possibility of change and the hope of an alternate, more positive future for clients appears to have invigorated the moral commitment of these social workers to take a stand for their clients by attending to their clients' 'at risk' identities.

### **Impossibility of change**

Belief in the impossibility of change appears to have provided an impetus for two practitioners to emphasise their client's 'a risk' as opposed to 'at risk' identities. This was particularly evident in Jenny's narrative about her decision not to respond to telephone calls from her client following a suicide attempt. Jenny explained:

*I didn't buy into it because there is a long history and I thought that if I hook into this young person, they will just come down here and we will go around in circles once again. So that is why my intervention has been nothing...I think at the end of the day I thought that I can pump so much of my time, resources, energy into a family that is dysfunctional, not going to change...I have written down 'inter-generational' and you are looking at a family – this has probably happened through the generations and you think, 'Well, what can I possibly do in a short intervention anyway?'*

When asked if she had much hope for her client and her family, Jenny replied:

*No, I don't because I think in the past we have done what we can...She will just wander through life and mum will just – mum will reach a point*

*when she is an adult I suppose, that it will not be her responsibility. But in the end the community will have to pick it up, be it the police or hospitals or whatever.*

Thus Graham and Jenny's interventions were directed away from their clients' 'at risk' identities. However, while Jenny felt at ease with the morality of her intervention, Graham was concerned that he had contributed to his client being 'at risk'.

### **Uncertainty of change**

Maggie was undecided whether her client was capable of change. While Maggie said that he was doing all the things he was supposed to be doing and saying the 'right' things, she basically did not trust him. Nor did she trust her own judgement of him. Maggie explained her indecision about the possibility of change for her client in the following terms:

*You are told they are smart...and if you say, 'Could you do a juggling act for me?' they will do a juggling act for you because that's the way they operate...perhaps he is trying to please me. Perhaps he's trying to do the right thing – so for God's sake, Maggie, stop being so bloody suspicious of his motives!*

Accordingly, Maggie remained undecided which of her client's risk identities she should have given precedence to in her intervention – his 'at risk' or 'a risk' identities.

### **Theoretical and practice frameworks**

The final reference points which social workers referred to as a basis for constituting a moral stand in response to risk identity conflicts was their theoretical and practice frameworks. However, rather than acting as an impetus for practice, social workers spoke of theoretical and practice frameworks as philosophical justifications for the stance they had adopted in their interventions after the event. Table 11 presents the number and names of practitioners who referred to theory and practice frameworks in their reflective accounts about how this reference point supported their stand in their interventions.

**Table 11: Practitioners who Referred to Theoretical and Practice Frameworks as a Reference Point for Interventions**

Theoretical and Practice Frameworks  n=9	Stand for Client  n=7	Stand for Self and Client  n=1	Stand against Client/ Colleague and for Self  n=1	Unreconciled  n=0	Influence upon Client and Worker Risk Identities
<b>Theoretical Frameworks</b>  n=4	Frances  Petra  Sebastian	Geraldine			Emphasised client and worker 'at risk' identities.
<b>Practice Frameworks</b>  n=5	Frances  Josephine  Kaitlin  Linda		Jenny		Emphasised client and worker 'at risk' identity.

### Theoretical frameworks

A small number of practitioners referred to how an organised belief system or world view was able to give their practice theoretical coherence whilst simultaneously supporting the virtue of their interventions. Frances spoke of this in terms of Foucaultian theory. In Geraldine's case it was feminist theory. For Petra it was an existential philosophical perspective. And Sebastian spoke of his ideas about heterosexual dominance, which resonated with queer theory. In each instance, the theoretical perspectives of these practitioners directed their attention towards social theories of oppression and social injustice which they then claimed were in evidence at the micro level of their practice dilemmas. Thus each of these social workers attended to their client's and their own 'at risk' identities.

### Practice frameworks

Practice frameworks were expressed as formal intervention models that guided the general practice orientations of Frances, Jenny, Josephine, Kaitlin and Linda. Common to the approaches of Frances, Josephine, Kaitlin and Linda were narrative and strength-based models of practice. In addition, Kaitlin also clarified that her

intervention with her young client had been informed by practice experience that had taught her the importance of ‘survivors of abuse’ having a significant adult in their lives who believed them. Jenny’s discussion of her practice framework differed from these practitioners, articulating her practice framework in terms of her preferred ‘modus operandi’. This was spoken of as being results focused, as opposed to reflecting a formal practice framework. Jenny explained:

*I am really into results. This is what is going to happen and this is what I will see, be it a year or two months, whatever, however long it takes. So this is just a frustrating one for me because all the things I have tried in the past have seen no change...it comes back to the fact that I need to have the answer; I need to be able to help people; I need to be able to fix things so that they can move on. That would be it. I use the word ‘fix’ because that is what I think at times. That is what I am like and that is when I have interventions, I have it planned. I have worksheets and a sense of where I need to be.*

Hence part of Jenny’s frustration with her client was that she had not had results in her work with the client. Accordingly Jenny spoke of her client as a ‘problem client’ (a risk) and herself as a ‘vexed worker’ (at risk). Thus Jenny’s stance in her intervention reflected Jenny positioning herself against her client.

## **The Assimilation of Reference Points Constituting a Moral Stand in Social Workers’ Interventions**

Having considered each reference point in isolation, this final section of the chapter considers which reference points in combination were used by practitioners to comprise the moral stand evident in their interventions. This is illustrated in the following table. Reference points are ranked according to the frequency of their mention, and numbers of practitioners who referred to them are also noted. This table also includes the risk identities that these commonly-referred-to reference points emphasised and de-emphasised. While those practitioners who were unreconciled about the morality of their interventions have not been considered to have ‘taken a stand’, I have included them within this table as a means of capturing the reference points that were important to them.

**Table 12: Practice Standpoints, Emphasised and De-emphasised Risk Identities and Reference Points Most Commonly Referred to by Social Workers within Each Stand in their Interventions**

Stand taken in Intervention	Emphasised Risk Identities	De-Emphasised Risk Identities	Reference Points
<b>Stand for the Client but not for Self</b>  (n=7)	Client 'At Risk'	Worker 'At Risk'  Client 'A Risk'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The moral emotions of compassion and empathy (n=6)</li> <li>• Personal morals and values (n=6)</li> <li>• The 'reality' of risk (n=6)</li> <li>• The degree of risk (n=5)</li> <li>• Belief in the possibility of change for clients (n=5)</li> <li>• Sense of responsibility and obligation (n=4)</li> <li>• Professional ethics and values (n=4)</li> <li>• Theoretical framework (n=4)</li> <li>• Practice frameworks (n=4)</li> <li>• Organisational contexts (n=4)</li> <li>• Personal contexts (n=2)</li> </ul>
<b>Stand for Client and Self</b>  (n=5)	Client 'At Risk'  Worker 'At Risk'	Worker 'A Risk'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The degree of risk (n=5)</li> <li>• The moral emotions of compassion and empathy (n=4)</li> <li>• Sense of responsibility and obligation (n=4)</li> <li>• Professional ethics and values (n=4)</li> <li>• Personal morals and values (n=4)</li> <li>• Organisational contexts (n=4)</li> <li>• The 'reality' of risk (n=3)</li> <li>• Theoretical framework (n=3)</li> <li>• Personal contexts (n=2)</li> <li>• Belief in the possibility of change for the client (n=2)</li> </ul>
<b>Stand against Client/Colleagues and for Self</b>  (n=2)	Client/Colleagues 'A Risk'  Worker 'At Risk'	Client 'At Risk'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organisational contexts (n=2)</li> <li>• Personal contexts (n=2)</li> <li>• Sense of responsibility and obligation (n=1)</li> <li>• Professional ethics and values (n=1)</li> <li>• The degree of risk (n=1)</li> </ul>

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impossibility of change for clients (n=1)</li> <li>• Theoretical framework (n=1)</li> <li>• Practice framework (n=1)</li> </ul>
<b>Unreconciled morality of interventions</b>  <b>(n=3)</b>	Worker 'A Risk'		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The moral emotions of compassion and empathy (n=3)</li> <li>• Sense of responsibility and obligation (n=2)</li> <li>• The 'reality' of risk (n=2)</li> <li>• Organisational contexts (n=2)</li> <li>• Personal contexts (n=2)</li> <li>• Professional ethics and values (n=1)</li> <li>• Impossibility of change for clients (n=1)</li> <li>• Theoretical framework (n=1)</li> <li>• Practice framework (n=1)</li> </ul>

It is apparent from the above table that 'ethics, morals and values', 're-contextualised meanings and qualities of risk' and the 'belief in the possibility of change for clients' were important reference points for social workers who took a stand for clients, either independently or in addition to taking a stand for themselves. Thus these reference points supported a focus upon clients' 'at risk' identities. It is difficult to make claims regarding those practitioners who took a stand against their client/colleagues and for themselves and those practitioners who remained unreconciled with the morality of their interventions. The small numbers of social workers in these two groups of practitioners precludes such claims. However, given the predominance of 'a risk' identities within these two groups it may be that fear, in one of its guises, exerted its influence upon practitioners' interventions in their instances. Certainly those social workers who were unreconciled about the morality of their interventions spoke of being plagued with the doubt that they had somehow harmed their clients and that they were fearful that the negative repercussions of their actions would repeat over time. It seems nothing was able to assuage this fear. Accordingly these social workers, in point of difference to other practitioners, remained deeply troubled about how this reflected upon them as moral subjects within their work.

## Concluding Comments to the Chapter

This chapter has considered what was important to practitioners as they oriented a moral stand for themselves in their interventions in response to the dilemmas presented by their clients' and their own risk identities. Chapter 6 explored how practitioners were faced with a choice about whether they would direct the focus of their interventions towards their clients, colleagues or own interests. Faced with this predicament, social workers confronted questions about their integrity as moral agents in their practice. This chapter has explored what practitioners identified as important to them as they faced this difficult circumstance. Each of the five reference points that were mentioned by practitioners intimated a specific focus for their interventions, be it towards the client's or their own 'at risk' or 'a risk' identities. Nonetheless the reflective passages presented in this chapter indicate that resolving how to respond to the moral dilemmas attendant to risk identity conflicts was a complicated process for practitioners and no one reference point provided them with the definitive 'answer. 'Ethics, morals and values' and 're-contextualising meanings and qualities of risk' were important considerations for those practitioners who responded to their clients' 'at risk' identities in their interventions. Those practitioners whose interventions indicate that they took a stand for their clients spoke about how these two reference points assisted them to allay the fear that had become embodied in their client's 'a risk' identities and their own 'at risk' identities. Other reference points seem to have been important for those practitioners who gave greater attention to their own 'at risk' identities in their interventions. And finally, those practitioners who were unreconciled with the morality of their interventions spoke of the futility of reference points, singularly or in combination, to allay their concerns. For these practitioners the fear of having done, or potentially doing, the 'wrong thing' remained a dominant and pervasive concern.

This concludes the presentation of results in this thesis. The following chapter discusses what these results suggest about the operations of risk in social workers' practice, with particular attention being given to the meaning, emotion and morality of risk.



## Chapter 8

# The Operations of Risk in Social Workers' Interventions: The Meaning, Emotion and Morality of Risk Identities

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Political urgencies come and go, but it's a fair enough vocation to strike one match after another against the dark isolation, when spectacular arrogance rules the day and tries to force hope into hiding (Kingsolver 2002, page unknown).

## Introduction to the Chapter

The focus of this thesis has been upon how risk operates in social workers' practice. It has questioned how ideas about risk are constituted and integrated into social workers' interventions. My research has explored whether risk is necessarily as totalising of our practices and professional identities as the 'catastrophe story' of risk contained within the critical social work literature presented in Chapter 3 suggests. With a desire to identify how we might 'speak back' to the conservative impetus of risk, my research aimed to identify how social workers resist invitations into the moral conservatism of negative constructs of risk. I determined to conduct my explorations of the operations of risk in social work by considering how risk was spoken of by social workers within reflective accounts of interventions that were significant to them.

The findings of the study indicate that risk operated as a complex and discursively persuasive concept within social workers' reflective accounts of their practice. Most significantly, risk operated as a powerful constituent of client and practitioner identities within these stories. In this chapter I discuss the significance of this finding in relation to how risk identities were an integral dimension of how social workers spoke about their interventions. This discussion explains that social workers were

active agents in the generation of meanings of risk and the ascription of risk identities within the context of their face-to-face work with clients and colleagues. Their intellectual, emotional and moral presence is foregrounded throughout the chapter as an argument against the narrative of practitioner passivity that seems to feature in recent theorising of the social, political and cultural dimensions of risk in social work.

## **Constituting and Integrating Risk Identities in Social Workers' Interventions**

The findings of this research indicate that risk did not operate as an abstract, theoretical or philosophical concept in social workers' reflections of their interventions. Risk was embodied. Risk was integral to how practitioners recognised their clients and themselves. Risk was intimately and intricately connected to practitioner and client identities. Clients, colleagues and social workers were spoken of by all but one practitioner (Craig) as being 'at risk' and/or 'a risk'. The ascription of risk identities meant that for these social workers risk became inseparable from the identities of people when practitioners narrated a risk story. Following the logic of 'storyline' analysis (Søndergaard 2002, p. 191), it seems apparent that when practitioners identified a risk plot within their interventions risk-based characterisations invariably ensued. Extrapolating from Dean's (1999, p. 131) suggestion, then, that 'the significance of risk does not lie with risk itself but with what risk gets attached to', risk can be understood from the results of this study as an identity defining concept (Culpitt 1999; Webb 2006); risk was attached to 'characters' rather than contexts. It was fundamental to how social workers recognised and positioned clients, colleagues and themselves as well as the ambit of the parameters of their interventions. Hence while risk may have been spoken of as being 'everywhere' by these practitioners, the focus of their interventions was their clients, colleagues and themselves, as opposed to the broader contexts within which they were all located.

## **'At risk' and 'a risk' identities in social workers' interventions**

There is general recognition within the critical social work risk literature that client and practitioner subjectivities are mediated by notions of risk – and to ill effect for both groups. 'At risk' clients are characteristically spoken of in this literature in terms of their vulnerability and/or dependence (Furedi 2003; Kelly 2001; Kemshall 2002; Sharland 2006). In either case, 'at risk' clients are said to be subject to intense scrutiny, paternalism, excessive control and social exclusion (Kelly 2001; Kemshall 2002; Sharland 2006). 'A risk' clients are spoken of as dangerous, be it in terms of their posing a specific physical threat or as a consequence of their high dependency upon welfare services (Culpitt 1999; Kemshall 2002; Rose 2000; Warner 2006). 'At risk' practitioners are similarly positioned as vulnerable within this literature on the basis of them being under increased surveillance, regulation and their consequent identification as targets of blame when things go wrong (Craddock 2004; Green 2004; McDonald 2006; Parton 1996, 2001; Parton, Thorpe & Wattam 1997; Webb 2006). Social workers are spoken of as 'a risk' to clients by virtue of incorrect or overzealous risk assessment and management, given an increased reliance upon actuarial practices (Craddock 2004; Goddard et al. 1999; Munro 1999; Warner 2003; Webb 2006). The risk identities attributed to clients, colleagues and practitioners within my research reflect these general ways of comprehending client and practitioner subjectivities. The vulnerability of clients and social workers pervaded practitioners' narrations of their clients and own 'at risk' identities. 'A risk' clients were 'violent' and/ or 'problematic', and in this regard their identities correspond with notions of dangerousness and the pejorative depiction of clients who are welfare dependent. And 'a risk' practitioner identities, whether they were reflexively generated or ascribed by others, resonated as presentations of social workers operating in difficult circumstances within their workplaces which were largely beyond their control.

## The agency of social workers in ascribing risk identities in their interventions

Contrary to the fatalistic narrative that seems to underscore many aspects of the critical social work risk literature, the generation of client, colleague and practitioner risk identities occurred through active and conscious processes on the part of practitioners in this study. While risk identities were often spoken of as ‘naturalised’ or indigenous identities (Søndergaard 2002; Taylor & White 2000), the discussions of practitioners during their reflective interviews indicate their presence as active agents in the inscription or rejection of identities. Hence social workers were active agents in the creation and maintenance of identities.

Consistent with the results of researchers whose focus is the ‘subjectification’ of groups of people such as social workers and/or clients (Craft & Willis 2005; Fook & Napier 2000; Juhlia 2003; Juhlia et al. 2003; Moffat 1999; Taylor & White 2000; Watkins 2006; White 2003), this study demonstrates that social workers enacted considerable power in attributing the discursive significance of risk to people and events. However, the results of my research indicate two further points. First, multiple rather than singular risk identities were in operation during practitioners’ interventions. Clients, colleagues and practitioners more often than not were ascribed both ‘at risk’ and ‘a risk’ identities to the point that each person involved in the intervention was recognised as having several identities. The complexity of this context was recognised by practitioners within their reflective narratives and serves as a sobering reminder of the intricacies that underscore social workers’ ethical and moral dilemmas in these situations. Second, practitioners’ reflective accounts of their interventions indicate that client, colleague and their own risk identities did not operate in simple terms as fixed identities. Whereas various studies have considered how client and practitioner identities are constructed, this generative process is spoken of as a *fait accompli* in the sense that once spoken, these identities ‘become more fixed and durable over time’ (Taylor & White 2000, p. 138). My study indicates a more complex understanding of this process. In the context of there being co-existent multiple risk identities in operation, practitioners spoke of needing to make a choice about which risk identities they would attend to in their interventions. In this active, difficult process of resolution, the morally conservative potential of risk was able to be resisted in the majority of situations. Thus while risk remained core to

identities throughout social workers' accounts of their interventions, certain risk identities were emphasised over others as social workers determined the moral stand of their interventions.

The objectification of risk through the ascription of risk identities thus reverberates as a reflection of the agency of social workers in their generation of the meaning of events. Craig's alternative conceptualisation of risk also stands as a testimony to this claim. Craig's was the 'maverick' storyline (Søndergaard 2002) amongst the reflective narratives of practitioners in this study. In a point of difference from the other practitioners who participated in this study, he argued against the presence of risk within his intervention. This alternative narrative disrupts both the naturalised assumption that risk is a ubiquitous feature of social work practice and that risk has an essentialised meaning. Craig spoke fluently and coherently about the meaning of risk within his practice. Within this generation of meaning, Craig was able to isolate and contextualise his understanding of risk so that he could bracket out its negative features from his intervention. Accordingly Craig recounted how he felt freer to follow other creative ways of assisting the young woman he was working with. His denial of the presence of a negative construct of risk within his intervention intimates that its inevitability as a feature of practice is not a foregone conclusion and that practitioners can take active steps to prevent this from being the case. Whether or not we agree that Craig's approach was appropriate to the circumstances of his intervention is a separate matter. What is important in the context of this discussion is that even though Craig told a different 'risk story' to other practitioners, it supports the finding of this study that social workers were able to act with discursive power in the generation of meanings about risk within their interventions. Thus the deterministic conception of risk that pervades the critical social work risk literature – that it is always a dominant and negative presence – can be disputed.

As risk is discussed within this literature it could have been assumed that each of the practitioners who participated in my study would have spoken a fatalistic narrative in their reflections about their interventions – that there was little point in their trying to escape from the pervasiveness of risk. However, practitioners did not present themselves as duplicitous or as acting out of a sense of compulsion. They inscribed themselves as active agents within their reflective accounts as they wrestled with their

risk identity dilemmas. Though they may not have spoken of themselves as consciously engaging with the discursive realm of risk, they took great pains to present themselves as having acted for good reasons when confronted by the moral dilemmas of their practice. Thus practitioners did not present themselves as ‘victims’ of a larger discourse or mentality of risk. Risk was personal – and hence it was within their sphere of influence to have an effect upon it.

## **Practices of ascribing risk identities in face-to-face encounters in social workers’ interventions**

Social workers created risk-based identities in very intimate spaces within their practice contexts. They were created in conversations between workers, in their cars, during telephone calls, in people’s homes and in their offices, as they encountered children and adults who had known the terrors of abuse, were affected by mental illness or who had been socially displaced in other ways. Client risk identities were thus created in the context of practitioners’ relationships with clients during ‘face work’ (Webb 2006). The reflective accounts of practitioners of their face-to-face encounters with clients are thus a testimony to the inter-subjective processes involved in formulating risk identities (Culpitt 1999; Webb 2006). In this space social workers constructed identities by reflecting upon their relationship with clients and colleagues often, though not exclusively, within the context of the implied question of ‘Are you a risk to me and/or am I a risk to you?’. Accordingly, risk was often personalised as a matter between clients, colleagues and practitioners.

This is an important finding, given that Webb (2006) and others (Culpitt 1999; Dean 1999; Green 2004; Parton 1996; Parton & O’Byrne 2000; Parton, Thorpe & Wattam 1997) claim that risk has seriously undermined the face-to-face encounter between clients and practitioners. Overtaken by the ethos of ‘short termism’ evident in the increased reliance upon case management, care contracts and empirical practice strategies, Webb (2006) argues that the quantity and quality of direct work with clients in social work is in decline. However, the findings of my study indicate that even where social workers’ practice contexts were overshadowed by legislative and policy requirements that foreshadow a preoccupation with risk, relationships between

clients and practitioners operated as a significant medium in which identities were negotiated. When actuarial assessments were done, practitioners often disputed their significance, foregrounding instead their more subjective understanding of events. Thus face-to-face work existed as a space in which social workers were able to enact their agency in the constitution and integration of ideas about risk within their interventions.

Lending further support to this claim is that although practitioners spoke of feeling as if they were under ‘the gaze’ of colleagues and other professionals, for the majority of social workers their face-to-face work with clients was done in the presence of minimal or negligible supervision. The critical moments when practitioners faced their difficult choices about how to respond to the dilemmas posed by the tensions between client, colleague and their own risk identities often occurred when they were on their own or in the company of clients. Thus there is a sense within this data that practitioners were able to exert significant influence upon how the discursive space between their clients, colleagues and selves would be used in the creation and emphasis of their risk identities. However, it is also important to recognise that the discursive power of risk pervasively and insidiously invited practitioners to monitor and regulate their behaviour according to the all seeing eye of others. During the critical junctures of their interventions practitioners were not asking themselves, ‘What would others think of me if I do well here?’. Instead practitioners questioned, ‘What would happen to me if I do something wrong?’ or ‘What can go wrong?’. Thus the forensic operation of risk (Douglas 2003) as a stratagem of self-surveillance was starkly apparent within practitioners’ reflective accounts as they grappled with which risk identities they would emphasise within their interventions – their clients and/or their own. The implications of this for their interventions was that it contributed to them questioning what would be the focus of their interventions – safety and or issues of justice and need; who would be the focus of their interventions – the client or themselves; and, in turn, what kinds of interventions would be initiated – interventions of care or control.

In summary, my research indicates that the discursive power of risk to act as a morally conservative impetus in social work practice was not fully realised within practitioners’ reflective accounts of their significant interventions in this study. While

technical, legalistic and calculable models of risk may have featured in their workplaces, and social workers felt that risks hovered over them in the disembodied gaze of others, they were able to act with purpose in the generation of ideas about risk and how these ideas operated in their interventions. The inter-subjective processes involved in the constitution of risk identities indicate that direct client work is a powerful discursive site in which practitioners enact considerable discursive power. While the circumstances in which practitioners worked were difficult and they were at times faced with 'win-lose' or 'lose-lose' situations, their passive acceptance of a fatalistic outcome for their clients and/or themselves is missing from their reflective narratives. Practitioners spoke of themselves as active agents in the constitution of ideas about risk and their integration into their interventions. These operations of risk involved a complex interplay of meanings of risk and the constitutive elements of emotion and morality. Each of these dimensions of the operations of risk in social workers' interventions will now be discussed.

## **Constituting and Integrating Meanings of Risk in Social Workers' Interventions**

A significant proportion of the socio-cultural and social work risk literature is devoted to exploring contestations regarding the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin realist and objectivist risk paradigms. The 'nature of risk' is the pivotal focus of these often polarised debates (Houston & Griffiths 2000). In their attempts to answer the question 'What is risk?', theorists have engaged in a heated exchange over whether risk is inherent to events or a product of social, political and cultural forces (Adam & Van Loon 2000; Lupton 2004). That is, it is disputed whether risk is 'natural' or constructed. In view of the answer to this question a further question is asked, that being, 'How we can know risk?'. That is, can it be objectively measured or should our investigations centre upon the construction of meanings of risk (Shaw & Shaw 2001; Webb 2006)? These questions, it is argued, are important for conceiving of how we practice as social workers, for it suggests that in the case of the former our practices would be based upon actuarial models of risk assessment, whilst in the case of the latter notions of subjectivity and contingency would guide practice (Croft 2001; Goddard et al. 1999; Houston & Griffiths 2000; Webb 2006). What is not disputed in this literature is the dominance of risk as a central preoccupation for



orienting social work practice in the contemporary era. Houston and Griffiths (2000, p. 1) claim that in this respect the ubiquity of risk 'can be likened, in psychological terms, to a first-order construct – or a totalizing schema – against which other constructs (such as client need) are processed or rationed'. Similarly Giddens (2003a, pp. 123-124) in arguing that late modern societies are risk societies has stated that:

[It] is not that day-to-day life is inherently more risky than was the case in prior eras. It is rather that, in conditions of modernity, for lay actors as well as experts in specific fields, thinking in terms of risk and risk assessment is a more or less ever-present exercise...

Social workers' engagement with this most fundamental of theoretical problems was spoken of by them in terms of the qualitative values they ascribed to meanings of risk within their practice – it was 'real', 'everywhere' and it was unanimously considered a 'negative construct'. Consistent with the literature, social workers in this study who spoke of its presence within their interventions emphasised that it presided as an ever-present force during the history of their interventions. Thus risk was not only everywhere in the sense that it transgressed the domains of individuals, organisations and communities, it was largely constant in its duration. In certain respects, then, risk had a limitless dimension to it. It would seem that, once narrated, the plot of risk was inescapable as a defining context for social workers speaking about their practice.

Risk was objectified – it was made real – through the ascription of risk identities. Risk was located in, and synonymous with, how social workers recognised clients and themselves. The dominance of risk identities as a primary source of recognition within practitioners' narratives of their interventions can be understood as having had a profound impact on how social workers constituted their ideas about risk. Given that these identities existed only as problem-based identities (DeJong & Berg 2002; Milner & O'Byrne 2002; White 1995), the nature of risk seemingly could only be conceived by social workers as a negative construct. Parton (2001, p. 69) argues that within the context of a 'blame' culture the dominance of this 'negative interpretation of risk' is expected. Nonetheless, Parton (2000, 2001) and Green (2004) state that this construction of risk is problematic, as it limits how social workers can imaginatively, creatively and holistically respond to client need. Thus Parton and Green advocate the benefits of adopting a more positive view of 'risk taking' (Titterton 2006). However,

this more positive reading of risk as a liberating concept offering opportunities for change or personal growth was not initially available to or entertained by the majority of practitioners within my study as they engaged with their risk saturated intervention contexts.

Nonetheless, despite their overwhelmingly negative constructions of risk and their sense of risk being deeply embedded and constant to events and people, risk was not spoken of by the participants in this study as a static concept. While risk was noted as a constant presence in their practice, many practitioners' conceptions of risk changed over time, often in quite subtle ways. Thus it can be noted that there was a contingent quality to risk as it was spoken of within social workers' reflective narratives which was not always initially recognised by them. Croft (2001) has argued that adopting a contingent understanding of risk enables a distinction to be made between 'risk events' and 'risk consequences'; between 'actual' and 'potential' risks. Croft (2001, p. 751) states that:

The theoretical conceptualisation of risk as a fixed entity is unhelpful, given the complexities involved, but when conceptualised as a position over time, risk can be understood as a process of some fluidity where different stages intermingle across the life course with varying degrees of control of and by those affected.

That this contingent understanding emerged in many practitioners' stories makes sense within the context of the findings of my research that practitioners were required to make a choice about which risk identities they would give greater emphasis to when faced with various risk identity dilemmas. In reconciling these dilemmas practitioners re-evaluated their understandings of risk and their ideas about their clients and themselves. Risks that had been previously understood in de-contextualised terms were re-contextualised, as practitioners resolved how to act with integrity in their work. This in turn reflects that the risk identities that had been spoken of, though having the potential to operate as totalising identities (White 1995), were not necessarily fixed. Given that risk had been objectified through client and practitioner risk identities, the concept of risk itself became a revisable construct for social workers.

## **The Prominence of Fear in the Constitution of Risk Identities in Social Workers' Interventions**

The risk society thesis posits that late modern life is dominated by a preoccupation with safety and security (Beck 1994, 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2004; Giddens 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2003d). According to Furedi (2003, p. 1), 'Safety has become the fundamental value of our times'. In keeping with this focus, Culpitt (1999, p. 3) has argued that risk has become 'integral to the idiosyncratic knowledge of who we are'. As a 'category of fear' (Culpitt 1999, p. 93), then, risk positions individuals and governments and citizens in relationships dominated by suspicion, and attitudes and moralities of protectionism and responsibilisation (Dean 1999; Ewald 1991; Leonard 1997; O'Malley 1996; Parton 1999, 2001; Parton, Thorpe & Wattam 1997; Rose 1996a, 1996b, 2000; Webb 2006). Thus how we view ourselves and others, be it in the context of personal or social relations, has become dominated by the legions of polarised identities that cumulate around notions of risk – dangerousness and vulnerability, independence and dependence, responsibility and irresponsibility, trustworthiness and untrustworthiness, culpability and innocence. Within the context of neo-liberal risk society, then, how we experience ourselves in relation to risk is intensely personal. Accordingly Beck (2003, 2004) and Giddens (2003a, 2003c) claim the reflexive generation of personal biographies has become a central project for individuals confronting anxieties that have their genesis in people's knowledge about and experience of risk, whilst the 'making up of people' (Hacking 1991, p. 4) through classification and codification is spoken of as a key strategy of neo-liberal governments (Culpitt 1999; Dean 1999; O'Malley 1996; Parton 1999; Rose 1996a, 1996b; Webb 2006). Within this analysis, overwhelming fear operates as a core constituent for defining the personal experience of risk within contemporary society.

The findings of my research reflect this general understanding of the primacy of fear as an emotional response to risk. Fear sat at the heart of practitioners' tales as they spoke about the moral quandaries posed by risk identity dilemmas. However, more specifically, fear was a major constituent of client and practitioner risk identities. In this sense it was generative of how practitioners viewed their clients and themselves, and was intricately interwoven into the client and practitioner relationship. This was particularly the case for clients and colleagues ascribed as having an 'a risk' identity

and where social workers spoke of themselves as 'at risk'. They feared their clients and colleagues. However, some social workers also spoke of themselves as 'a risk' when they feared that their actions would harm or had harmed clients or others. These practitioners spoke of this identity in tandem with an 'at risk' identity in view of the burden they correspondingly felt. Thus social workers' fears were very specific. And in this regard this study offers important insight into the operations of fear in the context of risk in social workers' practice, as very little research has been conducted regarding social workers' experiences of fear (Smith, McMahon & Nursten, 2003; Smith, Nursten & McMahon 2004).

Social workers in my study most commonly feared the negative reactions of colleagues and others. The dominance of this form of fear strongly reflects literature themes that critique the 'culture of blame' (Parton 1996) that has intruded into social workers' practice domains alongside increased regulation of their work practices to minimise opportunities for error (Kemshall 2000, 2002; Goddard et al. 1999; Green 2004; Lymbery 2004; Parton 1996, 2001; Parton, Thorpe & Wattam 1997, Webb 2006). It also supports the results from Taylor's (2005) and Smith, McMahon and Nursten's (2003) studies in which employees reported that they feared being blamed by colleagues and managers in their workplaces (cf. Smith, Nursten & McMahon 2004). In addition to fearing negative judgements of their practice, social workers in my study feared they might be subjected to some form of violence within their practice situations, most often by clients whom they knew had committed a violent act in the past. Social workers who participated in Smith, McMahon and Nursten's (2003) research also reported fear of violence as a dominant concern. However, what is important to note in my study is that social workers spoke of the latent potential of their clients to be violent towards them – none of their clients had previously been violent toward these practitioners. In this regard the de-contextualised conception of risk can be understood as having impacted upon the construction of clients' 'a risk' identities. Finally, social workers feared they would cause harm to clients or others by not being effective helpers. They doubted their skill levels and that their interventions would effect change. In this sense, social workers doubted their capacities to achieve good outcomes for their clients. This was spoken mostly as an ethical concern of practitioners. However, it often corresponded with their fear of being negatively judged by others. Thus fear of clients and colleagues was pivotal in how risk was

experienced personally by practitioners and instrumental in how they recognised the identities of clients, colleagues and themselves. Accordingly, this finding is consistent with the social work risk literature that emphasises the centrality of fear as a 'category of risk' (Culpitt 1999) that is instrumental in the constitution of fear-based risk identities.

Fear had the potential to act as a morally conservative influence upon social workers' practice – it could have influenced them to retreat from the challenges presented in their practice situations and take actions that would have made them feel 'safe'. That is, practitioners could have privileged their 'at risk' identities within their interventions, amplified their client's and colleague's 'a risk' identities and/or de-emphasised their client's and colleagues 'at risk' identities. The social work risk literature is littered with the suggestion that this defensive approach to practice has become typical of social work interventions. Faced with the overwhelming fear generated by a preoccupation with safety and security as opposed to need, being overly regulated and viewed with distrust by managers and the public, it is claimed social work practice has become 'very defensive, overly proceduralised and narrowly concerned with assessing, managing and insuring against risk' (Parton & O'Byrne 2000, p. 1). According to this narrative Sebastian could have referred Trevor to another social worker. Josephine and Mark could have decided not to work with their 'challenging clients'. Kaitlin could have left her young client to cry in his seat or unattended in her office. And so on. But they didn't. Indeed, the majority of social workers' actions indicate that they took a stand for their clients – sometimes quite selflessly, it would seem, given the types and levels of fears they had. This result contradicts literature which suggests that the 'terrible fear that is driven by overwhelming risk' (Culpitt 1999, p. 132) has succeeded in estranging us from one another (Furedi 2003, p. xvi) so that self-protection from risk overrides an ethical concern for the 'other' (Culpitt 1999, p. 14). However, my study indicates that the conservative morality of risk is neither as totalising nor the foregone conclusion that this literature suggests. It can be resisted. This is discussed in the following section of the chapter, which focuses specifically upon how risk operated as a moral force in social workers' interventions.

## Constituting and Integrating the Morality of Risk Identities in Social Workers' Interventions

Risk operated as an intensely moral site in social workers' interventions. Contrary to claims that morality is extrinsic to risk (Giddens 2003a) the results of this study support the literature that highlights 'the myriad ways in which risk and morality are intertwined' (Ericson & Doyle 2003, p. 3). As Ericson and Doyle (2003, p. 2) argue:

Assessment of the chance of adverse consequences also depends on morality. Identification of a threat or danger, and of adverse consequences, is based on judgements about 'goodness' and 'badness' and distinctions between right and wrong.

The morality of risk was spoken of most clearly in my study through the moralisation of client and social worker risk identities, in practitioners' reflections about the moral dilemmas they faced within their interventions, and in their efforts to construct a morally justifiable response to the moral dilemmas posed by their risk identity conflicts. In this sense, then, risk operated as a construct imbued with moral significance. Risk was moral. Risk operated at a conceptual level to define the landscapes of being and action (White 1995) for clients and practitioners in terms of what was right, wrong, good, bad, innocent and culpable. Hence, given the attachment of risk to identity, risk identities were *moral identities*. They operated as judgements of the 'moral adequacy' (Taylor & White 2000) of clients, colleagues and practitioners. Given that social workers faced competing and conflicting moralised risk identities within their intervention contexts, their choices about which risk identities they would emphasise or de-emphasise in their interventions can be understood as *moral choices*. Similarly, their decisions to take a stand for or against their clients and/or themselves can be understood as *moral decisions*. Accordingly, practitioners' interventions can be understood as *moral responses* to risk. Thus not only was risk deemed to be 'everywhere' by practitioners in their practice, its distinctive moral presence can also be understood as ubiquitous in their interventions.

The critical social work risk literature accepts that 'discourses and practices of risk are always imbued with moral language and ethical clauses' (Ericson & Doyle 2003, p. 1). However, the morality of risk is rendered problematic within this literature (Culpitt 1999; Garland 2003; Kelly 2001; McDonald 2006; Warner 2006). Risk is

positioned in these arguments as a wholly morally conservative force in social work practice and in the welfare sector more generally to ill effect for clients and practitioners. However, the findings of my research suggest that this macro analysis of the morality of risk bears only a slight resemblance to the full force of the moral operations of risk that were enacted between clients and practitioners in this study within the context of their face-to-face encounters.

## **Risk identities as moral identities**

It is argued that a determination of the moral value of citizens within the context of neo-liberal risk society has become a matter for public audit (Culpitt 1999; McDonald 2006; Webb 2006). This process relies upon the objectification of individuals through their enumeration according to various risk factors (Green 1997; Houston & Griffiths 2000; Kelly 2000, 2001; Moffat 1999; Parton 1999). Within this context risk operates as a moral calculus for judging individuals according to how 'risky' they are which in turn supports the kinds of interventions that are conducted and types of services that are provided (Dean 1999; Green 2004; Kemshall 2002; Lupton 2004; Moffat 1999; Parton 1999; Rose 1996a, 1996b, 2000; Warner 2006). As such, people's identities have become entangled, perhaps some would argue overtaken, by the conservative ethos of neo-liberal rule, so that people's identities are constructed in terms of moral deficits (Culpitt 1999). Thus the project of social work has become the remoralisation (Culpitt 1999; Green 2004; Kelly 2001; Rose 1996a, 1996b, 2000) of people with 'flawed identities'.

Elements of this analysis are reflected in the results of my study. The ascription of risk identities to clients and social workers can be seen as a process of objectification. Here, the 'making up of people' (Hacking 1991) occurred through the discursive influence of risk. Thus people's identities were conflated with risk; risk acted as a lens through which practitioners recognised themselves and clients. However, the objectification of persons within this context did not occur through processes of enumeration in a formal assessment process, which is the primary focus of commentary in the social work risk literature (Webb 2006). Client and practitioner risk identities were conferred and negotiated in the discursive spaces of their relationship in their face-to-face encounters. Nonetheless, these identities were

‘counted’ in a sense within these encounters; practitioners narrated a moral accounting of risk identities in terms of their ‘moral adequacy’ (Taylor & White 2000) – people were good and/or bad according to their propensity to do harm and/or be harmed by others. Thus ‘at risk’ clients and ‘at risk’ social workers were primarily moralised as innocents by virtue of their ‘victimhood’. The exception to this was Jenny, who moralised her young clients’ dependency as problematic. In doing so, Jenny’s moral accounting of her client reflects how her client and family were responsibilised (Kelly 2001) for their troubles. ‘A risk’ client identities were mostly considered to be at fault. However, a number of social workers were able to balance the moral deficits of their clients by recasting them within the spectre of their ‘victimhood’. And finally, practitioners were able to redeem the virtue of their own ‘a risk’ identities by pointing to their actions having unintended negative consequences for clients.

These results are consistent with Taylor and White’s (2000) analysis of practices of professional speech, where moral judgements about clients are generated in professionals’ talk which then becomes a source of professional knowledge. In the case of my research, moral audits conferred positive and negative moral identities on clients and practitioners based upon very fundamental criteria – vulnerability and dangerousness. The critical social work risk literature argues that the provision and withdrawal of health and welfare services has become intricately bound to each of these risk-based characterisations. Increasingly, reduced safety net provisions mean that only the ‘most vulnerable’ whose ill fortune is ‘no fault of their own’ are entitled to welfare services (Culpitt 1999; Davis & Garret 2004; Kemshall 2002; Lymbery 2004). Concomitantly, those who are considered to be a danger to themselves and/or others face increased regulation and control of their behaviour (Rose 1996a; 1996b, 2000; Warner 2006). Thus the schism in service provision between protection and punishment is inextricably connected to how these risk states are moralised and conferred. Hence practitioners’ risk identity dilemmas in this study reflected the moral quandary of the long-standing tension between ‘care and control’ that has persistently troubled the profession. In the crudest of terms, then, practitioners viewed harmed clients as ‘good’ clients who were deserving of care. However, harming clients were ‘bad’ clients who needed to be controlled or ignored. The difficulty for practitioners in this study was that more often than not clients were ascribed both ‘at



risk' and 'a risk' identities. In addition, many practitioners also saw themselves in these terms. Thus practitioners faced a dilemma over which identities they would recognise in their interventions.

## **Risk identity dilemmas as moral dilemmas**

The finding of this study of the presence of co-existing, multiple risk identities within a single intervention offers a new insight into the operations of risk in social work. Discussions of risk in the social work literature have a tendency to present 'risky' individuals as belonging to the discrete categories of the 'at risk' (such as children and elderly people) and 'a risk' (such as people with specific mental illnesses and people who have committed sex offences). Furthermore, such discussion focuses almost exclusively upon clients; little attention is given to the 'at risk' social worker and even less to the 'a risk' social worker. However, beyond this understanding of the presence of co-existing, multiple risk identities, this study offers an alternative perspective upon the nature of the moral dilemmas that risk presents to social workers in the micro aspects of their practice. In the presence of co-existing, multiple client and practitioner risk identities, social workers in this study faced the quandary of which of these identities they would emphasise within their interventions and how they would reconcile the tensions between their own and clients' identities. That is, practitioners were confronted with having to primarily make one or both of two choices: first, which client risk identities they would give greater attention to – their clients' 'at risk' or 'a risk identities' – and, second, whose interests they would respond to – their client's or their own. Practitioners spoke of the moments in their practice where they faced these choices of how to engage and respond to their clients' and their own risk identities as moral dilemmas.

## **Moral categories of 'clienthood'**

The construction of client identities by social workers is a relatively new focus of study within social work research (Juhlia et al. 2003; Taylor & White 2000). Juhlia and colleagues (2003, p. 11 – 14) claim that although clients are central to social work, the machinations of how 'clienthood' is constructed through particular

conceptualisations and by discrete social work practices remains under-examined in social work theory and research. They note that:

clienthoods are always ultimately produced in local negotiation. This is why it is necessary to study in detail the practices in which this negotiation takes place and to present interpretations on how the partners together construct the realities and clienthoods of social work...It matters how client categories are constructed in social work interaction: categories have real consequences for people's lives (Juhlia et al. 2003, pp. 18 & 19).

Client risk identities can be understood as categories of clienthood in social work. In the context of this study it is also clear that the categories of clienthood were moral categories (Juhlia 2003; Taylor & White 2000) – being ‘good’ and ‘bad’ clients. However, it is important to note that for the majority of social workers in this study it was not immediately clear which risk identity category was the more pertinent or ‘truthful’ client identity – their ‘at risk’ or ‘a risk’ identities. In narrating their clients’ multiple risk identities, social workers’ practice narratives indicate that until the critical moment where their categorisation was complete, clients’ moral identities existed in a liminal space. I suggest that recognising the liminal quality of client risk identities offers a means of understanding why this struggle over which risk identities social workers emphasised in their practice was a source of unease for them.

According to Lupton (2003, p. 133), ‘The liminal is that which represents a transitional, middle stage between two distinctly different entities, identities or sites. It thus cannot be categorised into either: it is ‘in-between’’. Following this, Bauman (1995) argues that the ‘stranger’ exists within the liminal space of blurred boundaries. Lupton (2003, p. 134), discussing Bauman (1991) comments that these ‘strangers’ or ‘undecidables’ ‘paralyse knowledge and action’. It is not clear to us whether the stranger or ‘undecidable’ is friend or foe. A similar process may well have been in operation for the participants of this study as they spoke of their clients straddling both ‘at risk’ and ‘a risk’ identity categories. As Lupton (2003, p. 136) notes, ‘Those things that are not easily categorised, that fail to stay in their categories, or that simply are too different from the self, tend to arouse anxieties and fears’. Certainly fear, anxiety, doubt and heartache troubled social workers as they confronted the moral dilemmas of their client risk identity conflicts. Following from Honneth’s ‘ethics of recognition’ (Culpitt 1999; Webb 2006), those practitioners whose clients

were both 'at risk' and 'a risk' faced a moral struggle over which of these identities they would 'recognise' in their interventions. Their choice would be one that would commit them to a particular form of ethical relationship with their clients and, in turn, shape the interventions they conducted. Hence practitioners spoke of questioning whether they would take a moral stand for or against their clients. Thus client risk identity conflicts bespeak the potency of those moments in our intervention histories where we confer the status of a client's moral identity not only because of the power that is incumbent to naming the 'other' (White 1995), but also because of the ramifications of that naming in terms of its impact on the client/practitioner relationship and the kinds of services that are provided.

### **The polarisation of risk identities**

All but one practitioner (Linda) who had narrated a risk story within their practice account spoke of themselves as 'at risk' in some way. Of this group all but one (Joseph) had identified their clients/colleagues as having an 'at risk' identity, either singularly or in combination with an 'a risk' identity. These practitioners thus faced a tension between their own and their client's 'at risk' identities. There was a conflict over whether they would give greater emphasis to their client's need for 'safety' or their own. In this respect this tension reflects the claim made by a number of theorists that security has supplanted need as the core concern of governments, professionals and individuals in neo-liberal risk societies (Culpitt 1999; Furedi 2003; Kemshall 2002; Parton 1999, 2001; Parton, Thorpe & Wattam 1997; Rose 1996a, 1996b; Waterson 1999; Webb 2006). In their presentation of this dilemma practitioners spoke of their concern for their physical and emotional 'safety' as well as wanting to keep their professional reputations and esteem intact. In Bauman's (2000) terms, this moment reflected social workers confronting their moral responsibility as their 'brother's keeper'. According to Bauman (2000, p. 10), 'Being one's brother's keeper is a life-sentence of hard labour and moral anxiety', and 'The uncertainty which haunts social work is nothing more nor nothing less than the uncertainty endemic to moral responsibility'. Thus it is evident that client and practitioner 'at risk' identities were presented as polarised identities, intimating that a choice needed to be made about which identity would be responded to – that of the client or the social worker. Accordingly, this struggle is another indication that risk identity conflicts can be understood as 'struggles over recognition' (Culpitt 1999; Webb 2006). However, the

polarisation of risk identities also reflects the polarisation of risk and need – it supports them being seen as oppositional elements of social work practice, with the consequence that social workers seem necessarily faced with a choice about which to focus on and which to exclude in their interventions.

What is abundantly clear is that the moral dilemma between client and practitioner ‘at risk’ identities was fuelled by fear. This particular risk identity conflict reflects the intersection of practitioners’ sense of the meaning, emotion and morality of risk. Practitioners were frightened. The risks they had identified for the client and themselves were ‘real’ and they were presented with a choice about whose ‘risk’ would be attended to in their interventions. It is in the construction of this particular moral dilemma through the conflation of these operations of risk that the potential for practitioners to have acted in morally conservative ways could have been realised. Practitioner’s concerns for themselves could have been given primacy in their practice stances. They could have claimed that in these instances they had reasons not to act as their ‘brother’s keeper’ (Bauman 2000). However, my study indicates a result contrary to the dominant catastrophe narrative of the critical social work risk literature. In most cases practitioners spoke of having taken a stand for their clients. Some also took a stand for themselves in their interventions and thus demonstrated a shared concern for themselves and clients. Or, in other words, they attended to both need and risk within their interventions. Jenny and Joseph were the only two practitioners who were reconciled to having taken a stance that attended to their own well-being, subsequently reinforcing the problematic moral identities they had ascribed to their client/colleagues. Elaine, Graham and Maggie remained unreconciled with the stand they had taken in their interventions. How practitioners spoke of their own and their clients’ moral identities and agency, as they reflected upon the stances they had taken, is discussed in the following section.

## **Resolving the moral dilemmas of risk identities**

Webb (2006) argues that a ‘practice of value’ is necessary in social work to respond to the politics of neo-liberal risk society. He claims that:

In a society that narrowly pursues material self-interest and individual choice adherence to an ethical stance is more radical than many people

realise...the legitimacy of social work rests on exhortations that betray an ethical intent rather than a set of empirical or outcome-based possibilities (Webb 2006, pp. 7-8).

Webb (2006) and others (Bauman 1995, 1997, 2000; McBeath & Webb 2002; Parton & O'Byrne 2000;) optimistically position social work ethics as having the capacity 'to counter the hegemony of neo-liberalism' (Webb 2006, p. 233). While this thesis has not put these claims to the test, it has demonstrated that risk operated as a highly moralised construct in social workers' interventions and that engaging with its presence in their practice imbued practitioners' interventions with moral significance. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that ethical and moral concerns were core elements of the deliberative processes that social workers spoke about when accounting for how they resolved their risk identity dilemmas. Specifically social workers spoke about the importance of being able to reconcile their moral subjectivity as practitioners, the interconnection between risk taking and evaluations of the moral worth of clients, and the irresolvable nature of the moral dilemmas faced by several practitioners. Each of the dimensions that were articulated by practitioners as comprising their efforts to enact a moral response to the dilemmas posed by risk identities will now be discussed.

### **The moral agency of practitioners**

Webb (2006, p. 204) in discussing Taylor (1989), states that 'the self is constituted in and through the taking of moral stances'. That is, our moral identities are formed through how we position ourselves in relation to what is 'good' and how we 'negotiate and move in the ethical space we inevitably find ourselves in as human agents' (Webb 2006, p. 204). Accordingly, how practitioners reflected upon the moral problems posed by risk identity conflicts speaks of how they constructed themselves as moral agents in their interventions. However, given that practitioners had also attributed a moral value to their clients' risk identities, their reflective comments also bespeak the moral agency that practitioners finally resolved to bestow upon clients – that they were 'at risk' (good) or 'a risk' (bad).

The reflective narratives of the social workers in this study indicate that their commitment to do 'good' was a concern for them. What is important to note, then, is

that practitioners not only wanted to do what was 'right', it was important for them to reconcile their subjectivity as moral agents so that they could say they had been 'good' practitioners who had done 'good' social work. According to Webb (2006, p. 203), social workers have 'an ethical disposition to do the best for clients and insofar as they have the resources to do so, they try to use these to maximise ethical ends'. Thus Webb (2006, p. 203) claims social workers have a particular kind of 'ethical will' that is disposed to doing 'good'; a bold claim indeed. However, the choice for social workers in my study was not as clear as Webb's (2006) commentary intimates. The dilemma that social workers in my study faced was that 'at risk' and 'a risk' identities and client and practitioner 'at risk' identities were positioned as oppositional to each other. According to Banks and Williams (2005, p. 1011) this situation reflects a pure 'ethical dilemma', as practitioners confronted 'a situation where there [was] evidence for and evidence against what an agent ought to do...' and there was nothing in and of the situation itself which clarified what the practitioner 'should' do. In this instance it is possible to see how practitioners' moral dilemmas reflected the confounding enmeshment of risk and uncertainty in the risk society (Beck 2003, 2004; Giddens 2003a, 2003c; Parton 2001; Webb 2006). Thus any action taken on behalf of the practitioner was considered by them to incur a 'cost', given that they had in the majority of instances positioned themselves as 'at risk' in some way. Spoken in other terms, in order for practitioners to resolve the moral dilemmas of their interventions they were required to 'take risks'.

### **Taking risks: resolving the moral worth of clients**

Titterton (2006) argues that the concept of risk taking has not received proper attention in the health and welfare risk literature. In the context of welfare debates this can perhaps be understood as a result of the largely negative construction of risk as a problematic concept referring to threats and dangers that 'will result in adverse consequences for a specified party' (Ericson & Doyle 2003, p. 2). However, Titterton (2006, p. 25) claims that risk is equally concerned with the likelihood of something good happening. Thus he states that:

risk taking is a course of purposeful action based on informed decisions concerning the possibility of positive and negative outcomes of types and levels of risk appropriate in certain situations (Titterton 2006, p. 25).

Building on this argument Green (2004) argues that ethical practice in the community care sector requires agencies to support staff to take risks. Green (2004, p. 11) states that:

Just as surgical and procedural medicine is based on legitimate risk taking and risk avoidance, so is the skilled but less 'scientific' work of professionals in the community. Risk minimisation and risk taking must be seen as equally legitimate and sometimes competing objectives in decision making about practice.

However, how social workers resolve this tension between risk taking and risk avoidance or minimisation when faced with welfare dilemmas in the micro aspects of their practice is recognised as a significant gap in the social work risk literature (Titterton 2006). This study goes some way to exploring this unexplored territory. The findings of my research indicate that in considering whether or not they would take certain risks in their interventions (such as giving greater attention to the client's as opposed to their own 'at risk' identity) practitioners considered whether their clients were 'worthy' of their risk taking actions. That is, having moralised their clients' risk identities in terms of them being innocent and/or at fault, good and/or bad, social workers considered whether their clients were deserving of them taking a stand on their behalf.

The majority of practitioners in this study did take risks in their interventions, though determining the moral value of clients in terms of their worth would, at least on the surface, appear to be a morally ambiguous foundation for practice. Nonetheless this seems to have been the case to some degree for many practitioners, as they faced the moral conflicts generated from their feelings of fear for themselves and their determination to do what was right. However, the notion of the 'deserving client' was not the straightforward or vacuous conceptualisation of clienthood (Juhlia et al. 2003) that this analysis would initially imply.

For those social workers who took a stand for their clients in some way, and for those who were unreconciled regarding their client's identities, compassion and empathy acted as the emotive moral impetus (von Dietze & Orb 2000; Fox 2006) for them to do what would be good for their clients. In addition, ethical, moral and value standpoints were a major reference point for orienting the moral responsiveness of

their interventions. This is of little surprise, given that risk operated as an overwhelming moral construct in social workers' practice. In combination with their reassessments of their ideas about risk, the extent to which they felt supported by their organisations and their belief in the possibility of change for clients, the majority of practitioners were able to resolve their risk identity dilemmas by attending to their client's 'at risk' identities. Clients' identities at this point became fixed as practitioners committed themselves to an ethical recognition of their moral responsibilities to them. In these moments, then, social workers' actions and their relationships with clients can be understood as their enactment of an ethics of care (Banks 2006; Hugman 2003; Meagher & Parton 2004; Webb 2006), facilitated by the moral emotion of compassion (von Dietze & Orb 2000; Fox 2006) and their willingness to revisit their initial conceptualisations of risk. Thus, in combination, these dimensions of social work practice appear to have enabled social workers to recognise the 'other', that is their clients, as morally significant within their interventions, or in other words to acknowledge they were worthy of having risks taken for them.

### **The residue of risk identity dilemmas**

These decisions concerning risk identity dilemmas were difficult for practitioners. They struggled, sometimes long and arduously, through the unforgiving quagmire of their risk-based moral dilemmas. For some, the residue of these dilemmas lingered long after the 'closure' of their interventions. This was particularly evident in the reflections of Elaine, Graham and Maggie, who remained unreconciled with the morality of the stand they had taken within their interventions. Banks and Williams (2005, p. 1012) note that feelings of regret are common following the resolution of a moral dilemma, given that by definition moral dilemmas involve having to make an agonising decision between two equally unwelcome alternatives. However, Elaine's, Graham's and Maggie's unreconciled stand in their practice can be understood as indicative of a qualitative difference of their risk identity dilemmas. For them, 'the moral loss or cost' (Banks & Williams 2005, p. 1012) of their decisions was great and hence their risk identity dilemmas can be understood as resembling Hursthouse's (1999, cited in Banks & Williams 2005, p. 1012) conceptualisation of 'irresolvable' or 'tragic' dilemmas.



## Concluding Comments to the Chapter

This chapter has discussed how the results of this study indicate that risk is constituted and integrated into social workers' interventions through the creation and ascription of client and practitioner risk identities. These identities operated within social workers' interventions to constitute specific meanings of risk within their practice. Thus social workers acted as powerful narrators of the meanings of risk as they spoke constructions of their own and their clients' identities into existence. In addition, fear operated as a major constituent of client and practitioner identities, thereby serving as an important constituent in defining the context within which risk identity conflicts and dilemmas were experienced. It has also been demonstrated that the risk identities that were spoken into existence within social workers' practice narratives were moral identities. Thus risk operated as an intensely moral concept in social workers' interventions, signifying social workers' decisions and practices as matters of ethics and morality.

Importantly, given the aims of the study, the results indicate that social workers can resist invitations into morally conservative and defensive practice when facing fearsome risks. Ethical, moral and value standpoints, as well as the capacity to reflect upon core assumptions made about the nature and extent of risks, were spoken of as invaluable reference points to orient the 'ethical will' of social workers as they struggled to do 'the right thing' in their interventions. When faced with the uncertainty generated by risk identity dilemmas these standpoints operated as powerful grounding influences for supporting social workers in taking a stand for clients. While it has been noted that this was not the case for all practitioners, the result nonetheless supports a new story of hope for social work practice as we continue to face the challenges posed by the social, political and cultural conditions generated within the context of neo-liberal risk society. My study indicates that our commitments to justice and care, and responsiveness to need can still be realised even though we experience, in a very personal sense, the presence of risk. The implications of these results for social work education, practice and research are discussed in the following and final chapter of this thesis.

## Chapter 9

# Conclusion: Resisting Invitations into the Conservative Influence of Risk in Social Work

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## Introduction to the Chapter

As the title of this final chapter intimates, the main conclusion of my study is that there are opportunities within social workers' interventions to resist the 'culture of low expectation' (Furedi 2003) that has become synonymous with theorising social work practice in the context of neo-liberal risk society. Social workers' conflation of negative constructs of risk with their own and their clients' identities resulted in risk operating as a significant and specific form of moral dilemma for practitioners. Practitioners faced the uncertainty of which risk identities they would respond to within their interventions. Described in other terms, they faced the moral dilemma of whether they would respond to their clients' and/or their own needs within the context of each having been ascribed risk identities. In facing this dilemma, practitioners confronted the conservative impetus of risk that supports a focus on practitioner 'safety' as opposed to client needs (Gillingham 2006; Green 2004; McDonald 2006; Mullaly 2001; Parton 1996, 2001; Parton & O'Byrne 2000; Webb 2006). However, in this study, practitioners' feelings of fear did not necessarily operate as the predominant impetus for their interventions. Instead, moral, ethical and value imperatives, alongside re-contextualising the nature and extent of risk, enabled the majority of social workers to take a stand for their clients as opposed to 'playing it safe'.

In taking this moral stance I conclude that these social workers were able to enact a particular form of moral agency which incorporated a concern for the 'other' – their clients. This enabled them to resist the morally conservative and repressive impetus of risk that has been theorised within social, political and cultural theories of risk

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(discussed in Chapters 2 and 3). I consider the knowledge, educative and practice implications of my conclusion in this final chapter. I also reflect upon the limitations of the study which intimate the need for further research in specific areas of social work. These reflections mark the end of the thesis.

## **Implications of the Study and Recommendations for Social Work**

This study has demonstrated that spaces do exist within our practice contexts which enable us to resist invitations into the moral conservatism engendered by negative constructs of risk. Faced with the moral dilemmas posed by the tensions and conflicts attendant to the presence of co-existing, multiple risk identities, social workers in this study engaged in the difficult process of determining a moral response within their interventions. For most practitioners, a moral response was one in which they attended to their client's 'at risk' identities. Some social workers also managed to attend to their own 'at risk' identities, but not, it would seem, at the expense of their client's needs. While the empirical focus of the study has provided insight into how the moral conservatism of risk was resisted by these practitioners, the question that remains is how it is possible to minimise opportunities for these risk-based moral dilemmas to occur in the first instance. On the basis of the findings of this study into the operations of risk in social work it would seem that there is scope to provide some tentative answers to this question. However, in order to answer this question two further subsidiary questions need to be considered.

The first question concerns how it might be possible to narrate practice contexts in other terms than negative constructs of risk. As discussed in Chapter 8, when practitioners identified a risk plot, risk operated as a constituent of identities as well as the focus of practitioners' interventions. While it is not clear from the data whether an acceptance of the 'reality' of risk preceded the ascription of identities in a linear development of plot and characterisation, the important point is that if the reality of risk is left uncontested a focus on problem identities can be established as the focus for interventions. It follows, then, that an alternative storyline might support the creation of alternative client and practitioner identities and thus open the realm for

other forms of social work actions. This is not to suggest that risk wouldn't necessarily be referred to, but it wouldn't stand alone as the only option for defining the storyline of social workers' interventions.

The second related question needing consideration is how might the polarised thinking that featured in the construction of client and practitioner identities be interrupted or resisted from the outset of social workers' interventions. Risk identities were divisive. They positioned clients, colleagues and social workers in oppositional terms in which there was a struggle of recognition (Culpitt 1999; Webb 2006) over which risk identities would be emphasised within social workers' interventions. Framed in these terms the personalisation of risk became exacerbated. Risk was a matter between clients and practitioners, as opposed to it being a matter requiring thought and action in relation to broader systemic and structural issues. Furthermore, the polarisation of client and practitioner risk identities supported the polarisation of other issues within social workers' practice, particularly the competing imperatives between 'care versus control' and 'risk versus need'. Entertaining the possibility of doing 'care *and* control' and 'risk *and* need' was at least initially obfuscated by the dynamic of oppositional thinking. Accordingly, reflecting upon strategies to disrupt this binarised way of thinking might assist efforts to resist invitations into morally conservative and timid social work practice.

I suggest that the findings of this study offer a valuable starting point for responding to each of these questions. In most cases, social workers were able say what helped them to resolve the difficult moments of their practice dilemmas in which they determined whether to take a stand for and/or against clients and for and/or against themselves. Utilising these findings, I present responses to each of the questions raised here to clarify the implications of my research and the attendant recommendations for social work knowledge, education and practice.

## Revision and reflection of meanings of risk

As discussed in Chapters 5 and 8, risk was spoken of as an embodied construct in social workers' practice narratives. In speaking of risk in these terms, ideas about risk became 'real' for them. Risk was regarded by practitioners as being pervasive, negative and intimately connected to people, not events. In their consideration of what supported them taking a stand for clients in their interventions, practitioners stated that further reflection upon their understanding of what was 'real' about risk was helpful. That is, they were able to re-contextualise their understandings of risk, which primarily served to reaffirm their clients' 'at risk' identities and destabilised their own 'at risk' and 'a risk' identities. This has important implications for social work practice. It alerts us to the need to thoroughly examine how we make sense of risk within our practice. This reflective process requires us to question the assumptions, feelings and motivations that contribute to our understandings of the meanings and qualities we ascribe to our embodied conceptualisations of risk. In a sense it means that we question our initial assessments – formal and informal – over time not because they are necessarily wrong, but because by doing so the story we are narrating about our clients, ourselves and our practice becomes more substantial. Utilising the critical reflective process and questions implemented in this study would be a means of achieving this. As mentioned in Chapter 4, many social workers undertook considerable preparation for their interviews, especially for the second interview. Hence the critical reflective process used in this study can be undertaken independently by practitioners. However, the method and type of questions used in the study are well suited for implementation in professional supervision sessions.

Reflecting upon how we generate our understandings of risk in specific interventions would also require us to engage with risk as a contextualised concept during our initial and subsequent assessments; we need to identify the concrete circumstances in which a concern for risk is generated, sustained or disregarded. Croft's (2001) conceptualisation of risk events and risk consequences could be helpful here. Firstly practitioners would identify the specific 'risk events' that have occurred and then theorise their possible 'risk consequences'. Tracing the link between both would be important. We would need to ask ourselves, 'Are my theories about risk consequences for clients, myself and other invested parties directly related to the circumstances in which the risk event occurred? What are the points of connection

between them and where are the gaps? How can I make sense of this?'. This is essentially the process adopted by practitioners who re-contextualised their understandings about the reality and degree of risk for clients and themselves. This suggests that the process of assessment and critical reflection needs to be ongoing, with practitioners and agencies remaining open to revisable understandings of the operations of risk. However, focusing on contexts also means that the constitutive effect of negative constructs of risk upon client and practitioner identities could also be undermined. That is, the personalisation of risk could be limited. This would be a powerful means of interrupting the moral conservatism of negative constructs of risk upon social workers' interventions. Thus the first recommendation of this thesis is that ongoing, critical reflection of the meaning and qualities of risk that are embodied in risk identities be the focus of social work supervision.

## **Positive meanings of risk**

A second recommendation of this thesis is that practitioners remain sensitive to the possibility that alternative conceptualisations of risk could also be considered within their interventions. Risk could be considered as having positive as well as negative dimensions. As noted in Chapter 5, risk was spoken of by practitioners within this study as meaning a threat, harm, abuse or violence towards self or others, as danger and more generally as negative consequences. More positive meanings of risk were absent from social workers' reflective statements. However, several authors suggest that positive understandings of risk would enrich the landscape of social work interventions (Green 2004; Parton 2001; Parton & O'Byrne 2000; Titterton 2006). Following their suggestions, risk could be understood as a source of motivation towards change; as an opportunity for improved life circumstances; and as an opportunity to showcase strength of character, resourcefulness and ability.

These alternative conceptualisations of risk are reflective of the ideas that underpin 'Strengths' (Saleebey 2006a, 2006b) and 'Solutions' (DeJong & Berg 2002; Milner & O'Byrne 2002; O'Connell & Palmer 2004) approaches to working with clients in crisis and involuntary settings. Shared understandings and commitments to change are the focus of interventions within these models of practice, as opposed to a focus on problems, negative conceptualisations of crisis and the deficits of clients and their

environments. As discussed in Chapter 7, belief in the possibility of change inspired seven practitioners to take a stand for their clients in their interventions. That is, these practitioners spoke of their hopes for their clients. In the presence of hope practitioners were prepared to 'take risks' for their clients. In its absence, practitioners remained unconvinced of the necessity for such action. Thus there is value in considering the intersection between risk, change and hope.

## **Risk taking in social work**

In Chapters 7 and 8 I made the point that social workers aspired to do the 'right' thing when faced with risk identity dilemmas, particularly in view of the tensions and conflicts between their own and their clients' risk identities. However, aspiration alone was not the mainstay of what characterised the actions of those social workers who took a stand for clients in their interventions. They took risks. These risks often involved them acting in ways in which their vulnerabilities were laid bare.

Acceptance of the necessity to take risks in order to be an effective advocate for clients was common to these practitioners. In addition, supportive organisational contexts were noted as vital to mediating practitioners' concerns. This finding has several implications. First, it suggests the need to reinforce risk taking as an integral dimension of social work practice throughout undergraduate social work education. Undergraduate social workers not only need to understand that the purpose of the profession is to effect social and personal change but that their capacity to resolutely act with purpose as agents of change involves taking risks. In this sense they enact their responsibility as their 'brothers' keeper' (Bauman 2000). In the absence of such practice it is not difficult to surmise that changes in peoples' lived experiences of inequality and inequity will be slow to actualise. Thus a recommendation of this thesis is for undergraduate social work education to include curricula that explores the connections between risk taking and direct service delivery as a strategy of change.

Second, in a related sense there is a need to develop more generally our understanding of how change happens in social work practice. The results of this study indicate that our theories of change in social work need to incorporate an understanding of the moral operations of risk. While various critical theories of social work emphasise the importance of taking a stand on certain aspects of marginalisation

and discrimination, these theoretical arguments rarely consider risk taking as a form of direct practice behaviour. This could be useful in making clearer the connections between theories of change and practices of change in social work. Thus a recommendation of this thesis is for further research to be undertaken that explores how social workers facilitate change through their capacity to take risks in their practice. In addition further research needs to be undertaken to develop greater understanding of the internal and external conditions that support practitioners to take risks.

Third, the comments of social workers in this study indicate the importance of organisational support for social workers to take risks in their interventions. Reflecting the observations of various writers (Green 2004; Smith, McMahon & Nursten 2003; Smith, Nursten & McMahon 2004; Taylor 1995), practitioners in this study spoke of their concern for feeling ‘unsafe’ at work. Invitations to adopt defensive and morally conservative practices beckoned when a sense of ‘safety’ was absent. Organisations thus need to consider their responsibility to interrupt the conservative ethos of negative constructs of risk through a variety of measures aimed at supporting social workers in their direct service roles. Social workers’ sense of their own vulnerability in their practice dissipated when they knew their work was valued, when they had been positively acknowledged by managers and colleagues, and where fellow practitioners were prepared to offer them emotional and practical support. In the absence of this support, practitioners’ sense of themselves as ‘at risk’ remained a key concern for them, thereby exacerbating their risk identity dilemmas. Thus a recommendation of this thesis is that social work managers exert their influence in creating organisational systems, management practices and team climates that enable staff to take risks in the service of clients.

## **Creating identities founded upon care, hope and change**

The results of this study suggest that ideas about risk were constituted and integrated into social workers’ interventions through the ascription of ‘at risk’ and ‘a risk’ client and practitioner risk identities. As Chapters 5 and 8 discuss, social workers in most instances actively participated in ascribing these risk identities to themselves and their clients. Risk identities were the predominant subject positions available within the



context of risk 'plots'. However, many social workers also spoke of their clients' strengths, resourcefulness and capacities. These characterisations of clients resonated in practitioners' compassionate and empathetic responses to their clients' situations. As discussed in Chapters 7 and 8, 'compassion and empathy' was the primary moral reference point spoken of in social workers' reflections on their actions. Within these statements it is possible to distil identities that were separate from those problematised risk identities that had been noted. These alternate client and practitioner identities coalesced around statements of care, hope and change. Clients were recognised in these statements as people of strength and resilience. Practitioners can be recognised in these statements as optimistic and committed to practices that were ethical and moral.

This observation has important implications for social work education and practice. First, it indicates the value of incorporating 'Strengths' (Saleebey 2006a, 2006b) and 'Solutions' (DeJong & Berg 2002; Milner & O'Byrne 2002; O'Connell & Palmer 2004) models of practice in teaching. These two models offer clear strategies for developing hopeful client and practitioner identities, and avoid the 'problem' identities that were typical of the risk identities identified in this study. Second, opportunities for recognising and 'growing' these strengths-based identities need to be cultivated by practitioners and organisations. These identities offer us a direct connection to embodied aspects of hope, and, as this study has demonstrated, ascribed identities are powerful constituents of social workers' interventions having profound ramifications for practitioners and clients. A focus on hope in social work practice would seem a necessary antidote to the despair and despondency that is said to plague our profession (Charles & Butler 2004; Lymbery & Butler 2004; Lymbery 2004; Mullaly 2001). Recognition of hope and the possibility of change, alongside a commitment to care therefore need to become directives, as opposed to incidentals, of practice. Supervision is a site in which this orienting framework could be mutually explored and supported by managers and practitioners. Critical reflections of interventions could be used to support this process. Thus a recommendation of this thesis is that critical reflection be integrated into social work supervision as a means of connecting to practitioners' stories of hope in their practice.

## Ethics, morals and values as frameworks of social work practice

On the basis of the findings of this study it seems necessary to (re)assert and (re)envision 'social work *as* care' and social workers as '*doing* caring' as a means of speaking back to the moral conservatism of the neo-liberal rhetoric of risk. This suggestion has strong support in the literature (Banks 2006; Green 2004; Hugman 2003; Meagher & Parton 2004; Parton & O'Byrne 2000; Taylor & White 2000; Webb 2006). Webb (2006) notes that ethical practice is radical practice within the politically and morally conservative confines of neo-liberal risk society. Care, grounded in our compassionate recognition of others, thus could become an organising framework for practice within which our moral identities as social workers would be clearly defined.

A surprising result in this study was how little practitioners referred to social work theory as a reference point for their stances within their interventions. Ethics, morals and values were primary to social workers' thoughts about their practice. Yet theory commands significant attention in the social work literature and as a pedagogical focus of social work education. 'Connecting theory to practice' is somewhat of a mantra of undergraduate social work education. Yet the results of this study indicate that ethics, morals and values were a more pressing concern than theory for practitioners as they engaged with risk identity dilemmas. Indeed, practitioners stated that ethics, morals and values were helpful in directing them towards a resolution of these dilemmas. If we are to accept the warning of the critical social work risk literature that social work is in danger of losing its emancipatory agenda in the face of overwhelming risk, then the results of this study suggest that we need to make ethics, morals and values central to our understanding of practice.

If the purpose of social work is to 'take a stand' rather than 'play it safe' then an ethics of care needs to be incorporated as a central organising concept for social work practice. This implies the need to refocus social work education towards a concern with ethics in practice, not as a subsidiary element of undergraduate education but as a core subject. It also seems important that we develop models for critically examining the operations of ethics, morals and values within social workers' risk stories. This could be easily integrated into supervision practices. Finally,

foregrounding ethics as the centre of social work practice has dramatic implications for how accountability could be configured in organisational contexts. As discussed in Chapter 3, it has been argued that the ‘culture of blame’ endemic to risk society has meant that social workers have become subject to increasing demands for perfection in risk assessment and risk management interventions (Craddock 2004; Green 2004; Kemshall 2000, 2002). In the conditions of uncertainty that are said to be endemic to the ‘risk society’ (Beck 2003, 2004; Giddens 2003a, 2003b, 2003c), identifying evidence of ‘good’ practice in the moral sense, as opposed to ‘right’ practice in the calculative sense, seems not only a more noble aim, but a more realistic one.

## **Empowered practice**

In Chapter 3 I noted that the critical social work risk literature is characterised by a ‘catastrophe’ narrative in which social workers are presented as despondent and despairing. In Chapter 8 I discussed that while risk identity dilemmas were a source of despair for practitioners, and a lingering one for a minority, despondency was not their response. Social workers were committed to constructing a moral response to the moral dilemmas of their practice even as they faced the paucity of external resources to support them in these endeavours. This is an important finding. It confronts the characterisation of social workers’ passivity in the face of the political and moral conservatism of neo-liberal risk society. Social workers spoke of being able to enact their moral agency within the context of their face-to-face encounters with clients and colleagues. The implication of this is profound. It means that while neo-liberal risk society might be a defining context for contemporary social work, its effects are not necessarily total – there are spaces in which social workers can enact their influence upon their practice. This is a valuable source of empowerment for social workers who confront the widening gulf within the context of neo-liberal risk society between the ideals of their ‘mission’ in social work and the ‘realities’ of their practice (Lymbery & Butler 2004). As educators and managers we can use this knowledge to inspire our students and employees towards inspired, creative and contextually sensitive practice to facilitate opportunities for demonstrations of care and responsiveness to need. It is a source of hope and a source of power in social work practice.

I suggest that the findings of this study offer a valuable starting point for responding to each of these questions. In most cases, social workers were able say what helped them to resolve the difficult moments of their practice dilemmas in which they determined whether to take a stand for and/or against clients and for and/or against themselves. Utilising these findings, I present responses to each of the questions raised here to clarify the implications of my research and the attendant recommendations for social work knowledge, education and practice.

## **Limitations of the Study and Implications for Further Research**

The strength of this thesis is its empirical exploration of the operations of risk in social work. While risk has recently become a topic of theoretical interest in social work, few attempts have been made to develop empirical links between these arguments and direct, front-line practice. As noted in Chapters 1 and 3, a key focus of the emergent critical social work risk literature is a concern for the propensity towards morally conservative social work practice as our profession becomes increasingly subject to the social, political and cultural conditions of neo-liberal risk society. Against this theoretical backdrop I questioned if there are spaces within our practice contexts where social workers can resist invitations into the moral conservatism engendered by negative constructs of risk. I sought to answer this question by asking how risk is constituted and integrated into social workers' interventions.

The means by which I investigated this question was to speak with social workers about an intervention which they had implemented that was significant to them. Having a single focus enabled me to gather detailed, nuanced data of the operations of risk within the context of the meaning, emotion and morality of risk identities within social workers' practice. However, this purposefully narrow focus to the study has also been its limitation. This study shares the limitation common to qualitative research with regard to generalisability (Alston & Bowles 2003). The study sample was small and drawn from one state in Australia. Participants in the study worked in diverse work places, with differing organisational mandates, and in rural and urban

areas. So while the research has proven valuable in generating an overview of the theory and practice of risk, as well as substance to support the importance of social work ethics, morals and values in speaking back to the conservative ethos of neo-liberal risk rhetoric, further empirical, in-depth research needs to be undertaken to consider the operations of risk in specific social work contexts.

## **Local, national and international contexts of social work practice**

The possibilities of such a research agenda are exciting. With few empirical studies having been conducted in the area there is much to capture the research imaginations of social workers. Consideration of the specificity of the operations of risk in social work could be conducted in statutory and non-statutory practice settings, according to specific fields of practice and/or with regard to a particular client group. Comparisons to identify similarities and differences between these defining contexts of practice could also be undertaken. Developing this suggestion, differences in regional practices could be subjected to research. This has the potential to yield a complex understanding of the constitutive effect of differing structures of governance and how this might be linked to day-to-day encounters between social workers and clients. On a grander scale, a close examination of the specific contexts and practices of social workers according to the countries they work in would be important. Given that the conservative politics of neo-liberal risk society has become a core concern in welfare literature, a study that identifies how social workers resist its influence in embodied social work interventions within an international context would undoubtedly operate as a powerful and instructive story for developing future social work practice.

## **Utilising mixed methods approaches**

Developing the idea of increasing depth of understanding of the operations of risk through a specific focus, consideration could also be given to research that incorporates a mixed methods approach. This type of study could look at the intersecting domains of social and organisational policy, legislation and practice. This type of research lends itself to some form of discourse analysis. However, it would be

important in the construction of such a project to remain committed to achieving depth of understanding by grounding data collection in embodied aspects of social work practice.

## **Focusing on the negotiated aspects of identity between clients and practitioners**

As a new research agenda develops in social work regarding how we come to construct various ‘clienthoods’ in our interventions (Juhlia et al. 2003; Taylor & White 2000; White 2003), the negotiated space where risk identities are ascribed, rejected and utilised becomes a focus for future research. This study has focused upon how practitioners constituted and integrated ideas about risk in their interventions. Clients’ and other stakeholders’ perspectives are missing from this investigation. Tracking how each ‘voice’ speaks of risk, and how risk identities are negotiated between clients, practitioners and other stakeholders, would enable a more nuanced understanding of how ideas about risk shape client futures.

## **Resisting an ethos of moral conservatism in social work**

Building upon the results of this study, further research in social work needs to be conducted into what helps us resist invitations into the moral conservatism of negative constructs of risk. Current literature has generated important understandings about the problems of risk in social work – few have considered solutions. This is a research agenda that requires practitioner and academic researchers to harness their commitment to developing a hopeful narrative of social work practice. It means standing against invitations into cynicism and simplistic notions of pragmatism. The ideals of social work practice may not be wholly possible within the contemporary context of neo-liberal risk society where fear is utilised to dampen ambitions towards ‘radical practice’. Within this context, social change can be viewed as an aspiration rather than a possible reality of practice. However, the ideals themselves are no less important or meaningful. And as this study has demonstrated, they are not in hiding: they are evident in day-to-day, face-to-face social work interventions.

## Concluding Comments to the Chapter

This thesis has considered a growing concern expressed in contemporary literature that social work is in peril of losing sight of its capacity to resist the morally conservative influence of the rhetoric of risk contained within neo-liberal discourse. I have argued that the moral agency of practitioners is largely obscured within this narrative. When our presence is noted we are essentially characterised as hapless ‘victims’ of the systemic violence of regulatory bureaucratic and government systems whose function is aimed at eliminating risk and maximising security. This literature has been criticised for positioning social workers as overly passive agents amidst the structural impediments of their practice contexts. This thesis speaks back to this narrative. This thesis has concluded that there are spaces within practice contexts where social workers can resist invitations into the moral conservatism of negative constructs of risk.

Risk was fearsome for social workers. Social workers felt this personally, as it was inscribed into their own and clients’ identities. It was a source of consternation for them as they faced a decision about which risk identities they would recognise within their interventions – their clients’ and/or their own? While the enmeshment of risk with identity created a landscape of consciousness (White 1995) within which practitioners initially assumed the ‘reality’ of their own and their clients’ risk, steered the focus of their work toward matters of ‘safety’, and inscribed the dualism of their own and their clients’ welfare, this did not preclude their expressing and enacting compassion and care. Thus an emphasis upon fearful identities and the proclivity towards defensive and morally timid practice were on the whole resisted by practitioners in this study through their contemplation of the ethical, moral and value imperatives of their practice and the re-contextualisation of their ideas about their own and their clients’ risk.

While ethical problems and dilemmas have been discussed generally in the social work literature, the specificity of the context of risk for making ethical decisions remains under-explored. Thus an important contribution of this study has been to present evidence of the centrality of the social work practitioner as an active ethical and moral agent in their practice deliberations in the construction of, and response to,

risk identity dilemmas. Furthermore, this study has demonstrated that the moral conservatism of risk is not an inevitable feature of social work practice. The face-to-face encounter between client and practitioner has been shown in this study to be a space where social workers can act with discursive persuasion in the formation of identities and the enactment of micro practices. Thus this study has demonstrated that the relationship between the 'self and other' – practitioner and client – can be recognised as a relationship of compassion and care, even in the presence of fearsome risks.



# Appendix 1: Letters of Invitation

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School of Sociology and Social Work

University of Tasmania

Locked Bag 1340

Launceston, TAS 7250.

23<sup>rd</sup> February 2004

Dear Reader,

My name is Sonya Stanford and I am a PhD student in Social Work. I am writing to you to invite you to participate in a study I am conducting for my degree. The title of the research is "Risk and Social Work Practice". I am very interested in the idea of risk in social work and in particular how it influences practitioners' interventions. The project provides an opportunity to explore the tensions, contradictions and accommodations social workers make between formal social work knowledge and the influence of risk when deciding upon and implementing social work interventions.

I have enclosed an Information Sheet that provides details about the study and what your participation would involve. I have also detailed how I intend to promote your anonymity and confidentiality should you choose to participate. If you are interested in the study I would appreciate you contacting me at your earliest possible convenience. I intend to run an Information Session in the next couple of weeks about the study that you would be welcome to come along to. However, your attendance at this session does not commit you to participating in the study. You can either let me know on the day or sometime after this session if you would like to be a participant. Alternatively I could meet with you privately to explain the study and answer any questions you may have. If you are interested in either of these options could you please let me know before the 13<sup>th</sup> of March 2004. I will then be able to let you know when and where the Information Sessions will be or arrange a date for a private meeting.

Please note that while your participation would be gratefully appreciated you are absolutely under no obligation to do so. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you

may withdraw from the study at any time. There will not be any consequences for you if you decide not to participate.

This research has been approved by the Northern Tasmanian Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Tasmania. Thank you for taking the time to read and consider this material.

Yours sincerely

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Sonya Stanford (BSW [Hons] MSW)

PhD Student and Investigator

## Appendix 2: Information Sheet

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This Information Sheet has been produced to outline for you what the research project “Risk and Social Work Practice” is about and what your participation would involve. The Information Sheet is for you to keep.

### ***1. What is the focus of the research?***

This study is being undertaken by myself, Sonya Stanford, to fulfil the requirement for a Doctoral degree in Social Work. The research is exploring how ideas about risk are incorporated into social workers’ practice. Risk is being used in a broad sense. I am interested to know what risk means for you within the context of an intervention and how these ideas play a role in the kinds of things you do.

### ***2. What benefit will the research have?***

This project provides an opportunity to explore the tensions, contradictions and accommodations social workers make between formal social work knowledge and the influence of risk when deciding upon and implementing social work interventions. This will provide an insight into what informs social work practice.

At a broad level, the value of this research project is that it could contribute to deepening an understanding of how the theory/practice nexus in social work may be being facilitated and/or interrupted. Specifically, the benefit of the project is that it may clarify whether an alternative social work education curriculum is required to address how practitioners actively engage with decisions about their practice. In a similar vein, models of social work supervision might benefit from insights into influences upon social workers decisions about their interventions.

### ***3. Who can participate in the research?***

3 groups of people are being sought as participants for the research:

### **Social workers with less than 2 years practice experience**

You would be a member of this group if you are eligible for membership with the AASW and have worked for less than 2 years in the welfare industry since obtaining your qualification. You may have been employed on a permanent or casual basis, full-time or part-time. Your position may have been a designated social work position or classified as something else, e.g. counsellor, mediator, project officer, educator, manager etc. Whatever your employment circumstances your participation would be greatly valued.

### **Social workers with between 2 and 4 years practice experience**

You would be a member of this group if you are eligible for membership with the AASW and have worked between 2 and 4 years in the welfare industry since obtaining your qualification. You may have been employed on a permanent or casual basis, full-time or part-time. Your position may have been a designated social work position or classified as something else, e.g. counsellor, mediator, project officer, educator, manager etc. Whatever your employment circumstances your participation would be greatly valued.

### **Social workers with greater than 5 years practice experience**

You would be a member of this group if you are eligible for membership with the AASW and have worked in the welfare industry for 5 or more years since obtaining your qualification. You may have been employed on a permanent or casual basis, full-time or part-time. Your position may have been a designated social work position or classified as something else, e.g. counsellor, mediator, project officer, educator, manager etc. Whatever your employment circumstances your participation would be greatly valued.

## ***4. What does being a participant in the research involve?***

Agreeing to be a part of this study would mean agreeing to participate in a series of 1-1 interviews based upon an example of your practice. It will work similarly to a supervision session. We will meet and I will conduct a reflective interview with you about what you did and why. I will have some prepared questions to ask and I will also ask you some spontaneous ones. Your participation would involve you engaging in an unravelling of the thoughts, feelings and situations that you found yourself in when implementing your example of an intervention. It is important that you realize my role in the interview is not to be critical or judgemental of your actions. It is to work with you to come to an understanding of the types of things that were influential in your decision making process.

After the first interview I will think about what you spoke about and then develop some more questions to deepen my understanding of the various elements that featured in your initial account of your practice. I will send these questions to you by mail and then re-interview you. We will repeat the process if this seems necessary. So in total you would be interviewed a minimum of 2 and a maximum of 3 times.

You could expect each interview to last for about 1 to 1 1/2 hours. The venue for the interviews would be your choice, be it at work, on one of the University campuses or in your home. I am happy to travel to you wherever you may live in the State. The time and date of the interview will be negotiated with you when you contact me to say you are interested in being a part of the research.

### ***5. Am I expected to do anything else as a participant in this study?***

While there is no obligation for participants to be involved in other aspects of the research, ideally I would like to check out some of the ideas that emerge in my analysis after all the interviews are completed. You simply need to let me know if you would want to do this.

This would involve the following:

- I would send you a written copy of my analysis of what you had said;
- You would read this;
- You would make any corrections to the accuracy of the information, provide suggestions or additional information in writing, over the telephone or in person; then
- You would send your contribution back in a pre-paid envelope.

Apart from this, your contact with me is at your discretion. I am very willing to discuss any aspect of your participation in the research at any time pre and/or post interview. My contact details are provided on the back page of this Information Sheet.

### ***6. How will the interviews be recorded?***

With your permission, the interviews will be tape-recorded. I will be transcribing the taped sessions. I will also make notes and diagrams as we speak to assist in my understanding of what you are saying. These notes will omit any identifying information.

## ***7. How will confidentiality and anonymity be promoted?***

I am very aware of the importance of Confidentiality and Anonymity for participants in the study.

In this study confidentiality and anonymity need to be extended to meet your own as well as those that feature in the interventions you would be discussing with me.

The following procedures have been put in place to respect your right to confidentiality and to enhance anonymity:

- Certain details about your particular circumstances (i.e. years of experience, type of work and your gender) will need to be included in the study. However, I intend to describe this type of information according to grouped identities. For example, a participant might be described as having greater than 5 years practice experience with statutory responsibilities and male. Other demographic details such as where you work, your specific job title, age, where you live etc. will not be actively sought. However, they are likely to emerge through the course of talking about your ideas and experiences. This type of detail will be omitted in the transcriptions, data analysis and the reporting of findings. This will mean that you should not be identifiable in any written or spoken documentation that results from the research.
- Tapes will be kept in a lockable filing cabinet in my office on the Launceston campus of the University of Tasmania. As these tapes constitute the 'raw data' of the study they have to be kept for 5 years. They will be kept in lockable filing cabinets at the Launceston campus of the University of Tasmania and at my home in Launceston for the required 5 years.
- The transcriptions, data analysis and the results will be kept on the hard drive of my computer in my office on the Launceston Campus of the University of Tasmania during the course of the study. I am the only person who uses this computer and I also have a password on it. My office is locked when unattended.
- Back up copies of transcriptions, data analysis and the results will be kept on floppy discs at my home in Launceston. They will be stored in a lockable filing cabinet.
- Disc copies of data have to be kept for 5 years. These will be kept in lockable filing cabinets at the Launceston campus of the University of Tasmania and at my home in Launceston.

- The results of the study will be collapsed into themes rather than presented as case studies of individuals. This will reduce the likelihood of your information being identifiable.
- Pseudonyms will be given when the reporting of findings requires a source, e.g. 'Practitioner 1 said that...' or 'Practitioner 2 from group 3 noted...' and/or you may want to choose an alias for yourself.
- I will not disclose information given to me other than for the agreed purpose of the reporting of results in my thesis, journal articles and conference proceedings.
- Confidentiality is a primary value and ethical obligation amongst social workers. By agreeing to participate in the research you will be agreeing to respect the privacy of the details associated with other individuals who feature in your practice example. This means that you make an undertaking not to reveal the identity of people who feature in your practice example or use information that is in any way identifying. This would include information about clients, agencies, other social workers etc.
- Accordingly the standard of confidentiality outlined in the AASW Code of Ethics applies to your conduct in these interviews. A copy of the Code of Ethics is provided for your benefit.
- If identifying information is accidentally presented, I will ensure that it is omitted from the transcripts, analysis and results.
- The importance of confidentiality and its practice in this study is reinforced by clauses 4, 7, and 9 of the Consent Form.

You can be assured that every precaution will be taken to guard against your responses from the interviews being identifiable to others.

### ***8. What happens if I have strong feelings when I participate?***

It is possible that in the course of discussing your experiences you might feel embarrassed or feel uncertain about the significance of public and personal influences upon your work. You could also feel tired from the interviews. You might find it useful to know that I have had 13 years post-graduate experience as a social worker. I have worked in crisis and trauma counselling, conducted supervision sessions with social workers and have also conducted research interviews before. This means that I am

skilled at responding to strong emotional feelings on a 1-1 basis. We can pace the interviews to accommodate your needs around maintaining your energy levels.

It is also important for you to note that I am not acting as an evaluator of your practice. I will not be making judgements about the worth or appropriateness of your decisions and actions. What I am really interested in are the factors that influenced you in the situation and how you have made sense of your experiences.

It is also important that you understand that participation in this study is voluntary and you will not be reproached or disadvantaged in any way if you decide not to participate.

***9. What happens if I begin to feel tired when being interviewed?***

I understand that being involved in reflective exercises can be quite tiring. To minimize the possibility of this you can name the time of day that would suit you best to be interviewed. I will be monitoring the pace of the interview and checking out how you are feeling as we progress. However, you are able interrupt or end the interview if you are feeling tired. You can also say how long you would like the intervals between your interviews to be.

It is also important that you understand that participation in this study is purely voluntary and you will not be reproached or disadvantaged in any way if you decide not to participate.

***10. What happens if I start and then want to stop being involved in the research?***

You can withdraw from the study at any time and may request that any material you have supplied be excluded from the study. You will not be reproached or disadvantaged in any way if you do this.

***11. Do I get to see the results of the study?***

I intend to send interested participants a copy of the result section of the thesis. If you would like to receive the results, simply circle 'Yes' or 'No' on the Consent Form when we meet for our first interview. You are also most welcome to a copy of the complete thesis after it has been examined.



**12. Who do I contact if I have any concerns or complaints about the study?**

The study has been approved by the Northern Tasmanian Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Tasmania. However, If you have any concerns of an ethical nature or complaints about the manner in which the study is conducted, you may contact:

Prof. Roger Fay

Ph: 63 243576

Chair Northern Tasmania Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee

or

Amanda McAully

Ph: 62262763

Executive Officer Northern Tasmania Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee

**13. What do I do if I want to participate?**

All you need to do is contact:

Sonya Stanford

PhD Student and Investigator

Work: 63243657

Mobile: 0417 265755

Email: [Sonya.Stanford@utas.edu.au](mailto:Sonya.Stanford@utas.edu.au)

I will be more than happy to answer any questions you may have about the study and once it is clear you would like to be a part of it, we can arrange a time and a place that is suitable to you for us to do the first interview. When we meet you and I will sign a Consent Form. The Consent Form clarifies that you are making an informed decision to participate in the study. We will both have a copy of this Form once signed.

Alternatively you can contact:

Prof. Robert Bland

Chief Investigator

Head of School of Sociology and Social Work

Work: 63243946

Email: [Robert.Bland@utas.edu.au](mailto:Robert.Bland@utas.edu.au)

Thank you for considering participating in this study and for taking the time to read this Information Sheet. Please contact me if you have any questions or are interested in participating. Remember that you can keep this Information Sheet.

Sincerely

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Prof. Robert Bland

Chief Investigator

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Sonya Stanford

PhD Student and Investigator

## Appendix 3: Consent Form

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### Consent Form

#### “Risk in Social Work”

1. I have read and understood the ‘Information Sheet’ for this study.
2. The nature and possible effects of the study have been explained to me.
3. I understand the study involves being asked a series of reflective questions in the course of 2 or 3 interviews about what informed decisions I made in an intervention I implemented.
4. I understand tapes may be transcribed by somebody other than the researcher
5. I understand that the following risks are involved:
  - I could potentially be identified in the research;
  - I may feel embarrassed talking about my work;
  - I may feel strong emotions when talking about influences upon my work;
  - I may feel tired in the course of participating in the interviews.
- I understand that a number of precautions have been taken to avoid these risks.
6. I understand that all research data will be securely stored on the University of Tasmania premises for a period of 5 years. The data will be destroyed at the end of 5 years.
7. Any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.
8. I agree that research data gathered for the study may be published provided that I cannot be identified as a subject. I understand that measures have been taken to ensure this.
9. I agree to participate in this investigation and understand that I may withdraw at any time without effect to:
  - My employment
  - My professional reputation
10. I understand I am obligated to respect the privacy of the identities and information of people and agencies that feature in my practice example.
11. I am aware that my interview may be transcribed by somebody other than the researcher.

Name of participant\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of participant\_\_\_\_\_Date\_\_\_\_\_

12. I have explained this project and the implications of participation in it to this volunteer and I believe that the consent is informed and that he/she understands the implications of participation.

Name of investigator\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of investigator\_\_\_\_\_Date\_\_\_\_\_

I would like to receive a copy of the results of the study                      Yes                      No

*cc. Investigator*

*Participant*

## Appendix 4: Interview Schedule

### First Interview

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#### Preamble

I would really like to thank you for agreeing to meet today and to participate in this study. I am excited about us working together and am so looking forward to hearing about your work.

I wondered if I could take a little time before we start to chat about a couple of things.

You might find it useful to keep in mind that all practice stories are of equal value to me as I see each story as an opportunity for us to explore the meanings within them. I am not focusing on the specifics of practice. I am keen to explore meanings. So if you were to find yourself wondering whether your story was ‘good enough’, remember the exploration is about unravelling how you have made, or come to make, sense of what happened in your story. There will be opportunities to make sense of what happened all the way through your story and this is what we will look at together.

Similarly, if you are concerned that your practice may be judged in some way on the basis of your story, remember that the specifics of whatever action you took are not the focus of the research. This means that the ‘rightness’, or ‘appropriateness’ or any other kinds of evaluations of your work or yourself do not have any relevance to the research and so I will not be looking to make such judgements myself or to invite you to make them for yourself. Instead how you understood what took place is what I will be wanting us to talk about.

Does this make sense?

So hopefully this will create a space for us to talk where you can feel as free as possible to tell your stories and to 'speak the unspoken' if you like.

If at anytime you are wondering about any of these things let me know so we can talk about it. OK?

Having said this, there is one limit I should mention which is pretty standard in social work contexts, which has to do with being at risk of harm to yourself or others. There is a limit to confidentiality within the research, which is that if you were to tell me that you had the intention to, or already had, hurt someone I would need to tell somebody about it. So you may like to keep this in mind if you think it might impact on what you would like to talk to me about today? OK?

Do you have any questions you would like to run past me before we begin?

Reminders for Interviewer of things to mention throughout the interview:

- Check out how participants are generally feeling through the interview.
- Check out if feeling vulnerable in any way.
- Remember to be gentle in the way that I ask questions.
- Rely on recursive questioning that is situated in reflections of meaning, content and feeling.
- Keep focused on decision-making process in terms of decisions made, what influenced the decisions and the consequences of decisions for participants.
- Keep an ear out for any information that suggests risk played a role in decision-making contexts.

## Section 1: Introduction to the Intervention

Question 1: What is the significant intervention you would like to discuss?

*Prompts:*

*Rely on recursive questions that cover the following areas. The questions listed below are a guide to the material to be covered and should not be asked in a literal manner:*

- *When did it occur?*
- *How long did it take?*
- *What was it like being in this situation?*
- *What did you feel?*
- *What do you think influenced you feeling this way?*
- *What sorts of things were you thinking about?*
- *What do you think was influencing your thinking?*
- *What were your physical responses in the situation, e.g. what language did you use, how did you stand, did you limit conversation, make eye contact, blush, turn your back to someone etc.*

## Section 2: Making Sense of the Intervention

Question 2: How did you come to an understanding about what you would do?

*Prompts:*

*Rely on recursive questions that cover the following areas. The questions listed below are a guide to the material to be covered and should not be asked in a literal manner:*

- *What options did you think you had in the situation?*
- *What seemed important or significant to you when deciding what to do?*
- *Why were these things important or significant to you?*
- *How do you think you present yourself in your account? Why?*

- *How does this representation compare to how you generally view yourself both professionally and personally?*
- *How do you think you present the client/agency/colleague in your account Why?*
- *How do you think this scenario has impacted on you?*
- *How do you think it has impacted on others?*
- *How do you think and feel about the decision in retrospect?*

### Section 3: Reflections of Meaning of Significance

Question 3: What is important that I understand about the meaning of this story for you?

*Prompts:*

*Rely on recursive questions that cover the following areas. The questions listed below are a guide to the material to be covered and should not be asked in a literal manner:*

- *What is the core meaning of the story you have told today?*
- *Why is this story significant to you?*
- *How have you come to understand what happened so far?*
- *What kinds of tensions, paradoxes, ambiguities etc. seem evident when you think about what we have spoken about today?*
- *What seems unresolved, unknown or unclear or 'un-understood'?*
- *Is there anything else I should understand or know?*
- *What has it been like talking about this today?*



## Appendix 5: Interview Schedule

### Second Interview

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#### The Place of Risk in Interventions

##### Part A: Preamble

###### Introduction:

Today I would like to try and understand some specific aspects of the intervention you talked to me about last time we met. You might remember that last time you spoke to me about ... *(fill in specifics of person being interviewed)*. During the interview we explored a whole range of details and pathways that were important to your decision-making and my understanding of what was happening for you.

I'm going to start today with some information about what I would like to cover with you in this interview. Please feel free to stop me and ask questions as I explain things to you.

###### Reflections From First Interviews:

As you know, I am particularly interested in the idea of how risk comes to play a part in how practitioners make certain decisions about how to intervene in situations. So I guess I am interested in how risk might or might not be shaping of social work practice.

Since speaking with you I have listened to the tapes of the interviews, and in particular I listened for times when risk might have been present in each story. It seemed to me that risk was present in most of the accounts in a couple of ways. One way in which it was present was in terms of how clients were 'at risk' of experiencing or perpetrating some kind of harm. It also seemed that risk was an element, to some extent, in how practitioners were situated in the stories. It seemed to me that there

was a sense that social workers were experiencing particular risks in the course of deciding what to do in the intervention and going ahead and doing whatever needed or could be done.

### How I Use the Term Risk:

It might be useful for you to hear about how I am using the term 'risk' in relation to clients and yourself as a practitioner.

### Clients:

In talking about clients who are 'a risk' or 'at risk', I am referring to when practitioners were assessing the potential for harm to occur to clients or others. For example, clients were thought to be 'at risk' of harms, such as violence, suicide or homelessness. This is probably how 'being at risk' is most often talked about in the social work literature. Clients were seen to be 'a risk' when they posed a threat to somebody, for example of being abusive towards a partner or children. Clients were also seen to be 'a risk' if it was thought they may not do what was expected of them, such as failing to comply with court orders. This understanding of risk is also commonly written about in the social work literature.

### Social Workers:

In talking about the place of risk as it relates to you I am referring to the anticipation of possible negative consequences occurring for yourself. For example, I am talking about the times where you might have talked about when you felt worried or scared about whether you were doing the right thing in your work or that you didn't know what the right thing to do might be. I am talking about when you might have mentioned you were scared or concerned about what other people might have thought about you and/or your work, that the client, agency, minister or some other person might take actions against you, or funding for a program might be lost. I'm talking about the times you might have said you felt worried that you would be letting someone down by your actions, be it the client, a colleague or someone else who was meaningful to you. I'm talking about times where you might have said to yourself, 'My fear could have had a place in this decision' and then you tried to work outside

of what fear would have said you should do. I am also talking about if you had said you had concerns that you could, or already had, experienced distress or harm in the situation you were speaking of.

Many practitioners spoke of doubt, uncertainty and fear being a part of the contexts in their decision-making and they somehow felt 'at risk' in doing their work in the ways mentioned above. Many practitioners spoke about how they also had a sense that they 'took risks' in their practice given their anticipation of possible negative consequences that might eventuate from them. And some practitioners spoke about how they had a sense that they 'took risks' because they were uncertain about what outcomes may eventuate. So in talking about risk I am focusing on how risk was present in your assessment of the client as well as how you experienced risk as the person having to make decisions about what to do.

So I wondered if I might explore these ideas with you in the context of the intervention you spoke to me about in our first interview,

#### Final Checks and Information about the Second Interview:

It might be important for you to know that the stories that I have been told by practitioners like yourself touched me deeply. Amongst other things, these stories signified to me how complex the needs of clients can be and in turn how complex decision-making in social work is. I was struck by how practitioner's engaged with clients, how they negotiated a whole range of conditions that were specific to each story, how they were committed to finding the best possible solution for someone in need, and how each practitioner spoke with honesty about what all this meant for them at the time.

So in part what I am saying is that I realise that each story had many elements to it, not all of them related to risk. In making risk the focus of the second interview I do not wish to over emphasise/under emphasise its place in your intervention. It is simply a focus of my research so I am keen to explore where it may or may not have played a role in the context of your decision making in the intervention.

And following from this I wanted to reiterate how my position in the research is not one of evaluating your practice. Instead I am aiming to get a more solid understanding of a specific context in which your decision-making and actions took place.

Finally, I wanted to let you know that our discussion will be more structured than our first meeting as I have 6 main themes comprising of several questions that I want to explore with you. I am anticipating that the interview will go for about an hour or so.

Do you have any questions about any of this?

## **Part B: Questions**

### **Section 1: Meaning of Risk**

As mentioned above, many people in the interviews spoke about how clients were ‘at risk’ or ‘a risk’. Practitioners also spoke about risk in terms of the possibility of experiencing negative consequences themselves either at the time of, or after, the intervention took place.

1. How do you think risk (client and self) was present in the intervention that you described to me?

Consider this question in terms of:

- Your ideas about the client;
- How you were experiencing risk;
- Organisational factors; and
- Any concerns you had for others, e.g. colleagues, family, services, communities, etc.

## Section 2: Risk and the Client

1. How do you think these thoughts about risk (client and self) impacted on how you thought about the client?
2. How do you think thoughts about risk (client and self) impacted on how you thought about yourself in relation to the client?

## Section 3: Risk and Social Workers

Many people have spoken about how they felt that they were being, or could potentially be, scrutinised by others in their work. People also talked about how they judged their own actions.

1. How did ideas about how you saw yourself or thought others saw you feature in the decisions you made in your intervention?
2. What kinds of evaluations were you doing about yourself, knew were being done to you, or thought could be done about you?

## Section 4: Risk and Ethics and Morals

1. How do you think risk (client and self) was present in your considerations about what the 'right'/'good' (i.e. moral) thing to do in the situation might be?
2. How do you think risk (client and self) was present in your thinking about what you thought you 'ought' to do (i.e. what was ethical) in the situation?

## Section 5: Risk and Change

1. How did risk (client and self) play a part in what change you thought was possible at the time?

## Section 6: Theorising Risk

1. How would you explain how risk (client and self) shaped the intervention that you described to me? What kind of things, (e.g. personal, professional, organizational, cultural, social, global, philosophical, ideological, fiscal, theoretical, etc.), have helped you to make sense of the place that risk occupied in your intervention?

## Section 7: Clarifying I Understand

1. Is there anything else you think is important to tell me about the intervention in terms of risk or regarding other aspects of the intervention?

## **Part C: Finishing the Interview**

Thank you for your time today.

How are you feeling after our interview?

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