Social Work Activism:
Resistance at the Frontier

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I declare that the work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original, except as acknowledged in the text, and that the material has not been submitted, either in whole or part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

Lyndal Greenslade

(25 February 2013)
What follows is for those who want to change the world from what it is to what they believe it should be.

(Saul Alinsky, 1971, p. 3)
Acknowledgements

As a marathon runner, I thought I knew a thing or two about going the distance and pushing beyond the limits of what my body and mind told me was possible. It turns out that marathons have nothing on PhDs. Marathon preparation takes about six months and if you’re really unlucky, involves the odd sidelines due to overused muscles. A PhD takes years and involves many unforeseen twists and turns in the road, some minor and some life changing. I would not have been able to go the distance were it not for the guidance, encouragement and care of the following people.

Firstly, my thanks go to my supervisors, who kept me on track despite some very major life changes along the way. I find it hard to capture in words just how grateful I am to my principal supervisor, Associate Professor Donna McAuliffe. She has ticked all the boxes for what you want from a PhD supervisor…and then some. I think the memory that will stay with me the most is how many times Donna asked, ”What do you need?” with good cheer and a genuine willingness to try to provide whatever it was that I put on the table. Thank you also to my associate supervisor Professor Lesley Chenoweth whose infectious enthusiasm blew through the project each time it needed re-igniting. How lucky was I?

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husband Leif, who always believes that I am capable of seeing through any plan I come up with and willingly takes on the role of pit crew so that I can make it happen.

Lastly, I’d like to thank the 15 social workers that chose to participate in this study. In solidarity with them, I believe in the importance of activism within social work practice and hold an affiliation with the radical tradition. It is my hope that this tradition evolves in such a way that it is a life force within the profession, remaining a vital and workable form of practice that challenges injustice and plants seeds for a better world.
DEDICATION

To Florence Irene Smith and Maureen Ann Greenslade

For believing in the power of educating girls
Abstract

When social and economic systems disadvantage individuals and groups, social workers have historically been amongst those who protest. The contemporary context provides particular challenges for social workers discontent with welfare service delivery influenced by neo-liberal ideology. Recent research reports on a range of barriers to activist practice, with participants identifying the negative impact of contemporary welfare ideologies, which have contributed to a dominance of technical practice models and an accompanying loss of structural, activist approaches. Participants in these studies informed that contemporary welfare organisations have led to a concealing of activist activities, for fear of reprisal should more open forms of radical practice be attempted. This thesis explores the motivations and behaviours of social workers employed in statutory workplace settings who identified that they undertook covert activist activities as a response to challenges resulting from the current service delivery model. The overarching research question was: What are the experiences of Australian statutory social workers regarding the types of covert activism they practice, and their reasons for doing so? Findings from this research are aimed at informing current discussions on the relevance of radical practice methods in challenging the contemporary welfare model and the role of social workers as agents of change.

This study involved fifteen professional social workers involved in statutory work within the fields of health, mental health, child protection and income support in Australia. Qualitative interviews were conducted over a six month period via the method of Email Facilitated Reflective Dialogue. The purpose of the dialogues was to investigate how social work practitioners utilised covert resistance strategies within statutory welfare organisations to challenge organisational-professional conflict and
what the experience of doing is like for them. Additionally, the dialogues also explored
the identity of this group of practitioners, with the goal of understanding more about
who contemporary social work activists are.

A number of themes emerged from the data in relation to the research questions. In
agreement with existing research, the study found that contemporary models of welfare
practice that social workers are employed within contributed to a range of challenges
that proved problematic for practitioners. As a result, this group of social workers chose
to take action covertly, motivated by a number of factors including the need to meet
client need effectively and deliver on their professional values. This study found that
covert actions included those found in the small number of existing studies relating to
this phenomena, but also found additional actions taken to push back at a system
participants identified as unjust and inequitable. The experience for participants of
undertaking covert actions was identified as both rewarding and challenging, but despite
the challenges, this study found that overwhelmingly, this group of social workers
remained committed to continuing to undertake covert work. Exploration of the
personal and professional identities of this group of social workers provided some
explanation for why they might remain committed to covert activism, with findings
identifying similarities in the values held. As a result, a typology of contemporary social
work activist is developed, contributing to knowledge in the profession on social
workers employed in statutory organisations attempting to deliver on their professional
requirement to take action against injustice. Implications for the profession, the
professional association, social work education and further research are discussed in the
final chapter of this thesis.
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