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 sidelining 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.

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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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Chapter One

Introduction

This research investigates the experiences of Australian social workers employed in statutory welfare organisations, in relation to covert workplace activism undertaken to reconcile and challenge organisational/professional conflict.

Motivations

I developed an interest in this topic whilst employed in the capacity of Career Services Social Worker for the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). In this role, I had the opportunity to speak with social workers experiencing a range of ethical concerns relating to conflict between their professional ethics and the requirements of their employing organisations. Social workers shared with me the extent of their discomfort, which ranged from frustration and emotional exhaustion to despair, and frequently informed of their suspicions that the task of social work within contemporary welfare organisations was perhaps undoable. Social workers who shared their stories spoke of an enduring commitment to the core professional values of social work and a heartfelt desire to prioritise these values in their practice. Motivated by an often intense drive to take action to improve what they identified as ever increasing unethical constraints on their work with clients, these workers described feeling as though they were attempting to practice with their hands tied behind their backs. Unable to find congruence between their professional ethics and the actions they were required to take by their employers, many informed me of their decision to leave the profession. Whilst the majority of these discussions were overwhelmingly bleak, my occasional contact with social workers who were managing to reconcile ethical issues despite being employed within organisations commonly identified as having a reputation for being particularly ethically challenging, alerted me to the existence of resistance. These social
workers’ stories moved beyond tales of “survival” to describe experiences of thriving. Although only privy to a small number of social workers reporting their experiences of implementing the core values of the profession despite conflict with organisational policy and procedure, I became alerted to the existence of behaviours that I believed could be identified as activism. Given that social workers shared with me the covert nature of their resistance and the risks associated with them, I began to conceptualise these workers as contemporary radical social workers.

This experience led to an exploration of the professional literature and research surrounding social work activism, radical social work and organisational-professional conflict in contemporary welfare organisations. This initial exploration identified a distinct gap in knowledge regarding activist or radical practice within contemporary organisations and in addition, found significant discussion relating to the existence of ethical complexities of practicing social work within statutory welfare organisations. Although a reading of the codes of ethics of member countries of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the assertion in much of the literature of the profession that an activist approach is central to the social work role, the recorded history of the profession attests to the marginal place a social work that challenges have played in reality (Healy, 2001; Ife, 1997; Lyons, 1999; Schneider & Lester, 1999). Although there is a growing wealth of literature that seeks to bridge this gap by providing practice models and methods for a structural approach to casework, this is not reflected in the empirical research (Adams, Dominelli, & Payne, 2002; Allan, Briskman, & Pease, 2009; Bailey & Brake, 1975; Fook, 1993b; Ife, 2001; Langan & Lee, 1989). Research that does exist adopted a conceptualisation of activism as being primarily associated with macro practice. Given that literature and research within the social work field has established a range of negative consequences for social workers
employed within contemporary welfare organisations, including the fear of reprisal should they openly challenge organisational policy and procedure, it is perhaps more likely that contemporary social work activists are utilising more covert methods of activism than their historical counterparts.

The paucity of research into activist social work within contemporary workplaces has been acknowledged by several writers as a gap in knowledge within the profession, with repeated calls for further empirical study to explore the chasm between what the profession espouses and what it does (Abramovitz, 1998; De Maria, 1993; Evans, 1975; Healy, 1993; Hearn, 1982; Mendes, 2007; Prichard, 1998; Wagner, 1989).

This study is significant because research about social workers who covertly challenge practices that create conflict between organisational policies and procedures and professional and personal ethics has not been the primary focus of any previous Australian research. It is timely, due to current discussions in the professional social work literature concerned with the complexities of attempting to adhere to the professional social work values in a market oriented welfare system that has increasingly legalistic implications, and in particular within statutory settings. At a policy level, the dominance of market modelled welfare services and the resultant increase in surveillance of workers and loss of professional autonomy has generated much debate within the profession regarding the clash between contemporary welfare policies and professional ethical requirements. Additionally, social work has been the subject of recent media attention both criticising professional decisions made by workers within statutory child protection settings and calling for increased social workers to meet growing demand in that sector (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2009; AASW, 2008c; Bourke, 2009). Public interest in the role of social work within statutory settings can be seen to be growing, alongside the push by
the professional Association to pursue registration in an effort to increase protection for
clients (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2012).

Additionally, the professional literature contains reports of a re-imagining of the
radical roots of the profession to explore new opportunities for challenging and
subverting the dominant practice landscape (Dreikosen, 2009; Fine & Teram, 2012;
Murdach, 2010; Reisch & Jani, 2012; Rogowski, 2012; Thompson, 2009; Wagner,
2009). This research project can contribute insight into the behaviours and experiences
of social workers employed in statutory welfare organisations, identifying their
motivations and means of resistance to procedures and policies that may be incongruent
with professional ethics and the costs and benefits of their actions. This knowledge will
assist the profession to explore the role of social work within statutory welfare
organisations and identify potential strategies for achieving greater congruence between
professional ethics and practice realities. Additionally, this research project can
contribute to the ongoing discussion within the profession on activist/radical social
work practice, exploring its role in challenging contemporary welfare policies and
practices.

Definition of Terms

This research utilises a broad definition of activist social work with the
acknowledgement that the profession has long grappled with issues of definition in
relation to activist practice strategies (De Maria, 1993). The essential concept informing
activist social work is the notion of challenging perceived injustice. Activist social work
involves taking action to challenge individuals, groups, societies and/or organisations in
relation to policies or practices that are perceived as unjust (Mendes, 2003). In doing so,
social work activism moves beyond passive agreement with the concept of a social
work that challenges injustices, to actively engage in strategies to do so. Further, activist
social work involves a motivation to not only challenge injustice, but to actively work towards implementing change. As such, activist social workers can be identified as change agents, committed to taking action to protect the “individual person against oppression by more powerful individuals, groups or structures” (Fook, 1993b, p. 7). These concepts are included as elements of radical social work, structural social work, anti-oppressive social work, feminist social work, human rights based social work and critical social work (Clifford & Burke, 2009; Dominelli, 2002a; Fook, 1993b; Ife, 2001; Mullaly, 2006; Pease, 2009). The use of the term activist social work in this research, as opposed to choosing one of the terms used above, is an attempt to capture the common theme of challenge and change that is prominent in all of these terms. Employing this broad definition allows for the inclusion of a wide range of strategies aimed at challenging and changing injustices, and limits the potential for exclusion of social workers whose actions may not fit a more narrowly defined term and yet are engaged in actions to challenge and change.

When utilising the term social work values, these values include those expressed in the previous edition of the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) Code of Ethics (AASW, 1999), as this was the Code that participants were working under at the time of this study. These values were human dignity and worth, social justice, service to humanity, integrity and competence. The 2010 version of the Code of Ethics lists three values; respect for persons, social justice and professional integrity (AASW, 2010). Although there has been a reduction in the number of values in the new Code of Ethics, none of the previous values have been discarded, but rather integrated under one of the three new values. Although these values are listed in the Australian Code of Ethics, they are broadly consistent with social work principles.
identified by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2012), listed as human rights and human dignity and social justice.

Informed by the AASW Code of Ethics (1999), this research defines the **aim and purpose of social work** as seeking to “maximise the development of human potential and the fulfilment of human needs” (p. 5). This is broadly consistent with the aim and purpose of social work defined by the IFSW, which states that social work, “Promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being” (IFSW, 2012, para. 3).

Multiple terms are used in the literature to identify the change in welfare service delivery that has occurred in approximately the last 30 years as a result of neo-liberal ideology and the meaning of those terms varies to some degree. This research utilises the phrase **welfare service delivery influenced by neo-liberal ideology** and understands this to mean a welfare system that is increasingly focused on accountability and outcomes, competition and efficiency, risk management and privatisation of services (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Hough, 2003; Lees, Meyer, & Rafferty, 2011; Stanford, 2008; Wallace & Pease, 2011; Weinberg, 2010).

This research defines **statutory practice organisations** as organisations whose policies and procedures are required and authorised by law. Social workers employed in statutory organisations have a range of legal obligations that they are required to fulfil (Collins, 2008). Statutory practice organisations have been chosen for this research as they are associated in the social work literature with both market modelled welfare reform that limits the social work role and a range of ethical difficulties centering on conflict between care and control functions (Bell, 1999; Collins, 2008; Dominelli & Hoogvelt, 1996; Gibbs, 2001; Huxley et al., 2005; Jones, 2001). Statutory practice organisations in the Australian context include state child protection services, state
mental health services, state corrections services and a national income service.

Additionally, state hospital services are included in the definition of statutory practice organisations, in recognition of the similarities that exist between hospital social work and social work within more clearly defined statutory settings, particularly in relation to the market modelled organisational structures (Pockett, 2002; Siefert, Jayaratne, & Chess, 1991).

Informed by literature from within the fields of social work, sociology and nursing, this research defines **covert workplace resistance** as an informal action undertaken by a social worker in the workplace that does not conform or comply with workplace policy and procedure and is primarily motivated by the desire to benefit the client (Fleming & Sewell, 2002; Hollander & Einwohner, 2004; Peter, Lunardi, & Macfarlane, 2004; Prasad & Prasad, 2000). In pursuing this course of action, the social worker is aware that such an action conflicts with workplace policy and procedure and therefore “owns” the action as resistant (Prasad & Prasad, 2000).

**Insider Research**

Robson (2002) defined an insider-researcher as having direct involvement or connection with the research setting and/or participants. As a social worker, I identify as an insider-researcher, to the extent that alongside participants in my research project, I have a responsibility to uphold the ethical requirements of my profession. Further, my own experiences of completing student field placements within contemporary welfare organisations and being employed by the AASW in the capacity of Career Services Social Worker has afforded me firsthand experience of organisational-professional conflict and alerted me to the existence of activist practice utilising covert resistance strategies. I am not however, laying claim to insider research status as a social work practitioner employed in statutory practice.
The Structure of the Thesis

This thesis begins with a comprehensive overview of the literature reporting on social work activism, drawn primarily from countries whose social work professional landscape is similar to that of Australia. These include the United States of America (USA), Canada, the United Kingdom (UK), New Zealand and South Africa. Empirical evidence suggests that welfare systems in these countries have been significantly affected by managerialist practices and as a result, the business of social work has experienced a range of stresses and strains. In addition to empirical literature on social work activism, Chapter Two reviews empirical literature on organisational-professional conflict in contemporary welfare organisations, a well documented occurrence that results from clashes between the requirements of professional social work codes of ethics and those of the employing organisation. To provide a fuller picture of such conflict, Chapter Two reviews empirical research from the fields of sociology, nursing and education in relation to “workplace resistance”, a concept that proves useful for contextualising resistant practices in social work. Finally, Chapter Two reviews literature relating to professional requirements for activism within social work codes of ethics, establishing firmly the enduring role that activism plays in social work discourse.

An overview and rationale for the research design and method is explored in detail in Chapter Three, including discussion of the conceptual framework that supports the research. This framework is located within the constructionist epistemology and utilises the theoretical perspective of critical theory. The choice of critical theory allows the explicit exploration of the ways that power is held and enacted by social institutions. The choice of qualitative research design is defended in relation to its suitability to this project, and in particular to the sensitivity of information being
sought in this research. Of importance to the methodology for this study is the influence of social work principles and this is discussed with reference to my own professional values and beliefs as a social worker. The chapter then identifies the research question: What are the experiences of Australian statutory social workers regarding the types of covert activism they practice, and their reasons for doing so? Methodological rigour is discussed, with strategies outlined to ensure a high level of research rigour. Ethical issues such as consent, confidentiality and benefits and risks of the research are presented, with limitations discussed. Issues relating to the design of the research, such as sampling, participant criteria, recruitment, data collection and management, and data analysis are discussed in detail. Chapter Three finishes with an exploration of challenges that arose in relation to the methodology.

The context of contemporary social work practice is discussed in Chapter Four, the first of four chapters that present findings from the research. This chapter reports on a range of challenges that existed for participants as a result of working within a welfare system that is informed by neo-liberal ideology. These findings support earlier empirical research and discourse from the profession, which establishes a range of negative experiences that result from attempts to deliver on social work’s professional role in environments that are resistant and at times hostile to the professional value base of social work. Inter-professional and structural conflict was experienced by participants, who reported that this conflict resulted from a range of factors, including conflict between the organisational policies and procedures of their workplaces the professional ethical requirements of social work. Further exploring the context of contemporary practice, this chapter reports on the complex and problematic role of power within contemporary social work practice, with participants identifying a range
of negative experiences that resulted from inter-professional use of power, misuse of power over clients and structural power.

A range of both covert and overt activities undertaken by participants are identified and explored in Chapter Five. Whilst continually striving to mount overt challenges, participants reported that covert challenges were more successful in meeting client need. They described eight covert activities that they had utilised as a means of both enhancing client outcome and challenging policies and procedures that they identified as unjust. In discussing their motivations for covert activities, participants were primarily concerned with benefiting clients, but reported that a range of prior workplace experiences and their own self-agendas also impacted on the decision to act covertly. When deciding to undertake a covert action, participants utilised a number of tactics, chosen based on the perceived success of a particular tactic in meeting a particular goal.

The experiences of participants undertaking covert activism within their daily work are explored in Chapter Six, with a range of challenges and rewards identified for themselves, their clients, their employing organisation and the profession of social work. As found in existing empirical research, a range of disturbing emotions are experienced as a result of contemporary practice and contribute to significant stress for participants. Conversely, participants also experienced positive emotions and rewarding outcomes that result from their covert work. Although there were both challenges and rewards experienced by participants, the rewards were felt to be significant enough to motivate them to continue to utilise covert practice methods.

The identity of contemporary social work activists is explored in Chapter Seven, with a range of similarities between participants identified, both in their personal and professional identities. Sharing a strong focus on critical thinking, interest in
politics and commitment to the value of justice, participant’s identities motivated them to challenge practices that they felt were not consistent with their personal and professional value bases. The importance of congruence between their personal and professional identities was also a shared goal, with participants reporting that they would not continue to work in environments where it was not possible to bring their whole selves to the work. The exploration of identity facilitates the development of a typology of contemporary social work activism, with four distinct categories of activist identified.

The conclusions and implications that arise from the research are discussed in Chapter Eight, which begins by bringing together the main themes of the research to identify a range of implications for contemporary social work practice. Implications for the practice have been identified for social work activists, the AASW and social work employers. Implications have also been identified for education and further research.

This chapter has outlined my motivations in undertaking this research; established a rationale for significance and clarified definitions of terms and provided an overall structure of the thesis. The following chapter presents the literature on which the study is founded.
Chapter Two

Literature and Discourse Review

Approach to the Review

This chapter identifies previous empirical research exploring activist social work, organisational-professional ethical conflict and workplace. It subsequently identifies gaps that inform research questions for this study. Additionally, the literature review explores and outlines appropriate methodologies and methods for the conduct of the research.

The history of social workers acting to resist and challenge is largely untold in the empirical research of the profession, both within Australia and internationally. Despite a growing number of books, discussion pieces, papers and editorials on activist practice, there remains a paucity of empirical research into social work activism. Several reasons may explain this omission. That the profession of social work embraces social justice activism is evidenced by its explicit inclusion in the statement of ethical principles of the IFSW and the codes of ethics of its member countries, a review of which is presented in Appendix A. This endorsement of the importance of activism is embodied in the glorification of Jane Adaams in social work literature, portrayed as the instigator of the birth of the radical tradition through the Settlement House Movement in the U.S during the Progressive era (Abramovitz, 1998). Adaams’ challenge to the Charitable Organization Societies, exemplified in the work of Mary Richmond, led to a move away from the moralistic notion that fault was to be found in the failings of the individual and not in the system (Ehrenreich, 1985; Reisch & Andrews, 2002). The tension between the two approaches associated with these two women, has evolved into two camps within the profession, those that give primacy to the casework relationship and those that advocate for a larger structural reading and the associated social reform
(or revolution) that accompanies it (Drakeford, 2002; Hugman, 2009; Mendes, 2007; Thompson, 2009). Despite proud claims to the existence of a radical past, Murdach (2010) contended that visions of a progressive professional history are unable to be substantiated. Olson (2007) captures the disparity between rhetoric and practice by contending that as a profession social work prefers to “talk Jane Adaams and do Mary Richmond” (p. 60).

Specht and Courtney (1994) believed that the professional project has sidelined the development of more radical approaches; a drive that they suggest has seen the profession abandon its commitment to social justice issues. In attempting to explain the lack of congruency between the professional commitment to structural approaches and practice realities, Andrews and Reisch (2002) identified political, economic and cultural factors that “dilute the seemingly radical potential of the profession” (p. 7). This explanation attests to the complex nature of the social worker, who is both aligned with client’s struggles and a part of the oppressive machine (Clifford & Burke, 2009; Ife, 2001; Jordan, 2004). Mendes (2007) expanded upon this, by capturing the tension many social workers felt as they are caught between the desire to resist and the necessity to remain employed. Wagner (2009) attested to the notion that whilst the profession expresses affiliation with social justice, in reality, it fails to endorse any real radical change. Taking a highly critical view of radical social work, Carey and Foster (2011) asserted that radical practice was largely confined to academic theory and failed to provide any concrete influence on front line practitioners.

In contrast to this view, McDonald (2007) suggested that radical social work, although always a fringe movement within the profession, had none the less had a significant impact on Australian social work. In exploring the notion that radical social work is no longer a part of the Australian landscape, McDonald (2007) suggested that
although opportunities for radical practice may have been limited under contemporary welfare systems, the influence of radical social work could still be seen in the choices that practitioners made on a daily basis. Cox (2009) found hope in the disillusionment that contemporary individualistic approaches were fostering in the profession, a situation that may lead social workers to question the status quo and in doing so, reignite radical discourses in the future. Reisch and Jani (2012) believed that the changes in the practice landscape have “potentially revolutionary implications that social workers need to address to continue to be effective in the future” (p. 1146). Rogowski (2012) supported this notion, suggesting that “there remains scope for a radical/critical practice that involves working alongside users on the problems they face” (p. 921).

A further explanation for the lack of empirical research may be located in the hesitance by some social workers who embrace radical perspectives to participate in the research process, as they may regard with suspicion the pursuit of knowledge through positivist research paradigms and the applicability of such an approach to social work (Andrews & Reisch, 2002; Wagner, 1989).

As mentioned previously, the limited amount of empirical research exploring activism that does exist, focused on macro activism. In addition to reviewing this research and research on organisational-professional conflict, this literature review will move beyond social work empirical research to include research on workplace activism within the fields of sociology and nursing. The rationale for the inclusion of sociological and nursing research is based on the existence of the concept of informal workplace resistance within these fields, a concept that proves useful for conceptualising social work activism within contemporary statutory practice.
A review of the IFSW and its member country’s ethical documents is included to establish the professional associations’ support of social work activism and the role of social workers in challenging organisational policies and procedures which conflict with professional ethical requirements.

The chapter now explores the relevant literature in depth, traversing the following bodies of literature.

- Requirements for activism in social work codes of ethics
- Previous empirical research on social work activism
- Previous empirical research on organisational-professional conflict in contemporary welfare organisations
- Workplace resistance

**Activism in Social Work Codes of Ethics and Practice Standards**

In conjunction with the Center for the Study of Ethics in the Professions, Buila’s (2010) research compared 55 codes of ethics from professions that have a direct helping or instructional role and found that the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2009) Code of Ethics in the USA was unique in its articulation of the requirement for social workers to demonstrate a responsibility towards social justice activism. That social work is a profession concerned with taking action against injustices of various forms is a belief long enshrined in the literature of the profession. This legacy remains today, demonstrated in the codes of ethics of the social work professional associations around the globe.

A review of the ethical principles and practice standards/guidelines of the IFSW and eleven member associations (with English language versions available) identified that the active pursuit of social justice was explicitly referenced in all documents reviewed (Appendix A). That social workers are required to take action towards the
pursuit of social justice is evidenced by the language used, which included words and phrases such as “promote”, “act to change”, “engaging in action”, “action is taken” and “challenging injustice”. This language clearly asks that social workers move beyond agreement in principle, to actively engage in activities to promote social justice.

The majority of codes of ethics and practice standards/guidelines made explicit reference to managing organisational-professional conflict, with exceptions being Russia and Singapore. Of the remaining nine associations, all included this information within their code of ethics documents, with the Australian, Canadian, Aotearoa New Zealand and Irish Associations, also including information on organisational-professional conflict within their practice standards/guidelines documents. The information contained within these sections included advising social workers to take reasonable steps to ensure that practices and policies of their employing organisation were consistent with the professional code of ethics and to challenge policies and practices which were not consistent with their professional ethics. The documents reviewed specify that this be done through appropriate and established organisational channels. The British and Australian Codes of Ethics provided guidance on what should be done should the use of appropriate organisational channels not prove effective, with the British Code providing information on whistle blowing and the Australian Code recommending seeking support from the AASW (AASW, 1999; British Association of Social Workers [BASW], 2002). The Australian, USA, Swedish, British and Israeli Codes of Ethics and the Canadian Guidelines made clear statements advising that professional ethics takes precedence over employers’ policies and procedures (AASW, 1999; BASW, 2002; Canadian Association of Social Workers [CASW], 2005a, 2005b; National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2005; Swedish Association of Social Work [SSR], 2006; Union of Social Workers Israel [USWI], 2007).
A comparison of the codes of ethics/conduct and practice guidelines of five Australian professional associations in the allied health field revealed similarities and differences in relation to social justice activism and organisational-professional conflict (Appendix B) (Australian Community Workers Association [ACWA], 1999; Australian Counselling Association [ACA], 2002; Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council [ANMC], 2008; Australian Psychological Society [APS], 2007; Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia [PACFA], 2001). Professional associations reviewed are listed in Table 1, with a brief explanation of their role.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Allied Health Professional Organisations in Australia</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Name</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Counselling Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Community Workers Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Psychological Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation Australia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council (ANMC) and the Australian Community Workers Association (ACWA) Codes of Ethics were the only two to include specific reference to social justice (ACWA, 1999; ANMC, 2008a). Although the ACWA did include reference to social justice, the use of language was markedly
different from the language used within the AASW Code of Ethics and Practice Standards, with members charged only with the responsibility to ‘be concerned with’ social justice issues, as opposed to explicit instruction to take action on them. The Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA), the Australian Counselling Association (ACA) and the Australian Psychological Society (APS) contained no reference to social justice (Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia [PACFA], 2001; ACA, 2002; APS, 2003). This review highlights the unique focus on social justice activism within the social work profession.

PACFA was the only association that did not provide explicit inclusion of information relating to organisational-professional conflict in their Ethical Guidelines. The remaining four associations advised members to explore and resolve ethical conflicts with employing organisations through established organisational challenges, with the Code of Professional Conduct for Nurses advising that nurses should notify an appropriate authority external to their employer organisation, should an ethical issue remain unresolved.

That all but three of the ethical documents of the 17 professional associations reviewed included explicit reference to organisational-professional conflict attests to the awareness within professional associations of the ethical conflict that may occur when there is a lack of congruence between organisational policies and procedures and professional ethical requirements.

Through their documents relating to ethical practice, the social work profession clearly charges social workers with the responsibility to actively pursue social justice.

**Previous Empirical Research on Social Work Activism**

**Defining social work activism.** The majority of empirical research did not specifically ask social workers themselves for a definition of social work activism,
preferring instead to provide them with one prior to engaging as participants. Whilst this ensured that participants were all working from the same definition, it would be interesting to explore what social workers themselves believe is implied by the term ‘social work activism’. Two exceptions are studies by Wagner (1989) and Andrews and Reisch (2002), both of which asked participants for their self-perceptions of their activist practice. Wagner’s (1989) qualitative study involved in-depth interviews with 24 radical social workers in the USA who were active in the period covering the 1960s to 1990s. Participants were past and present members of the Catalyst collective, a radical social work group formed in the mid 1970s in New York city. In exploring their definitions of radical activism, some participants had difficulty identifying what constituted a radical social work approach, whilst others demonstrated differences in defining radical practice, attesting to their decline in certainty about what is meant by radical practice over time (Andrew & Reisch, 2002; Wagner, 1989). “Earlier on, I would have said ‘yes’, there is a radical practice. The older I get, I’m not jaded, but the sense of what’s possible and not possible…?” (Wagner, 1989, p. 277).

Participants in Andrew and Reisch’s (2002) qualitative study of self-identified radical social workers in the USA who practiced between the 1950’s and 2002 were invited to comment on their definition of radical social work. Findings suggest that although respondents expressed varying levels of comfort with the term ‘radical’, commonalities in defining radical social work included a questioning of the status quo, confronting issues of oppression and opposition to capitalism. Attesting to the decreased popularity of the word ‘radical’, several participants sought to avoid the ‘labelling’ effect that such a term has (Andrew & Reisch, 2002). One participant in this study believed that “labels such as [radical or progressive]…often carry their own baggage
and do not fully or accurately convey where a person stands on a specific issue” (Andrews & Reisch, 2002, p. 12).

The choice to avoid the term ‘radical’ may in part speak to the stigmatising effect that such a term could have, with participants informing that although they self-identified as radical social workers, they did not write from a radical perspective or openly identify as radical practitioners in the belief that such an open approach may limit their professional opportunities.

Given the ambiguous nature of the use of the terms ‘radical’, ‘progressive’ and ‘activist’ in the wider normative literature of the profession, further insight into how practicing social workers define activist social work is needed.

**Who are social work activists?** To date, no large scale study has attempted to quantify the number of social workers who identify as activists within the profession. Two older studies have provided insight into professional roles that may be more conducive to activist social work. Testing a hypothesis that professionalisation of social workers reduced support for radical action, Epstein’s (1970) study of 899 USA social work members of the NASW found that caseworkers employed as managers and executives were not less likely to support radical social action strategies. Although the findings of this study did not support the hypothesis that social work professionalisation is associated with reduced social activism, it did find that overall, those employed in casework positions were more conservative in relation to social action strategies than those employed in group work and community work. Overall, 54% of social workers in direct service roles and 53% in executive roles supported radical social action strategies. Further exploring support for social action, an early study of 166 Australian social workers identified participants’ beliefs about their role as social change agents (Evans, 1975). In exploring opinions on whether social workers believed that they were charged
with the responsibility for social activism, 88.2% replied in the positive. When asked, 'do you consider it one of your responsibilities to try to bring about such improvement?', an overwhelming majority of 94.4% reported that they did. Further, 71.4% answered yes to the question, 'Have you tried to bring about improvement?' In tempering these findings, it is important to note that of the 166 participants, 42.6% of the sample had less than three years experience. As this study was conducted in the mid-1970s, known as an optimistic period for social work, the limited time in professional social work of participants may have be associated with an untested idealism.

Both of these studies avoided exploring what actions social workers who reported that they had attempted to bring about improvement had made, or how many times they had been active. These studies established that the majority of participants felt that they had a responsibility to social activism. Studies identified in this section contribute useful historical perspective, however are not helpful in understanding the contemporary practice environment.

Later qualitative studies have included self-reports from social work activists that provide insight into their motivations, professional and political influences and professional roles. Wagner's (1989) research with American social workers identified a variety of motivations for why social workers adopt a radical stance. His interviews elicited responses from radical workers who cited their disappointment with initial employment experiences in child welfare work, hospital social work and probation work as motivation for seeking out less oppressive and disappointing avenues of social work. Speaking of an early experience as a hospital social worker in the 1970s, one participant informed:
After all this professional gobblygook in social work school, here I was on the line, seeing dozens of people each day and increasingly more paperwork, more accountability, less time to follow up and do long-term work. All those nice sounding professional theories, you didn’t even have time to think.

(Wagner, 1989, p. 272)

Participants cited their experiences in university social work courses as further motivation for pursuing radical perspectives, less related to influence by radical academics and more in reaction to what was perceived as a domination of psychoanalytical orientates in the academy.

Oh, school was difficult for me. The politics felt real conservative, [a] psychoanalytic orientation that I struggled with the whole time I was there. The majority of teachers just looked at the intra-psychic…and I found it kind of blaming-the-victim stuff….maybe it was my feminism, but I found myself always arguing against the Freudian stuff…that’s how I became radical.

(Wagner, 1989, p. 273)

These findings were supported in a study by Andrews and Reisch (2002) thirteen years later, which reported on the motivating influence on activist practice of a disenfranchisement with psychotherapeutic perspectives within the social work profession. Although smaller in size, Mendes’ (2007) more recent study of Australian social work activists supported several findings in previous research regarding motivations for activist practice. Conducting in-depth qualitative interviews with ten Melbourne social workers, identified for their reputation as activist social workers, this study explored the political, professional and organisational factors that influenced or created barriers for social work activism. Like participants in earlier research, several participants highlighted the influence of educational studies, although in contrast with
the negative educational experiences found by Wagner’s (1989) respondents, spoke of the positive influence of lecturer ‘mentors’ who encouraged an activist approach. Additionally, respondents identified individuals encountered during field placements and early work experiences as being influential in their decisions to pursue social activism. Political and professional influences were identified in all three studies as the influence of Marxist and anti-capitalist ideologies, childhood experiences such as poverty and racism, the influence of the women’s movement, peace movements and civil rights movements.

Utilising data collected as part of a larger study of Canadian and Australian social workers, Baines’ (2010) study, asked social workers to choose one aspect of their work they would change if they could. This study found that developing activist capacities was one of 11 changes identified, suggesting that activism held an important place for this group of participants.

Although few in number, limited by sample size and confined to populations in North America and Australia, findings from these interview studies of populations of social workers who identified as activist find commonality in participant’s motivations, influences and experiences.

Methods of activism. A number of studies have explored the methods that social workers undertake when they are involved in activism. Utilising the same questions as those used in Epstein’s (1970) earlier study, Reeser and Epstein’s (1987) quantitative study of 682 members of the NASW in the USA provided insight into the changing beliefs of social workers regarding social action. For both the earlier sample and the later sample, there was overwhelming acceptance (80%) for consensus strategies such as giving expert testimony and personal communication with public officials aimed at social change. Further, a majority of social workers (68% in Epstein’s
1970 study and 78% in Reeser and Epstein’s 1987 study) supported mainstream conflict strategies identified as campaigning for political candidates or working through political parties. In contrast to this, social workers were not supportive of less socially sanctioned protest strategies such as supporting protest groups or actively organising demonstrations (28% in Epstein’s 1970 study and 41% in Reeser and Epstein’s 1987 study).

These findings correlate with three large quantitative studies exploring the political participation of social workers. Domanski (1998) surveyed 513 social work leaders in the USA directly affected by health policy decisions that were controversial at the time of the study. This sample was gathered with the goal of capturing a population more likely to be engaged in political activity. Participants were asked to report on their involvement in political activities in the six month period prior to completing the survey. Responses informed the development of a prototype of social work political participation, which included 10 categories (see Table 2).

Of these, the most common form of political participation was found to be that of 'communicator' (99%), a type which included keeping informed about political and social policy issues and engaging in political discussions with friends, family and colleagues, with 'advocate' (97%) and 'voter' (95%) being the second and third most popular categories. The lowest participation was found in the type 'Activist' (9%), which included direct action in organised demonstrations in support or protest of policy. These findings support those found in Reeser and Epstein’s (1987) study that also identified a lack of support for less socially sanctioned forms of activism. These findings attest to the lack of activism undertaken by social work practitioners, despite the high place that activism holds in professional codes of ethics (AASW, 2010).
Utilising Domanski’s (1998) typology, Gray, Collett van Rooyen, Rennie and Gaha (2002) undertook a comparative sample of approximately 190 social work members of the professional associations and registration boards of South Africa, New Zealand and Australia that explored the nature and extent of political participation by social work professionals. Their findings confirmed that social workers support and are involved in political action, with the largest cluster being the type 'communicator' (89.2%). As with previous studies, findings relating to the type 'social action' indicated less support for less socially sanctioned activist behaviour, such as attending political rallies or participating in organised political demonstrations, with 33.7% of the total sample reporting involvement in these activities. Larger numbers reported engaging in the type 'lobbying' (44.5%), 'advocating' (68.2%) and 'individual action' (37.6%).

A fourth study of Hong Kong Social Workers, utilised the same methodology and typology as that of Australian, New Zealand and South African populations, and found that social workers in Hong Kong also reported participating in a range of political activities (Chui & Gray, 2004). With a sample size of 263 social workers from a diverse range of practice settings, findings indicated that the most popular type of political participation is that of 'voter' (81.1%) and that the second highest type, 'communicator' (64.6%), although less popular than in the study of Australian, South African and New Zealand social workers, also scored highly with Hong Kong social workers. As with the previous populations studied, the type of 'social action' was not strongly supported, with only 17.4% of Hong Kong social workers identifying participation within this category.

Findings from these studies, summarised in Table 2, suggest that participants supported a range of political strategies, with higher involvement in more mainstream and less confrontational strategies and lower involvement in more direct and anti-
establishment actions. In conceptualising activist practice, these studies emphasised activism conceived as outside of day-to-day practice, which corresponds to the historical association between activism and macro practice within the profession (Hugman, 2009; Mendes, 2007).

Table 2
Prototypes of political participation by social workers across three studies

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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Communicator</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>89.2</td>
<td>64.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocate</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>68.2</td>
<td>38.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voter</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>84.6</td>
<td>81.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lobbyist</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>44.5</td>
<td>20.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuader</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>34.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborator</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaigner</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualist</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>21.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Witness</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>29.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activist</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Barriers to social work activism. Several qualitative studies explored social workers opinions on barriers to activist practice. In identifying the contemporary climate and its impact on radical social work, participants in Wagner’s (1989) study attested to the loss of the radical spirit, which they attributed in part to the aging population of social workers, whose increased commitments to family and other responsibilities negatively impacted on their abilities to maintain an activist voice.

Participants in this study further identified the dominance of technical models of practice as being detrimental to structural, activist approaches, with the majority feeling pessimistic regarding the future of activist practice. Similarly, participants in Andrew
and Reisch’s (2002) widely cited study expressed concern with the contemporary emphasis on clinical perspectives within the profession, believing that such an emphasis limits opportunities for activist practice. As one participant said,

I think that I did at one time actually believe that I could change the world. Now I do the best in my sphere of influence and hope that how I treat others will make a difference in how they treat others.

(Andrews & Reisch, 2002, p. 21)

In contrast with these studies, Mendes (2007) found that participants in his study attested to a high level of support from employing organisations offered to participants involved in activist strategies, with all participants reporting that they felt their employers endorsed their actions. A possible explanation for this is the choice of employment. All participants worked in non-statutory settings, including charity and community organisations and all held senior positions. These findings may attest to the specific choice to work within organisations that support a social change agenda, with several participants informing that the promotion of social justice had been a stated core requirement of the role.

In exploring the impacts of pursuing an activist practice, Andrews and Reisch (2002, p. 24) provided insight into why radical social workers may choose to conceal their beliefs and disguise their behaviours, describing themselves as ‘closet radicals’. Participants reported being censored, sanctioned, accused of being troublemakers, being socially shunned, considered ‘goof balls’ by colleagues, marginalised and looked over for promotion. Despite these negative experiences, participants reported continuing to practice activist social work in such a way as to not attract too much attention. To date, no further studies exist exploring the covert activism of ‘closet radicals’ and none seek
to explore the role that age, experience and position in the workforce or field of practice may play in relation to barriers to activism.

**Activism and professional associations.** Several studies into social work activism supported the view that activism is an integral part of the social work role and as such should be an articulated goal of professional associations. Evans’ (1975) early research found that Australian social workers included in her study supported the notion that social action was an identified part of the social work role, with 90.8% of participants supporting the view that the Australian Association of Social Workers had a role to play in acting to improve social benefits and community facilities. Reeser and Epstein (1987) found that more social workers in Epstein’s (1970) earlier study (53%) believed that the profession had a role in pursuing societal change than in the 1984 sample (37%). Although participants in the 1984 sample were more likely to identify structural causes of poverty they were less likely to believe that societal change was an appropriate professional agenda. These findings suggest that there has been considerable change in social workers opinions regarding the role of the profession in seeking societal change, with the latter sample less convinced that such a role is central to their profession. When coupled with the finding that social workers in the latter sample are more likely to identify structural causes of poverty, it is somewhat surprising that this identification does not lead to the belief that attempting to change such structures is part of the professional role. In support of earlier findings, Mendes’ (2007) research found that participants endorsed the view that activism was an appropriate goal for professional association, however these findings need to be tempered with both the small size of the sample and the fact that all participants self-identified as activist social workers. One participant reflected that, “As social workers there is a strong part of our history and of our ethics that we should be activists. An activist in the sense of trying to
bring about policies which deal with structural causes of poverty” (Mendes, 2007, p. 37).

When taken together, these findings support the view expressed in the normative social work literature that social workers and the profession have a complex relationship with activist practice, characterised by divides between a pro-activist professional rhetoric and the day-to-day realities of attempting to operationalise such an approach in practice (Olson, 2007; Prichard, 1998; Reeser & Epstein, 1990; Reisch & Andrews, 2001; Specht & Courtney, 1994).

**Gaps in Research on Social Work Activism**

All of the studies reviewed in this section highlighted the lack of empirical research into social work activism. There is a need for further exploration into various elements of social work activism, including specific examples of activist activities, activism by social workers employed in large government and statutory agencies, ‘micro’ activism at the casework level, activism by less experienced practitioners and the extent of activist activity within the profession.

In accordance with the literature of the profession, these studies conceptualised activist practice as predominantly associated with actions undertaken outside of the casework role, supporting the notion that activist practice is most easily aligned with macro practice (Hugman, 2009; Mendes, 2007). This conceptualisation limits the ability of these findings to inform on how activism may function within casework relationships or to explore the role of activism within organisational workplace settings. To explore these forms of activism, it is necessary to move beyond studies of political participation, populations of self-identified activist social workers and support for activism as a professional responsibility, to the more necessarily covert experiences of those who seek an activist practice within organisational micro practice settings.
Organisational-Professional Conflict in Contemporary Welfare Organisations

Much has been written within the social work profession documenting the market-modelled restructuring of welfare services that has occurred within the last twenty years and the challenges that such changes represent for the social work profession (Baines, 2010; Bell, 1999; Carey, 2009; Collins, 2008; Ferguson & Lavalette, 2006; Gallina & College, 2010; Gregory, 2010; Hanssen & Zahl, 2003; Jones, 2001; Jones & Novak, 1993; Jordan, 2004; Lonne, McDonald, & Fox, 2004; McDonald & Reisch, 2008; McAuliffe, 2005; Muetzelfeldt & Briskman, 2003; Postle, 2001; Reisch & Jani, 2012; Rogowski, 2012; Stark, 2008; Wastell, White, Broadhurst, Peckover, & Pithouse, 2010). Although there is national and regional variation, changes to welfare service delivery in Europe, USA, Canada, and Australia have all been influenced by neo-liberal ideologies which have seen a preoccupation with accountability and outcomes, competition and efficiency, increased focus on risk management, a narrowing of eligibility for services, privatisation of services, the loss of services and the de-politicising of the public realm (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Hough, 2003; Lees et al., 2011; Lymbery, 2012; McDonald & Reisch, 2008; Reeser, 1996; Stanford, 2008; Wallace & Pease, 2011; Weinberg, 2010). Speaking to the changes in the welfare sector, McDonald and Chenoweth’s (2009) Australian study of social workers in the field of income support highlighted that social work has become a ‘business’ requiring economic outcomes. Marston and McDonald (2012) suggested that the changes associated with “reconfigured welfare states” (p. 1022), may prove particularly challenging for new social work graduates, who may experience a “mismatch between the promise of being a social change agent and their experience as a beginning practitioner” (p. 1022).
There has been recognition within the profession of the need for empirical research that explores the experiences of practitioners in relation to working within contemporary welfare organisations, and there is a growing body of research to meet that need. The complexity of attempting to practice social work within contemporary welfare organisations that do not easily align with social work values, has focused on the difficulties of trying to advance a social justice perspective and to advocate for structural causes of client vulnerability at a time when the social work role has been reduced to mechanistic tasks governed by organisational protocols and policy (Banks, 1995; Considine, 1988; Dickson, 2009; Dominelli & Hoogvelt, 1996; Fook, Ryan, & Hawkins, 2000; Jones & May, 1992; Lees et al., 2011; Simic, 1995; Tsui & Cheung, 2004; Weinberg, 2010).

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, a cluster of empirical research exploring levels of stress and the resultant phenomena of burnout appeared in the UK, Canada, USA and Australia. Although this research clearly established that social work can be a stressful experience for practitioners, more explicit links identifying organisational conflict as a key cause of moral and ethical dilemmas and the resultant consequences did not emerge until the late 1990s. This research explored conflict between organisational and professional requirements, a situation that is seen as increasingly prevalent in contemporary welfare organisations (Gallina & College, 2010; Jones, 2001).

Causes of Conflict in Contemporary Welfare Organisations

**Role conflict.** Role conflict occurs when individuals are required to fulfil multiple roles that are incompatible or in conflict (Jones, 1993). Role conflict has been found in empirical studies in the UK, Australia, Canada and the USA to be a prominent cause of concern for social workers employed in contemporary welfare organisations.
Findings from these studies informed on conflict between the ‘policing’ and ‘caring role’, between the need to assess risk and provide care and between the medical model and psycho-social model (Bell, 1999; Jones, 1993; Pickett, 2002). Social workers in the field of criminal justice reported in a British study by Gregory (2010) that the contemporary focus on punishment rather than rehabilitation has had significant impacts on their abilities to do the job they were trained to do.

Gallina and College’s (2010) study of 376 NASW members from a broad range of practice fields found that the situations that led to the greatest perceived role conflict included falsification of information for the purposes of enhancing performance outcomes or in applying for grants; inflating statistics to obtain funding; prolonging treatment to satisfy performance targets; terminating clients who could not pay; selecting clients for services based on their potential for successful treatment; and selecting clients based on their ability to pay.

**Value conflict.** Taking a different approach, Baines’ (2010) asked social workers what drew them to the social service sector and found that the majority of participants cited the potential of working for a sector that provided a good fit between their values. These findings promote the notion that congruence between professional and personal values is of importance to social workers. When questioned about the negatives of working in the sector, the majority of participants in this study spoke of the conflict between their values and those of their workplace. The findings of these studies attest to the relationship between the current welfare regime and the existence of role conflict amongst social workers.

Participants in Bell’s (1990) study spoke of the difficulty of trying to work from a participative framework within child protection services, a finding echoed by
participants in McDonald and Marston’s (2006) study of Australian social workers employed in income support. The challenge of trying to practice from a social justice framework within contemporary welfare organisations was identified by participants in a range of studies as being a key contributor to organisational-professional conflict (Bell, 1999; Healy, 2002; Jones, 1993; McDonald et al., 2008).

**Role curtailment.** Organisational-professional conflict was also identified when social workers were confronted with the loss of government funding for services aimed at delivering broader change activities, which participants felt had negatively impacted on their ability to advocate for medium and long term change for clients (Healy, 2002). Participants identified this loss of funding for longer term projects with a de-politicisation of welfare programs, providing social workers with a loss of space for advocacy interventions (Aronson & Smith, 2009). Additionally, short term reporting requirements led focus away from the complexity of need and the structural contributors to it, a situation that participants found strangled their ability to support long term change for clients (Aronson & Smith, 2009). Postle (2001) found a range of additional impacts of welfare reform on the professional social work role, including the loss of professional expertise, de-skilling and conflict between organisational requirements and the social work role. Participants’ informed that the social work role no longer represented the traditional values of the profession, being largely concerned with mechanistic tasks and a focus on tightly enforcing eligibility requirements that did not allow for in-depth client contact or client advocacy. As a result, social workers reported increased organisational tension, with 57% of participants in Abramovitz’s (2005) study attesting to an increase in organisational-professional conflict.

**Increased surveillance.** An increase in accountability and surveillance was found to create further conflict for social workers, with findings suggesting there has
been a ‘narrowing of the social’ and the requirement to define client’s needs within an increasingly superficial frame which limits their inability to address underlying systemic causes of client distress (Aronson & Smith, 2009; McDonald & Marston, 2006). The drive to be accountable through evidence based practice was further cited as a cause of conflict, as social workers felt pressured to report ‘successful’ outcomes, a situation which they informed felt like reducing complex problems to numbers (Aronson & Smith, 2009). Social workers in the field of criminal justice added further insight into the nature of organisational-professional conflict, with participants in Gregory’s (2010) study informing on the change from clinical modes of practice that focused on rehabilitation, to more punitive approaches that focused primarily on punishment.

**Ethical dilemmas.** Several studies explored ethical dilemmas for social workers employed in contemporary welfare organisations, with Abramovitz’s (2005) study finding 49.5% of participants identified an increase in ethical dilemmas. Increased ethical dilemmas proved to be both a cause of conflict and a result of conflict. Focusing on the resultant ethical dilemmas experienced when organisational demands conflicted with professional ethics, participants in these studies spoke of value conflicts, difficulties in ensuring confidentiality, promoting client self-determination, enhancing client well-being, a lack of moral agency in navigating dilemmas, a decline in professional autonomy, increased surveillance and an inability to meet the professional requirements for working towards social justice (Abramovitz, 2005; Banks & Williams, 2005; Gallina & College, 2010; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009; Singer, 1991).

In relation to how ethical dilemmas were responded to by organisations, Lonne et al.’s (2004) research found that state organisations were more likely than non-profit human service organisations to display management non-responsiveness when
confronted with ethical issues. These findings may explain why contemporary social workers may be reluctant to openly challenge organisational procedures if they perceive that little will be done to address them.

These studies found similarity in participants’ reports on the impacts of welfare reforms on contemporary social work practice in the UK, USA, Australia and Canada. Findings from these studies identified that participants felt that the social work role had been negatively impacted upon by welfare reform, which led to role conflict, a lack of congruence between professional and organisational requirements, the decline in opportunities to practice progressively and a rise in ethical dilemmas.

Impacts of Working in Contemporary Welfare Organisations

Empirical research has explored the experience of organisational-professional conflict for social workers employed in contemporary welfare organisations. Unlike earlier studies, this body of research makes explicit links between organisational-professional conflict and stress, highlighting the importance of seeing employee stress not as an individual failing, but as an organisational one. Sources of job stress were identified as under resourcing, time pressure, increased documentation requirements, the inability to effectively assist clients, conflict between a caring and policing role, organisational conflict and negative organisational culture, (Baines, 2010; Huxley et al., 2005; McLean & Andrew, 1999; Storey & Billingham, 2001; Thompson, Stradling, Murphy, & O'Neill, 1996). All participants in Storey and Billingham's (2001) study stated that they had experienced stress resulting from a lack of resources to meet demand, which required them to decide who would receive assistance and who would not. In ranking job stressors, McLean and Andrew (1999) found that the most stress resulted from role conflict, contradictory instructions and organisational culture. In agreement with these findings, Balloch, Pahl and McLean (1998) found a major source
of stress and job dissatisfaction was “conflicting demand” with 23% of social workers reporting that they experienced this “all or most of the time” (Balloch et al., 1998, p. 336). A participant in Thompson et al.’s (1996) study spoke to the culture of individual blame that is fostered when social workers exhibit signs of stress, commenting that,

Social work agencies need to remember just how stressful social work can be and, when an employee shows clear signs of stress, the question should not be: 'What is the weakness in this employee?', but what is the weakness in this organization that allows this to happen?

(Thompson et al., 1996, p. 663)

In identifying which workplaces contributed to the most stress and job dissatisfaction, Balloch et al.’s (1998) large study found that social workers employed in statutory social service settings experienced more stress than workers in other parts of the health and welfare services. Role ambiguity within statutory welfare work emerged as a central contributor to job dissatisfaction and stress, with social workers reporting an inability to do work that they considered important to their job, which they identified as therapeutic work consistent with the aims and values of social work practice (Balloch et al., 1998). Findings from Tham and Meagher’s (2009) recent study confirmed that statutory child welfare workers experience more acute workforce problems than other human service professionals.

Findings from a range of empirical studies established that the costs of attempting to practice social work within contemporary welfare organisations include physical ill health, impaired mental health, increased anxiety, disillusionment, frustration, depression, insomnia, withdrawal, anger and despair (Gibbs, 2001; Huxley et al., 2005; Jones, 2001; Kim, Ji, & Kao, 2011; McAuliffe, 2005; Postle, 2001).
Huxley et al.’s (2005) study of 237 UK frontline social service workers employed in the mental health field found that 47% of respondents scored in the range indicating psychological disorder on the General Health Questionnaire. Alarmingly, research conducted with 175 front line and management social work staff at a large urban child protection service in Canada found considerable stress levels, with 48.7% of managers in the high or severe range for symptoms of post-traumatic stress syndrome (Regehr, Chau, Leslie, & Howe, 2002).

Fear emerged as a common theme in a range of empirical studies, with participants citing a fear of repercussions should they seek to address organisational-professional conflict, with the belief that any challenge to the organisation would be reframed as an individual failing of the worker (Gibbs, 2001; Huxley et al., 2005; Jones, 2001; Lonne et al., 2004; McAuliffe, 2005; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009; McDonald et al., 2008). Fifty-five percent of participants in Lonne et al.’s (2004) Australian study of human service workers agreed with the statement that, “practitioners are frightened to publicly complain about what’s really happening in the new environment” (Lonne et al., 2004, p. 353). Huxley et al.’s (2005) participants confirmed the role of fear of reprisal, declaring that there is risk associated with complaining to management, with one participant informing that 'there appears to be a perception in management that workers who complain about poor services for staff and recipients are moaners' (Huxley et al., 2005, p. 1074). Gibbs’ (2001) participants were fearful of the loss of their professional reputation should they be publicly held accountable for wrong decisions, citing an organisational culture of 'blaming', which they reported often sees individual workers internalising blame as opposed to confronting organisational deficiencies. With findings attesting to the prevalence of serious negative impacts, it is not surprising that not one participant in Jones’ (2001) study felt they would recommend their job as a career.
Impacts resulting from working in contemporary welfare organisations reported in these studies are significant. The resultant actions that social workers take when responding to these impacts are discussed below.

**Actions Undertaken by Social Workers**

Despite the overwhelmingly negative findings on the impacts of working within contemporary welfare organisations on social workers, very little empirical research exists that explored social workers' actions when confronted with organisational-professional conflict and the resultant stress that it had been shown to cause. Of these few empirical research studies that addressed social workers' actions when faced with the negative impacts of welfare reforms, the majority focused on either individually adapting or leaving (Drake & Yadama, 1996; Gibbs, 2001; Huxley et al., 2005; Jones, 2001; Pockett, 2002; Postle, 2001). To date, there is a paucity of research exploring social workers who respond to organisational-professional conflict by whistle-blowing, despite findings on the prevalence of ethical conflicts that may warrant such an action in contemporary welfare organisations (Mansbach & Bachner, 2008).

Of these studies, several include participants' references to colleagues who adapted to organisational-professional conflict by retreating from the social work role, withdrawing or practicing mechanistically (Aronson & Smith, 2009; McDonald et al., 2008; Regehr et al., 2002). Confirming the bleak reports in the wider discussion within the field, participants in several studies reported the intention to leave as a direct result of organisational-professional conflict (Gibbs, 2001; Huxley et al., 2005; Jones, 2001; Regehr et al., 2002). Huxley et al. (2005) reported that 28% of 237 participants informed that they were considering leaving their current employer and 21% had specific plans to do so. Participants in Jones' (2001) study spoke of the commonality of seeing colleagues walk off the job after a stressful event, disappearing or hiding for
hours, taking sick leave and resigning. All participants in this study knew of colleagues who were actively looking for non-State social work jobs or were considering resigning. One participant in the study by Regehr et al. (2002) wondered, “what do I have to do first? Break down or find another job?” (p. 31). The choice to leave stressful work places has been identified by participants in earlier studies carried out in the USA, UK and Norway, attesting to the high rate of turnover in statutory workplace environments (Gibson, McGrath, & Reid, 1989; Hagen, 1989; Himle, Jayaratne, & Thyness, 1986; Samantrai, 1992).

There are even fewer studies that explore social workers who stay and actively resist. Given that research identified participants’ fear of repercussions, it is not surprising that the methods social workers use to challenge contemporary welfare organisations remains a largely untold story. Two studies reported on individual participants who chose to actively resist. Postle's (2001) study reported that one participant resisted the changes brought about by welfare reforms by undertaking 'undercover work', however this tantalising insight is not further explored. In contrast to most participants choice to withdraw, one participant in McAuliffe’s (2005) Australian study informed that, “I also became aggressive at work, particularly in meetings where some manager was speaking the government speak...I'd let them know I thought it was crap” (McAuliffe, 2005, para. 28). This same participant also spoke of disregarding directives from management in favour of 'doing her own thing', although what is meant by this is not identified.

Six studies from the UK, USA, Canada and Australia were found that specifically explored the role of resistance by social workers in contemporary welfare organisations (Abramovitz, 2005; Aronson & Smith, 2009; Baines, 2001; Carey & Foster, 2011; Gregory, 2010; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009). One additional study
utilised data from an earlier study conducted by the researchers to explore instances of covert and overt resistance (Fine & Teram, 2012). Social workers in these studies reported a range of activist resistance strategies, including acting in opposition to organisational directives; utilising consciousness raising strategies; looking the other way when client's did not comply with directives; ‘creatively’ filling out forms to advance the chances that clients will receive services; over stating a client problem to promote their access to services; being 'flexible' with rules and laws; refusing to carry out directives from senior management; expanding entitlements for clients who do not officially meet eligibility for services; 'turning a blind eye' when workers evaded directives from management; and case by case 'rule bending' (Abramovitz, 2005; Aronson & Smith, 2009; Baines, 2001; Carey & Foster, 2011; Fine & Teram, 2012; Gregory, 2010; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009). With the exceptions of openly refusing to comply with management directives and challenging management on practices participants believed were unjust, all of these strategies were ‘covert’ in nature, in recognition of the potential dangers that may have resulted from overtly challenging (Abramovitz, 2005; Fine & Teram, 2012). Surprisingly, Baines’ (2001) participants defined overtime as resistance, reporting that they believed extending their working day was not just altruistic but also a protest against social injustice. The researcher noted however that this form of resistance was also self-exploitive, as workers were strained by the experience.

Not all studies explored the motivations for participants in choosing to covertly resist. In speaking of their motivation for activist resistance, participants in some studies informed that strategies utilised were aimed at improving opportunities for clients or advancing what they believed should be the core objectives of their practice - notably to
promote social justice and challenge structural inequity (Abramovitz, 2005; Aronson & Smith, 2009; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009).

Carey and Foster’s (2011) study briefly explored the experiences for social workers attempting to utilise covert strategies to actively resist organisational policies and procedures which conflict with professional ethical requirements, with a participant in this study expressing a sense of pride and dignity in relation to her covert activities. Insights into the experiences for social workers who choose covert workplace resistance activities remains largely unknown, with researchers suggesting that further study into progressive practice by frontline social work staff is needed (Abramovitz, 2005; Baines, 2001).

That the activism identified in each of these studies is ‘covert’ is not surprising when findings relating to the prevalence of fear of repercussion for speaking out are considered. This fear may provide some explanation for the lack of empirical research into more public methods of resistance, such as whistle blowing, as social workers are aware of the negative costs of openly challenging organisations. Given the mounting evidence on conflict experienced by social workers in contemporary welfare organisations, it is reasonable to expect that these environments are rich habitats for ‘closet’ activists. As social workers have a professional obligation to challenge organisational practices and policies that are incongruent with their professional ethics, more exploration is needed on the ways that social workers are choosing to meet this requirement and the experiences of attempting to do so, within workplaces that do not encourage or permit open challenging.

**Workplace Resistance**

Although there is minimal research within the social work field exploring micro activist strategies of resistance within contemporary welfare organisations, literature
from the fields of sociology, education and nursing establishes both the existence of workplace resistance and the strategies being utilised (Hodson, 1991; Knights & McCabe, 2000; Mulholland, 2004; Parker, 1993; Sachs, 2003; Thomas & Davies, 2005). Several concepts have emerged out of the study of workplace resistance from within sociology that are meaningful for this research project. These include the role of resistance within welfare services informed by neo-liberal ideology and the associated growth in ‘everyday resistance’ (also referred to in the literature as ‘informal’ and ‘routine’ resistance).

Discussion by various scholars has included the development of different models and typographies to define and explore everyday resistance (Fleming & Sewell, 2002; Hollander & Einwohner, 2004; Prasad & Prasad, 2000). Despite a significant volume of literature, little consensus existed on how to define workplace resistance. Hollander and Einwohner (2004) suggested that debate over a definition for workplace resistance generally concerned consideration over the ‘scale’ of resistance (individual or collective), the ‘level of coordination’ (purposeful unified action), the ‘targets’ (individuals, organisations or social structures) and the ‘goals’ (achieving small or wide spread change). Traditional notions of workplace resistance have required that for an act to be considered resistant, it must be of a large scale involving collective action, targeting organisations or broad social change and aimed at comprehensive change (May, 1999; Prasad & Prasad, 2000; Weitz, 2001). This definition corresponds with the conceptualisation of activism from within the social work profession, which has largely focused on collective action and macro change strategies. During the growth in discussion and research on workplace resistance within sociology in the late 1990s, the traditional definition of workplace resistance began to be challenged resulting in the inclusion of more subtle, informal and individually located modes of resistance (May,
The interest in identifying more subtle forms of workplace resistance arose alongside the notion that opportunities for resistance had been shut down or at the very least limited by new management practices that had isolated and individualised workers (Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995). Several writers contended that whilst it may prove true that traditional notions of resistance, associated with trade unionism and collective action, have been silenced, in their place more informal and routine forms of resistance have emerged (Fleming & Sewell, 2002; Knights & McCabe, 2000; Mulholland, 2004; Thomas & Davies, 2005). Empirical evidence into this phenomenon has identified informal resistance practices that included absenteeism, resignation, ignoring management directives and disciplinary action, falsifying reports, concealing information, omitting to inform management, bad mouthing management and the use of cynicism and humour to resist (Hodson, 1991; Knights & McCabe, 2000; Mulholland, 2004; Parker, 1993; Thomas & Davies, 2005).

Of use to this research project is Prasad and Prasad’s (2000) concept of ‘owned’ everyday workplace resistance, which established that resistance can be identified as such if the instigator claimed that the intention of their actions was to in some way, however subtle, challenge and resist. Such a definition is solely located within the subjective reality of the workers themselves and does not require authentication by any third party. Additionally, the concept of ‘owned resistance’ is not concerned with the outcome or effectiveness of the act, but remains centrally concerned with the intentions of the instigator.

There are two empirical studies that explicitly referenced the sociological concept of workplace resistance within the field of sociology that included social workers as participants (Griffiths, 1998; Thomas & Davies, 2005). Thomas and Davies (2005) explored subtle workplace resistance in four senior professionals employed
within new public management organisations, one of which was a social work manager. Findings were that individual’s identities as resisters were formed within particular contexts, with the social work manager reporting that his self-identification as a ‘maverick’ allowed him the space to contest organisational policy and to take actions that resisted those procedures that he did not agree with. Griffiths’ (1998) qualitative study, although small, draws from sociological literature on humour to investigate its use in two community mental health teams, to explore its potential for resistance. This study found that humour was used as a resistant behaviour aimed at reducing and challenging the power dynamic, which saw the psychiatrist as the primary decision maker. As such, the resistant humour was most often directed at the psychiatrists, challenging their professional opinions and the medical model on which they based their decision-making on. A potential weakness of the study is the fact that participants were aware that the researcher was studying humour as resistance and that this may have unduly influenced the emergence of humour within team meetings that were attended by the researcher.

Although the concept of workplace resistance is primarily located within the field of sociology it has informed research within other disciplines, including nursing. A significant body of research within the field of nursing has found a range of resistant strategies employed by workers attempting to find congruence between professional and organisational requirements which support the findings from these social work studies (Ahern & McDonald, 2002; Hutchinson, 1990; Lützén & Schreiber, 1998; Lützén, Nordstrom, & Evertson, 1995; Lützén & Nordin, 1994; Oddi, Cassidey, & Fisher, 1995; Penticuff & Walden, 2000; Peter et al., 2004; Sleutel, 2000; Smith, 1996; Smith, Droppleman, & Thomas, 1996; Wurzbach, 1999). The concept of the nurse advocate has long been established, with the recognition that, “A principled level nurse is not a
conformist, but he or she questions rules that do not serve human values” (Hutchinson, 1990, p. 4). Hutchinson’s (1990) concept of “responsible subversion” examined the actions nurses took when confronted with rules and policies in the workplace that conflicted with their personal or professional ethics. Findings established that when nurses identified that the rule in question did not correspond with their personal and professional goal of optimising patient care, they might have chosen to bend the rule. Hutchinson (1990) established that rule-bending motivated by the desire to improve patient outcome was 'responsible' as it broadly corresponded to the professional requirements as set out by nursing codes of ethics and standards. However, such behaviour may also be subversive as it may conflict with organisational policies and procedures and for this reason, the process is a complex one requiring much deliberation and self-reflection on the part of the nurse. Peter et al.’s (2004) more recent review of the literature on nursing resistance and moral conflict supported this notion, finding that nurse workplace resistance occurred when moral conflict arose, and frequently resulted in the nurse being unwilling to act in compliance with the rule or policy, and instead choosing to act in the best interests of the patient. Such action was therefore ethically motivated. Additional research into nurses’ moral acts of resistance has identified resistant behaviours including optimising patient outcomes through choice of wording in documentation, informing patients and families of information not sanctioned by physicians, refusing to participate in care orders, delaying paperwork and communicating in a covert fashion (Ahern & McDonald, 2002; Lützén & Schreiber, 1999; Penticuff & Walden, 2000; Sleutel, 2000; Wurzbach, 1999). Research into workplace resistance in nursing included some exploration of the personal and professional characteristics that might lead to nurse activism, identified as courage, honesty, confidence, assertiveness, unconventionality, diplomacy and argumentation.
skills (Georges & Grypdonck, 2002; Kurtz & Wang, 1991; Scott, 1998). Exploring the outcomes of nurses’ subversive actions, research found that workplace resistance sometimes led to changes in the rules themselves, as informal practices became accepted (Hutchinson, 1990; Wurzbach, 1990).

The concept of informal workplace resistance found in sociology and utilised to inform research within the nursing profession, is useful for this research project in that it establishes that subtle, informal, ‘everyday’ resistance within workplaces can be conceptualised as activism. Of additional use are research findings that identified a range of activities that constituted informal workplace resistance. These activities were also identified in a small number of social work studies, lending further weight to the assertion that social workers may be involved in informal workplace resistance (Abramovitz, 2005; Aronson & Smith, 2009; Baines, 2001; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009). Framing informal workplace resistance as an example of activist practice opens up a space for conceptualising social work activism within micro practice, as opposed to traditional notions of activism as a macro practice.

**Key Points from Literature and Discourse Review**

This section summarises the key features of the literature review. In contrast to other allied health professions, the ethical documents of social work professional associations explicitly stated that social justice activism is a requirement of professional practice (ACA, 2002; ACWA, 1999; ANMC, 2008a, 2008b; APA, 2007; IFSW, 2001; PACFA, 2001). Additionally, the ethical documents of IFSW member countries provided guidance on navigating organisational-professional conflict, with six countries explicitly stating that professional ethics takes precedence over employers’ policies and procedures (AASW, 1999; BASW, 2002; CASW, 2005a, 2005b; NASW, 2005; SSR, 2006; USWI, 2007).
Despite support in the literature for the role of activism in the social work profession, there is a limited amount of research exploring activism and what does exist conceptualises activism as a form of macro practice. These studies identified a range of macro activist strategies that included political participation, engaging in critical discussions, advocating for client groups, collaborating with others and joining existing issue groups (Chui & Gray, 2004; Domanski, 1998; Gray et al., 2002; Reeser & Epstein, 1987).

Studies of social workers who identified as ‘activist’ reported a range of barriers to activist practice, identifying the negative impact of contemporary welfare ideologies, that contributed to a dominance of technical practice models and an accompanying loss of structural, activist approaches (Andrews & Reisch, 2002; Wagner, 1989). Participants informed that the culture of contemporary welfare organisations had led to a concealing of activist activities, for fear of reprisal should more open forms of radical practice be attempted (Andrews & Reisch, 2002).

Both scholarly and empirical literature has established that social work practice within contemporary welfare organisations provides increased opportunity for organisational-professional conflict, with findings suggesting that conflict was more prevalent in statutory practice environments.

Empirical research has reported on a range of situations that caused conflict for social workers employed in contemporary welfare organisations, including role conflict, loss of services, chronic under resourcing, loss of professional expertise, increased accountability and surveillance, loss of client time and increased paperwork (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Bell, 1990; Healy, 2002; Jones, 1993; McDonald et al., 2008; McDonald & Marston, 2006; Postle, 2001). As a result, findings from several studies attested to the rise in ethical dilemmas, as social workers attempted to implement their professional
values in environments that were incongruent with these values and increasingly hostile (Abramovitz, 2005; Banks & Williams, 2005; Gallina & College, 2010; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009).

The negative impacts on social workers of working in contemporary welfare organisations were found to be serious, with several studies identifying the existence of severe stress, emotional exhaustion, impaired mental health, frustration, depression, insomnia, withdrawal, anger and despair (Gibbs, 2001; Huxley et al., 2005; Jones, 2001; McAuliffe, 2005, Postle, 2001; Regehr et al., 2002). One large study found that social workers employed in statutory social service settings experienced more stress than workers in other parts of the health and welfare services (Balloch et al., 1998).

Fear emerged as a common theme, with participants in multiple studies attesting to increased fear of reprisals should they openly challenge employing organisations (Gibbs, 2001; Huxley et al., 2005; Jones, 2001; Lonne et al., 2004; McAuliffe, 2005; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009; McDonald et al., 2008).

The research established that when confronted with organisational-professional conflict, social workers responded by staying and ‘coping’ or ‘breaking down’ and leaving, with most voicing the intention of finding alternative work (Drake & Yadama, 1996; Gibbs, 2001; Huxley et al., 2005; Jones, 2001; Pockett, 2002; Postle, 2001). Although an option, whistle blowing as a result of organisational-professional conflict is chronically under researched (Mansbach & Bachner, 2008). A much smaller number of studies identified a third reaction to conflict, reporting on social workers who stay and resist (Abramovitz, 2005; Aronson & Smith, 2009; Baines, 2001; McAuliffe, 2005; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009; Postle, 2001).

Reports from social workers who actively resisted when faced with organisational-professional conflict identified a range of micro activities including,
acting in opposition to organisational directives, looking the other way when client's did not comply with directives, ‘creatively’ filling out forms, over stating a client problem to promote their access to services, being ‘flexible’ with rules and laws, refusing to carry out directives, expanding entitlements for clients who do not officially meet eligibility for services, 'turning a blind eye' when workers evaded directives from management and case by case 'rule bending' (Abramovitz, 2005; Aronson & Smith, 2009; Baines, 2001; Carey & Foster, 2011; Fine & Teram, 2012; Gregory, 2010; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009). None of these studies explored in depth the experiences for social workers utilising covert resistant strategies as a form of activism. As a result, little is known about the motivations or the personal and professional costs and benefits of choosing to resist.

Sociological literature informed on the growth of informal forms of workplace resistance, reporting that opportunities for more overt traditional notions of resistance had been shut down or limited by neo-liberal systems of management (Clarke, 2004; Thomas & Davies, 2005; Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995). Practices associated with the concept of informal workplace resistance identified within sociological and nursing research are congruent with resistant practices identified in social work research (Hodson, 1991; Knights & McCabe, 2000; Mulholland, 2004; Parker, 1993; Thomas & Davies, 2005). Utilising the sociological concept of informal workplace resistance provides a method of conceiving of social work activism as a micro practice.

Considered together, this literature established that social work activism is a requirement of professional ethical practice, that contemporary welfare organisations created a range of organisational-professional ethical conflicts, that social workers were reluctant to openly challenge their employers in relation to these conflicts and as a result may utilise a range of informal workplace resistance strategies to deliver on their
professional requirement for activism. To date little research exists on this phenomena and no research exists which explicitly explores the experience for social work practitioners utilising informal workplace resistance as a form of professional activism.

The next chapter will set out the conceptual framework and methodology chosen for this study and will include discussion of participant criteria, sampling, recruitment, data collection and analysis and ethical issues.
Chapter Three

Methodology

This chapter presents the overview and rationale for the research method and design, beginning with a justification of the choice of a qualitative research design. Continuing with a description and rationale for the conceptual framework that was chosen for the research, this chapter goes on to discuss the conduct of the study, including issues of sampling, participant criteria and recruitment. A description and rationale for the choice of the data collection method of Email Facilitated Reflective Dialogue is provided (McAuliffe, 2003). This is a method that although relatively recent in its development, has been widely used in a variety of fields and has been established in the literature as useful for eliciting in-depth data that has the potential to prompt participants to be highly reflective (Egan, Chenoweth, & McAuliffe, 2006; Gilzean, 2011; Houston, 2008; Ison, 2009; King & Horrocks, 2010; Klenke, 2008; Leach, Cornwell, Fleming, & Haines, 2010; McCoyd, 2006; Novick, 2008; Price, Richardson, & Jelfs, 2007). Data analysis is described in detail, both with regards to manual and computer analysis processes. Strategies to promote methodological rigour are discussed. Ethical issues of consent, confidentiality and benefits and risks of the research are identified with discussion of processes utilised to ensure ethical requirements are met. Limitations of the study are disclosed. Finally, methodological difficulties are discussed with reflection on the experience of utilising Email Facilitated Reflective Dialogue explored in some depth, and conclusions made about the strengths and challenges of this method for this research.

Conceptual Framework

Located within a constructionist epistemology, this research understands knowledge to be “contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of
interaction between human beings and their world” (Crotty, 2003, p. 42).

Constructionism holds as paramount the role of the social context in constructing meaning, with meaning built as individuals engage with and interpret their environment (Crotty, 2003). In this way, meaning is not created, but rather constructed. Constructionist research therefore understands participants as being engaged in a process of ‘meaning making’, as they are confronted by and react to their environments. This epistemological approach allows for the acknowledgement of the important role that individual values, beliefs and worldviews play in the individual’s construction of meaning.

Informing this research is a conceptual framework that has as its foundation the theoretical perspective of critical theory. At its core, critical theory seeks human emancipation “to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (Horkheimer, 1982, p. 244). In its broadest sense, critical theory seeks to expose and challenge domination and oppression. Associated with a varied range of ‘schools’ and social movements, critical theory holds as its purpose, social inquiry into the domination of people in modern society (Crotty, 2003). Critical theory is concerned with notions of power, allowing for critical exploration of the way that power is held and enacted by social institutions (Crotty, 2003). Critical theory also holds at its core the notion that knowledge is power and that with knowledge of the ways in which humans are oppressed; opportunity arises to take action to challenge oppressive structures (Held, 1980). Issues of power are relevant to this research as it is concerned with social workers taking action against perceived injustices promoted by statutory organisations which have at least in part a controlling function over the lives of vulnerable people. As such, it is appropriate for this research to utilise a theoretical
perspective which allows for explicit exploration of power and the ways in which individuals seek re-dress through activism to challenge or limit this power.

Within the field of critical theory, the work of Italian philosopher and political activist, Antonio Gramsci, provides a useful lens for this research. Gramsci’s work is not unfamiliar in social work literature, having been used in analysis of contemporary, neo-liberal welfare ideologies that continue to impact on social work service delivery (Brookfield, 2009; Carey, 2009; Garrett, 2008, 2009, 2010; Horder, 2007; Mayo, 2010; Sewpaul, 2006; Singh & Cowden, 2009; Webb, 2010). In attempting to explain why the revolution posited by Marx was not forthcoming, Gramsci developed the theory of cultural hegemony, which holds that culture and ideology play an important role in controlling individuals (Gramsci, 1971). Physical or economic domination are therefore not the only means by which individuals are oppressed, but additionally, the dominant culture is able to ideologically indoctrinate individuals so that they remain subordinate (Simon, 1991). As this research project reports on resistance by social workers to the challenges associated with welfare services that are influenced by neo-liberal ideology, the theory of cultural hegemony can provide a lens when considering that social workers report working for organisations whose practices require them to be in conflict with both their professional ethics and their personal values. Additionally, social workers have traditionally challenged the existing hegemony through alliance with other groups and as this research seeks to explore, may now be individually employing strategies to challenge the dominant hegemony, at a time when it has begun to show ‘cracks’. Finally, social work participants in this study share their hope that their actions might bring about a challenge to the dominant hegemony. Gramsci’s (1971) theory of cultural hegemony will therefore be used in interpreting the data in this research project.
The method was also informed by both feminist research and critical reflective practice, which is aimed at fostering a research environment that explicitly seeks to limit traditional power relationships between researcher and researched, creating instead a shared learning process whereby the possibility exists for both participants and researchers to be moved and changed by the process (Roberts, 1981). Feminist research is concerned with challenging social inequality and recognises that as the experts of their own experiences, participants are best placed to challenge forms of oppression in their lives (Roberts, 1981). Such a concern recognises the opportunities afforded by consciousness raising and solidarity, which occurs when individuals are empowered by the knowledge that they are not alone, but rather struggling together against a common experience (Roberts, 1981). Recognising that “the change of the status quo becomes the starting point for a scientific quest” (Mies, 1983, p. 135), feminist research moves beyond exploration of a topic for the sake of knowledge generation, to a motivation to use such knowledge to challenge oppression. Additionally, feminist research recognises the researcher as part of the research process, requiring the researcher to locate themself in relation to the topic being explored (Crotty, 2003). Participants may feel more affinity and equality with an insider-researcher, who has insight into the experiences shared by both participants and researcher (Roberts, 1981).

Critical reflective practice continues to grow as a contemporary social work perspective that holds emancipatory possibilities for the social work practitioner (Payne, 2009). Fook (2004) contends that critical reflection “can provide a means of reconstructing, and thus changing, the ways in which individuals perceive and relate to their social worlds” (p. 16). Fook (2002) further informs that through critical reflection, individuals are able to take action to implement change. In the spirit of this definition, this research seeks to facilitate opportunities for participants to critically reflect on their
practice, so that the work that they do and their very selves may potentially be transformed in the process.

**Rationale for Qualitative Research**

The methods utilised by this research are informed at each stage by the theoretical perspective and methodologies. Informed by previous studies relating to the topic, this research utilised a qualitative methodology. The choice of a qualitative approach to the research is based on the usefulness of this approach to affording in-depth enquiry, which allows the researcher to explore and discuss with participants and in the process reach a depth that allows participants to explain and reflect upon their experiences (Grbich, 1999). Further, the topic being discussed for this research is a sensitive one that requires participants to self reflect on behaviours that may be difficult to explore and may expose them to potential repercussion. It was felt that this would be better facilitated by the opportunity for researcher and participant to build a sense of trust and rapport that is well catered for in qualitative research (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). Finally, not a great deal is known about the topic being explored from within the field of social work, and therefore the research needed to be able to probe for insight into this phenomena, in ongoing dialogue with participants. It was felt that in order to do this with sufficient depth, qualitative methods were most suitable. Additionally, this research seeks to promote power sharing between researcher and participant by decreasing power hierarchies through a range of processes that may be more naturally aligned with the qualitative method (Alston & Bowles, 2003).

For these reasons, it was decided that qualitative research methods were more applicable than quantitative methods for this particular study.

**Influence of Social Work Principles**
As a social work practitioner, the choice of methodology for the research was also influenced by my own professional framework, which is solidly based on social work values. Respect for persons, social justice and professional integrity form the foundation of my practice framework and prompted me to adopt a research approach that embodied these values. For this reason, I felt naturally drawn to the qualitative method, which I believed would provide opportunity for participants to make choices about how they wished to express themselves and to do so with opportunity for ongoing reflection. Social work principles also afforded me a level of comfort with the choice of feminist research methods, as my professional framework includes acknowledgement of power imbalances between individuals and motivates me to seek out ways to name this power and attempt to ameliorate it where possible.

Robson (2002) identifies that there are degrees of insiderness, including practitioner research, where the researcher has direct involvement with the research setting. Although I have never been employed in a statutory social work role, I am a member of the social work ‘community’ and this affords me a level of insiderness. Additionally, Devault (2004) identifies a level of insider research defined by the feeling of partisanship to the emotional or political affiliations of participants, as may be the case in feminist research. The benefits of this level of insiderness are that participants report feeling comfortable talking openly about their experiences as they feel that our shared professional qualifications promoted a level of understanding.

**Research Questions**

Building on gaps identified in the existing empirical research, this study aimed to elicit information that first described the activities that were being undertaken by social workers, second explored how participants felt that their actions were challenging organisational-professional conflict, and finally gain insight into what the experience of
undertaking these actions was like. This research therefore asks the following primary question: What are the experiences of Australian statutory social workers regarding the types of covert activism they practice, and their reasons for doing so? Additional prompt questions that guided the interview process are listed in Appendix D. These questions were not asked in any particular order, but rather were woven into the interview process where appropriate.

Given that this research explored ‘covert workplace resistance’ in social work and there is a minimal amount of literature on this topic, an in-depth understanding of this phenomena is needed. The participant’s experiences therefore would be best understood by inviting them to engage in a high level of self-reflection that could be obtained by facilitating multiple opportunities for the researcher and participant to engage in dialogue. This led to the choice of the Email Facilitated Reflective Dialogue method, which in turn influenced the choice of questions, as the secondary questions would need to be open and flexible enough to be woven into a dialogue that takes place over time (McAuliffe, 2003). Such an approach allows both researcher and participant to influence the course of the dialogue, as both respond to each other’s responses. The interview schedule developed therefore served as an initial guide, as well as a checklist to ensure all topics were adequately covered by the end of the dialogue process.

**Participant Criteria**

All participants needed to be qualified social workers, having completed a qualification that meets eligibility requirements for membership of the AASW. Overseas trained social workers were eligible for inclusion, should their qualifications be equivalent to Australian social work qualifications. Participants were not required to hold current AASW membership as this is voluntary and a large number of Australian social workers choose not to be members. All participants needed to be over 18 and
capable of giving informed consent. No restrictions were placed on years of social work experience in the employing organisation. Of interest to this research was whether years of social work experience or level of expertise was an influencing factor in informal workplace resistance activism and therefore a range of experience and expertise was desirable.

Participants were current or recent past employees of an Australian statutory welfare organisation. The decision to include past employees of statutory organisations is aimed at including social workers who may have left employment due to issues arising from organisational-professional conflict and the actions they may have taken to resist such conflict. Participants who were past employees needed to have concluded their employment no more than two years prior. A two year time frame was chosen to reduce the potential for participants to have less accurate historical recall. For the purposes of this research project, statutory welfare organisations identified included:

1. State child protection services
2. State corrections services
3. State mental health services
4. State hospital services
5. Federal income support service

No restrictions were placed on the title that participants were employed under, in recognition that the role of social work within contemporary welfare organisations is differently titled. However, participants’ qualifications must have been a determining factor in the employer hiring them for their role.

In accordance with Prasad and Prasad’s (2000) concept of ‘owned’ everyday workplace resistance, which establishes that resistance can be identified as such if the instigator claims that the intention of their actions was in some way, however subtle, to
challenge and resist perceived injustice. Potential participants were instead provided with a definition of informal workplace resistance and asked during a recruitment dialogue to discuss motivations and actions that they believe are resistant. Potential participants’ who identified a motivation to maximise client opportunities as the primary reason for undertaking informal workplace resistance were included, whilst those expressing a primarily self-interested motivation, were excluded (Hutchinson, 1990; Peter et al. 2004).

As interviews were conducted via email and potential participants were asked if they had access to and were comfortable with email communication over the Internet. Whilst it is recognised that this may have excluded potential participants who were unable to access email, the benefits of reaching a national sample are believed to outweigh this constraint.

**Sampling and Recruitment**

The sampling method aimed to reach social workers who self report utilising informal activist resistance strategies within statutory employing organisations. As it is not known how many social workers are involved in such activities, the recruitment process was aimed at alerting as many social workers as possible to the existence of the research. It was hoped that a sample size of approximately twenty participants would be achieved. Participants were sourced using purposive and snowball sampling methods. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to utilise their own knowledge of a population, based on previous research and experience, seeking a smaller subset of the larger group (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). Snowball sampling provides further access into populations that may be difficult to locate (Alston & Bowles, 2003).

Of concern was the need to recruit social workers who were not necessarily members of the AASW, a population difficult to access due to the dispersed nature of
the professional landscape. It is not known how many social workers are employed in Australia, as many are not employed under the title of ‘social worker’. This situation has led to the use of the AASW member lists in many research studies as a useful access point to reach Australian social workers. However, as only a small number of Australian social workers choose to be members of the AASW, this means that a potentially large sample of social workers may be under represented in research. Snowball sampling potentially provided access to this non-AASW member group of Australian social workers.

With the exception of participants from the field of Corrections, all four other categories were represented and the sample contained a spread across all States and Territories, excepting Western Australia and South Australia. Contact was made using purposive sampling with several social workers known to colleagues who were employed in the field of Corrections and who might be aware of potential participants, but this proved unsuccessful.

In an effort to reach as wide a national sample as possible, initial recruitment was to involve advertisement in key AASW documents as well as targeted emails to senior social work staff employed within statutory welfare organisations identified as appropriate for this research. However, recruitment proved difficult. The initial twenty emails were sent to people who had expressed interest in the project from hearing about it at professional development events, or who were identified by myself and my PhD supervisor as having potential interest in the project. The response to these initials emails was positive, with a number receiving them expressing interest in the project and requesting further information. Despite all those initially emailed requesting and being sent an Information Sheet and Consent Form, only two decided to participate.
The next phase of recruitment occurred when information on the project was advertised in the AASW e-bulletin, which is emailed to all members who opt to receive it. Once again, the response was positive, and yet few consented to participate. After these phases of the recruitment process, nine participants had consented to be interviewed.

Due to the fact that the first two phases of recruitment had attracted only nine participants, a third approach was adopted. This included sending targeted emails to colleagues who it was hoped would serve as ‘gatekeepers’, accessing their wider networks and practice knowledge of where potential participants might be located. This email asked recipients to forward on the information on the project to any parties they felt might be appropriate. This snowball sampling method eventually elicited a further six participants. From a total of 76 emails sent by myself, and a further 12 sent by two supervisors, 32 people requested to receive the Information Sheet and Consent Form, with 16 participants making the decision to participate. Of these, one pulled out of the project after two emails, with the decision by the participant that she did not fit the eligibility criteria as she had previously believed that she did. The final sample was 15.

**Data Collection**

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted via email, using Email Facilitated Reflective Dialogue (EFRD) over a secure Internet connection which was password protected. EFRD was first developed by McAuliffe (2003) in a study of ethical dilemmas in social work practice. Since then, EFRD has been successfully utilised for a number of national and international qualitative research projects from a variety of disciplines, including nursing, education, rehabilitation counselling, management and library studies (Benford & Stanton, 2009; Egan et al., 2006; Gilzean, 2011; Houston, 2008; Ison, 2009; Kazmer, 2007; King & Horrocks, 2010; Klenke,
It is believed appropriate for this project due both to its ability to allow access to a national sample and to enhance opportunities for practitioners to move beyond reporting actions to reflecting on them (Benford & Standen, 2009; Egan et al., 2006; Kazmer, 2007; McAuliffe, 2003; McCoyd, 2006; Parker, 2008). Critical reflection is of central importance to this research, in recognition both of its potential to be transformative and of its role in facilitating critical appraisal of structural inequality, and it was felt that EFRD enhanced opportunities for critical reflection (Fook, 2002). A further rationale for the choice of EFRD is its alignment with feminist research approaches that seek to decrease hierarchical relationships between researcher and participant (Stanley, 1990). EFRD allows for flexibility in the interview process, with participants able to choose the timing of their involvement. Affording participants the opportunity to have greater choice in determining the time and potentially the place of their involvement, limits the ‘power over’ researcher-participant dynamic (Roberts, 1981).

In-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews were planned using a staged process, over a six month period. Semi-structured interview questions served as a guide throughout the EFRD process. Informed by previous research utilising EFRD, it was expected that the number of interviews would vary amongst participants and this proved to be accurate. As participants were recruited, they were initially asked to book into one of six, four weeks slots. It was thought that interviews would proceed with a maximum of five participants in each four week slot. It was planned that each participant would complete their interviews within their four week slot. Although it was identified that some flexibility would need to exist for participants who were unable to begin or complete their interviews within the allotted time, the reality of attempting to adhere to
this plan proved unworkable. Participants were highly unpredictable in relation to how often they engaged in the email dialogues, with some having long gaps between contact. Reminder emails were sent if the participant had not responded to an email in over two weeks. In the event that participants did not make contact after a reminder email, another was sent in two weeks’ time. Of all 15 participants, only one did not need to be reminded by email, with four participants requiring three reminders. This meant that the dialogue process took much longer than the estimated four weeks to complete and that there was a high variability in the number of different participants who were engaging via email at any one time. The average time of completion of the email dialogues was eight weeks. Due to the nature of the method of EFRD, the number of emails exchanged between researcher and participant also varied, as questions were adapted and clarifications sought. The average number of emails sent by participants was eight.

In addition, two face-to-face interviews were conducted with participants who found it difficult to engage with the email process. Despite initially informing that they were comfortable with using email as a method of communication during the recruitment phase, these participants were not regular users of email and as a result, long gaps were occurring between emails. After attempting to connect with the process for two months, a face-to-face interview was suggested that was accepted and completed by both participants.

**Data Management**

As each email was sent and received by researcher and participant, the text was copied from the email into a word document that had been de-identified by assigning each participant a number. These documents were stored to a hard drive that was password protected and backed up onto an external hard drive which was stored in a separate, locked device.
Due to the large number of emails, a method of managing records of the data was essential so that all participant information could be easily accessed. A spreadsheet was used to record the participant’s assigned number, email address, starting and ending date for the dialogue process, number of emails received and number of reminder emails sent.

**Overview of Participants**

A total of fifteen social workers participated in email interviews, located in five States or Territories in Australia. The sample included two male and thirteen female social workers. Participants were employed within the statutory fields of health, mental health, income support and child protection, with a range of professional experience from two years post-graduation to twenty five years. Participants ranged from entry level graduate positions to senior managers. Participants either chose a pseudonym or elected to have one chosen for them. The following table lists pseudonym names. The choice to include any other identifying information is explained below.
Table 3

*Participant’s pseudonym names*

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<th>Pseudonym Name</th>
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<tr>
<td>Abby</td>
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<td>Megan</td>
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<td>Maureen</td>
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<td>Janet</td>
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<td>Elise</td>
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<td>Rachel</td>
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<td>Susan</td>
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<td>Imre</td>
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<td>Hannah</td>
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<td>Peter</td>
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<td>Erin</td>
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<td>Phoebe</td>
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The original intent had been to include demographic information including age, years of social work experience, the identification of field of practice of participants and the State or Territory of the participant, however the level of risk that participants felt exposed to with regards to their covert practice required that a change be made to confidentiality procedures, with the decision to leave out any information that might specifically assist in identifying a participant. Of concern to participants was not only being able to be personally identified, but also to having the practices they describe shut down by organisations vigilant for opportunities to identify and dismantle covert practices. Thirteen of the 15 participants expressed concern at being identified; with several suggesting that their employing organisation would go to great lengths to uncover identities of workers should it be apparent that they were involved in covert
practices. These participants did not wish to have their ages, locations or fields of practice specifically revealed. It was felt that the loss of demographic information was acceptable given the desire to encourage participants to be involved in the study.

Data Analysis

Due to the unpredictable nature of the timing of the email dialogue exchange, manual thematic analysis began with those interviews that were completed first, whilst the interview process continued. As the process of editing and storing the emails in word format was undertaken, a relationship with the material began to build that allowed initial identification of emerging themes. Each time another email was received, it would need to be carefully read, along with all previous email exchanges between researcher and participant. This re-reading that occurred many times throughout the duration of the dialogue process facilitated a continual deepening in my understanding of the data, highlighting recurring themes.

During all phases of the data analysis process important elements of the conceptual framework were considered (Crotty, 2003). As the research utilised a critical framework and was informed by a feminist approach, a critical lens was applied to the process, ensuring that issues including power and gender were addressed (Held, 1980; Roberts, 1981). Therefore, although the data analysis process was inductive, allowing themes to emerge from the data, the conceptual framework of the project was suggestive of the need to look for thematic content relating to power and gender. This was achieved by cutting and pasting relevant passages of each dialogue that related to power and gender into a new document developed to capture emerging themes.

Once interviews were completed, a final manual ‘broad sweep’ of all completed transcripts was conducted, and a list of initial themes were developed. All data was
uploaded into the data analysis software programme, Nvivo 9, to begin the computer analysis process.

**Coding using Nvivo 9.** Once all data was uploaded, all transcripts were re-read from within the computer program and initial codes that captured the descriptive themes were developed. Initial coding built upon the themes that had emerged in the first sweep of manual analysis, and moved on to search for commonalities that were mentioned by most participants. These included descriptions of the covert activities that social workers were describing and also some of the experiences that they shared that were held in common.

Once the commonalities between participants had revealed preliminary codes, a process of analysis that searched for deeper codes was begun. This was aimed at moving beyond describing the data to identifying patterns and explanations (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). Nvivo allows for ‘tree nodes’, which capture a broad topic and can then include ‘child nodes’ which are sub-sets of these broader codes. This process was highly useful in moving from descriptive analysis to understanding the connections between themes and as a result of this process, new codes emerged and codes already established in preliminary coding grew in complexity and subtlety. As the data was analysed, many codes were replaced or moved as they were understood to fit more appropriately with other codes. New codes continued to be developed until a point was reached where no new codes were emerging. The end result of this process was a large number of codes, which began to feel somewhat unmanageable.

**Manual coding.** Manual thematic analysis, outlined by Sarantakos (1998) involves three stages:

a) Data reduction – coding, summarising and categorising of data to identify important aspects
b) Data organisation – assembling information around key themes

c) Data interpretation – identifying patterns and explanations that inform conclusions

At the completion of data analysis using the Nvivo program, a final manual coding was conducted, to ensure that no further themes emerged. This involved printing out all transcripts and using different coloured highlighter pens to identify primary codes. As with the computer coding, a second sweep of the data involved seeking to uncover and analyse deeper themes. This process did not reveal any further codes or themes, but served the purpose of both increasing my confidence in my coding and enhancing the trustworthiness of the data analysis process.

**Inter-rater reliability session.** Inter-rater reliability provides opportunity for examination of the degree of agreement between several parties as to the themes identified in the data and helps to further define the coding (Ruben & Babbie, 2008). In this way, the reliability of the research is enhanced. An inter-rater reliability session was conducted, where the primary supervisor and a research colleague read a section of transcript, coded it and then compared manual thematic coding. This process was highly beneficial both in confirming the accuracy of the analysis conducted and also in suggesting a number of additional codes that had not been fully captured. As a result of this session, a final sweep of the data occurred utilising the suggestions that arose from the inter-rater session.

**Methodological Rigour**

Trustworthy qualitative research is primarily concerned with the implementation of strategies designed to maximise objectivity and minimise bias (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). To promote methodological rigour, a number of strategies were employed, including prolonged engagement and member checks, both strategies that proved highly
congruent with the EFRD method. As mentioned above, an inter-rater reliability session was conducted, in addition to ongoing peer de-briefing that occurred throughout the process whereby data analysis was discussed with PhD supervisors and a PhD colleague familiar to the project.

In addition, the trustworthiness of the research was promoted by maintaining a careful audit trail, ensuring thick descriptions of participants experiences were sought that reached sufficient depth and detail. Further, I had as a goal the need to authentically represent participant’s views and appreciate their unique perspectives and as a result sent out a final Participant Report to all participants inviting them to comment. Participants responded enthusiastically to this report, with several expressing that reading the report felt ‘validating’ and ‘powerful’. Finally, methodological rigour was promoted through a high level of researcher reflexivity, facilitated by ongoing reflection on researcher bias for the duration of the project. The issue of researcher bias was an interesting one for this research and will be discussed in more depth later in this chapter.

Ethical Issues

Several sources have served as a guide to determining ethical issues of importance to this research, including the AASW Code of Ethics (1999), the AASW National Ethics Officer, Griffith University Human Research Ethics Manual, and a range of social research texts (Alston & Bowles, 2003; Grbich, 1999; Robson, 2002; Rubin & Babbie, 2008). This research received approval from the Griffith University Research Committee prior to commencement of the recruitment process.

Consent. To ensure that participants were fully able to consent to their involvement in the research, written information outlining the research project was provided during a preliminary email interview (Appendix C). The consent form included information on the purpose and process of the research, potential benefits and
risks, the right to withdraw at any time, the intended use of the information gathered, including publications and grievance procedures. Consistent with Griffith University’s research ethics requirements, ethical clearance was obtained prior to recruitment of participants. The preliminary interview allowed participants to raise any questions regarding the research process. Member checks provided participants with an opportunity to re-consent to the representation of their information.

Confidentiality. Participant’s identities remain confidential, with all data gathered de-identified. De-identification initially aimed to conceal participant’s names and employment location. Participant’s fields of practice were to be identified, to allow for comparison between the experiences of social workers employed within a range of statutory welfare organisations. As the recruitment process progressed some social workers informed that they wished to participate but were highly concerned that their employers may be able to identify them, the decision was made not to specifically list fields of practice. All direct quotes used in publications will be de-identified, with consent to use such quotes sought and granted by the participant. Additionally, as the data was gathered by email, special consideration needed to be made to maintaining confidentiality when communicating via an Internet connection. For this reason, participants were informed in the initial contact that they must use a private email account and specifically not use their work email account. It was also recommended that participants have a password connected with this account and that they refrain from participating in the dialogues from their place of work, even if they were using their private email to do so.

Participants were informed in the preliminary interview on the limits of confidentiality, which required that it be broken should it become apparent that the participant or any third party is at risk of harm. For the purposes of this research, harm
was defined as any action that has the potential to result in physical or psychological
danger, hurt or injury to the participant or any third party (AASW, 1999). Participants
were fully informed that if such a risk of harm exists, confidentiality may be breached.
Should participants have shared information that was suggestive of potential or actual
physical or emotional harm of a third party, they would have risked the researcher
possibly needing to take appropriate action. Participants may have disclosed
information of criminal activity. Unless such activity met the abovementioned criteria
for potential or actual harm to a third party, it was decided not to breach confidentiality
to disclose information of criminal activity. Decisions relating to this matter were based
on information presented in the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Manual,
which informed that researchers in Queensland are generally not legally obligated to
disclose criminal activity. As I am also a social worker, section 4.2.5 of the AASW
Code of Ethics (1999) also provided guidance on this matter, informing on the decision
to breach confidentiality should potential or actual harm to a third party be disclosed. If
participants were aware that I intended to report illegal activity that did not place any
third party in harm, it was likely that such information would not be shared. Of interest
to this research topic is whether or not social workers employed in statutory welfare
organisations break laws in their attempts to optimise client experiences and outcomes.
Such information is vital to understanding organisational-professional conflict and the
experiences of social workers employed within contemporary statutory welfare
organisations. At no point in the research process did the need arrive to break
confidentiality for any of the reasons discussed above.

**Benefits and risks of the research.** In accordance with the requirements of
conducting ethical research, participants were informed in the Information Sheet of the
potential benefits and risks of the research, which are identified below.
**Potential benefits.** Social workers employed within statutory welfare organisations have reported a range of negative impacts and a fear of reprisal should they seek to address issues of organisational-professional conflict; a situation which has contributed to the silencing of their experiences. Providing social workers with an opportunity to be heard is a potential benefit for participants, whose voices may create a subversive text that challenges contemporary welfare practices (Grbich, 1999). In addition, the experience of participating in the research process may prove empowering for participants, who may find solidarity in the knowledge that other participants are also acting to informally challenge organisational policies and procedures (Fook, 1993b). The process of EFRD encourages critical reflective practice, which may provide opportunities for social work participants to identify and analyse past practice achievements, develop new strategies for practice and in doing so, provide participants with hope for their professional futures (Fook, 2002; Payne, 2009).

Should information gathered in the research raise insight into organisational-professional conflict that results in change to policies and/or procedures, clients of statutory welfare organisations may benefit from such changes. Additionally, awareness of the experience of working within statutory welfare organisations may provide the professional association with insight into the nature of such work and potentially result in increased support for social workers employed in such organisations.

**Potential risks.** It was not believed that participants would be subjected to psychological or emotional stress as a result of participating in this research. However, participants were monitored throughout the research process, and should any negative impacts have become apparent, a discussion with the participant would have occurred about an appropriate course of action. Such a course of action might have involved
participants choosing to withdraw from the research and seeking professional and/or personal support, a situation that never arose.

Potential risks to participants may have arisen as a result of reflecting on past actions taken, if participants assess their actions to have been ethically or legally inappropriate. In such a case, participants may have felt professionally obligated to disclose ethical or legal breaches to the appropriate bodies, which may have resulted in a loss of professional reputation and potential legal recourse.

Limitations

Several limitations existed for this research project. Due to small sample size, findings cannot be generalised. Although initially a sample size of approximately twenty participants was sought, the final sample of fifteen participants was considered acceptable in light of review of the existing research into informal workplace resistance and social work activism. This existing research supports the notion that the subtle nature of the phenomena being explored is only accessible through “close-up, fine-grained forms of qualitative research” (Anderson, 2008, p. 267). The use of participant self-report has been identified as a limitation in qualitative research, as the data it produces might not always reflect actual behaviours (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). Additionally, the accuracy of retrospective recall is dependent on the participant’s memory and as such, details may be distorted by the passing of time (Alston & Bowles, 2003). For this reason, events occurring longer than two years prior to the interview were not included in the data.

Methodological Challenges

Although the research design chosen proved useful and appropriate for this project, considerable challenges emerged. These were due both to the nature of the topic being researched and the use of the EFRD method for data collection.
**Email Facilitated Reflective Dialogue.** As the Email Facilitated Reflective Dialogue method is relatively recent, it is appropriate to reflect on and identify challenges that arose from this method. These challenges were at times considerable, and although both participants and myself reported that EFRD was a useful means of data collection for this research project, several key areas of challenge did emerge. The first area of difficulty arose around the challenges of relying on computers and Internet connections to conduct the research, with two participants reporting that they had lengthy emails that they had composed had been ‘lost’ due to Internet connections dropping out or errors in sending the email. This was experienced as extremely frustrating by participants, who reported that they did not have the energy to re-write the email on the spot. As a result, it was suggested to these participants that they compile the email dialogue in a word processing format and then paste it into an email, to prevent further loss and this seemed to address the issue. Once this problem became apparent, this method was suggested to all participants prior to them beginning the dialogue process.

Delays in receiving emails from participants were experienced as challenging. Given that there was no way of knowing if the email had been received or why the participant was not responding, waiting for emails, sometimes for weeks at a time, was felt to disrupt the flow of the dialogue. An email prompt was developed to engage with participants who had not responded within two weeks that attempted to be understanding of the busy lives of social workers, but at the same time try to impress on the participant the need to continue with the process. The interviews that elicited the most coherent and in-depth data were those that were completed over shorter periods of time, as the exploration of experience was not interrupted by lengthy time delays. McAuliffe (2003) and Egan et al. (2006) also found these issues with EFRD.
The EFRD method also required sensitivity to tailoring each email to fit the unique needs of the participant. I needed to determine if participants showed a preference for receiving a significant number of questions and then spend time in answering them all, if they preferred to use the questions as prompts and provide a more narrative approach. Whilst some participants required an amount of ‘drawing out’ to expand upon what were initially short answers to questions, others provided lengthy responses that included information not originally elicited. This method therefore required that I keep abreast of what stage each dialogue was at, which questions had been asked and what information still needed to be gathered, as well as assessing how each participant was experiencing the process and whether or not changes needed to be made along the way to better meet the needs of a participant. One positive effect of this process was that the unique personalities and preferences of participants became known and this assisted greatly during the data analysis process as I was better able to understand each participant’s particular story.

Additionally, it became apparent that without the ability to utilise non-verbal cues, building rapport became an essential part of the initial email exchanges. As a result, the number of questions in each of the early emails was reduced, to give participants an opportunity to become comfortable with the method and establish how they wished to approach the dialogues. The inability to provide non-verbal cues also required ensuring that participants felt well received, especially when they were sharing information that suggested they were feeling strong emotions. This was achieved by validating what the participant had shared and conveying empathy. This approach fitted with inclusion of feminist theory in the conceptual framework, as participants were able to take some control over the process, drive it forward in a way that fitted well with them and were afforded the opportunity to feel heard and understood.
As the process moved forward, my own skills in utilising the method grew. I learnt that the process that worked best was one where I was able to actively bridge the gap between researcher and researched, through being authentically present to the person telling their story and noticed that the relationship between participants and myself deepened and their comfort with sharing information grew. I made the decision that due to the sensitivity of the information I was seeking, it was not fair to ask participants to share with me their covert behaviours without offering them insight into how I felt about such behaviours. I did not impose my views on the process, but if participants sought feedback on their actions or feelings or directly expressed, I provided a non-judgemental response.

In choosing to dialogue in this way, I was mindful of the literature around objectivity in research, but drawing on feminist methods, felt that subjectivity may promote a more equal relationship between researcher and researched (Jayaratne, 1983). I engaged in a process of researching objectivity in research in more depth and began to believe that whilst concerns around the researcher imposing their views on the interview process are highly valid, the belief in and desirability for pure objectivity may not be well suited to all types of research.

As authenticity was important to this project, I made the decision to allow for a more subjective approach to the process. Ramazanoglu (1992) captures this by arguing that “it is more logical to accept our subjectivity, our emotions and our socially grounded positions than to assume some of us can rise above them” (p. 211). This view is consistent with a literature that supports the view that objectivity may not be entirely possible or desirable (Jayaratne, 1983; McRobbie, 1982; Roberts, 1981; Stanley & Wise, 1990; Westmarland, 2001).
I consider that the data that was obtained from the later interviews reached a depth that was not always present in earlier interviews (with some exceptions). The experience of choosing to dialogue in this way was that I felt a decrease in the power hierarchy between researcher and researched, a greater opportunity to understand participants and their stories and ultimately, a higher sense of authenticity in the data collection process. This afforded a high level of congruence with the conceptual framework for the research.

**Recruitment.** In informal discussion with social workers at professional development events and through the exchange of emails with social workers, it became apparent that many more people wished to participate but felt concerned about doing so. These discussions elicited that these social workers were fearful of participating for two main reasons. The first related to fear of having their covert actions discovered by their employers and as a result being subject to a range of disciplinary measures that may have included the loss of their jobs. The second explanation provided was a fear that their employers would discover what they were doing and would respond by ‘closing the loopholes’ that allowed these workers to meet client’s needs in a covert way. Both of these reasons are backed up by empirical research that has revealed the existence of fear of reprisal should social workers challenge organisational-professional conflict (Gibbs, 2001; Jones, 2001; Huxley et al., 2005; Lonne et al., 2004; McAuliffe, 2005; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009; McDonald et al., 2008). Further, these two reasons for not participating were echoed by those who did make the decision to participate, as several participants attested to feeling fearful should their actions be discovered and/or expressing concern about their employers eventually limiting their ability to continue to perform covert activism should they discover what they are doing. A final concern for one participant was based not on fear of reprisal for themselves, but on the concern that
colleagues who are also participating in covert actions may be exposed by employers being made aware of the sorts of actions that were occurring.

**Confidentiality.** As previously stated, changes needed to be made to the information that would be revealed in the thesis and any publications to further protect the identities of participants. I first became aware of the high level of concern that social workers interested in participating in the project felt when a number of participants who had requested Information and Consent Forms did not choose to participate. Although it was decided not to re-contact those who had received the Information and Consent Form and chosen not to participate. It is reasonable to draw the conclusion, based both on existing literature on high levels of fear in social workers in relation to contemporary practice and from the data that those that did participate offered on fear of identification, that the choice not to participate may have partially related to the sensitivity of the topic.

As a result of these concerns, a decision was made to reduce the amount of demographic information of participants that had originally been planned. It was decided not to reveal the State or Territory that participants were working in, their years of experience as a social worker or their field of practice. Doing so reassured those that had agreed to participate and encouraged two further participants, who stated they were highly motivated to participate but were concerned about identification. This decision limits opportunities for comparisons between location, years of experience and fields of practice, but provides additional protection for participants in relation to identification.

Although a range of significant challenges have been identified, the benefits of the research method for participants were reported to be positive. All participants informed that despite experiencing some challenges, they had enjoyed the process, been challenged by the reflection and appreciated the flexibility that email communication
allowed them. Overall, the EFRD method facilitated a high level of critical reflection in participants, reduced power hierarchies between researcher and researched, elicited rich descriptions in the data, allowed for continual member checks, enhanced depth in the data analysis process and provided congruency with the conceptual framework for the research project.

The conceptual framework, based on critical theory, feminist research and critical reflective practice informed the choice of qualitative in-depth EFRD interviews, which resulted in a small sample of highly motivated social work practitioners employed in statutory settings. The following four chapters will present the findings from this study, identifying major themes that emerged from the data.
Chapter Four

The Challenging Context of Contemporary Social Work

Delivering on the aim and purpose of social work in the contemporary welfare service delivery model is challenging. As seen in Chapter Two, previous research has clearly established that the result of initiatives associated with welfare service delivery influenced by neo-liberal ideology, have contributed to a range of complex challenges in social work practice (Baines, 2010; Gallina & College, 2010; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009; Rogowski, 2011; Weinberg, 2010). Adding to existing findings, participants in this study had much to say with regards to the complexities of delivering on the role of social work in contemporary statutory settings.

This chapter presents three key findings in relation to the context in which contemporary social work is practiced, and concludes with a discussion of these findings. The first finding is that contemporary welfare service delivery that is informed by neo-liberal ideology was experienced as highly problematic, with identification of a range of problems with both service delivery and the demands on capacity of social workers. The second finding is that high levels of conflict existed within the contemporary model of service delivery, including between people, policies, organisations and methods of service delivery. The third finding is that the role of power within the contemporary context of social work was felt by participants to be complex and problematic. This chapter will report on these three key findings relating to the context of practice, and show how these correspond with findings from existing empirical research, which report on a range of challenges associated with contemporary social work practice in the current context of welfare delivery.

Contemporary Australian statutory social work practice can involve work within a diverse range of fields as social workers may have statutory obligations with regards
to child protection, criminal justice, health and mental health systems, aged services, residential care, income support, asylum seekers and refugees and working with involuntary clients in a range of government and non-government statutory settings. Participants in this study reported on experiences while working in child protection, health, mental health and income support.

**Problems Associated with the Context of Contemporary Social Work Service Delivery**

All participants identified multiple challenges, demonstrating not only that the social work role was a difficult one for these participants, but also that they were highly aware and able to articulate what specific issues are problematic for their practice. Imre summed up the complexities of working within a large bureaucracy as, “daily banging your head against the structures of a faceless managerialist system that is not connected to the shop floor does get too difficult, resulting in a task only approaches/ models of care and does not foster a critical thinking workforce”. Challenges have been summarised in Table 4 below.

Table 4

**Problems identified with Contemporary Social Work Practice**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem category</th>
<th>Problem identified</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practice Problems</td>
<td>Risk management</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Compliance focused</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Surveillance</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Punitive focus</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demands on capacity</td>
<td>Excessive caseloads</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of resources</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Long work hours</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increased documentation</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of supervision</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Practice problems. Participants identified a cluster of issues that have been previously highlighted in Chapter Two as associated with welfare service informed by neo-liberal ideology. These are risk management, a compliance focus, surveillance and an overly punitive focus and these four problems will now be discussed in detail.

Risk management. Five participants identified the increased risk management agenda as a contemporary social work challenge; a finding that supports existing research into the rise of risk management practices and the subsequent challenges faced by social workers (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Sawyer, 2008; Stanford, 2008). Participants identified that they felt hampered by the realities of risk averse practices, which saw decisions made largely in relation to what several participants described as ‘the front page of the newspaper test’. This involved consideration of what would happen if an action about to be considered was to end up as a front page story in the newspaper. This consideration often led to abandoning the action being considered, even though participants informed that the action may have been in the best interests of the client and in line with organisational policy. Speaking to this problem, Susan said that, “I have brought up a less authoritarian approach to a person's care and been quickly overridden because of risk concerns”.

Participants made particular reference to the field of Mental Health and in particular to Involuntary Treatment Orders, which they believed were at times kept in place beyond the time necessary to meet the best interests of the client. Participants believed that this was done in an effort to minimise risk. Participants identified that an over emphasis on risk management led to a loss of professional autonomy, increased time spent in paperwork, a loss in client self-determination and the decrease of more therapeutic interventions.
Compliance focus. A focus on ensuring that workers and clients strictly comply with workplace directives, policy and legislation was identified as a problem by six participants. This issue is related closely to a risk management focus, as organisations fear the results of clients and workers who do not comply with their directives. This is particularly true of statutory practice, where client compliance is often legislated by law. Participants who identified compliance as a challenge, spoke of an underlying environment of social control, which labelled clients ‘non-compliant’ if they made any attempts to self-determine their progress. Erin informed that “there are many ethical dilemmas inherent in others deciding what to control in clients (which is part of the daily role of a mental health worker), and paternalism, social control and beneficence feature strongly”. Peter identified that there were a large number of “shoulds”, “musts” and “obligations” in relation to the acceptable behaviour of his clients and that failure to meet these often resulted in the client being negatively labelled. He informed that a client labelled “non-compliant” was identified as difficult and their contact with the service, which they were mandated to attend, would become challenging. Erin identified that an over focus on compliance was at times at odds with the models used in her work:

The other important informer of my practice is Recovery theory in mental health. This is in its purest form a very radical theory and while is officially the Health approach in practice is partially implemented at best. This goes along with the coercion/control issue above, as a true Recovery journey is individual and requires risks to be taken. It requires that failures are reframed as learning opportunities not forever brought up as reasons why the person can’t "be allowed" to increase in independence in the future.
These participants identified that a focus on compliance is at odds with their social work value base, which promotes self-determination and seeks to uphold the human rights of the client.

**Surveillance.** Feeling micro managed, overly scrutinised and ‘watched’ as they work, three participants in this study reported a feeling of being under surveillance as a problem with contemporary practice. Additionally, these participants commented that the increased requirement to document how they spent their time at work also made them feel as though their work was under an unnecessary level of scrutiny. This finding supports earlier findings that attested to a feeling by contemporary social workers that they were under increasing surveillance (Aronson & Smith, 2009). Requirements to record on computer the time spent on each task, including phone calls, meetings, client time and breaks, contributed to participants feeling as though there was a lack of trust in the workplace. Susan found requirements to document her practice “onerous and pointless to my client work and I feel monitored by employers”. Participants felt that the time spent documenting their work day took too long and could have been better spent in meeting with clients.

**Punitive focus.** More than a quarter of participants identified that an emphasis on practices that were punitive in nature were problematic in their work. These participants stated that colleagues were seeking ways to identify clients who were not behaving in ways endorsed by their organisation and punishing them. June felt that “it’s like they sneak up on clients to catch them out.” Penny discussed staff practices aimed at “punishing serial non-compliers”. In addition to staff seeking punitive actions against clients, participants identified that requirements to report clients to other agencies also felt punitive. In particular, several participants cited the recent Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act (2007), which was a legislative response by the
Federal Government to the enquiry into the protection of Aboriginal children from sexual abuse. This response saw social workers at the frontline implementing changes in the provision of welfare to Indigenous Australians including income management, compulsory child health checks and enforcing changes to community living arrangements (Australian Human Rights Commission [AHRC], 2007). The punitive nature of the response was problematic for social workers as it was felt to be inconsistent with the values of the profession (AASW, 2008b). One participant in this study who worked on the Northern Territory interventions in an Indigenous community stated that her agency set up meetings with the Territory Manager to explain how aspects of the Intervention were “dangerous and unhelpful, intrusive and punitive”, to no avail.

Findings from this study support existing findings that attested to an increasing focus on punishing clients and the resulting negative impact this caused social workers who were attempting to deliver on their ethical requirement to adopt non-judgemental attitudes towards clients (Gregory, 2010; Singer, 1991).

These four practice problems presented significant challenges for participants and as will be discussed in later chapters, contributed to their decisions to take action against a system they believed was not consistent with their professional value base. In addition to these practice problems, participants identified a range of demands on their capacity to work as social workers in statutory settings and these will be discussed below.

**Demands on capacity.** Another cluster of issues emerge that place demands on workers capacity to carry out their role. Participants identified five problems relating to this theme that impacted on their capacity to fulfil the requirements of both their workplace and the profession of social work. These were excessive caseloads, lack of
resources, long work hours, increased documentation and lack of supervision and these will be discussed below.

_Excessive caseloads._ The rise in the number of cases handled by individual workers has been associated with welfare service delivery informed by neo-liberal ideology and identified in the literature as a significant cause of concern for contemporary social workers (Acker, 2004; Jones, 2001; Lymbery, 1998). Increased caseloads have been associated with increased demand for services, lack of adequate staff due to retention problems and the introduction of mandatory reporting in many States and Territories of Australia (Rix, 2003). Seven participants in this study spoke of the constant exhaustion that came with managing excessive caseloads and the resultant loss in meeting client needs adequately. Abby revealed that in order to meet the demands of her client load, she was often working until 11pm at night and needed to be back at work at 8am the next morning. She reported that “each worker had at least double the legal amount of cases allowed. But the [agency] said there was no money to employ more staff”. Imre described a caseload of 75, and stated that the legal number of workers for this large a load is 25. Elise called the workload “onerous and punishing” and reported stress levels of staff as exceptionally high. Participants reported that as a result of excessive caseloads, they were unable to fully assess client’s needs or plan suitable interventions; instead they had to choose the most expedient approach. Imre believed that excessive caseloads are a very effective social control mechanism for both staff and clients, as the work must necessarily become narrow and efficient, leaving less time for workers to advocate for clients or critically reflect on structural barriers to meeting client need. Janet reported that “our case loads are so heavy that after a while most people work within the framework of what’s most expedient”. Participants
described the ongoing burden of excessive caseloads as a contributing factor towards leaving their job, with Phoebe stating that “it was a joy to leave”.

**Lack of resources.** Closely linked to the existence of large caseloads, six participants identified a significant lack of resources as a challenge of contemporary practice. Lack of resources included lack of adequate funding, staffing and programs to meet client demand for services. This finding adds to existing research that has found that deficits in resourcing negatively impacted social workers abilities to perform their job (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Healy, 2002; Storey & Billingham, 2001). Elise suggested that resourcing issues were frequently used as an excuse for not implementing organisational policies and Janet stated that she often had to make excuses to clients explaining that her efforts to assist were “the best we can come up with”. This situation leads to frustration, with participants reporting that they were unable to fully work from a client centred approach when their interventions were limited by the resources available. Janet captured this frustration:

> The budgetary constraints of the organisation set a strong message about what I can and can’t do as a social worker – we can’t ‘afford’ to ‘over-service’ clients. It’s often cheaper to support the ‘efficient’ decisions made by management and medical teams than to provide ethically considered support to clients. And that’s my reality. I don’t have the resources at my disposal that would allow me to offer the service to clients that I would like to offer – most notably the resource ‘time’.

Two participants particularly mentioned an extreme lack of resources in rural and remote practice and the difficulties of working ethically with clients when services were simply not available.
**Long work hours.** Two participants identified high stress levels as a result of working long hours, a situation that is closely related to unrealistic workloads and lack of funding for additional staff. Forced to work well into the night on some occasions, participants spoke of feeling unable to take the required time in lieu, as this would have meant that clients were left unseen. This situation caused significant stress, as participants spoke of weighing up their own self care needs against the consideration of client's needs. Rachel described a situation where a client was at significant risk of violence and no service was available to accommodate her crisis. Despite understanding the ethical risk in relation to boundaries, Rachel felt her only option was to accommodate the client in her own home for the night, a situation which caused her to be placed in a considerable ethical dilemma. Baines’ (2001) study found that workers often continued working well after their shift finished in an attempt to meet client demand. Participants in Baines’ study reported that this overtime was a form of resistance, as they had been specifically told not to work after hours as there was no facility for remuneration for after-hours work. Participants in this study who identified long hours as problematic did not conceptualise working overtime as a form of resistance, but rather as an ethical problem that led to stress and the eventual decision to resign from the job.

**Increased documentation.** Three participants identified that increased requirements to document practice led to a range of negative impacts on their social work practice, including less client time, a loss of advocacy opportunities and a loss in professional autonomy. These findings correspond with those from earlier research that identified an increase in requirements to document and the resulting problems that may arise from this (Burton & van den Broek, 2009; Tsui & Cheng, 2004). The rise in requirements to document has been associated with a risk management focus and is
particularly present in statutory settings, as the consequences may be more serious if there is a lack of attention to documentation. Whilst there may be sound reasons for increased attention to documentation in statutory settings, participants were critical of computer and paper client assessment tools, which they identified as being repetitive, onerous and excessive. Participants informed that these tools are so specific that they do not allow the social worker to feel that they have fully captured the client’s situation with the result being that client’s problems may not be adequately identified. Susan addressed the problem by being selective with her use of documentation:

In my documentation, I focus on key psychosocial issues I feel are relevant to the ongoing work with the client and sometimes fail to complete a full mental state examination and risk assessment (required for each face to face contact with a client). I find this excessive and requires asking repetitive questions of clients and incongruous to the session at hand. There is such a focus on risk that wasn't always there, so I feel rather cynical about the request to document risk every time. I don’t feel it's in the client's best interest. By completing a MSE and risk assessment every time is very time consuming, again taking time away from direct client work.

*Lack of supervision.* A lack of supervision has been identified in existing empirical research into the problematic nature of contemporary social work practice. Noble and Irwin’s (2009) study found that due to changes associated with welfare service delivery informed by neo-liberal ideology, social work supervision had become “more focused on efficiency, accountability and worker performance often at the expense of professional and practice development” (p. 345).

Four participants identified the lack of supervision within their workplaces as a significant problem. Participants spoke of the importance of supervision not only in
assisting them in making complex decisions, but also in debriefing situations that had the potential to lead to significant trauma for the worker. For one participant, being required to make life or death decisions about the future of a child within the child protection system, without access to adequate supervision, was cited as a major stressor and contributor to her decision to leave the job. For this participant, five years on from an incident that involved the death of a child, she reported still feeling pain and uncertainty. Even when supervision was identified within organisational documents as being a requirement of the organisation, participants reported that it was generally seen as an ‘add on’, frequently undervalued and postponed in preference to other tasks. Additionally, participants shared that the role of social work supervision is not understood by non-social work members of the multi-disciplinary team. Although participants identified that they could access and pay for their own supervision outside of work, they resented the cost of doing so, both in dollar value and time.

These nine problems were cited by participants as causing significant problems in their daily practice and as a result, impacted negatively on their professional experiences. Taken together, these problems interweave to present a picture of contemporary statutory practice that is consistent with existing findings on the complex and challenging environment faced by Australian social workers.

In addition to these problems, participants identified an issue with conflict in contemporary statutory practice and this theme this will be discussed below.

**Conflicts within the context of Contemporary Social Work Service Delivery**

As discussed in Chapter Two, conflict in the workplace has been previously identified in existing research, with social workers reporting that their workplaces at times resembled battlegrounds, with high levels of conflict impacting negatively on their workplace experience (Abramovitz, 2005; Gregory, 2010; McLean & Andrews,
1999). All participants identified a range of problems relating to conflict, including conflict with other professionals; between different models and methods of working; between policies and legislation; between organisational demands and social work values (see Table 5). The findings on conflict can be grouped together under the categories of inter-professional conflict and structural conflict.

Inter-professional conflict refers to instances of conflict that exist between colleagues from within the social work profession and colleagues from other professional disciplines such as those that make up the inter-disciplinary team, such as doctors, nurses and police officers. In addition, inter-professional conflict captures conflict that occurs between social workers and their professional association. Structural conflict refers to instances of conflict that arise as a result of the way the welfare system is organised and the impacts of this organisation at the practice level.

Table 5

*Conflict in Contemporary Social Work Practice*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict category</th>
<th>Conflict identified</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inter-professional conflict</td>
<td>Conflict with colleagues</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conflict within the profession</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of change agenda</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural conflict</td>
<td>Organisational/professional conflict</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Methods and models</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Legislation/policy</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Devaluation of social work</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural conflict</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Inter-professional conflict.**

*Conflict with colleagues.* Eleven participants identified conflict with other professionals, including social work colleagues and those from other professional
disciplines, as a major challenge of their practice. This conflict was identified as personality clashes, power plays, “bitchiness” amongst team members, confusion by non-social work professionals regarding the role of social work and differing values between colleagues. Megan described a situation where conflict occurred between the value base of a social work colleague in the following way:

And I know there are lots of social workers, who are hardcore about that stuff. And I feel like they are really starting to lose their perspective... like they’re losing their values and stuff. I had this ... person the other day ring me and say they were assessing [client’s eligibility for a service], and all the boxes were ticked, so in a sense they met all the criteria. But she was saying she had a bad feeling about it... And I was like ‘my god…what are you even hesitating about?’... But really her concern was that it was unclear whether the perpetrator had been living with the ... I don’t like to say ‘victim’... but the victim. And she was feeling that the information she was given suggested the perpetrator had been living there ...So she was starting to get all huffy about that. She's completely lost her perspective here because that’s got nothing to do with [the service].

Participant’s discussions revealed a serious level of conflict between colleagues and amongst teams. Descriptions of this type of conflict included shouting matches in meetings, attempts to discredit colleagues, withholding information necessary to complete a task, manipulation of team members and ostracising individuals. Two participants described conflict so severe that it resulted in them being bullied. Phoebe informed about a situation where she was coerced by her senior manager into reprimanding a staff member on behalf of the senior. As Phoebe was a new graduate and new employee of the organisation and the staff member she was told to reprimand
was in a senior position to her, she felt unable to do this. Phoebe became aware that there was a high level of conflict within the team and felt she was being manipulated by the senior manager. When she expressed her discomfort, work life became intolerable and she reports feeling bullied. Ultimately, Phoebe left the job.

In the past I had challenged her instructions when she had made me feel uncomfortable, asking if she could perhaps have these discussions with her colleague, or suggesting that I might go about the directive in another way that I was more comfortable with. My supervisor was not very receptive to this idea on the previous occasion, and instead dialled the phone number and instructed me to make the call in her presence.

Much of the work of a social worker is carried out as part of the multi-disciplinary team. The challenges of performing the role of social work as part of a team from differing professional backgrounds has been previously documented (Carpenter, Schneider, Brandon, & Wooff, 2003; Frost, Robinson, & Anning, 2005). Participants in this study identified that non-social work professionals at times struggled to understand the role of social work and as a result, conflict ensued. Additionally, non-social work professionals may work from a significantly different value base than social work, and participants identified that this led to conflict in the workplace. Janet, exploring why conflict between doctors and social workers might occur, stated that:

I think most of the young doctors I work with are good people. I think that the decisions they make that are not necessarily in the best interests of the client (according to the client) are due to a variety of reasons including: medical teams are often too busy to really stop and reflect on the bigger picture as their framework of practice is too narrow to account for anything but the medicine due to their inexperience or the very strong medical model grounded in a history
of rarely/unsuccessfully challenged power they make assumptions/judgements about the dignity and worth of a client and in turn are more likely to allow a little self-determination to those they perceive as ‘worthy’.

June summed up her working environment in the following way:

The climate had and still can be frosty and as the only allied health worker in this unit I have been waiting to feel accepted before speaking out. And I work in silence so as little as possible is known about my work.

This differing value base can be significant enough that colleagues can hold vastly different views on the ultimate purpose of their work. This can be especially true when those in senior management roles come from non-social work backgrounds. Existing literature has identified that it is not uncommon for managers in the human services to be from a range of backgrounds and that this situation might raise additional conflict for social work staff (Globerman, Davies, & Walsh, 1996). Elise described the complexities of working under management who believed the purpose of their organisation to be significantly at odds with Elise’s own ideas and professional values. Elise described the situation as follows:

I work with workers who believe ‘these people’ are ‘unworkable’ as they ‘refuse to change’. Last year I was unable to convince my team leader to keep three children with their mother and they were taken into care. The mother has not coped. This has been seen as her not caring enough about the children, as if she cared she would ‘pull herself together’. REALLY! You would think that in a job like this, workers would have more understanding of grief and loss, trauma, and how their experiences have affected their sense of self esteem and identity. I was told I was ‘wasting departmental resources’ because I continued to work with a
family to keep their kids at home rather than bring them into care. She wanted to know how long I was going to ‘prop the family up’. I said as long as it takes.

At times, this conflict led to a situation where social work was not highly regarded in the organisation. Phoebe identified that although the role of social work is identified in workplace documents as being of importance to the organisation, the reality was a distinct lack of regard for the social workers employed there. Phoebe found that this led to an ‘undercurrent of resentment’ which made the experience of working there both difficult and distressing.

Conflict was also identified outside of the workplace, with participants informing that conflict with other stakeholder professionals also proved challenging. Rachel’s job required that she work closely with the Police Service, a situation that has led to conflict, as she believes the Police purposely offload difficult cases to her agency in an effort to relieve their already over stretched resources. This situation resulted in a high level of conflict between the social work staff and the local Police service.

When I was on call, the police continued to bring inebriated women to us who had been sexually assaulted. The policies and guidelines clearly state that an inebriated woman cannot give legal consent to a medical examination and yet they are so keen to dispose of the ‘problem’ that they break the legal guidelines to avoid a possible black death or injury in custody. Police are supposed to take such women to a holding area/watch house until they sober up. We had to wait with the women until they had sobered up enough – a process which could take hours.

Conflict within the profession. In addition to the findings on conflict discussed above, five participants identified three problems experienced as a result of inter-professional conflict within the profession of social work. These included problems
with the social work professional association (AASW), a lack of passion amongst social workers and a lack of change agenda. Existing research into problems with the contemporary social work landscape do not include these findings. These accounts may provide new insight into an additional problem with contemporary social work practice.

The current emphasis by the AASW on the promotion of registration for social workers was felt by participants to have sidelined more activist approaches to practice, which they believed are essential when working in welfare services informed by neo-liberal ideology. Although now dated, this issue has been discussed within the profession, with Specht and Courtney (1994) arguing that the professional project has sidelined the development of more activist approaches. Rachel believed that the AASW has ‘kowtowed’ to pressure to pursue registration. Additionally, Rachel believed that the AASW should play a greater role in ensuring that social work students are appropriately suited to the profession, as she felt that too many graduates did not identify with or promote the core values of the profession. Participants also spoke about incidents where individuals not trained as social workers were presenting themselves as such, and that this has harmed both clients and the profession. These participants felt that the AASW has a role to play in ensuring that those claiming to be social workers have the appropriate qualifications. This is a seemingly contradictory criticism of the AASW, as one of the purposes of registration is to ensure that only those individuals trained in an accredited social work program can call themselves social workers (AASW, 2011).

A lack of change agenda. A lack of passion to drive a change agenda amongst social workers was also identified as a professional problem causing conflict, with five participants citing colleagues who seemed uninterested and unmotivated for the job. Earlier research also found that social workers believed that driving a change agenda
was an important role for both social workers individually and the professional association (Mendes, 2007; Reeser & Epstein, 1987). These participants spoke of a disconnect by colleagues from the social justice focus of the profession, a focus which they felt is integral to the social work role. Phoebe explored reasons behind this lack of passion:

I found my colleagues to be impersonal, and very careful with what they said and did. I understood this as a fear of political retribution within the workplace, that the guardedness I perceived was a coping mechanism within the department.

Participants reported that due to the contemporary working environment, they have at times themselves experienced a loss of passion for the role of social work. Participants reported that the role of social work seems to have become one of keeping the status quo, as opposed to challenging injustice and promoting professional values. That the pursuit of social change has been largely lost from the role of social work has been well documented within the profession, with the suggestion that welfare service delivery informed by neo-liberal ideology has contributed to this loss (McDonald, 2007; Wagner, 2009). Participants also reported that the working culture of the team led to an agenda of maintaining the status quo. Participants felt that individuals and teams that had been in the same position for ten years or more were likely to be less interested in trying new methods of working. Participants in this study found these teams the least likely to embrace a change agenda. Imre suggested that as a profession, social work needed to re-identify with a social change agenda, infusing it back into the education process for social work students. He described the current social work professional agenda in the following way:

It is evident that social workers at large have taken on the role of nothing more
than administrators who have become ineffective, politically inept and focused on nothing more than their own self serving needs, wants and white privilege. Not good enough, maybe we have to look at how we are being taught, trained and who are we teaching and training.

Rachel summed up the problem of a limited change agenda from within the profession:

Many of my Team Leaders, Co-ordinators and Managers have lost sight of the social work values and the fact that we are social change agents and therefore EXPECTED to rock boats and stir shit, not 'cover our arses’ and look after ourselves at the expense of members of society who are disadvantaged and/or dysfunctional to such an extent that they are doing harm to others as well as to themselves.

These three areas of inter-professional conflict provided a significant challenge for all fifteen participants. In addition, participants spoke of conflicts that can be grouped under the theme of structural conflict and these will be discussed below.

**Structural conflict.** Conflict resulting from working within welfare services informed by neo-liberal ideology has been identified and discussed in previous literature and research in Chapter Two, with the finding that structural conflict was higher in statutory social work settings, as the work was bound by a range of policy directives, legislation and legal requirements (Balloch et al., 1998; Tham & Meagher, 2009). Structures that participants in this study found problematic included legislation, workplace policies and the structuring of the employing organisation. Participants reported that these problematic structures contributed to a lack of understanding relating to cultural diversity, devaluation of social workers knowledge and skills, conflict between the employing organisation and the requirements of the professional social work association and unworkable methods and models.
**Organisational/professional conflict.** The first finding relating to structural conflict is the conflict that existed for participants in relation to being ‘part of the system’. This type of conflict can be understood as organisational-professional conflict and nine participants cite this as problematic. Two of this group of participants identified a problem with working for large bureaucracies, feeling that this conflicted with the role of social work, which to them required a critical exploration of systems and an embracing of the belief that social workers are social change agents. These participants felt that trying to fulfil the role of social worker from within a system that they perceived as patriarchal, racist and unjust turned social workers into little more than administrators and agents of social control. The tension between social workers as carers and controllers has been documented since the early days of the profession, with discussion of the complexities that come with working from within a system, whilst trying to fulfil a care role (Barnes & Hugman, 2002; Fook, 1993b; Jordan, 1976). These participants took a step back from the daily challenges of working within managerialist bureaucracies, to capture the broader problem of trying to do the job of social work, as they understand it, from within a system at odds with the core values of the profession.

Existing empirical research attests to the existence of conflict between the directives of the employing organisation and the requirements of the social work role, as set out in professional codes of ethics (Abramovitz, 2005; Gallina & College, 2010; McDonald et al., 2008). Eight participants identified this type of conflict, citing ethical dilemmas on a daily basis as a constant challenge of their practice. These were serious enough that participants felt they were at times unable to do the job of social work within their employing organisation. This finding supports Abramovitz’s (2005) claim that ethical dilemmas were on the rise as a result of organisational/professional conflict. Participants spoke about how they navigated through this bind, referencing their covert
activities as a means of remaining ethically consistent on the job. Abby spoke to these dilemmas, by suggesting that:

Sometimes, I think, to follow the rules all the time, without being creative, would be to go against the principles and values of social work (i.e. you couldn't fulfil the 'service to humanity' if you send someone home hungry, and without care). So, I have two options, I guess: obey the rules all the time regardless of circumstance, and leave people hurting and in need; or help them and act in kindness and care, and make the 'rules' fit into what you do. At least that way, I would be doing my role as a social worker.

Abby went on to explain that in order to be a social worker in her job, covert practice was a “way of life” as the organisational culture is so contrary and hostile to the social work value base. In contrast, Erin overtly refused to carry out directives that she believed were in conflict with her professional Code of Ethics, a situation that she described occurs frequently in her role.

The differences between the organisational documents and the actual practices of the employing organisation can also be significant, with participants informing that even when organisational documents supported the underlying value base and ethical requirements of the social work Code of Ethics, the workplace culture and practices can be highly divergent from these. Janet explained that looking back she had naively believed that the values existing on paper at her organisation would be those that were practiced:

It’s easy to write anything down on paper, but it takes a lot more effort to see such values realised. I struggled during my first year at the hospital, because I was so disappointed that I didn’t always see the values in action; doubly disappointed that I didn’t see them in action in the Social Work Department.
The effects of continually facing conflict between the employing organisation and the profession of social work, caused several participants to move on from their jobs.

**Methods and models.** A second problem relating to structural conflict included conflict between methods and models of working, with nine participants raising this issue. Participants who worked within organisations largely based on a medical model, struggled to reconcile this with social work practice. This issue has been documented in existing social work literature, with discussions on the ill fit between a medical model that emphasised deficits and pathologies and social work’s focus on empowerment and identification of strengths (Bell, 1999; Jones, 1993; Pockett, 2002). Participants spoke of the difficulties that doctors and other medical professionals had in understanding the role of social work, and as a result felt that the image of social work from within organisations that operated within a medical context suffered.

In addition, participants in the mental health sector identified the broker model as being problematic, as it focuses on consumer obligations as opposed to allowing workers to take a more interpersonal focus. The broker model involves the social worker acting in a coordinating role, assessing and referring clients to appropriate services (Zastrow, 2009). Using this model, the social worker is then responsible for monitoring the client’s involvement with these other services, a situation that has been found to be problematic, as it favours surveilling clients over attention to the client-worker relationship (Elder, Evans, & Nizette, 2009; Rohland, Rohrer, & Tzou, 2003). For these participants, this model delivered to consumers a range of ‘shoulds’ and ‘musts’ that were not helpful in empowering clients or fostering self-determination.

The case management model of service delivery was also identified as leading to frustration for some participants. The NASW defines social work case management as a method of service delivery where the social worker arranges, coordinates, monitors,
evaluates and advocates for a package of multiple services aimed at meeting a client’s specific needs (NASW, 1992). Phoebe informed that working within this model in a large multi-disciplinary team effectively meant that she needed to spend a large amount of time “chasing up” other professionals to fully understand their role in the treatment plan. This meant learning the language of a range of professional disciplines. Phoebe described her frustrations with this model:

The case management role meant that I was supposed to regularly contact each therapist for each patient and ask why they weren't up to the next stage yet, what the next stage would be etc etc. As there was so much pressure for faster discharge, this could be very stressful.

Participants identified that the models and methods utilised within social work services were increasingly limiting therapeutic interventions that seek to establish an ongoing treatment alliance between worker and client in favour of short-term crisis interventions. This problem has been identified in earlier research and linked to welfare service delivery that is informed by neo-liberal ideology, where a focus on efficiency and affordability has seen an increase in short term, crisis focused interventions (Postle, 2001). Nine participants found this situation a challenge in their work, informing that short-term non-therapeutic interventions did not permit them to fully deliver on the social work role. Elise had been told that her attempts to offer therapeutic interventions were only ‘propping up’ her client and that there was no place for therapy within her workplace. Hannah believed the role of social work within her organisation has become too narrow and that her professional skills are under-utilised as her job has largely become one of filling out forms and referring clients on to other services. June found herself reprimanded when she attempted to advocate for more therapeutic interventions, with members of her multi-disciplinary team claiming she misunderstood the
parameters of the job. Marie has learnt that the role of social work in her agency is to discharge patients as quickly as possible and that any attempts to offer additional services are dismissed as a waste of time and resources. Rachel shared her anger at the lack of therapeutic services and the impacts of this on clients:

This possibly sounds a bit pompous but I am very angry about what this organisation is doing. It is a situation which perpetuates the disadvantage and teaches clients nothing about capacity building and self-management - and certainly does not help the children who are essentially another stolen generation if rescued and another abandoned generation who will end up in the criminal justice system eventually (many are already involved with juvenile justice). It's heart-breaking, frustrating and depressing.

Legislation/Policy. Approximately half of participants raised issues relating to working under legislation and workplace policies that they identified as problematic in delivering on a social work role informed by the professional value base. Specifically, participants identified working with mental health legislation and in particular Involuntary Treatment Orders (ITO’s), as raising a number of concerns relating to client self-determination and overuse of orders. Involuntary Treatment Orders have been the subject of discussion within the profession of social work, with literature exploring the complexities of the fit between the professional ethical requirements of self-determination and duty of care and adherence to legislation (Campbell, Brophy, Healy, & O’Brien, 2006; George, 2011; Renouf & Bland, 2005). Participants in this study described practice situations where ITO’s were arguably not utilised as the legislation intended. Erin identified multiple occasions where she believed ITO’s were used as a means of ensuring compliance from clients labelled by the agency as “difficult”, a situation which she felt “was ethically and morally and often clinically contraindicated”.

Peter discussed a case whereby a client with an intellectual disability was put on an ITO, despite not having a mental illness. He informed that this was done as a means of ensuring that the client remained in his accommodation. All participants who identified problematic use of ITO’s spoke of the difficulty of reconciling them to the professional values of social work.

Additionally, mandatory reporting of sexual abuse and domestic violence was identified as problematic, with participants stating that this requirement placed limits on their professional autonomy and may have placed clients at risk of leaving a service. Discussion about the tensions raised from mandatory reporting requirements is not new within the social work profession, although there is to date little Australian research into this issue (AASW, 2008a; Hunter, 2008; Mendes, 1996). As research begins to explore the implications of the Northern Territory Indigenous interventions, more insights into the problems experienced by social workers attempting to work under this legislation may be forthcoming. Rachel believed her work with Indigenous clients was placed at jeopardy due to mandatory reporting requirements, as often reporting resulted in the client choosing to not only never return to the service, but to leave the area altogether. Rachel would prefer to use her rapport and discretion to build trust, assess the risk and determine the best way to assist the client. She spoke of mandatory reporting as “fostering disempowering constraints on people’s decision-making”, but did acknowledge that many people did benefit from this policy as well.

In addition to problems with individual policies, participants raised the issue of legislation and policy clashes, a situation that caused front line staff difficulty as they tried to determine how best to work with competing directives. Hannah informed about work she undertook that was under policy directives from two different departments and explained that there were not only clashes in these policies but also large ‘black holes’,
where information required to do the job was missing. This situation required that workers discussed these omissions and tried to fill in the blanks, as well as make decisions in isolation on a client by client basis. Rachel described how her colleagues managed this situation:

Much of this legislation and policy clashes in their intention and their processes and every Social Worker I spoke at the time had the same trouble. We talked together a lot about what we felt we SHOULD be doing and HOW we should be doing this, including ways to try and tweak our ways of working so that the disparity between our delivering core business and the way in which we were expected to do it was not so great.

Devaluation of social work. Another problem associated with structural conflict is the devaluation of social workers knowledge and skills, experienced by participants as conflict between their professional role and how it is understood in practice. Seven participants identified difficulties with how contemporary social work was understood in their workplaces. They reported that this situation led to a devaluation of their skills, confusion over their role, a deteriorating image of social work and the hiring of staff not effectively trained to meet the demands of the job. The devaluing of the social work role has been found in previous research and commented on in existing social work literature (Baines, 2006; Carey, 2008; McDonald & Jones, 2000; Wallace & Pease, 2011).

Participants informed that the social work role was not well understood by managers, colleagues and at times, clients. This was demonstrated by staff questioning what social work was, by participants receiving tasks that they felt were not part of the social work role and by clients mistaking them for other professionals. Additionally, participants spoke of an increase in ‘generic’ roles filled by social workers, occupational therapists, psychologists or nurses, and felt that this provided challenges in reconciling
the generic skill set of ‘assessment worker’ whilst at the same time attempting to deliver discipline specific skills. Phoebe reported that role confusion typically led to social work being given work that other disciplines did not want to do, a situation which led her to spend a good deal of her day tied up with the dual task of completing unskilled work and educating other staff about social work.

Closely related to the lack of knowledge about the social work role is problems relating to the image of social work, which five participants reported is not highly valued in their places of employment. Participants believed this was linked to social workers not fitting well with the growing emphasis on efficiency. Social work interventions were perceived as taking undue time to complete, with the focus being wider than the requirements to move people quickly through a service. Janet feared that this situation might result in a loss of social work services:

I think social workers have largely been dismissed from private hospitals and we question if we will eventually be removed from public hospitals if our interventions to not support efficient discharge.

Erin told of the “namby pamby” image of social work in her place of employment, demonstrated by the belief held by colleagues that social workers did not do much of value in the workplace. Rachel highlighted the negative perceptions held by police and doctors who she needed to work closely with in her role, informing that both professions did not like to work with the social workers and felt they had too much involvement. Phoebe spoke to misconceptions in the public view of social work:

I think when a lot of people think of social work they think of daggy women in hospitals who mop up your tears and pop in once a week. Funnily enough, someone I live with was in hospital for a really long time. And he said that he didn’t have a social worker. I know full well that in the unit he was in he would
have definitely had a social worker. But it was such a loose figure in his mind that he didn’t even commit her to memory.

Participants reported that as a result of this negative image, they had to work hard to gain respect and recognition, a process that was not always effective and that they believed has a detrimental impact on clients. To date, little empirical research exists on the negative image of social work from within employing organisations or amongst the community, although media discussion in the UK has reported on the damaged reputation of the image of social workers due to a number of high profile child protection cases (Ahmed, 2009).

A sub theme emerging within the devaluation of social work is that of the employment of non-social work trained staff to fill social work roles or a lack of adequate on the job training for those with a social work degree. Three of this group of participants reported that working alongside inexperienced or undertrained workers, as well as being placed in roles that they themselves do not feel trained for, provided for significant challenges in their practice. Participants felt that lack of sufficient training in the skills required to do the job reflected on the fact that the role of social work within their organisation was not well valued or understood. This situation is particularly prevalent in the child protection field, where participants reported feeling out of depth in the roles they were asked to fill. As new graduates, several participants spoke of severe stress that resulted from being asked to make decisions about the future of a child, often without support from other colleagues. These participants were highly aware of the potential consequences of making the wrong decision, which may have resulted in the death of a child, and ultimately this situation led to their decision to leave the child protection field. This situation is echoed in previous research and discussion.
within the profession on the lack of retention of child protection staff, as the stressors of the role become untenable for workers (AASW, 2008c; Hodgkin, 2002).

Cultural conflict. The final finding relating to structural conflict is the existence of cultural conflict in a variety of work settings, a finding that is supported by earlier research and discussion within the Australian social work profession (Calma & Priday, 2011; Green & Baldry, 2008). Working with Indigenous clients from within organisations that do not effectively understand Indigenous cultural issues proved problematic for four participants. Peter provided more details of the client with an intellectual disability who was placed on an ITO. He informed that this client was Indigenous and was placed on the ITO because he would leave his accommodation to go “walkabout”, a practice that the organisation found difficult to reconcile with the requirement for him to remain in his accommodation. The transient nature of some Indigenous clients and their practice of sharing addresses and phones also led to challenges in relation to privacy and confidentiality, with participants sharing that there were times when they were required to arrange appointments of a sensitive nature over the phone. Although attempts were made not to reveal limited information about their role, it was possible that associates of clients were made unintentionally aware of the nature of a client’s problem. This might have caused problems if client’s associates became aware that they were attending a health service, particularly in relation to domestic violence and sexual abuse situations. Participants informed that despite this ongoing issue, no effective policy was ever identified or implemented to address this issue.

Rachel identified current policies to keep Indigenous families together at all costs as “a dangerous blinkered goal based on Indigenous racism”. She explained that this policy is an attempt to understand and incorporate the importance of culture, but
that in reality it placed clients at harm of continuing abuse. Rachel went on to discuss the lack of knowledge from within her organisation about Traditional Indigenous Law:

The issue of young women (some as young as 10) presenting with such Sexually Transmitted Infections - and often being pregnant- posed further problems under the Intervention because according to NT law, these cases needed to be taken to court and punishments handed out to perpetrators. Children having children constitute further problems, including intergenerational dysfunction and disadvantage, not forgetting the health implications for the mothers and babies. Under Traditional law, however, menstruation means adulthood and sexual activity is sanctioned. As you can imagine, the problems inherent in this clash of cultures were enormous and prior to the Mandatory Reporting of all sexual activity under the age of 16, all workers involved in this area made comprehensive assessments of each individual situation before reporting.

As social workers are required in their Code of Ethics (AASW, 2010) to ensure culturally sensitive practice, these problems cause participants considerable stress, as they feel unable to deliver on this requirement.

These eight areas of conflict, grouped into inter-professional or structural categories, were felt by participants to be highly problematic and as a result, impacted negatively on their professional experiences. In addition to problems identified with contemporary social work practice and the challenging role of conflict, a third theme of the role of power within the current welfare delivery context emerged.

**Power within the Contemporary Context of Social Work Service Delivery**

The profession of social work has long understood the importance of consideration of the role of power in relation to social work practice. Much of this discussion has involved a focus on empowerment, centred on investigations of methods
of increasing client’s power (Fook, 2002; Ife, 2001; Pease, 2002). Less discourse and empirical research has focused on the broader role of power within contemporary social work practice and in particular, how power functions within statutory welfare organisations (Hasenfeld, 1987; Smith, 2010; Smith, 2008; Tew, 2002). All participants in this study identified that the way that power functioned within the current context of social work service delivery informed by neo-liberal ideology was complex and problematic (see Table 6). Findings relating to power in practice can be broken down into three categories, as shown in the table below.

Table 6
Problematic Use of Power in Contemporary Inter-professional use of power.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of power</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inter-professional misuse of power</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misuse of power over clients</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systemic power</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Inter-professional use of power.** Seven participants in this study informed on the misuse of power within and across teams. This included activities such as jostling for power within teams, aggressive actions aimed at disempowering colleagues, competition between workers, misuse of hierarchies of power between multi-disciplinary teams, punishment and surveillance as a result of questioning actions, demotion or reduction in work hours and bullying. Abby summed up the misuse of power by colleagues in her workplace and her feelings about it, “There was a lot of bitchiness - people fighting for power. The workers reflected everything they were fighting against - dominance, aggression, and power-play. I hated it”.

Phoebe agrees, explaining that “I felt that I was being used as a tool in a power struggle that I didn't want to be a part of”. Elise identified that whilst most workers in
her workplace were exceptional, those that did abuse power were able to have a significant impact as they tended to be senior workers and those in management. She went on to identify a lack of life experience by staff and the ramifications that followed:

There are workers who have very little experience outside of the department, have never experienced poverty or homelessness, and have never had to worry about paying a bill or putting food on the table. Coupled with this is their lack of ability to see the grey. They only see black and white and they apply that to their reading of the Act. They also for some crazy reason that is beyond me, see removal as the final answer. When you ask “and then what”, they cannot answer. They believe they have kept a child safe – for this day and for this moment – and do not question what will inevitably happen down the track.

Several participants addressed the complexities of the operation of power within the medical model of service delivery, which sees a clear hierarchy of power amongst professional groups. Janet informed that within the medical model, doctors maintained the most powerful positions, with their decisions carrying ultimate weight. Underneath doctors were nurse unit managers, nurses, and other allied health staff. Janet believed that social workers were not perceived to hold a great deal of power when it came to having their voices heard. Janet supposed that this is a result of historical based power assumptions that “doctor knows best” and that this remained largely unchallenged in her experience. Maureen shared an example of the low regard that social workers were held in, describing a situation whereby social work case notes were removed from a medical record. She suggests that other professional staff simply removed notes made by social workers if they did not agree with the social work assessment.

Participants also experienced the misuse of power when they viewed the ostracisation of colleagues who challenged actions undertaken in the workplace.
Maureen spoke of a colleague who was gossiped about, treated with disrespect and sidelined in professional decision making due to questioning a decision made by a popular staff member in a staff meeting. She shared that watching this event unfold made her hesitant to speak out herself. This experience was not an uncommon one, and clearly served as a warning to other members of the team to be wary of challenges.

Maureen raised an issue with her supervisor and experienced the following situation:

> I can remember many years ago, saying to my social work supervisor at that time, that I was planning to discuss a situation that had potential for conflict with my operational manager because I didn't like work practices that were imposed, I felt they lacked equity when comparing rural nursing and social work staff with metropolitan nurses and social workers. Basically I was going to do a bit of advocacy. My social work supervisor advised me against this action saying that I would be at risk of not being liked. I have remembered this conversation despite it being many years old because I was unprepared for it.

At times, the misuse of power between colleagues can result in bullying. Two participants attested to having been bullied in the workplace. June reported on being bullied by a doctor who did not agree with her assessment and did not appreciate her attempts to continue to advocate for clients. The doctor utilised other staff in attempts to discredit her and June reported that as a result she felt that she is “talked about” in the office. Maureen experienced a serious case of bullying when she questioned a colleague’s work practice within a meeting. This bullying went on for six months and left her too afraid to go to the car park alone at the end of her shift. When she finally found the courage to raise the problem with a sympathetic colleague, she was surprised to find that her colleague had also been the victim of bullying in that workplace.
Maureen has now accepted that bullying will be the consequence of overtly raising problems with work practices that conflict with the “dominant group”.

**Misuse of power over clients.** Thirteen participants reported the misuse of power in relation to the treatment of clients. Identified actions include workers ‘ganging up’ on a client, taking a highly punitive approach to decisions in relation to a client, speaking in a highly judgemental and negative way about clients, choosing interventions aimed at disempowering a client, experiencing enjoyment from holding significant power over a client, ignoring client’s rights, over surveillance of clients and marginalising clients within a service.

Elise’s experiences of the misuse of power over clients in her workplace included many of the above mentioned examples. She suggested that her field of statutory practice was regularly abusing the power bestowed upon them by legislation. Elise explained that she felt she was constantly fighting for clients, who were viewed as “incapable, wasting departmental resources, unworkable and refusing to change”. Elise explained that these judgemental views provided little opportunity for her to advocate for clients, who were seen as a problematic aspect of the work, despite the fact that they are the core business.

June reported that in her workplace, there was an underlying current of trying to “catch client’s out”, which resulted in unnecessary and intrusive surveillance that she believed infringes on her client’s rights. This involved increased questioning of client’s actions, requirements for clients to report on their actions above and beyond what is required by the service and going to extreme efforts to find “holes” in client’s “stories”. Megan tells of colleagues who seemed to take pleasure in “busting” a client and believed this is an extreme misuse of power, especially as clients of her service already feel disempowered.
Three participants identified power abuses in relation to the use of Involuntary Treatment Orders (ITO). Erin summed this up:

I guess what I’m talking about is more clients who are kept on Orders because they don’t like to play the game- they aren’t great at keeping appointments or being home for arranged visits, they tend to play around with their treatment but are usually easily worked with around discussing this. I see psychiatrists keep such people on ITO’s “just in case” and often it is easier for them as if someone doesn’t do as they want, rather than working with the person around the reasons for this and allowing clients to make their own choices (and god forbid mistakes). The big stick of breach of order, enforced compliance, enforced admission to hospital can be easily pulled out. I believe this goes against the spirit of the act and the natural rights for all people, including those with mental illness, to have their human rights protected.

Erin found that the abuse of power around ITO’s was more likely to occur when clients did not have family or friends to advocate for them. Susan and Peter have also seen clients kept on ITO’s as the most convenient method of ‘controlling’ them, with such decisions being made by treating professionals mostly out of convenience and the belief that a client on an ITO will be easier to manage.

**Systemic power.** Statutory practice involves the use of power over clients in a way that proves challenging for social work professionals, who aim to reduce client barriers, address power imbalances and empower clients to achieve their goals. Eleven participants reported on power misuse at the systemic level. This category included power abuses relating to modes of welfare service delivery and the underlying values and beliefs of society that influenced welfare service delivery. Participants identified systemic power abuses including inept government practices, stigmatisation of client
groups and issues, unrealistic expectations of client outcomes, coercive legislation, punitive service requirements, over surveillance of clients, notions of ‘undeserving’ clients and social inequality and injustice.

Elise regularly experienced barriers for clients as a result of power abuses inherent in both the practices of her workplace and the society at large. She believed that many of her clients’ problems were made worse by “inept government practices and stigmatisation from a society who believes the stereotypical spin and bullshit”.

Expanding on the role of systemic power imbalance in society in general, Elise posited that most of her clients have become involved with her workplace not as a result of personal failing, but as:

Victims of poverty, who are unemployed, or where the parents have never had role models, or where the parents have been victims of abuse which has not been addressed, or who have suffered transgenerational trauma….the list goes on, and I believe it is society who has exacerbated their situation therefore society should do everything it can to assist them.

Marie identified that certain client groups were victims of marginalisation by the system, including people with a mental illness, and believed that as a result, some client groups were excluded from resources.

Erin felt that the underlying beliefs about vulnerable clients in her service were that they were undeserving and personally to blame for their situations. She expressed the difficulty of coming up against this system on a daily basis, which resulted in her feeling that she must fight the system before any real gains can be made for her clients. Megan believed that the organisation she works for disempowered clients on a regular basis, with workplace structures hindering the client’s abilities to “get the most out of their lives”. She goes on to suggest that any engagement with the organisation lowers
client’s self-esteem and leads to them feeling judged, a situation which she believes was “traumatic” for clients.

Rachel provided a gender analysis in relation to systemic power abuse, highlighting the disempowerment of women she viewed on a daily basis in her work. She cited the patriarchal social system as being responsible for her clients experiencing stigma, abuse and mistreatment resulting from sexist policy and practice. She viewed the impact of this situation on her clients as:

Continuing to keep them/us oppressed and unheard, secondary to males, and not equitably receiving/accessing resources to address wrongs committed against them/us. A gross social and legal injustice - perpetrated frequently and brazenly by male dominated organisations.

Imre articulated that power abuses at the systemic level were so prevalent and detrimental to his clients that he must maintain:

…a working understanding of the nature of power and the link between power, discourse and the creation of knowledge. Currently those with political power are shaping a discourse of disadvantage that penalises and targets the vulnerable as somehow unworthy. Those in positions of authority are able to shape the interests of the powerless so that they view their disadvantage as acceptable.

The misuse of power between professionals and over clients, as well as the effects of systemic power on the social work role proved a challenge for participants attempting to deliver on their professional value base in practice.

**Discussion**

Findings presented in this chapter support findings from earlier empirical studies and discourse from within the profession, that suggested that contemporary social workers faced a range of problems and complexities when attempting to do their job
from within statutory welfare organisations that were informed by neo-liberal welfare ideologies (Baines, 2010; Gallina & College, 2010; Gregory, 2010; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009; Rogowski, 2011; Stanford, 2008; Wastell et al., 2010; Weinberg, 2010). All participants in this study articulated multiple problems that they believed hamper both their ability to practice social work and the experience of clients in their services. Existing research and discourse from within the profession has established that practice within welfare services influenced by neo-liberal ideology was marked by an environment that had seen an increased focus on risk management, a concern with compliance by both workers and clients, increased surveillance of workers and clients and the growth of a punitive climate (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Gregory, 2010; Sawyer, 2008; Singer, 1991; Stanford, 2008). Findings from this study add additional weight to these existing findings, suggesting that contemporary statutory practice has been impacted upon by changes in welfare service delivery influenced by neo-liberal ideology.

Participants in this study also identified a range of stressors placed on their capacity to perform their job. All five problems identified support existing empirical studies and discourse in the profession, which has highlighted the increased demands placed on contemporary social workers (Acker, 2004; Aronson & Smith, 2009; Healy, 2002; Lymbery, 1998; Storey & Billingham, 2001; Tsui & Cheng, 2004). Findings from this chapter support those from existing studies that identify that excessive case loads, a lack of resources, long hours, increased documentation requirements and a lack of supervision place unreasonable demands on social workers abilities to meet client need.

The existence of conflict within any workplace or profession is not an unexpected or unusual occurrence; however the levels of conflict that are reported on by participants in this study are serious. All participants revealed conflict situations that
they experienced as highly problematic in their work. Existing studies and discourse from the profession support these findings, suggesting that the contemporary context of social work service delivery involves a high level of conflict (Carpenter et al., 2003; Frost et al., 2005; Globerman et al., 1996; McDonald, 2007; Mendes, 2007; Reesor & Epstein, 1987; Wagner, 2009). This conflict existed both between professionals, between social workers and their professional association and at a structural level. Participants in this study identified serious cases of inter-professional conflict that included personality clashes, power plays, ‘bitchiness’ amongst team members, confusion by non-social work professionals regarding the role of social work and differing values between colleagues. Additionally, participants spoke of serious cases of bullying resulting from this conflict.

Participants also identified structural conflict that resulted from both structures at the organisational level and the overarching social structures that influenced their work. Structural conflicts identified support existing findings and included problems with legislation and policies, conflict with methods and models of working, cultural conflict and the devaluation of social workers knowledge and skills that has led to the employment of inexperienced untrained workers who were not well equipped to do the job of social work (Baines, 2006; Calma & Priday, 2011; Campbell et al., 2006; George, 2011; Green & Baldry, 2008; McDonald et al., 2008; Renouf & Bland, 2005; Wallace & Pease, 2011). In addition, participants identified further structural conflict in relation to the image of social work from within their organisation and from within the society at large, which they suggested is not a positive one. Conflict is also identified between participants and their professional social work association, with participants in this study feeling that the professional association should and could do more to improve the experiences of social workers and to enhance the reputation of social workers in
society. Participants in this study attested to the ongoing battles they faced when confronted with organisational/professional conflict. Finally, participants in this study reported on the conflict that occurred when a social worker is part of a system that they saw as unjust and inequitable.

The final major finding relating to the context of contemporary practice is the problematic use of power within contemporary social work practice. Participants in this study identified serious misuse of power that occurred between professionals, over clients and as a result of the system. These findings included aggression and competition between colleagues, misuse of hierarchies of power between multi-disciplinary teams, taking a highly punitive approach to decisions in relation to a client, judging clients, ignoring client’s rights, over surveillance of clients and marginalising clients within a service. Participants identified systemic power abuses including inept government practices, stigmatisation of client groups and issues, coercive legislation, punitive service requirements, over surveillance of clients, notions of ‘undeserving’ clients and social inequality and injustice. To date, little empirical research exists that explores the way that power functions or is experienced by social workers in the contemporary context. Findings in this study reiterate findings from the small number of empirical studies that did explore this topic from within the profession (Bundy-Fazioli, Briar-Lawson, & Hardiman, 2009; Pollack, 2010). Further empirical research is needed that explores the role of power in welfare organisations that are influenced by neo-liberal ideology and how this impacts on social workers.

As discussed in Chapter Two, outside the profession of social work, conflict and power abuses arising as a result of the dominant neo-liberal welfare ideology have been the subject of discourse from within a diverse range of professions (Garrett, 2009). This continuing and growing dialogue about the challenges and problems of a neo-liberal
ideology can be understood by utilising critical theorist Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) theory of cultural hegemony. Building on the work of Marx, Gramsci identified that physical and economic domination were not the only means of oppression, but that cultural domination was equally powerful in subjugating the population (Gramsci, 1971). Exploring the ways that power is wielded by social structures, Gramsci identified that dominant ideologies allow power to be exerted through manipulation and duplicitous means (Brookfield, 2009). Gramsci posited that at key points in history, this dominant cultural hegemony shows ‘cracks’ which provide opportunities for change (Gramsci, 1971). In order to make the best use of these schisms, individuals must hold a critical awareness of the ways that power functions within the dominant cultural hegemony. Current empirical findings and discourse from within the field of social work on the problematic nature of working in welfare services influenced by neo-liberal ideology, joins critical discussions from other professions, to suggest that a schism in the dominant cultural hegemony may be in the process of occurring. As voices of dissent grow, opportunities for challenging the dominant hegemony have the potential to ripen. Garrett (2009) suggests that utilising Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony “could contribute to social workers’ critical reflection during a period of neoliberal inspired transformations” (p. 461). The discussion section of Chapter Five will apply Gramsci’s critical theoretical lens to explore how the actions of social workers might be demonstrating this challenge and transformation.

In addition to the theory of cultural hegemony, the perspective of critical reflective practice from within the profession of social work is useful in explaining the ability of participants in this study to articulate with a great deal of critical awareness the challenges to their professional capacity of working within the contemporary welfare climate. Critical reflective practice requires that social workers are able to
maintain a space for examining and critiquing situations, fostering greater understanding of what lurks beneath the practice surface (Fook, 2004). Participants in this study demonstrated critical cognisance of the problematic nature of their practice, including identifying a range of stressors they attributed to their job, the existence and experience of conflict and how power functioned for both themselves and their clients. In doing so, they demonstrate the perspective of critically reflective practice. The discussion in Chapter Five will continue to apply the perspective of critical reflective practice to gain insight into the tactics that participants employ when determining appropriate actions to challenge contemporary practice environments.

This list of findings relating to the existence of conflict and the misuse of power is perhaps not surprising when the problems identified with contemporary social work practice within welfare services influenced by neo-liberal ideology are taken into account. Faced with significant problems with practice and increased demands on capacity, it is not unreasonable to find that serious levels of conflict and power play follow. When social workers report feeling under pressure, over worked, under-appreciated, misunderstood, over watched and under resourced, the existence of conflict between colleagues, organisations and structures is not unexpected. In working environments that are highly competitive and hierarchical and involve delivering services to a population that is both vulnerable and stigmatised under the current welfare ideology, the existence of the abuse of power is perhaps not surprising.

For participants in this study, the contemporary context of social work practice within welfare services influenced by neo-liberal ideology was experienced as highly problematic. The range of problems identified place significant stress upon their ability to deliver on their social work roles with many participants finding that ultimately, their practice was not sustainable and the job of social work was not possible in the current
ideological climate. The problems identified are felt as grave enough that many participants ultimately chose to move jobs or change professions. For those participants who have chosen to remain within the profession and continue to be employed in statutory practice, their experiences in relation to the problems that exist within their practice have informed their choice of decisions in regards to how to survive as social workers. These participants have found ways to push back against the system, to challenge the underlying ideology of contemporary practice and in doing so, feel they remain committed to what they believe delivering on the job of social work is supposed to be about.

Chapter Five explores findings in relation to the actions that participants in this study have taken to deliver on the mission of social work and the outcomes they have experienced as a result of these actions.
Chapter Five

Activities of Resistance

The activities undertaken by social workers that challenge and resist have typically been conceptualised as macro actions that occur outside of the day to day work of individual practice (Hugman, 2009; Mendes, 2007). As discussed in the literature review, empirical studies into social work activism have found a range of overt activities such as supporting political parties, attending rallies, joining sympathetic organisations, influencing policy, advocating for change and lobbying (Chui & Gray, 2004; Domanski, 1998; Gray et al., 2002; Reeser & Epstein, 1987). Discourses within the profession as well as empirical research have suggested that contemporary social work practice within welfare services influenced by neo-liberal ideology has seen a closing down of spaces for resistance, resulting in both the loss of activist or radical practice and the growth of new forms of resistance (Gibbs, 2001; Huxley et al., 2005; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009; McDonald, 2007). This chapter will present three findings in relation to activities that social workers undertake to resist problems and pressures in contemporary social work practice and will conclude with a discussion of these findings. The first finding is that participants in this study undertook a wide range of both overt and covert resistance activities within their workplace, from minor challenges to law breaking activities. The second finding is that participant’s main motivation in undertaking covert activism was to benefit their clients. The third finding is that participants employed a range of carefully constructed tactics when undertaking covert resistant actions. The first finding supports findings from existing empirical research into social work activism and covert workplace resistance. The following two findings provide new insight into the reflective thought processes that social workers employ when making decisions about resistant activities.
Resistant Activities within the Workplace

As stated in the literature review, the definition of covert workplace resistance utilised by this study is based on Prasad and Prasad’s (2000) concept of ‘owned’ resistance, which established that resistance can be identified as such based solely on the subjective view of the worker who is of the belief that their actions are in some way aimed at challenging and resisting. Participants in this study chose both a range of traditional overt activities aimed at resisting problematic practice areas, as well as utilising newer forms of covert resistance in an attempt to drive change in a system which workers reported being non amenable to challenges (see Table 7). Imre summed up the movement from overt to covert challenge in the following way, “I always fight the causes in an overt way until I come to the conclusion that my attempts of resistance/challenges are stagnating and my activism stalls/fails”.

Table 7
Activities Undertaken by Social Workers to Challenge Practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Type of activity</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overt activities</td>
<td>Advocating for change</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Influencing policies</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public protests</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covert activities</td>
<td>Being creative</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rule bending</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Influencing others</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-compliance</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stretching professional boundaries</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Breaking the law</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Compromising the truth</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Over servicing</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Overt activities.** Activities classified as overt included those that were open and observable with no attempt made to conceal the activity. Overt activities therefore included actions that have traditionally been associated with radical social work, such as openly protesting or challenging ideologies that were deemed to run counter to the aims of the value base of the profession (Chui & Gray, 2004; Domanski, 1998; Reeser & Epstein, 1987). Additionally, overt activities also captured a range of open and observable actions that challenged workplace practices and policies and advocated for improved client outcomes. This category therefore includes both challenges at a systemic level as well as an individual level.

**Advocating for change.** Advocating for change as a method of overt challenge has been found in existing empirical research as a popular method of social work activism, with Domanski’s (1998) research finding that the role of advocate was the second most popular activity of ten prototypes of political participation by social workers uncovered in her study. Participants reported four overt activities to challenge problematic practice areas. All fifteen participants reported undertaking actions to advocate for change. Most often, these activities involved speaking up for clients in an effort to improve outcomes for them. These participants stated that they frequently confronted situations where they believed client’s interests were not best served as a result of the constraints of workplace practices or policies. Maureen reported that she frequently argued for the client’s perspective to be considered in team meetings however admitted that her efforts were rarely successful.

When I try to introduce new ideas into the discussion, such as patient preference, and argue my position based on patient preference and empowerment ….I find that no one wants to engage, hence there is a standoff.

Susan reflected on efforts to advocate for change via attempts at educating co-workers:
(I) raise awareness among colleagues and clients about barriers to engagement, barriers to recovery, that people from different backgrounds may require specific assistance, that there is evidence to show that social exclusion negatively impacts on a person's wellbeing and addressing pertinent issues can be effective in recovery, not medication alone.

She found that this approach was quickly overridden by concerns about managing client risk. Whilst her attempts proved largely ineffective, Susan maintained that she felt she should continue to “be openly trying to change systems, [finding] opportunities to make them fairer”. Both of these participants highlighted the difficulty of trying to deliver on social work’s client centred focus in an interdisciplinary team, where professionals from other disciplines may not have held the same value base as the social work profession. This resulted in an “us and them” mentality, with these participants finding that advocating for client’s interests to be considered alongside those of the organisation or other professionals became a battle that placed them at risk of being regarded as “annoying, a problem and a pain in the arse”. June felt that raising problems overtly led to being ostracised by colleagues, however she felt this was an important action for social workers, and she planned to continue to raise issues as needed. Rachel recognised that “speaking out is not going to be good for my career in the long run. However, I accept that fact and do it anyway – knowing that there are others like me out there too”.

Additionally, participants reported on actions that advocated for change in workplace policies and procedures. This included identifying problems in these areas and raising these problems with management and other colleagues. These participants felt that this was a central part of the social work role and expressed that they were unable to let problems in practice go unreported. Problems raised included concerns
about treatment approaches and ineffective work place practices such as forms that did not allow client’s full information to be captured. Erin reported continually raising ethical issues regarding treatment options for clients with her team leader but informs that, “Sadly the ‘how would it look on the front page of the courier mail’ test seems to have more sway these days than other factors such as client rights”.

Speaking to the ineffectiveness of raising problems, Maureen shared that:

> In my early days in social work practice I employed strategies such as community development as a means of addressing unmet need. I also overtly challenged, made requests, engaged in debate – I found these strategies only useful in some situations, covert or indirect methods and strategic approaches have a greater success rate and also more successful for systems change.

> It could be argued that advocating for clients and raising problems with workplace practices and policies is simply a form of core social work practice as opposed to a form of activism. However, all participants in this study conceptualised advocating for change as a form of overt activism due to the difficulties that resulted from their attempts to do so. Conceptualising advocating as a form of activism attests to findings from existing research that reported on the reluctance by organisations to tolerate oppositional voices (Andrews & Reisch, 2002; Gibbs, 2001).

**Influencing policies.** Five participants described attempts to influence policy as an example of overt activism. These challenges involved critical discussion of policies that they identified as inequitable for clients or problematic for social workers to deliver. Participants felt that engaging in policy debate had the potential for driving significant change, particularly if they were well placed to influence policy direction. Megan made a point of volunteering for any opportunities within her workplace to be involved in policy review or development, believing that this was a crucial task for
social workers. She collected case studies to provide evidence to management where policies were not effective, but remained sceptical of how effective this was in driving change.

Whilst some of these attempts at overtly challenging policies both within the employing organisation and larger government policy were felt to be effective, participants reported that on the whole they were left either unaware of the results of their attempts or unsuccessful, as Megan reflects:

We do have a role in feeding back up, so in that sense we’re often collecting case studies where the policy is falling down. To date, I don’t know if any of that has actually worked ... we will attempt to openly change things, but it’s very slow and we have no idea the impact we have, if any ... and I think it would be quite minor.

For this group of participants, trying to influence policy through overt actions remained an important part of their practice as they believed in the potential of social workers to be at the frontline of policy review and development. Imre had future plans to move into a more full time policy role and utilise both overt and covert methods of activism:

I do intend at some stage to get into corporate office and work in policy development!!!! How interesting would that be!!!!! There could be a lot of opportunities to establish some sound radical social work policy development, covertly linked to the socialist cause, I wonder if it would be possible to apply a covert approach to my practice at that level? So much fun reflecting on the impact one could have!

These findings support those from Domanski’s (1998) study discussed in the literature review that included attempts to influence and discuss policy in her category
of ‘Communicator’. This category proved the most popular form of political participation by social workers in her typography.

**Public protests.** Although public protests are associated with historical notions of radical and activist social work from the period of 1970s and 1980s, this is not supported by existing empirical evidence, which found that public protest has never been a popular method of resistance from within the social work profession (Chui & Gray, 2004; Domanski, 1998; Gray et al., 2002; Reeser & Epstein, 1987). These findings are supported by participants in this study, of whom only one identified participating in protests as a form of overt activism. Imre was the only participant who reported attending and organising protest rallies, although most of these occurred many years ago and in a different country. Interestingly, he informed that his involvement in protest rallies involved both overt and covert activism:

> The act of protest is an overt action but the illegal aspects tend to happen in the planning stages and in secret. Flying pickets for example were eventually made illegal in the UK by the Thatcher government during the miners strikes, so if you were caught you would probably get a short prison sentence but this did not stop the illegal activity from being planned and continuing.

> It is interesting that all of the problems that participants reported raising concerns about are those associated with client outcomes. Whilst this demonstrates that participants were committed to client-centred practice in relation to their activism, it is interesting that none of the participants reported raising problems relating to their own experience of practice, despite being able to articulate a wide range of challenges to their social work practice.
Ultimately, these overt actions were felt by participants to be largely ineffective, leaving them searching for additional means of activism that might prove more successful.

**Covert activities.** As discussed in Chapter Two, covert activities are defined as informal actions undertaken by a social worker in the workplace that do not conform or comply with workplace policy and procedure and are primarily motivated by the desire to benefit the client. Additionally, in pursuing covert activities, the social worker is aware that such an action conflicts with workplace policy and procedure and therefore ‘owns’ the action as resistant (Prasad & Prasad, 2000).

**Being creative.** Participants identified activities that are represented by nine categories of covert activities. Twelve participants reported ‘being creative’ with a range of daily work practices, including interpreting workplace policies, filling in forms, omitting information, feigning ignorance and ‘massaging the truth’. The term ‘being creative’ was chosen by participants, who utilised this term frequently to describe these actions. This echoes findings from Abramovitz’s (2005) research, which also found participants utilised the term ‘being creative’ to describe their covert workplace activities. This term is used broadly and being a largely positive term, may mask another dimension to covert practices, a shadow side to some of the actions that participants undertook. For example, some participants used the term ‘being creative’ to describe actions which broke the law. This research has chosen to represent the term ‘being creative’ in order to ensure that participant’s voices are represented, but has also broken down this term into more specific representations of what participants were doing.

Abby, Elise, Hannah, Maureen, Megan, Imre and Janet all described actions that involved them creatively interpreting workplace policies in an effort to meet client need.
For example, Abby regularly purchased food for clients when there was not enough money in the petty cash, an action that was forbidden by workplace policy. She was creative in her method of carrying out this action, in that she first ‘anonymously donated’ the money to petty cash. In doing so, she reported feeling able to defend the action should she be caught. She felt that in this way she was not directly breaking the policy, just being creative with it. Hannah used the sometimes conflicting directives that occur between workplace policies to creatively interpret their meaning to benefit clients. She explained that “there were gaps in these sources of information, and I think I used these gaps to develop my own ideas about how to respond and to justify to myself what I was doing”. She went on to say that she was grateful for these gaps as they allowed her the movement to be creative which she utilised to meet client need. In considering her actions she explained:

If there was a specific instruction that said I must/ or must not do something, then I would obey that instruction, but where there is discretion or unclear policy I think that gives us scope to interpret the guidelines in different ways.

Abby and Hannah both demonstrated a concern for being able to justify their actions should they need to do so. Their need to justify their actions stemmed from both their expressed desire to remain congruent with the ethical requirements of social work practice and their stated affiliation with critical reflective practice. This will be discussed further in the discussion section at the end of this chapter.

Marie creatively omitted information when advocating for clients with other services. She explained that when ringing accommodation services for a client she did not mention that her client had mental health issues as she has found that this jeopardised the chances of her client being accommodated. Imre told of situations where he has “dragged the chain” in relation to filling in required forms to delay the start of an
official process, giving clients additional time before actions are taken. Additionally, he exaggerated the requests for taxi vouchers, to allow injured clients to attend appointments, despite the fact that staff had been told to limit the use of these vouchers. Junior staff now approach him for assistance with creatively filling out taxi vouchers. Megan found that in her work there are a great many situations that allowed her to creatively manoeuvre to benefit her clients. She provided an example relating to the requirement for her to identify “barriers for clients”. Megan reported that this allowed her leeway to ensure that clients who did not attend mandated activities were not penalised and informed that she has never not identified barriers. Megan justified this action:

So in that sense, my little covert action would be that I would never say that I have not identified barriers. I would never be instrumental in having them cut off, because my values are such that….well, 1. In terms of human rights, I think that people are entitled to this money, to some basic safety net and 2. I don’t think it’s helpful in terms of my frameworks and I don’t think it will achieve anything.

Maureen found a creative way of ensuring that social work notes remained in a client’s chart, as there were instances where notes felt to be unfavourable by other colleagues had been removed. She explained that:

My strategy of writing on the back of existing notes is one I learnt early in my social work career. I had seen notes removed - usually just because staff had written them poorly and decided to be more comprehensive the following day but sometimes they have just disappeared.
These participants all described both the need to maximise client opportunities in an effort to meet their needs and an awareness of the need to justify their actions should they be caught. Megan called this ‘being creative but careful’.

‘Bending’ the rules. Nine participants reported bending rules as an example of covert activities. Once again, the term ‘bending rules’ was chosen as it was used by these participants to describe their activities. None of these participants described their actions as ‘breaking’ rules, preferring instead to use a less harsh descriptor in the choice of ‘bending’. This finding is supported by existing empirical research into covert social work practices, which found that ‘rule bending’ was a common practice amongst this group of workers (Abramovitz, 2005; Aronson & Smith, 2009; Baines, 2001; Carey & Foster, 2011; Gregory, 2010; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009). Rule bending involves undertaking actions that do not deliver strictly on the requirements of a rule and turning a blind eye when clients or colleagues do not strictly comply with a rule. Rules around petty cash and accessing particular funds of money or vouchers were bent by Abby, Janet, Marie, Megan and Imre, who all reported accessing these funds to assist clients when they might not strictly meet the criteria for eligibility for these monies. Abby explained that there simply isn’t enough petty cash to meet demand and although she had raised this issue overtly, nothing had been done. As a result, she accessed additional emergency funding to provide clients with necessities, although this process was supposed to involve a lengthy application process. Imre reported “dipping into petty cash” to provide clients with “some small thing” that may not strictly meet the rules in relation to appropriate uses for petty cash. Megan’s rule bending in relation to funding involved the use of emergency funds and travel vouchers. She explained that bending rules in relation to funds was a difficult process that required a great deal of thought, as
the guidelines were very strict. She provided the following example relating to a particular client:

She did need to get to her housing so we decided to give her petty cash. If they can go by train, you’re supposed to give them a train voucher, so some of the covert stuff that we will do will be that we will identify a suburb that you can’t get to by train and that would have a welfare agency and say they’re going there so we can give them petty cash. Then they can use that money for whatever they need it for.

She explained that although this may have only provided the client with an additional $15, it would have assisted them to buy nappies for their baby or some other small essential item. In considering this action she reflected that:

Sometimes, I think, to follow the rules all the time …would be to go against the principles and values of social work (i.e. you couldn’t fulfil the 'service to humanity' if you send someone home hungry, and without care). So, I have two options, I guess: obey the rules all the time regardless of circumstance, and leave people hurting and in need; or help them and act in kindness and care, and make the 'rules' fit into what you do. At least that way, I would be doing my role as a social worker.

Peter described his rule bending activities as manipulating time frames required by his service. For example, he would “allow” clients who were mandated to receive a medication via injection on a Friday to delay their appointment until the following Monday, if they had a significant reason for doing so. This went against the strict rules regarding injections for clients, but he had identified that bending this rule fosters a higher level of client engagement with the service, which ultimately benefitted the client. Erin also relaxed time frames in relation to rules for clients on ITO’s, finding that
clients who did not always keep appointments according to the schedule defined in the rules, were best served by an approach which allowed them to re-schedule rather than face punitive action. She felt that this approach afforded clients the “right to make their own choices about treatment if there was no risk to themselves or others imminently from making this decision”.

Imre described his rule bending as “turning a blind eye” to the behaviours of clients when they broke a rule. He provided an example of a client who seriously threatened him physically with a weapon. In this instance, he was supposed to press a panic button and report the client, but he felt that he could calm the client down and in not reporting them, enhance the rapport he had with the client. He explained that he had worked with a new graduate who expressed interest in rule bending and that he:

Introduced him to some forms of covert social work where the “blind eye” or boundary stretching can become a very progressive tool when working with such a marginalised group and so build a positive and trusting working relationship. I did point out the risks too, which are numerous.

Phoebe bent a rule relating to giving out room keys to residential staff. The rule stated that no client was to have a room key, however Phoebe felt that lending them a key so they could quickly enter their room and collect something was not unreasonable and that it showed trust. She explained:

It’s a rapport building exercise. If they can see that go ‘I know you’re a good person, look just take them’, rather than going ‘no the policy is…’ and you take them 10 metres together…it’s like a jailor. And I don’t think that’s the purpose of having power for me. For me, in my current work situation, the purpose is to be responsible and to hold responsibility, not to abuse power. Not to be overly controlling. Not to make people’s lives difficult.
Influencing others. Six participants described covert activities aimed at influencing the actions of colleagues and clients. Participants involved in attempts to influence clients described activities whereby they encouraged and supported clients to make complaints about a service, to fill out forms in such a way that they were most likely to receive a service and to engage in activities that promoted the most beneficial outcomes for them. The existing research into covert activities by social workers has not included this form of activity. Therefore, this category provides new evidence into an additional covert workplace activity.

Elise encouraged clients to bring support people with them to important appointments and to get legal advice if she felt it would lead to a favourable outcome for the client. Maureen encouraged clients to meet with medical staff and request particular information that she has found some Doctors are not forthcoming with. Penny provided clients with appropriate excuses to present to her workplace to reduce the chances of them being financially penalised.

Hannah explained a situation where she encouraged a client to answer a question on a form in a certain way that enabled them to receive additional financial benefits. This involved the client identifying as having a disability, which Hannah felt she could justify as the client had a long term illness which she believed could fit the definition of a disability that her organisation provided. The client would receive an additional $40 000 if they identified as having a disability. The client however did not see herself as having a disability, however with Hannah’s encouragement, filled out the form to reflect that he did. Hannah reports that:

This led me to other problems, which is about the client identifying as a person with a disability. The client didn’t want to be constructed as a person with a
disability, so we spent several weeks talking about how we see ourselves and our identity, and how we might put something different on the form.

Participants also described instances of attempting to influence colleague’s actions, with Elise regularly working to persuade colleagues to “see the family through a different lens”. She pushed for family meetings so that staff who had made negative judgements about a family would have an opportunity to hear the family’s story in more detail and “see their humanity”. She also carefully selected specific workers from other agencies to work with her clients as she felt that these particular workers knew how to respectfully use their power. Imre also attempted to influence which colleagues would be involved with a client by delaying intake presentations until certain colleagues were absent. He explained that this action:

…weighs the dice in favour of the client and not the bias of certain team members. Our client base can be complex and when certain clients try to return to our program some team members pass value laden statements that are linked to past histories of that client which can delay or even stop the client accessing the service. Sanctioned gatekeepers! Bollocks to that!!! My work enables me to sometimes covertly get clients into the service with a small manipulation of intake process and procedure.

Imre also reported covertly allying with colleagues at a very senior level to advance the “social work agenda”. He believed that “whispering in the right ear can and does have significant power. It’s worth the price of a few beers or dinner”.

**Non-compliance.** Five participants included the covert activity of ‘non-compliance’, which includes actions that directly go against the directives of their employing organisation or other staff. This activity was also found in existing empirical research into covert activities by social workers, with participants in those studies
informing that they chose not to comply with organisational directives or those supplied by other staff (Abramovitz, 2005; Aronson & Smith, 2009; Baines, 2001; Carey & Foster, 2011; Gregory, 2010; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009). Section 5.1 of the AASW Code of Ethics (1999) stated that “Social workers must act in accordance with the law and organisational directives” (p. 22). The Code did go on to recognise that tensions may exist between organisational requirements and observing the Code and outlines a process to follow should this happen (AASW, 1999).

Janet described a situation where she had been told that she was not to leave her place of work to visit a client at home, but she chose to do this on occasion anyway. She also described an event where the director of her service undertook a large “mapping process” to determine which staff practices could be kept and which could not. Despite staff attending the process and agreeing to her directives, Janet reported that “we have largely ignored her and push on as we need to. I think that’s social work – resistance is inherent”. In deciding as a group on this action, staff explored the likely outcomes and decided that it was “better to ask for forgiveness than ask for permission”. This type of group activism is discussed in more detail in the discussion of tactics for undertaking covert activism later in this chapter.

Phoebe explained that she decided not to carry out the directive of her supervisor to reprimand another staff member, even though she had agreed to do so. In taking this decision she explained that “I knew she was busy enough not to notice that I hadn't done what she had asked”. Susan chose not to complete a full examination when she was required to do so at each client visit. She made the decision not to comply with this directive, as she believed that it is:

…excessive and requires asking repetitive questions of clients and incongruous to the session at hand. There is such a focus on risk that wasn't always there, so I
feel rather cynical about the request to document risk every time. I don’t feel it's in the client's best interest.

Susan was aware of the serious risks associated with choosing not to conduct a full examination at each visit and feared being held accountable should a client’s outcome prove tragic, but believed that rapport is so significantly damaged by the “excessive” and “repetitive” questioning involved in these examinations, that clients proved more difficult to engage with the service as a result. However, given that the potential outcome may involve the death of a client, Susan’s actions in this case may point to a serious breach in professional accountability.

Susan also did not comply with the directive to document her movements on the computer system, which she informed she is obliged to do. Despite management continually telling staff to complete this process, Susan felt that it is “onerous and pointless to (her) client work” and that she felt excessively monitored by her employers. Whilst she cannot openly refuse this process, she chose to keep it “to an absolute minimum”, spending more time on her client work.

Participants who described actions of non-compliance all reported attempts at openly questioning directives in the past, and stated that their choice of covertly refusing to comply with directives was based on negative experiences of these past open challenges.

‘Stretching’ professional boundaries. Five participants reported stretching professional boundaries as an example of covert resistant actions. The term ‘stretching’ was used by participants as opposed to ‘breaking’ boundaries, as participants did not feel that their actions were a clear breach of professional boundaries, but rather a ‘blurring of the lines’ between professional and personal boundaries. That participants reported these actions with a great deal of caution suggests that they understand that
such actions may inhabit a ‘grey area’ of ethical practice and may not be seen as justifiable social work practice. Stretching professional boundaries was not found as an example of covert resistance in any of the existing empirical social work research.

Rachel shared the story of taking a client into her home for a night, when all other efforts to find emergency accommodation failed. Abby visited a newly arrived refugee family at Christmas time, taking a toy hamper for their little girl who had been diagnosed with a terminal illness and had been her client. The hampers were donated to her service and Abby knew that the family would not be able to come into the organisation to collect one.

Janet’s actions involved multiple examples of boundary stretching. She frequently chose to hug clients, even though her organisation specifically does not allow this. In doing so, it could be argued that she is not acting in accordance with section 4.4 of her professional Code of Ethics (AASW, 1999) that required that she follow the organisation’s directives. Additionally, section 4.1.4 (f) informed that “social workers will avoid any form of physical contact which may violate professional boundaries, result in unintentional psychological harm or damage the professional relationship” (AASW, 1999, p. 13). However, Janet recognised that some of her clients may have had no physical contact for years and that “it came naturally/authentically, it was a human to human moment rather than a worker to client moment”. She demonstrated reflective practice in considering stretching professional boundaries in this way:

I know the debate about ‘to touch or not to touch’ inside out and back the front. I think the decision now comes to me intuitively/quickly, but I am ever conscious that I may get it wrong and that I can potentially burden the client. So I don’t touch without a therapeutic intent.
She also gave out her home phone number to a family as a means of support and has gone guarantor for an ex-client with regards to him obtaining rental accommodation. Janet explained that she takes her ethical requirements extremely seriously, but practices from a place of authenticity and humanness. She considered that the careful reflection on her covert behaviours demonstrated, in her words, “the right to exercise professional discretion and professional judgment”. This is in accordance with Section 2 of the Code of Ethics (AASW, 1999, p. 11).

**Breaking the law.** Four participants reported undertaking covert activities that broke the law. The small amount of empirical evidence into covert workplace activism within social work that exists does not provide any examples of activities that break the law, although participants in Abramovitz’s (2005) study did hint at illegal actions but did not provide any details. Megan identified that she cannot openly challenge policy in her organisation because “it’s not just policy, it’s actually in legislation, so it’s actually illegal. It’s criminal activity”. She believed that her actions break the law but doesn’t dwell on this, and focused instead on how she was benefitting her clients. Participants in this category reported a range of illegal activities that were mostly centred on the choice not to report client’s actions when required to do so. Rachel described situations where she determined it not to be in the best interests of her client to follow through with mandatory reporting requirements in relation to sexual abuse. In making these decisions, Rachel explained that she used all of her professional knowledge and skills to critically reflect on the best course of action for her client and only chosen not to report when a client was at risk of self-harm or disengagement with the service if reported. Susan described a situation where she had not reported a client using drugs even though she was legally required to do so. Susan determined that her client’s marijuana use was
mild and that reporting it might result in “more assertive forms of treatment” that she
determined would not be in her client’s best interest.

Imre’s illegal activities have involved assisting a client to exit his work premises
“out the back way”, as his workplace was under surveillance by the police at the time.
Although the police were attempting to detain a violent drug dealer, Imre reported that
they were also harassing other clients of the service when they left the building. He
explains:

One of my clients had a warrant against him and if he was spotted by the police,
he would face a few day at least in the local goal and probably longer! His
offence was a drug charge. We became aware of the surveillance and started to
warn some of our clients. I mentioned the surveillance to this client during a
review and he was scared and started to panic about what would happen when
he left. My action was to let him out the back way and so doing allowed a
wanted person get away.

In revealing his covert workplace activities which break the law, Imre displayed a great
deal of caution, first needing to determine if it was safe to reveal this information as part
of a research project. Imre revealed one story at a time, seeking reassurance that his
actions would not be reported to authorities and waiting to see what my reaction would
be before sharing additional stories. He explains:

It’s an interesting dilemma illegal activity! And my reluctance to admit to covert
illegal activities. I have been reflecting on this in recent times and one
fundamental rule of covert action in my mind is the difficulty in trusting others.
I acknowledge this is a study and a very interesting one but I still find breaking
my own rules is a difficult one to address. One of the first things I learned in the
world of the leftist’s is know who you’re talking with and then still question their motives.

Imre’s final example of law breaking was shared towards the end of the interview process and involved assisting the movement of an illegal refugee from a client’s house to a different State. Imre accompanied the refugee for the 24 hour car journey. In exploring his motivations for this action, he explained that:

My family was assisted by strangers when we left our homeland and my father’s journey out of our homeland a few years before ours could not have happened without the help of strangers. After we had returned I reflected on what had occurred and I felt satisfied that our actions were well placed. I knew we had been involved in something that did make a difference to the life of this guy and we managed to fuck over a system of immigration that is probably one of the most inhuman in the modern world. I would do it again without a flicker of an eye too!

All participants who reported activities that break the law spoke in length about their justifications for doing so and felt that on balance, their activities were able to be justified as being in the best interests of their client and closely linked to the value base of the social work profession. That participants went to extensive efforts to explain their illegal behaviours can be seen as both an indication of critically reflective practice and the need to rationalise actions that they are aware walk a fine line between ethical and unethical behaviour. These participants demonstrated a great deal of caution in revealing illegal activities, expressing concern about what would happen should these actions come to the attention of their employing organisation, the social work professional association and the public. Such caution demonstrates that participants
were cognisant that these illegal activities could be construed as unethical and criminal and as such, reflect badly on both themselves and the profession.

These findings add important new insight into the lengths that some social workers will go to in an effort to deliver on what they see as the role of social work to challenge unjust practices.

‘Compromising’ the truth. Four participants reported covert activities that ‘compromised the truth’. This term was chosen as participants utilised it themselves, however, as with ‘being creative’, ‘compromising the truth’ is a more positive term than other terms used to describe this activity. Only one participant used the term ‘lying’ to describe their actions, with the others preferring to perceive them in a less negative or ‘softer’ light. Speaking to the difficulties that arise as a result of this form of activism, Phoebe stated that:

Running parallel truths is a cost. Things that I would tell one person and tell another person something else…it’s just lying basically. That’s not being able to operate transparently. That was immensely stressful. But that job was really hard because I’d never worked for Government before and I was trying really hard to work within the system. But I was finding it really hard to follow what should be done.

Section 4.1.3 of the AASW Code of Ethics (1999) stated that “social workers will provide assistance to clients in an objective, equitable and just manner…” (p. 12), however these participants felt able to justify their actions and argued that although not transparent, they were congruent with the aim and purpose of social work and necessary in the current managerialist welfare climate. They only ‘compromised the truth’ to deliver on the purpose of social work. Although these actions could be described as lying, participant’s descriptions of their activities tended not to involve absolute lies,
and in fact participant’s expressed that they would not tell an ‘absolute lie’. Instead, these activities most often involved omitting or embellishing information on forms or in discussion with other agencies about a client. Existing empirical research into covert activism within social work also found that participants were undertaking this form of resistance, with participants in these studies informing that they overstated client need to ensure a client would receive a service (Abramovitz, 2005; Aronson & Smith, 2009; Baines, 2001; Carey & Foster, 2011; Gregory, 2010; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009).

Phoebe and Susan described compromising the truth by overstating homeless clients’ needs for accommodation, which they both described as a common practice in their place of work. Phoebe explained that all workers understood the eligibility criteria that would place a client at the top of the Department of Housing’s critical list, and that workers regularly ensured that the information they included on their client’s application would enable them to be assessed as in critical need of housing. She acknowledged that this practice is problematic as it may cause others in need to be placed further down on the list, but in every case she determined that her client’s need was critical, even if they did not strictly meet the criteria established by the Department of Housing, which she felt does not adequately capture need. In this way, Phoebe demonstrated prioritising individual need over the greater good, an outcome that she and other participants in this research undertaking actions which have the potential to place the needs of their client over the needs of others, reported feeling uneasy about.

Susan compromised the truth when filling out how her time is spent at work on the computer system designed to track worker’s activities. She felt that the process of recording every minute of her work time takes valuable time away from meeting with clients. Penny also manipulated the computer system by incorrectly recording that client’s had attended mandated appointments with her service when they had not. She
stressed that she would only do this when she had assessed that “the history of the [client] made it difficult to engage consistently in the service”. For example, if the client was a single mother who could not afford train fare or arrange child care to attend a routine meeting that neither the client nor the worker deemed necessary, Penny might place the wishes of her client over those of the need to attend a face to face interview.

**Over-servicing.** Three participants described activities whereby they ‘over serviced’ clients. This is a term they used to describe going beyond the requirements of their service to deliver extra interventions or engagement with clients. These actions support findings in Baines’ (2001) study which found that participants were regularly providing out of hours services to clients and constructed this as a form of resistance to the time limited services offered by their employing organisation.

Abby described multiple examples of staying well into the night despite officially finishing her work day at 5pm. She did this when she identified that a client would benefit from her ongoing assistance and that there was no one else available to provide this service. She did not inform her supervisors that she was staying late or request time off, as she was aware that this would place additional strain on her colleagues who would need to take on her cases while she was away. She also reported situations whereby colleagues had conducted home visits when not required to and said that she herself had also done this on occasion. Although she spoke to the increased stress that this additional work placed on her, she said she did not regret it as client outcomes had always been enhanced by her decision to stay.

Elise described her resistance as continuing to meet with families beyond the time that the service would like them to remain involved with the program. She explained that she believed service time frames to be inadequate to meet client need and
that this was not in meeting with best practice as defined by the evidence relating to
time frames within her field of practice. Janet informs that:

    Most of my ‘resistance’ comes from ‘over-serviceing’ clients. For example,
    we’re not funded to see outpatients, but if I build rapport with someone and for
    whatever reason, the client finds it possible to move ahead with my support and
    impossible otherwise, I’m happy to continue seeing someone.

    Examples of her over-servicing clients included providing clients with her work
    phone number and encouraging them to call, even after they were no longer clients of
    the service, applying for pension and Medicare cards for clients even though this was
    not a job requirement and receiving mail for homeless clients addressed to herself at the
    social work department and then passing on this mail to the client. She found this work
    exhausting but very satisfying; sharing that clients seemed to appreciate the extra
    assistance and knew that these actions were “above and beyond the call of duty”.

    However, given that Janet continued to provide a level of service to former clients,
    issues regarding professional boundaries are brought into question by her actions, which
    are further highlighted in the section on stretching professional boundaries later in this
    chapter.

    It is worth reiterating that alongside undertaking the covert activities described
    here, all fifteen participants also engaged in overt challenges. The covert activities
    being utilised by participants in this study demonstrate a range from small
    infringements to illegal activities. Whilst some participants showed a preference for
    utilising two or three strategies, others employed the full range, choosing which activity
    to undertake to meet their desired outcome. The choice of activities chosen is informed
    by a range of factors, which will be addressed in the following section of this chapter.
Covert Motivations

When exploring their motivations for undertaking covert activism in their work, participants in this study identified three factors, with the most popular being the wish to benefit clients (see Table 8). All participants stated that client benefit was the main motivation for their actions. Other factors cited are in addition to the primary goal of assisting clients. Only three previous empirical studies into covert activism in social work asked participants about their motivations, with these studies also finding that improving outcomes for clients was a central motivator (Abramovitz, 2005; Aronson & Smith, 2009; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009).

Table 8
Motivations for Undertaking Covert Activism in the Workplace

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To benefit clients</td>
<td>Builds client rapport</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Client at risk</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace experience</td>
<td>Past experience</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Influence of others</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time pressure</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-agenda</td>
<td>To benefit self</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Benefitting clients.

_builds client rapport._ Participants returned many times throughout the interview process to their primary motivation for undertaking covert activism. Each time they informed on a covert practice, they articulated in depth why they chose this action, with the desire to benefit clients emerging as a central driver in their choices. Participants demonstrated a deep level of critical reflection in determining why they chose to act covertly, exploring their wishes to benefit clients in greater depth. This includes identifying the wish to enhance client outcomes, build client rapport and aid clients who they identify as being at significant risk. Erin summed up this approach:
I have reflected on this question and can honestly say 99.9% of the time it was the clients’ interests that were foremost. Occasionally I may be influenced by family pressure or others in the client’s life to ‘give it a try’ or ‘let it go’ but where this didn’t seem to be in the client’s best interests I wouldn’t.

Hannah reported feeling “compelled to act” when she could see that:

My clients were caught up in the bureaucracy of their situation, and might not be able to benefit from the intention of the policy (as I understood it), so I acted to make sure that my clients were able to access [services] and assistance that they needed.

When speaking of their wish to benefit clients, participants used highly emotional language, speaking of a deep connection to client-centred practice. Imre “cares deeply for my clients”. Maureen stated that “I was the voice for the patient when the patient’s voice was ignored”. Penny was passionate about “vulnerable clients who are unable to participate”. Being client-focused also provided participants with the justification for breaking workplace policies, which many felt was only excusable when client need demanded. Abby explained:

I don’t break policy/ procedure for the sake of it, and I rarely will go beyond our organisational boundaries, but sometimes I will, when I think the patient has needs I can meet without it causing harm to the patient, myself or the organisation (it would cause more harm not to do what I do, at times).

In discussing their covert actions aimed at benefitting clients, participants were also cognisant of ethical considerations or the ‘shadow side’ of covert activism. Maureen understood that behaving covertly to benefit her client may have impacted negatively on other clients. This may occur when she managed to keep her client engaged with a service and as a result, may have limited the service from taking in an additional client.
She framed this ethical dilemma as considering “the needs, rights of the one when compared to the needs, rights of many”. Her solution was to ensure that she continued to engage in policy review and other overt methods to challenge inequitable policies. This combination of both overt and covert activist practice, undertaken by all fifteen participants, functioned as an important means of balancing out the more ethically questionable covert activities with more traditionally acceptable overt forms of social work activism.

Phoebe, Abby and Megan believed that keeping the client at the centre of their covert practice ensured that they do not act from self-interest or unethical motivations. Phoebe stated that:

But it’s very rarely ever in my interest, in fact I would say never, to break a rule. It’s got nothing to do with me. I’m just seeing a rule and thinking it’s got no impact on anything. A lot of times when you break the rules it takes more energy, but I see that as therapeutic and worthwhile in the grander scheme.

Several participants spoke of the negative personal and professional costs of acting to benefit clients covertly but felt that this was secondary to promoting the safety and well-being of clients. Findings relating to personal and professional costs will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter Six.

**Builds client rapport.** Eight participants identified that covert activism built client rapport and that this was a major client benefit. These participants believed that covert work demonstrated to clients that the worker was willing to “take a chance”, “stick out their own neck”, “believe in them” and “afford them the dignity of risk”. Erin felt that this enhanced her therapeutic work with clients. Imre found that his “professional relationship with (his client) took on a whole new dynamic”. Penny found that her covert activities to benefit clients led to greater client engagement with her
service. Susan felt that to not engage in covert activities would have been to “make the relationship adversarial”. These participants believed that building rapport with clients may be negatively impacted on if they had not at times behave covertly.

These participants identified that they chose covert actions to benefit a client because they had assessed that the client was at significant risk if they did not undertake covert action. Imre considered that if he reported a client who had threatened him, his client who was on parole might end up back in jail. Janet will not risk losing the trust of a client experiencing domestic violence, understanding that:

Their fear is often so extreme, that trust is an enormous issue. If they build trust with me, I think it’s ethical to follow through with interventions until that trust grows and becomes strong enough for them to believe it’s possible to trust someone else and then someone else.

Megan reflected that not behaving covertly might mean that her highly vulnerable client’s children were removed with no good reason and that leaving clients at risk for “no good reason other than following the rules” was not ethical in her view. Rachel believed that the job of social work involves utilising her professional skills and knowledge to assist clients at risk and that in the current system this must necessarily involve being prepared to step outside of strict boundaries and behave covertly to protect clients from harm.

The overwhelming focus on client benefit as the main motivator for undertaking covert practices was felt by all participants to be well aligned with the social work professional value base and provided participants with what they believed was an appropriate and ethical justification for behaving covertly. Participants did consider that making independent choices on which actions will benefit a client, outside of any collaborate process, could be problematic. They expressed an understanding that whilst
they may believe a certain action is justified as being in the best interest of a client and therefore worthy of covert behaviour, others may not see this action in the same way. In an effort to rationalise their choices, participants fell back on their professional judgement and their interpretation of the AASW Code of Ethics to determine what was in the best interests of the client. They reported that the broad guidance offered by the AASW Code of Ethics in some ways endorsed their actions to independently interpret what is in a client’s best interests and express gratitude that this Code is not too specific as this may have restricted their professional judgement on a case-by-case basis. Participants spoke of welcoming the opportunity to discuss their covert activities in a more open collegial way and believed that this would assist them with making ethical decisions about client need, but reported that in the current practice environment, this was too risky to undertake.

**Workplace experiences.**

**Past experience.** Ten participants identified specific experiences in the workplace as a motivator for undertaking covert actions. These experiences led participants to believe that acting covertly was the best and sometimes the only way to achieve a desired outcome. No participants in previous empirical research on covert activism in social work specifically identify workplace experiences as a motivator for covert practice; however this is largely felt to be due to the fact that they were not asked. It is clear from the existing research that participants in these earlier studies felt that the contemporary practice environment in some ways contributed to their decision to undertake covert action if they wished to achieve the outcomes they desired (Abramovitz, 2005; Aronson & Smith, 2009; Baines, 2001; Carey & Foster, 2011; Gregory, 2010; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009).
Participants in this research identified negative past experiences at work as a motivation for choosing a covert action. This included attempting to raise problems overtly with no success, meeting resistance from management when suggesting new ways of working, being negatively perceived as a result of trying to challenge practices, and having permission to act in the preferred way denied. Participants used these experiences to determine that the most likely action to meet their client’s need when faced with future issues might be a covert one. Imre, Erin and Rachel found that their overt attempts at challenge have led to them being judged as difficult workers and bullied. Janet did not bother speaking with her boss about alternative ways of working any more as she knew from past experience that this would be unsuccessful. June knew that her previous efforts at challenging practices overtly were not understood by other members of the multi-disciplinary team as her “framework for practice is much broader and less oppressive than that of the medical/nursing staff (and if I) try to explain they just don’t get it”. Maureen felt from experience that “overt action is more likely to result in negation of the worker, hence further reduction in power and influence”. Susan believed the current focus on risk management in her practice field led to automatic denial of any new ways of working or challenges to workplace practices. Imre summed up the impacts on past experience in his practice:

In my practice, covert work is a result of failed attempts of legitimate forms of resistance, not that covert actions in my practice are illegitimate, far from it. The covert actions are challenges to the abhorrent, inhuman and oppressive systems. I always fight the causes in an overt way until I come to the conclusion that my attempts of resistance/challenges are stagnating and my activism stalls/fails. Six of this group of participants identified that they were motivated to undertake covert action because they had seen it work in their workplace. Elise has noted that
avoiding head on confrontation in favour of more subtle covert approaches is more likely to advance the needs of a client. Janet felt that “it’s an asset that a little covert operation can just ease the path to get little things achieved”. Maureen has learnt that covert strategies have a better success rate than open challenges. These participants identified the simplest path to achieving their desired outcome and found that often this involves covert rather than overt resistance.

**Influence of others.** Ten participants identified that the fact that co-workers are involved in covert resistance motivated them to also undertake covert actions. Whilst participants in existing research into covert activism within social work did not specifically mention being motivated by the covert actions of their co-workers, they did mention that other workers were also involved in similar covert activities (Abramovitz, 2005; Aronson & Smith, 2009; Baines, 2001; Carey & Foster, 2011; Gregory, 2010; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009). That the similar actions of co-workers proved a specific motivator for participant’s involvement in covert activism is therefore a new finding. Abby felt that covert activism within her field of practice is a “way of life as a social worker”. She believed that “it's good to know that I'm not alone in this and that so many others are also "being creative" with practice for the best interests of clients”.

Janet worked closely with a colleague and they are “covert together”. June had been told by another worker that “they (management) don’t know the half of what I do”. Megan entered a new work team to find that they were already engaged in covert practice. In describing the covert activities they had undertaken, several participants spoke of decisions to proceed with a covert activity as group decisions, endorsed by several colleagues. Interestingly, this then results in a form of covert practice that is actually overt within certain sub groups, who are aware of its existence and at times discuss it with each other. What keeps these actions from being conceptualised wholly
as overt is still the secretive nature of them, evidenced by the choice to discuss them in small groups and with caution and the motivation to keep their existence a secret from other colleagues and management. Undertaking covert activities within a team will be further discussed in the tactics for undertaking covert activism later in this chapter.

Four of this group of participants reported that they were taught in their workplace to undertake covert activism. Janet’s supervisor told her “this is what I have done” and taught her a range of covert practices. Megan found that on arrival at her new work team, she was “sussed out” by the existing workers to determine if she was amenable to covert work. Megan was already undertaking covert work within another social work job, but had never had the experience of it being openly discussed. Once colleagues had determined that she was ‘safe’, they taught her a range of covert methods to enhance client outcomes. Phoebe’s supervisor “coached and supported me” in undertaking covert actions. She was told when joining the work team that “this is what the book says, and this is what we do because the book methods don't work in this department”.

That participants are encouraged by the actions of other workers and taught how to work covertly speaks not only to the enhanced comfort that comes from knowing that you are not alone in covert challenges but also to the prevalence of covert actions amongst social workers. Although finding participants willing to divulge sensitive information about their covert practice for the purposes of this research proved challenging, it is clear both from the existing research and from participants in this study, that covert behaviour is known about and practiced amongst the social work profession.

*Time pressure.* Four participants reported that time pressure at work was a motivator for undertaking covert actions. When time to intervene in the interests of a
client is short, these participants identified that acting covertly was the most expedient way of ensuring a particular outcome. Megan identified that she acted covertly because “we’re trying to change things in the long run, but in the short term we’re trying to do our best for people with the resources that we’ve got”. Rachel, whose clients are often in crisis, chose covert actions when overt methods would take too long. Susan would have liked to raise problems overtly and “suggest a radical alternative” but acknowledged that time pressures on staff did not make the work culture amendable to lengthy discussions about alternative actions. For these participants, meeting a client need quickly informs their decision to choose a covert action where an overt one might not deliver the outcome necessary to aid a client in the time frame required.

**Self-agenda.** A smaller number of participants (5) reflected that in addition to other motivators, they were also considering their own needs when acting covertly. These participants believed that it is important to consider how they might be self-interested when choosing to undertake covert actions, as this ensures more ethical practice. No previous research into covert activism within social work has included the promotion of a self-interested agenda as a motivator for undertaking covert activities and as such, these participants provided new insight into the motivations of workers acting in this way. Imre identified that as “a committed socialist” he was always on the lookout for ways to advance this cause. As such, he was motivated by his ideological stance. He was aware that the cause will “always play a vital part of my bigger picture and at times my ethics may have to be semi abandoned”. Peter acknowledged that he may at times “be guilty of a bias towards my own agenda” and that it was important for him to understand this element of his practice. Susan shared that she needed to feel that she was doing a good job and that this need sometimes drove her choice to behave covertly. She felt she would be unable to do the job of social work in the current
political climate if she didn’t meet her own needs and ideas about the sort of practitioner she was. Susan believed that in order to feel like an ethical practitioner who delivered on the value base of the profession that she must act covertly.

Penny cited her anger as a motivator for undertaking covert actions and understood that this meant her actions were sometimes as much about her as her client. Her anger drove her to fight back at what she believed was an unjust system and she had delighted in undertaking covert resistance as a way of doing so. Elise, Imre, Phoebe and Peter all acknowledged that at times covert practice made their job easier, as it was the least confrontational path to take. Elise called this “working smart” in an effort not to burn out, believing that resisting every practice overtly was not beneficial to her own professional and personal well-being. Imre echoes this view:

Overt resistance also takes a toll on the worker leading to dissatisfaction, low morale, health issues, unhappiness and possible burnout. Daily banging your head against the structures of a faceless managerialist system that is not connected to the shop floor does get too difficult resulting in a task only approaches/models of care and does not foster a critical thinking workforce.

Phoebe felt that covert practices were sometimes “less troubling for me” as they reduced time frames of interventions and allowed her to complete tasks more expediently. June admitted to a fear of confrontation and cited this as a motivator to undertake covert rather than overt activism. She shared that she was seeking supervision on this issue and hoped to be able to feel confident enough to “rock the boat” more overtly in the future. She called this “doing a good job in silence”. Susan didn’t feel confident that she could argue effectively when mounting an overt challenge and therefore preferred to use covert methods. She was fearful of the repercussions that come with overt challenges.
Participants in this study believed they had explored their motivations for undertaking covert practice in depth, sharing that they had considered what drives them to undertake such actions prior to being questioned for this research. They stated that it was important that they understand why they choose covert activism and they express that they enjoyed the further opportunity to critically reflect on their motivations. Motivated by their ideological beliefs, need for belief in their own self-worth, strong emotions such as anger, discomfort with creating open conflict and the wish to make their job simpler, participant’s self-agendas raise questions about the extent to which covert activism serves their own purpose as opposed to that of their clients. Given that some of the covert activities reported raise serious ethical issues for both the practitioner and the professional, understanding this category of motivation is an area for further research.

Tactics for Undertaking Covert Activism

In choosing the most appropriate covert action, participants demonstrated a range of tactics. These were chosen with forethought, in an effort to promote the most successful outcome possible. Choosing from multiple tactics, participants matched up their own preferences in terms of activism with the problem they were attempting to solve to determine which tactic to apply to which situation. Existing research into covert activism in social work demonstrates that workers involved in these practices utilised similar tactics to those found in this study (Abramovitz, 2005; Aronson & Smith, 2009; Baines, 2001; Carey & Foster, 2011; Gregory, 2010; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009). Five categories of tactics were found (see Table 9).
Table 9  
*Tactics Utilised when Undertaking Covert Activism*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tactic</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acting individually or collectively</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protecting and enhancing professional reputation</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using workplace documents and policies</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding opportunities</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtlety</td>
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**Acting independently or collaboratively.** Of the fifteen participants, eight participants identified that they had worked with others when undertaking covert activism and ten state that they had worked independently. Some participants had used both tactics. The eight participants who utilised the tactic of acting with others when undertaking covert actions, believed that this enhanced both their experience of undertaking covert activism and the success of their actions. For Imre and Elise, this involved consciously allying with other well respected workers who had a reputation for advancing a change agenda. Collecting like-minded colleagues also allowed participants to call on others when they had reached their own limits of covert possibilities, referring clients onto others who might be able to assist them covertly in other areas. In this way, these participants were mirroring a tactic commonly used within overt social work practice, whereby the obtaining of supportive professional networks is considered good practice. Applying this tactic to covert practice provides similar opportunities for professional support, believed by participants to enhance client outcomes and nurture their own professional practice.

Megan felt that her confidence to undertake covert actions would not be as high if she had to act alone. She believed she’d still be “trying to do it”, but would be more anxious about her actions. Phoebe enjoyed opportunities to “be covert together”, stating
that, “I feel like I’m in a rogue cluster. And that’s one of the exciting things about my workplace now, we have really dynamic conversations about things. So exciting”.

Imre tried to challenge other staff and student social workers who expressed an interest in alternative models of practice in an attempt to grow a team of covert workers. When he is approached by “staff who are practicing on the edge, I tend to ask, ‘what would happen if you continue?, What’s stopping you?, What’s the risk and does it sit well with your values?’” He offered support to workers who wish to grow their covert practice. He shared that he was aware of a student social worker who he taught covert practices to now working in another organisation undertaking covert practice and that they often worked together “behind the scenes” to assist clients. Phoebe also enjoyed working with student social workers to grow their understanding of covert activism, sharing that:

It’s just like sowing seeds. I’ve done it in a number of places so far, where I focus really heavily on the students in the organisations and I tell them why I do things and how and my reasoning. Because I think of all the people in the organisations, they’re the people who will make a difference.

Additionally, Phoebe explained that when hiring new staff in her team, the recruiting panel would purposefully sound out whether the candidate was prepared to break rules and would hire new staff who were prepared to work with the team covertly. Additionally, she reported that they have headhunted workers that they knew worked covertly in the past.

Janet found teaching others covert options “a joy”, and has influenced her “young colleagues…. (to be) on board to be a little covert themselves”. Peter offered supervision to new graduates in his organisation and took the opportunity to assist them with reflection on their own rule bending.
As previously mentioned, acting in a team blurs the lines between covert and overt activism, as multiple people are aware of covert activities. However, these activities are still secretive in nature, in that they are revealed only to a limited number of people and great care is taken in determining who it is ‘safe’ to reveal these activities to. Additionally, acting covertly in a team to recruit like-minded colleagues or influence the behaviours of new graduates can be seen as further evidence of an ‘us and them’ mentality, with social workers going to efforts to grow a team of people who operate from a similar value base and professional perspective.

Ten participants utilised the tactic of working independently, choosing to undertake covert actions alone. Many participants chose to use both independent work and teamwork, depending on the covert action they are undertaking. If the outcome of the action was believed to be enhanced by involving colleagues, participants utilised a teamwork approach. However if the action was capable of being performed without the involvement of others, participants might have chosen to go it alone. Elise shared some of her covert activities with her manager but “cannot go to her with every resistant act”, so acted independently at times. Marie felt that acting independently could be far more expedient than acting with others, allowing her greater control over her choice of covert actions.

Other participant’s choice of working alone was based on the belief that their actions would not be tolerated or supported by their colleagues. These participants practiced covertly in silence, taking measures to ensure that their actions were not discovered by colleagues. June worked “in silence, so as little as possible is known about my work”. When speaking about working independently, participants discussed this tactic as having both risks and benefits. The benefits were that the action could be undertaken quickly and the risk of being exposed was reduced. Participants identified
the risks of working independently as not being able to collaborate with others to
determine if their action was ethically sound.

**Protecting and enhancing professional reputation.** Fourteen participants
utilised the tactic of protecting their professional reputation. This involved ensuring that
they were able to justify their actions should they be questioned on them. This served
two purposes. Firstly, participants felt that justification of actions would allow them to
avoid serious disciplinary action, including losing their job, and that this would be of
benefit both to themselves and to their clients. These workers felt that if they were no
longer in a position to continue to practice covertly, their clients would not receive the
benefit of their actions. Secondly, participants utilising this tactic felt that being able to
justify their action helped them to ensure that they were acting ethically. They believed
that critical reflection on their actions was essential and that being able to examine and
review their covert activities afforded them the opportunity to avoid unprofessional
behaviour. Abby believed that she “acts within the AASW ethical boundaries and I feel
that I can justify my behaviour, morally and ethically. I am a social worker above
anything else”. Janet felt that “I would never do anything that I couldn’t back up with
sound reasoning”. June used her professional supervision to reflect on her covert
activities, ensuring that she was protecting her professional reputation. Penny was
“pretty confident I could cover my tracks”. This need to protect their professional
reputation could be seen as a lack of self confidence in the actions they were
undertaking or the recognition that should they be discovered, their actions may not
have been defended or supported by their employers or their professional association.
Either way, this group of participants demonstrated a strong motivation to protect their
professional reputation from harm.
Participants utilising this tactic also spent time prior to undertaking a covert action considering the consequences of what that action might be. This involved thinking through what might happen to themselves, the client, the organisation and to the profession of social work should their action not go as planned or be exposed. This process of risk assessment afforded participants the chance to pause and re-consider their intended action before proceeding. Megan acknowledged that “there is some risk to me here, but I’m going to do whatever I need to do within the scope that I have to do that for this person”. This emerged as a common experience amongst participants, who even after determining they were placing themselves at some risk, chose to proceed with the covert action if they felt it was in the best interests of the client.

Nine of these fourteen participants utilised the tactic of specifically seeking to enhance their professional relationship. This involved building up their professional knowledge base and developing professional respect amongst their colleagues, in an effort to increase both the opportunity for being in a position to covertly effect change and greater skill in knowing how to be a successful and ethical covert activist. This was achieved through having regular supervision, keeping up to date with relevant literature on best practice, attending professional development opportunities and undertaking research. Elise reported that a welcome side effect of this tactic was that it helped her to “stay galvanised”. She was collecting evidence on the outcomes of her covert activities, in an attempt to grow an evidence base on alternative methods of intervention. Imre had developed his professional reputation to the point where he was now a respected senior in his organisation, a position that ensured his “power base is established and my working knowledge of our service is near to 100%. My freedom to practice covertly when the situation arises is easier now I hold that senior position”. Rachel found that growing her professional reputation also increased her confidence in her skills and
knowledge base, which in turn gave her the courage to step outside of the rules when necessary.

Elise focused on building professional respect through leading by example. She explained:

I try to broach my work with enthusiasm and optimism and I think that sometimes that’s what gets other people on board (though I know I also come across as a pain in the arse). I want other workers and especially new graduates to see another point of view. I want them to think about the family, and I can only do that by trying to walk my talk.

Janet was been honoured by her place of work with awards and achievements and was seen as someone who was able to work with ethically complex cases. She felt that some colleagues were aware of her covert activities, but that she was able to continue to do them without undue surveillance because she was a valued member of staff. Imre believed that you cannot understimate the importance of building your professional relationship when undertaking covert work, stating that:

Any covert action within a place of work should not proceed until you figure out your allies, understand policies and procedures and have a full understanding of the environment you are working in. Know the job inside out, work out the systems and trust no one until you are assured you have some protection and your power base is solid and acknowledged by others in your work place.

**Utilising workplace documents and policies.** Seven participants utilised the tactic of using workplace documents and policies to advance their covert activities. This involved a good working knowledge of these documents and the ability to identify loopholes or alternative interpretations that would suggest appropriate covert actions. Elise found that the legislation she worked under “says all the right things but on the
ground they are often not followed due to a resource issue”. She found that using the legislation to back up a covert activity provided it legitimacy. Imre found that being involved in policy writing and review allowed him to have loopholes built in, and that this may have afforded social workers some level of flexibility that would free them up to act covertly. Maureen used the professional social work documents to inform her choice of covert activity, sharing that the AASW Code of Ethics and Practice Standards provided her with valuable information on which covert actions were ethically consistent with practice excellence. She had also used the AASW Practice Standards to deliver a staff in-service about supervision, which was not being offered at the time, and explained that:

This was covert action as the social worker's operational manager was no longer able to impose her standards once the AASW standards were placed on the training calendar and her influence with senior management over this issue was negated.

Of these seven, four participants employed the tactic of feigning ignorance when undertaking covert actions and used workplace documents if there was a need to provide a rationale for their actions. This involved the pretence that they were unaware that their covert action was not endorsed by the policies and procedures of the organisation. Megan used this tactic with clients, filling out forms incorrectly to benefit the client and not letting on to the client that she was doing anything out of the ordinary. She also believed that senior staff in her organisation utilised this tactic as their own covert activism, in that they were aware of the covert actions of their staff, but feigned ignorance about them. This tactic proved useful for participants as both a form of self-protection should their covert actions have been discovered and a means of assisting clients without them suspecting that they were working outside of accepted procedure.
Actively seeking opportunity. Seven participants utilised the tactic of actively seeking opportunities to undertake covert activism. These participants believed that to deliver on the professional requirements of social work practice in the contemporary context required them to seek out opportunities to challenge what they identified as an unjust system. As overt attempts at challenge had proven less successful, participants employing this tactic believed that they needed to seek covert methods of challenge. Elise recognised that “resistance is what I can do” and as such, she must seek out opportunities to covertly and overtly assist clients. Erin and Imre reported that part of their decision to seek promotion was linked to the knowledge that to be in senior positions would afford them the autonomy and power to increase their covert work. Imre read policies searching for “loopholes, gaps or grey areas that can be exploited”. Peter felt that “social workers are always on the lookout to change or tweak workplace systems”.

Working with subtlety. Eight participants employed the tactic of working with subtlety when choosing covert activities. This tactic involved quiet covert challenges aimed at affecting small and incremental change for clients. Erin avoided “big subversive actions” in favour of subtler, silent activities. Janet found that a subtle approach allowed her to “almost go unnoticed” and that this meant that many of her colleagues would not even have been aware that her many small actions when taken together added up to significant covert resistance. Megan found that employing the tactic of subtlety avoided the likelihood of senior staff becoming aware of the loopholes that she was exploiting, and she feared that these loopholes would be closed off if discovered. Peter tried to keep a “low profile and work behind the scenes”. Elise summed up this approach:
My efforts are often low key, and I think that’s because I have a few years under my belt as a worker and I am better at getting honey from the bees. I KNOW now that it is often better to find a side door than beat the front door down.

Utilising these tactics involved prior thought to establish which tactic to employ to provide the optimal outcome of the covert action being considered. Once again, participants demonstrated a high level of critical reflection in the consideration of how best to challenge covertly.

Discussion

Findings in relation to the activities that participants were undertaking to resist and challenge problematic practice areas associated with welfare service delivery influenced by neo-liberal ideology both reinforced those found in earlier empirical studies and provided new insights into covert workplace activism. Whilst overt challenges continued to be employed by participants and indeed were felt to be an integral part of good social work practice, experience had taught these workers that they were rarely successful and may have impacted negatively on their own professional relationship. As a result, a range of covert practices had been born out of necessity to meet client need in a system that was not conducive to open challenges. The range of covert activities identified by participants in this study were consistent with those found in existing empirical research into covert activism within social work (Chui & Gray, 2004; Domanski, 1998; Gray et al., 2002; Reeser & Epstein, 1987). Some of these activities have previously been acknowledged by professional discourse. That social workers have long been creative or flexible with workplace policies has been the subject of much discussion, with the profession utilising Lipsky’s (1980) notion of the ‘street level bureaucrat’ to explore this part of practice. Lipsky’s (1980) work informed on the practice of frontline workers in large organisations attempting to implement at times
unworkable policies developed by those not cognisant of the realities of work at the ‘street level’. When faced with the inappropriateness of such policies, workers often altered them, making them more useable and applicable to their practice needs. In this way, the process of applying policy in practice was conceptualised as a ‘bottom up perspective’, with frontline staff responsible for influencing policy application (Ellis, 2011). Whilst this concept is useful for supporting the finding that participants in this study were also flexible with policies they found unworkable, it does not allow enough scope to explore the motivations of participants in this study, which were solidly based around mounting covert challenges to what they saw as an unjust system. This is supported by Prior and Barnes (2011) who identified that Lipsky’s work “is no longer adequate for an understanding of the relationships between actions and outcomes in contemporary social policy contexts” (p. 266).

That some of the covert activities identified can be seen as mild and highly consistent with standard social work practice, such as the category ‘advocating for clients’, gives further weight to existing findings on the ill fit between contemporary welfare services informed by neo-liberal ideology and the professional social work value base (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Baines, 2010; Gallina & College, 2010; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009; Rogowski, 2011; Wastell et al., 2010; Weinberg, 2010). When social workers wishing to advocate for an alternative intervention for a client feel that the only way of doing so is to act covertly, it demonstrates that they believe that the current practice context does not permit even small movements to challenge existing practice. This has serious implications for the profession of social work, which will be discussed in Chapter Eight.

Findings in relation to the motivations of participants in undertaking covert activities provide new insight into the phenomena of covert workplace resistance, as this
has not been a central focus in any existing social work research. These findings establish that participants demonstrated a deep commitment to client centred practice, as well as a connection to the ethical requirements of the social work profession. Additionally, findings in relation to motivations demonstrate that participants were concerned with protecting themselves. This agenda reinforces findings from existing empirical research into high levels of fear found by social workers in the contemporary welfare context (Gibbs, 2001; Huxley et al., 2005; Jones, 2001; Lonne et al., 2004; McAuliffe, 2005; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009; McDonald et al., 2008). Participants were also aware of a shadow side to their motivations, as they explored the role of self-interest in undertaking covert activities. This has been identified as an area for additional research. All participants expressed the desire to continually monitor their motivations, to ensure that they were primarily aimed at assisting clients. A smaller number of participants recognised that when working alone, determining what action is of benefit to a client is highly subjective and thus open to questions regarding how ethical such a behaviour may be. Abby in particular wondered what might happen if all social workers made decisions independently in the belief that they were doing the right thing. She feared that such a situation might result in a large increase in ethical violations.

When considering the actions that participants had undertaken to challenge the problems associated with contemporary practice, the work of Gramsci proves once again useful. When faced with the full range of problems that this group of participants identify, the choice to remain in the workplace and use their power to affect change can be understood as an attempt to challenge the existing hegemony. According to Gramsci, there are two methods of undertaking the struggle to challenge the existing hegemony. The first is the ‘war of manoeuvre’; a full frontal, rapid attack best utilised in societies
with a dominant and centralised state power or the ‘war of position’; a long struggle primarily located within civil institutions (Strinati, 1995). The ‘war of position’ strategy is useful in conceptualising what participants in this study are attempting to achieve. Whilst Gramsci supported notions of alliances amongst people fostering the means of challenging existing hegemony, he also believed in the power of the individual to drive change, asserting that:

So one could say that each one of us changes himself, modifies himself to the extent that he changes the complex relations of which he is the hub. In this sense the real philosopher is, and cannot be other than, the politician, the active man who modifies the environment.

(Gramsci, 1971, p. 352)

Participants in this study were attempting to do more than meet the needs of individual clients. They were motivated by a desire to afford real change in a system that they believed is unjust, inequitable and inconsistent with social work practice. They demonstrated a desire to build alliances, be part of ‘rogue teams’, introduce new workers and induct student social workers into covert practices. By doing so they hoped to grow and spread an alternative form of welfare practice that was more consistent with what they believed are the core values and actions of the profession. They chose their tactics with care, attempting to optimise the outcomes of resistance. They took their actions seriously, understanding that the stakes were high and the risks considerable. Their hope was that the dominant practice landscape would be altered by their individual and team tactics and actions and that in the process, a fairer welfare system might emerge.

When exploring the range of tactics that participants in this study utilised and the ways in which they spoke about choosing which tactic to employ when, a high level
of critical reflective practice was demonstrated. Critical reflective practice demands that social workers shine the full focus on their attention on understanding why and how they make the professional choices they do (Payne, 2009). Participants in this study displayed a great deal of enthusiasm for this process, communicating that they found this process ‘energising’ and ‘joyful’. No specific question asked participants to consider the tactics they employed in delivering covert practices, rather participants themselves chose to explore the strategies they undertake in delivering covert practices. This involved multiple reflective emails, thinking ‘things over in bed at night’, discussions with supervisors and colleagues and journaling. These activities were felt by participants to assist them in deconstructing the why and how of their covert behaviours, which they believed were both a positive and essential part of their practice. These reflective techniques are consistent with the literature on critical reflective practice, which includes techniques such as reflective questioning, reflective recall and knowledge mapping (Fook, 2002).

In addition to demonstrating critical reflective practice when considering their motivations and tactics in relation to covert practices, participants concern for considering the ways in which they utilised power in their covert practice is also consistent with critical reflective practice (Fook, 2002). Several participants reflected on rules, procedures and policies within their organisation that they felt abused power and cited this as a motivator for undertaking alternative covert actions. Most participants were also able to explore the shadow side of how they themselves might be using power, aware that working covertly independently had the potential to abuse the power they were afforded as professionals. The consideration of how power functions and the thinking consciously about how a social worker might use power ethically are highly appropriate actions for the critically reflective practitioner.
Critical reflective practice has also been said to develop opportunities for emancipatory change, as the process enables practitioners to increase insight and in doing so, enhances creative strategies to advance a social justice agenda (Fook, 2004). A major element of critical reflective practice is the need to utilise the insights gained through reflection to move the practice landscape in a continual drive for best practice (Fook, 2002). This can be evidenced by participant’s willingness to participate in overt challenges alongside their covert practice. However, some participant’s fear of exposure was so high that they did not overtly challenge practices that they were currently covertly challenging, for fear of being discovered. These participants would sometimes wait until they were no longer involved in the covert action, had moved to a different role in the organisation or moved on from the organisation until they raised the issue overtly. A small number of participants admitted that they were never able to raise the specific issue that motivated them to act covertly, but instead raised overt issues non related to those that informed their covert practice. In this way, they were able to grow their own professional practice as they learnt from their experiences, but were not able to contribute to the growth of best practice for the profession. They acknowledged that this was problematic.

Participants in this study shared that the process of critically reflecting on their professional experiences, both in their daily practice and as a result of participating in this research project, afforded them the opportunity to better understand their motivations for covert practice. For the majority of participants, this process of critical reflection fostered new insights into the possibilities for continuing both overt and covert practices, and as a result, they reported feeling more empowered by the potential for acting as change agents. This finding supports findings in Morley’s (2011) study,
which reported on increased emancipatory opportunities facilitated by critical reflective practice.

This focus on critical reflective practice proved useful for participants to move on from identifying and exploring their activities to reflecting on the *experience* of undertaking covert activism, which is the focus of findings in Chapter Six.
Chapter Six

The Impacts of Activism

As previously stated, covert activism is defined as informal actions undertaken by a social worker in the workplace that do not conform or comply with workplace policy and procedure and are primarily motivated by the desire to benefit the client. Previous chapters of this thesis have identified and analysed findings relating to the challenging context in which contemporary social work is practiced and the overt and covert methods in which social work participants in this study are utilising to push back against practices in welfare systems that they believe are incompatible with the aim and purpose of social work. This chapter will continue to explore covert practice, by presenting findings relating to what it felt like for participants when they were involved in covert activism and what they believed were the impacts for their clients, employing organisation and the profession at large. The experiences of social workers that covertly challenge within their daily practice has never been the focus of empirical research from within the profession. The small number of studies that explore covert activism do not include questioning aimed at gaining insight into what it is like to practice in this way and what the perceived impact of covert activism is and as such, findings in this chapter provide new information into the experience for social workers of undertaking covert resistance.

As identified in the previous chapter, a range of covert activities were utilised by participants in this study, including being creative, rule bending, influencing others, non-compliance, stretching professional boundaries, breaking the law, compromising the truth and over servicing. Participants identified a range of impacts that resulted from these covert actions. These findings can be categorised as falling into two categories; challenging impacts and rewarding impacts. Challenging impacts were those that
participants described have a negative impact on themselves, the client, the employing organisation and the profession of social work. Conversely, rewarding impacts were experienced positively. All fifteen participants identified both challenging and rewarding impacts for themselves, their clients, their employing organisation and the profession of social work (Table 10).

Table 10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Impact</th>
<th>Type of Impact</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Challenging</td>
<td>Decreased well-being</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increased risk</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Loss of opportunity</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rewarding</td>
<td>Increased satisfaction</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increased well-being</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enhanced reputation</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Challenging Impacts.

**Decreased well-being.** The first category, decreased well-being, affected all fifteen participants, and included strong emotional impacts such as fear, guilt, uncertainty, anger, frustration and regret. These disturbing emotions contributed to participants reporting high stress levels that resulted from their covert action. As discussed in the literature review, high levels of stress were found in existing research that explored the experience of social workers in relation to organisational/professional conflict (Gibbs, 2001; Huxley et al., 2005; Jones, 2001; McAuliffe, 2005; Postle, 2001). This research established that social workers experienced a wide range of stress disorders, with workers in statutory settings experiencing higher levels of stress than those in non-statutory settings (Balloch et al., 1998; Tham & Meagher, 2009). Existing
research has identified the causes of this stress included a range of factors associated with welfare service delivery influenced by neo-liberal ideology, including chronic under resourcing, time pressure, increased documentation requirements, the inability to effectively assist clients, conflict between a caring and policing role, organisational conflict and negative organisational culture (Baines, 2010; Huxley et al., 2005; McLean & Andrews, 1999; Storey & Billingham, 2001; Thompson et al., 1996). Participants in this research identified similar levels of stress resulting from their attempts to push back against these characteristics by undertaking covert activism.

Phoebe and Rachel reported that their covert work had led to chronic levels of stress, experienced “24 hours a day, seven days a week”. Phoebe described her covert work as “immensely stressful”. Susan’s constant worry that she would be found out had led to feelings of stress that at times she found unmanageable. Janet’s high stress levels have led to serious illness that had affected her home life. Rachel identified that “the cost to me was enormous in terms of stress at the time of decision making”. As a result of stress, participants reported experiencing both mental and physical exhaustion. Several participants spoke of exhaustion levels that bordered on feeling burnt out and as a result, had contributed to the decision to leave a job. Elise explained that, “(it is) tiring and exhausting – and a bit like a game of chess. I would say that exhaustion would be right up there; along with anxiety and a deep desire to work as a florist”.

Janet and Megan had found that working covertly meant working a large number of unpaid hours and involved the constant need to reflect and consider the ethical implications of each action, a situation that led to feelings of exhaustion. Janet reported that, “Every decision we make to intervene has ethical implications and juggling all the balls can be complex and exhausting”.
Megan’s exhaustion stemmed from the realisation that covert actions were time consuming and that “I’ve spent all that time sneaking around doing this”. Susan and Rachel recognised that “challenging the status quo” and “battling the system” were exhausting and perhaps unsustainable in the long term. Despite attesting to high levels of exhaustion, these participants reported that they planned to continue to undertake covert activism.

In addition to exhaustion, participants reported physical ill health, including loss of sleep and physical illness that resulted from the stress of undertaking covert activism. Kim et al.’s (2011) research supports these findings, as it found that the negative impacts associated with burn out were eventually felt as physical health complaints. Physical challenges resulting from stress have been identified in existing research on organisational/professional conflict, but have not been found in any studies of covert activism within social work (Gibbs, 2001; Huxley et al., 2005; Jones, 2001; McAuliffe, 2005; Postle, 2001).

Three participants experienced a loss of sleep, which resulted from worrying about covert actions causing harm, being discovered and questioning the ethics of undertaking particular actions. Abby lost sleep when critically reflecting on her actions:

I laid awake in bed during the night…wondering if I have been doing the right thing (if I'm the only one doing this kind of thing, why is that? Am I wrong for going beyond professional boundaries at times, even though I believe I'm doing the right thing?? If others are doing it too, why do we have to be sneaky? How can we change, or challenge the system so that we can implement flexible practice? Am I working according to 'best practice’?). I thought I was, and still believe I am, but should I be more transparent - but at what cost?? Am I an
ethical worker - I truly hope so!! Etc. I considered these kinds of things for about 2 hrs and ended up putting a relaxation CD on so I could go to sleep!

Two participants identified ill health as a result of undertaking covert actions. Janet experienced chronic health problems that she believed were compounded by her need to act covertly. Despite serious bouts of illness which had seen her hospitalised, she reported that would prefer to reduce her work hours to part time and still be able to practice covertly than to stop her covert full time work. This came from the recognition that she could not practice any other way. Phoebe reported putting on large amounts of weight as a result of the stress that came both from organisational demands and from her covert practice.

One participant identified that they had experienced feeling depressed as a result of their covert work. Although only experienced by one participant, the existence of depression is important to note, as previous research has established that social workers experienced high rates of mental illness (Huxley et al., 2005; Regehr et al., 2002). As discussed in the literature review, Huxley et al.’s (2005) UK study found that 47% of participants scored in the range indicating psychological disorder on the General Health Questionnaire. That mental illness is also experienced by social workers as a result of their covert activism is an important finding which supports these existing findings.

**Fear.** Nine participants identified that their well-being was affected by fear. Although no previous empirical research from within the profession has focused on the emotional experience of undertaking covert activism, there are several studies that found that fear was associated with social work practice in contemporary welfare services influenced by neo-liberal ideology (Gibbs, 2001; Huxley et al., 2005; Jones, 2001; Lonne et al., 2004; McAuliffe, 2005; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009; McDonald et al., 2008). As discussed in the literature review, previous research found that
participants were fearful of repercussions should they seek to address organisational-professional conflict, including loss of professional reputation, public shaming and loss of job. These findings are consistent with findings from participants in this study, who reported being fearful of having their covert actions discovered, losing their job, being held up as an example of bad practice and losing their good professional reputation. In addition to these fears, participants were also fearful of unwanted negative consequences for the client that might have resulted from their covert activities.

Abby felt that if she ever caused harm to a client she would be devastated and that she sometimes had sleepless nights, fearful that this could happen. She was aware that her decisions and actions might have involved life and death consequences for the families she worked with. Erin was fearful that her actions may “backfire”. Imre feared knowing who to trust when revealing his covert activities. Marie feared being criticised by colleagues and being exposed for her covert actions. Despite these fears, this group of participants informed that they continue to undertake covert actions and attempted to manage their fear. Janet summed this up:

Any fears/concerns I have about practicing the way I do are lost to the lyrics and I step forward bravely. I recognise my bent towards deontology – my fear is reduced when I play by the rules. I don’t want my fears to stop me from being swept into the full consideration of relationship.

Uncertainty. Six participants report experiencing uncertainty as they sought to grapple with their decision to work covertly. Uncertainty has not been identified in previous empirical research into the experiences of social workers in the contemporary practice landscape. This is perhaps because it specifically relates to the covert actions that this group of participants report undertaking and no previous research has focused on the experience of undertaking covert activism in social work. Participant’s
uncertainty involved worrying over whether they were doing the right thing, if they were behaving ethically or not, and whether they were meeting the AASW Code of Ethics requirement to practice with integrity. This uncertainty often led to self-doubt, with participants questioning their ability to do the job of social work. Elise frequently questioned her practice, wondering if she was in the right job. Hannah swung between feeling that she was doing the right thing for her client and worrying about the ethics of her actions. Hannah and Abby felt uncertain when they extrapolated what would happen if everyone broke rules or placed their own interpretation on them. Abby captured the shadow side of covert practice:

I am aware of the dangers of my way of thinking - if everyone breaks rules for the good of people, would we push too hard, too far? What would be the implications? What if what we think is right differs significantly from what others believe is right?... I trust myself and my own actions - but what would it mean if everyone took my attitude and acted according to what they personally believed is right and good for others, regardless of the boundaries and rules...Mmm, food for thought.

This uncertainty captured the internal conflict that participants experienced in relation to covert work. They were aware of another dimension in their actions, a shadow side, and felt that it was necessary to critically reflect on the appropriateness of their covert behaviours. This constant reflection at times became arduous, creating feelings of uncertainty regarding the ethics of their actions. This uncertainty could be severe enough to contribute to a lack of self confidence in their professional decisions. Given the serious nature of some of the covert actions identified in the previous chapter, some of which they believe break the law, it is perhaps useful for this group of participants to feel uncertain about their actions. In this way, their uncertainty may serve
as a counter balance, preventing them from straying too far in a covert direction. On balance, they found that they felt compelled to continue to act covertly as they believed it was the only way to deliver on social work’s purpose in a contemporary welfare system that is at odds with social work practice.

**Guilt and regret.** Given the highly reflective behaviours of participants and the findings related to uncertainty in relation to their covert practice, it is not surprising that guilt and regret were identified by four participants. What perhaps is surprising is that only a minority of participants grappled with feeling guilty in relation to their actions and only one participant specifically regretted a covert action that they undertook. This perhaps attests to the amount of time participants reported spending in justification and critical reflection on their actions and the resultant surety that they expressed that on balance, their activities were ethically appropriate and in the best interests of their clients. However, Susan, Phoebe and Hannah reported feelings of guilt if they lied or had to “sneak around” in the process of undertaking their covert activities. All participants who reported feelings of guilt expressed that after reflection, these feelings dissipated and were replaced by feeling justified in their actions. Abby summed up “….because I am always very aware that I'm going "outside the boundary" or what is expected by policy, I feel momentarily guilty or 'naughty', but I do it because I feel it's the right thing to do, morally”.

For the participant who reported regretting their covert action, this was because on reflection, she believed this activity might not have been entirely ethical. That only one participant experienced regret in relation to their covert actions is testament to the belief that this group of social workers had that their covert activism was justifiable in the contemporary practice context, which they believed is at odds with the social work
value base. Participants felt a sense of being forced to act co covertly to deliver on the aim and purpose of social work in the current welfare environment.

**Anger and frustration.** Five participants reported feeling angry and frustrated as a result of their covert activities. Anger has not been reported in any existing studies, either those exploring the experience of social workers in the contemporary workplace or those that explore covert resistance. Participants in this study reported feeling angry that covert actions were necessary, expressing that they would have preferred to work overtly to support clients and were frustrated that this was not always possible in the current welfare climate. Abby was angry that she must behave covertly to meet the needs of her client, believing that her social work department in her workplace should have taken steps to allow more open forms of challenge. Rachel was angry at her organisation’s implementation of policies and legislation that affected her Indigenous clients, and believed that they, “…perpetuate the disadvantage and teach clients nothing about capacity building and self-management - and certainly do not help the children who are essentially another Stolen Generation”.

Like Abby, Rachel felt anger that she must act covertly when her organisation should overtly be challenging these policies. Elise felt strongly that she could utilise her anger saying that “I believe my anger and frustration can be channelled into being healthy if I use them to stay galvanised”. Marie found that her frustration served as a useful means of critically reflecting on her covert actions, as she felt that it was from frustration that no other path was open to her that she felt justified in choosing a covert action.

Two participants acknowledged that their decreased well-being may have had a negative impact on their employing organisation. Abby and Janet recognised that at times, servicing of clients beyond the expectations of their organisation had led to
exhaustion, which may have impacted negatively on their employers. Although they tried to manage this themselves, they both acknowledged that there had been times when their mental, emotional and physical exhaustion had led to time off work for medical treatment or to recover and recuperate. They believed however that if they were not practicing covertly they would not be able to remain in the job and that on balance, it was more beneficial to their employers to have them remain in the organisation.

As noted in the previous chapter, participants demonstrated the need to justify their actions and this is once again in evidence when they talked through their experiences of decreased well-being.

**Increased risk.** Eleven participants identified increased risks as an impact of their covert practice. When asked about costs to themselves that resulted from their covert practice, only two participants explicitly mentioned potential loss of job or professional reputation if their actions were uncovered. Participants instead addressed the costs by focusing on challenging emotions that contributed to their loss of well-being. This may be because most participants reported that their jobs would not have been at risk if their covert actions were uncovered, as a result of their actions being either small enough to warrant only a reprimand or able to be justified. However, Megan identified that, “I do risk my job and possibly my career because if I got fired with grounds, I might have a bit of trouble getting a job elsewhere”. She goes on to state that the risk of losing her job motivated her to ensure that her covert actions were carefully constructed to ensure she is unlikely to be caught. She made sure she didn’t do anything “too outrageous”.

**Increased risks to clients.** For a group of social workers who expressed that enhancing client outcomes was a central motivator in undertaking covert actions, the perceived potential for negative effects from their actions caused significant distress for
participants. In addition to basing these perceptions on client feedback and worker observation, participants also imagined what some of the possible negative outcomes of their actions for clients might have been. In this way, perceptions in this category were not exclusively based on experience but on anticipated outcomes. This imagining of what might prove challenging for clients is consistent with the critical reflective process that participants undertook when trying to think through the potential consequences of their covert activities.

Five participants perceived that clients experienced increased risk as a result of their covert activities. Risks identified included clients choosing to disengage from a service when not strictly forced to comply with attendance requirements. Peter acknowledged that there is a potential in this situation that a client will have a relapse in their mental state. He shared that:

The cost to my client at times has been a relapse in mental state and a revisit of their journey towards recovery. It is better to focus on the construct of dignity of risk rather than a sense of failure. Both of us must look at a positive out of negative outcomes and it is my role to do just that.

Megan worried that clients might be exposed to risk as a result of her actions being discovered. This might include the client having to pay back a sum of money. To ameliorate this risk, she warned clients that:

…this is not something we can strictly do, and I do warn people sometimes…(to) just be a bit subtle. Because I really want to protect them from getting themselves in trouble because some of this stuff could end up in them (owing funds).

Imre identified that the refugee he assisted with moving States would have been at risk of deportation if caught, but that this would have occurred whether he was
involved or not. Erin identified that clients who chose not to take medication without her intervening might have been at risk of becoming unwell. She sought to address this by explaining, “…although this has always been picked up and addressed with the person so a risk can also be a learning experience, (a) motivator for change depending on how this is responded to”. These participants reported being troubled by this process of assessing increased risk that may have resulted from their actions but felt that thinking through potential risks was an important part of the process of working covertly.

Three participants identified that there was a risk of increased expectation experienced by clients as a result of their covert activism. Phoebe has experienced situations where her actions have led to clients feeling that staff are on their side, which has led to them feeling let down and “set up” when staff are not always able to bend rules. This led to confusion for clients as they had come to believe that rules were able to be broken and became confused about expectations when it became apparent that some staff did not bend rules. This forced them into a situation where they sometimes learnt to favour some workers over others, knowing which workers would allow rule infringements and which would not. She believed that her clients were “really tired of the rules being bent and broken. They just want to know what the rules are so they can live by them”. Janet recognised that her actions may:

…set clients up to expect that I can always be relied upon to intervene in the same way consistently, enduringly. This has not always been the case. There have been moments of tension, (with the) client and social worker feeling fatigued and hopeless (and) clients expressing anger.

Conversely, she also believed that it was healthy for clients to have high expectations of services and that doing so might lead to improved services. However, this may have
implications for other services, as clients may believe that workers in all services will be willing and able to act covertly. As a result, it is possible that this increased expectation may set up both clients and workers for future disappointment.

Seven participants in this study were not able to identify any challenging impacts for clients. Most who did identify challenges had not actually experienced a situation where clients had been harmed by their action, but instead were imagining what harm could occur. No participants extrapolated what might happen should their covert behaviours contribute to tragic events, such as the death of a client. Given that participants informed that they ruminated over their covert actions and were cognisant of the shadow side of these practices, it is interesting that none of them gave voice to the potential for tragic consequences. This may be due to the perception by participants that their covert actions were not grand in scale, but mostly concerned with small acts of resistance. However, on close inspection of some of their covert behaviours, it is not impossible to imagine that tragic outcomes for clients might be possible as a result of their actions. Given the usual level of critical reflection that participants demonstrated, the fact that they did not address potential tragedy is perhaps an indicator of an unwillingness to own this potential. Participants did state on multiple occasions that they would be devastated if any harm came to a client as a result of their covert behaviours and it is thought that for this group of social workers, experiencing such a situation may well lead to the cessation of their covert activities.

**Increased risk for the employing organisation.** Four participants believed that organisations potentially experienced increased risk as a result of their covert activities. This included the risks that came from a covert activity being exposed, such as media exposure and the resulting loss of reputation. Elise and Erin understood that their covert activities were not always in line with the risk management focus of their organisations.
and as such, may have led to increases in the risks the organisation was taking without the organisation being aware of it. As well as negative media coverage, Imre felt that his organisation might have faced legal issues if covert activities were discovered. He acknowledged however that this may not have been a negative outcome as it may have lead to policy review, which had the potential to open up debate about unjust and unworkable policy. One participant identified that their employer may have experienced a decrease in efficiency as a result of their covert activities and saw this as a risk to the organisation. Janet identified her employer’s focus on efficiency was challenged when staff attempted to keep clients in the service for longer periods than they were funded for. Janet believed that focusing on efficiency as a priority over human need was unethical and therefore felt that slowing down client discharge was a reasonable risk for the organisation to bear.

No participants reported actual instances where a covert action had been publically exposed and resulted in the employing organisation being negatively affected. Challenges to organisational focus on risk management and efficiency were felt by participants to be worthy side effects of their covert activities, based on the belief that such a focus was not consistent with good social work practice.

**Increased risk to the profession of social work.** Seven participants were concerned that their covert activities may have caused damage to the professional reputation and image of social work. Marie felt that by working covertly, the complexity of her work was not understood, which resulted in the belief in her organisation that social workers carried out simple, practical tasks. She wondered whether this belief might eventually further side line the profession. Additionally, participants imagined a loss of professional reputation if their actions were discovered;
believing that these negative outcomes could further marginalise the profession.

Maureen explained:

I always consider the potential to marginalise a small profession such as social work if their acts are not acceptable to the 'dominant group'. I believe I try to balance this by being supportive of other staff when it's appropriate and sometimes really extending myself.

Phoebe identified that having her covert actions uncovered by the media might change the public perception of social work and that this could result in a decline in reputation by the profession.

**Loss of opportunity.** Six participants identified lost opportunities that may have potentially resulted from their covert work, including the inability to document their work and thus grow an authentic evidence base and lost opportunities relating to building professional solidarity amongst social workers facing contemporary practice challenges.

Three participants identified that their organisation was unable to document the true nature of social work practice if it involved covert methods. This was felt to be a cost to the organisation, as it must continue to utilise methods that may not actually be working were it not for covert adaptations in their practice application. This situation perpetuated the continuation of practices that did not fully meet client need and as a result, did not afford opportunities for accurate evaluation of practice. These participants all felt that being able to overtly document their real practice would have allowed their organisation to see the positive outcomes that they believed stem from their actions, providing them with the opportunity to alter their services to reflect more accurately what works. Phoebe identified that not being able to “say how we get things done” did not afford the profession opportunity to transparently report on the positive
outcomes that she had observed resulting from her covert work. Penny believed that “If I had been able to change the system overtly it would have been much more beneficial to the profession but doing something covertly meant that, yet again, change has been effected without any recognition for the profession”.

Given that a key tenet of critical reflective practice is the reflexive process of allowing lessons learnt to influence future practice, the laments of these six participants in relation to feeding back to their organisations what really worked is evidence of their wish to be more transparent critical reflective practitioners.

Loss of opportunities for professional solidarity was felt by participants to be a challenge for the profession that resulted from covert activism. Participants in this category identified that ideally, they would have liked to be able to work openly to challenge systems that are unjust and that this is a central role for the profession. They believed that being able to work overtly, in solidarity with their social work colleagues and professional association, would breathe life into the profession, affording a growth in activist practice. Additionally, they felt that the loss of solidarity left social workers unsupported and exposed in their covert work, which meant that individual workers carried a great deal of risk. As this group of participants believed that their covert activism arose in part from the attempt to implement professional values in practice, they believed that their professional association should support their actions, providing opportunities for solidarity amongst their members.

**Rewarding Impacts.** In addition to the challenging impacts reported by participants in this study, all fifteen participants identified a range of rewarding impacts. These findings provided insight into why this group of social workers might continue to practice covertly, despite the significant challenges they experience. Only one existing study identified a rewarding experience that resulted from covert actions, with one
participant in Carey and Foster’s (2011) study expressing a sense of pride and dignity in relation to her activities. Findings on the rewards that stem from covert practice therefore add new insight into the experience of covert activism within social work.

**Increased satisfaction.**

**Satisfaction for workers.** Thirteen participants experienced satisfaction as a result of their covert activities. This category included feeling satisfied that covert actions made a positive difference for clients, that covert actions managed to beat an unfair system or policy and that in undertaking covert actions they had delivered on their professional values. Participants reported strong levels of satisfaction that motivated them to continue to practice covertly, at times reporting that the satisfaction was also personal. Marie felt “personally validated” by her covert actions. Abby described feeling “so pleased” that she had made a difference. Erin’s satisfaction helped her to feel less conflicted about her choice of working in an organisation she identified as unjust. Janet felt that when she practiced in a covert way she was “most satisfied”. Phoebe got a “really strong feeling of satisfaction”. Giving voice to a level of personal satisfaction was perhaps indicative of some level of self interest in relation to undertaking covert activities. Interestingly, the five participants identified in the previous chapter as being somewhat motivated by self-interest, did not report feeling personal satisfaction as a result of their actions. However, Megan and Abby identified that as they got personal satisfaction from undertaking covert activities, they needed to be careful to ensure that these activities did not become more about satisfying their own needs than those of the client. Megan reported that:

> I feel like I’m actually assisting people where they need to be assisted instead of making their lives harder. If I did feel like I always had to make people’s lives harder, I wouldn’t continue in the job. It feels good. It does. It’s a personal
benefit as well. I have to be careful about that though because I’m not doing it for me, so in that sense I do need to step back sometimes and go ‘why am I doing this? Is this actually going to help them or put them in more trouble?’. I can’t do it just because I’m feeling bad for them and I want to do something to help them. I do try to reflect about that sort of stuff because I don’t want to fall into that trap. But it does feel good.

Participants also identified feeling happy as a result of their covert work, because they believed that it led to enhanced client outcomes and involved acting consistently with professional social work values. Additionally, these participants felt happy that an unjust system had been “beaten”. Megan enjoyed ‘beating the system’ but cautions that:

I do feel happy that I’ve beat the system in the sense that…..but not for the sake of beating the system….in the sense that I’m cross at the system for not having made this easier for that person. But I have achieved what needs to be achieved despite the system. So not for the sake of ‘I’ve beat the system, because I just want to’. I don’t want to beat the system just because I have the power to. My sense of satisfaction is I haven’t let the system get in the way of what I needed to get that client.

Abby reported that experiencing happiness had a direct link with her decision to remain employed in her job and to strive for higher levels of skill development. It can be seen from participant’s thoughts in relation to the positive emotions they experienced as a result of their covert actions that they were cognisant of the need to not allow these rewards to overly influence their decisions to act covertly. They attempted to do this by continually giving examples of how they placed the client’s needs as the central focus, above their own enjoyment of the rewards that may have come as a result. In this way,
they hoped to embody a central tenet of social work practice, the belief that the client comes first.

**Satisfaction of clients.** In addition to their own satisfaction, ten participants felt that as a direct result of covert actions they undertook, the client’s experience of social work was enhanced. Participant’s reported knowing that clients were pleased with their actions, because clients told them so. Elise has had clients who have been long time service users tell her that the service they have received from her have been the best they’ve ever had. She shared that:

I have some families who have been involved with the (organisation) for years and have had feedback to say they are the best they’ve ever been. This is not said with any intent to brag – just to show that respecting families and working with them makes sense.

As she believed that social work within her employing organisation did not have a very good reputation amongst service users, she was particularly pleased that her clients were able to have a positive social work experience. Janet’s clients expressed gratitude at the extra effort she made, even if they did not know that to do so, she had to break some rules along the way. Rachel’s clients also expressed gratitude and she found that some clients “demanded ongoing interventions from us –often in areas beyond our jurisdiction – so I think we can take it that they were happy with the service”.

This positive client feedback strengthened the resolve of these participants to continue to work covertly and assisted them to believe that the means undertaken to achieve their goals were worth the ends.

**Satisfaction for the employing organisation.** Fourteen participants identified increased satisfaction for their employing organisation, that resulted from enhanced staff and client satisfaction, reduced client demand and the ability to deliver on
organisational values in practice. Four participants identified that organisations experienced more satisfied staff as a result of covert activities. Abby suggested that a satisfied client most likely led to a satisfied staff member and given that more clients were satisfied as a result of covert activities, more staff might also be satisfied. This resulted in less staff change over and higher rates of staff retention. Hannah found that workers that she knew practiced covertly were more engaged and motivated in their work and that this contributed to a more dynamic and skilled workforce. Given the problems identified in the literature with staff retention in statutory welfare organisations, staff who reported higher levels of job satisfaction and the intention to stay in challenging work environments may be a significant benefit for the employing organisation (Gibbs, 2001).

Three participants identified that client satisfaction as a result of covert activities benefitted the employing organisation. More satisfied clients were likely to engage less confrontationally with a service and may have provided more positive feedback when evaluating the services they receive. Penny felt that, “…one of the benefits may have been that clients were more engaged if they were aware of the support they were receiving from me and this helped with compliance (more likely to attend future appointments etc)”.

Participants felt that this could have concrete impacts on services acquiring additional funding, as service user feedback and program outcomes were used in funding applications. That the organisations were unaware that positive feedback may have come as a result of covert practice and that if they had have been aware of this, organisations might have decreed that on balance, the risks were too great to bear, is not raised by participants. Instead, participants reported that contemporary practice was so fast paced and outcome orientated, that the means employed to achieve positive results
were not overly scrutinised. This is perhaps a by-product of the funding system, which sees welfare organisations competing with each other for limited funding opportunities. When competition is high and there is not enough funds to meet demand, proving positive outcomes and meeting targets can become so central to ongoing service delivery that there may be a decreasing scrutiny regarding how targets are met. Whilst a focus on outputs was identified in the literature review as a deficit of contemporary welfare service delivery, in this instance it may prove useful to covert practice as its ability to stay under the radar is enhanced (Aronson & Smith, 2009).

**Reduced client demand.** Seven participants felt that their organisation experienced reduced client demand and cost for services as a result of their covert activities, and that consequently, their employing organisation experienced greater satisfaction. This category included clients presenting less for hospital omissions as a result of receiving a covert outpatient service, fewer children becoming clients of child protection services due to covert efforts to support a family, reduced outpatient bed days as a result of non-adherence with an ITO, decreased burden of oppositional clients and fewer clients requiring re-admission due to increased covert resourcing. Erin reported that, “There is a chance that my action has saved inpatient bed days, usually the result of non-adherence with an ITO, but (it’s) difficult to quantify this at all”. Participants identify that these outcomes would add up to significant decreases in costs for the employer.

**Values delivered on.** Two participants felt that their employer experienced greater congruence between the mission and values of the organisation and the delivery of these in practice. These participants identified that such congruence was a rarity, as lofty organisational values were rarely evident in practice. Abby felt that her covert work provided concrete examples of the values of her organisation being enacted in
practice. Phoebe recognised that her work was “all in line with achieving the organisational goals”, even if in order to deliver on these goals she must act covertly. Janet believed that:

For the organisation – whether or not they know it, they need people who practice the way I do. Human beings deserve to be acknowledged as being worthy, most especially at those times when they are pushed to being extremely vulnerable.

These two participants had chosen their place of employment based somewhat on the values espoused by the organisation and one of them expressed despair that these values were not in evidence in practice. In can therefore be seen that delivering on the organisational values in practice was extremely important to these two practitioners. One of these participants had received awards for outstanding practice for delivering on organisational values, an ability which was in part achievable due to her covert methods. Whilst she had been chastised for small policy infringements repeatedly by her seniors, she believed that the positive feedback she received overall is testament to the organisation being happy with her methods.

**Satisfaction for the profession of social work.** Five participants felt that the profession was better able to deliver on social work core values as a result of their covert practice and that this led to greater satisfaction for the profession. This involved the implementation of the AASW values expressed in the Code of Ethics as well as delivering on ethical practice requirements. Given the challenges that have been identified in delivering on these professional requirements in a welfare climate that is in opposition and at times resistant to what they embody, finding ways to integrate them into practice was felt by participants to be a significant win for the profession. Additionally, Imre felt that covert activities that sought to deliver on the values of the
profession kept alive the radical element of the profession, allowing it to lay claim to the notion that social workers continue to be change agents despite extreme pressures to do otherwise. He explained, “There are social workers who work to change our society and will sacrifice their privileged position to achieve their goal through covert actions if called upon to do so”. Phoebe contended that the end result for the profession of social workers who mounted covert challenges was that “we won’t become a stagnant, health type” profession.

Participants who identified these rewards for the organisation all believed that activism was a foundational component of good social work practice and therefore felt that covert activities contributed positively to delivering on a aim and purpose of the profession. Their overarching belief that social work practice must include an element of activism was an important part of their professional identity and will be discussed in more depth in the next chapter.

**Increased well-being.** Fourteen participants identified experiencing positive emotions that enhanced their own well-being, including hope and relief. As identified earlier in this chapter, all 15 participants reported decreased well-being as a result of their covert activism. Therefore, the findings presented in this section saw eight participants who experienced both increased and decreased well-being. Additionally, this category included a range of rewarding experiences for clients that were felt to increase well-being for the client, including closer working relationships, material benefits and being treated with respect.

**Hope.** Five participants reported experiencing feelings of hope in relation to their covert activism. This included the hope that their covert actions might eventually lead to more open forms of challenge and that more social work practitioners would undertake covert activities. Several participants were keeping records of their covert
actions in an effort to grow an evidence base on how effective their actions were in meeting client need. For this group of practitioners, the belief that their actions would in some way engender change in a system they identified as unjust, provided them with hope that the time will come when the role of social work within such an environment will become that of ‘agent of change’. Elise’s hope is that her covert practice would in some way “sow a seed which will see the sunshine when it’s ready to”.

As advocates of critical reflective practice, it is important for this group of practitioners to believe that the time may come when they can use their insights from covert practice to mount overt challenges to grow best practice. They were hopeful that covert work may not always be necessary and imagined a future time when social work could work confidently and openly from its social justice value base. Additionally, they were hopeful that they might grow their own professional skills in mounting overt challenges and not be professionally penalised in the process.

That this group of practitioners found hope within a practice environment that they identified is at extreme odds with the mission of social work is perhaps related to their own professional and personal identities, which will be explored in more depth in Chapter Seven.

**Relief.** Four participants experienced relief in relation to their covert activities. The experience of relief resulted from the feeling that they were able to assist clients despite considerable obstacles, and that they were able to continue to feel confident enough to “go out on a limb” and practice covertly. Phoebe felt relief that she was able to avoid being ‘caught up in the rules”. Additionally, these participants identified that they felt a sense of relief that their actions led to positive client outcomes. Maureen shared that “when my action meets the (client’s) need, I think I am relieved”. This finding perhaps demonstrates that these participants were aware of the potential risk
with regards to their covert actions. Given the serious nature of some of the covert actions identified in the previous chapter, it is interesting to note that only four participants expressed feeling relieved when their actions managed to lead to positive outcomes.

No participants expressed relief that they were able to complete a covert action without being caught. As discussed earlier in this chapter, participants did feel fearful of exposure, however they did not report feeling relieved when their actions went undetected. This may attest to the recurrent level of justification that this group of practitioners reported undertaking, which left them feeling protected should their actions be discovered and they need to explain them.

Although participants identified more individual categories of challenges than rewards, they were largely undeterred in their drive to continue to practice covertly. This may be explained by this group’s primary motivation to optimise client outcomes, their focus on delivering on social work’s value base despite the difficulty of doing so, and the belief that their actions constitute the ‘right thing to do’. This belief in their covert actions being the ‘right thing to do’ will be further discussed in Chapter Seven, which explores the identities of this group of practitioners.

**Enhanced client well-being.** All participants identified rewards for clients as a result of their covert activism. As discussed in the previous chapter, enhancing client outcomes was one of the central motivators in undertaking covert activism, therefore it is not surprising that all participants were able to identify client rewards. It is supposed that for this group, covert actions may not have continued or be seen as valuable if they could not identify rewards for client. Enhancing client well-being is central to the practice of social work (AASW, 2010). The perception that their covert actions
enhanced client well-being was based both on client feedback and worker observations. Elise informed that:

I have three fathers who are now guest speakers in schools in relation to sniffing. At his invitation, I walked with one dad in a recent march, and it was great to be able to listen to him speak to me about how his life is back on track and what he wants for his family.

She has enjoyed watching the journey of these clients and felt that her covert actions assisted them to improve their lives. Erin has observed that bending the rules for clients on ITO’s to afford them more opportunity for self-control and self-responsibility has enhanced their personal recovery. She reported that her covert work afforded clients “the opportunity to take more control and responsibility themselves for their lives and treatment for their illness thereby enhancing their personal recovery from mental illness”.

Janet’s actions to go guarantor for an ex-patient attempting to secure boarding house accommodation led to him getting a paid position within the boarding house. As a result, she has watched this client’s health and sense of self-esteem improve. Penny observed reduced stress rates and better management of mental health issues in clients she was working covertly with. She noticed that this enhanced well-being led to clients being more stable in their accommodation and able to focus on employment goals instead of just “survival goals”.

Participants displayed a sense of pride and accomplishment in their work as a result of the enhanced well-being that they reported witnessing in their clients. That this enhanced well-being had been facilitated via covert methods served to reinforce their participation in covert actions and assisted them in justifying their actions to themselves. On balance, they believed that the means had justified the ends.
Treated with respect. Eight participants perceived that clients felt more respected as a result of their covert actions and that this enhanced their well-being. That over half of participants cited this category is perhaps testament to their belief that contemporary contexts for practice engendered a level of disrespect of clients. Respect for clients is a core requirement of ethical practice, as identified in the AASW Code of Ethics (1999).

Abby felt that in order to deliver on the mission of social work, she must behave in covert ways but that in doing so, she was better able to work from a place of respect for clients. Abby believed that working covertly allowed for additional opportunity to treat clients like “like human beings with individual, strong needs”. She believed this approach demonstrated to clients “that someone (who isn't a robot and is compassionate) cares about them individually and will act according to their need, however possible”.

Janet described leaving her place of work to pick up the mobile phone of a client who was dying and had repeatedly requested his phone. Other staff felt this request was irrelevant, but Janet felt that respecting the dying wishes of her client was important, so she broke the rules about leaving her workplace and picked up the client’s phone. She explains the result:

I went up to see him before I left for the day. He was weak and his eyes were closed. I whispered, 'You’ve got your phone'. He opened his eyes, tears rolled down his cheeks and he said quietly, ‘Thank-you’. I took his hand and held it (what a big no-no) and said, “My pleasure.” They were his last words. Phoebe felt that clients experienced greater levels of respect as a result of her covert actions, as they somewhat flattened out power imbalances in her place of employment. She informed that “It’s also a benefit to the client to be seen as a human being rather
than as an object in the system”. She reported that her actions were all designed in part to address power inequality and she observed that the result was that client’s enjoyed her less authoritarian approach and felt more respected.

Believing that their actions have led to enhanced client well-being, a core marker of good social work practice, assisted these social workers with justifying their covert actions and motivated them to continue to work in this way. Whilst they may have to bend or break some rules in the process, they felt that doing so facilitated their ability to deliver on the principle of ‘respect for persons’ outlined in their Code of Ethics (2010).

**Material benefits.** Seven participants noted that their clients received material benefits as a result of their covert actions and that this enhanced their well-being. This included receiving a service or being eligible for a program that they may not have been if the worker did not behave covertly. Material benefits were also identified as receiving additional resources, accessing funds or other increased financial benefits. As discussed in the literature review, lack of resources, services and limited funding have proved challenging for social workers practicing in the contemporary managerialist welfare climate (Baines, 2010; Huxley et al., 2005; Storey & Billingham, 2001). Assisting clients to access material benefits was therefore experienced as a significant achievement for participants.

For Megan’s clients, this might have meant the difference between being able to purchase nappies and baby formula. Hannah felt that a client she covertly helped to receive additional funds:

…will make good use of this money and I felt like they really needed it, and were deserving of it. I think I use the outcome of the situation to further justify
my actions, and maybe I would think about it differently if the outcome was different for the client.

Like other participants, Hannah pointed to the success of increasing material benefits for clients to justify her covert actions. When identifying their covert actions in the previous chapter, participant’s raised the issue that benefitting one client covertly may mean that other clients are disadvantaged. However, during discussions on the rewarding impacts for clients that stem from their covert actions, they did not raise this issue.

**Closer working relationships.** Five participants observed closer worker-client relationships as a result of their covert activism and believed that this enhanced client well-being. Enhanced rapport building and trust were reported as examples of closer working relationships. Participants noted that for clients who had learnt to be mistrustful of social workers within their service, this improvement in worker-client relationship had spill over benefits into the rest of the client’s life, as they began to grow their ability to trust others. Enhanced worker-client relationship also led to increased engagement with the service, with participants reporting that clients were more likely to keep appointments and work towards goals. Peter reported that some clients know that his actions were not sanctioned by his employer, with the result being that “when you go out on a limb for someone there is an element of strain in the alliance that is useful in a therapeutic relationship”. Susan shared that this enhanced relationship was particularly beneficial when working with involuntary clients, as this group of clients were difficult to engage with in her field of practice.

During discussions on the rewarding impacts of their covert practice with clients, participants did not speak of the shadow side of their behaviours, focusing wholly on the positive results of their behaviours. Previous discussions always included
a strong element of rumination, with participants choosing to talk of their concerns about the ethics of their actions, however focusing on the rewarding client outcomes was largely free of this critical reflection.

Overall, participants felt that the rewards stemming from their covert practice were more significant than the challenges, a situation that contributed to participants plans to continue to practice covertly.

Enhanced reputation. Ten participants believed that the reputation of social work was enhanced as a result of their covert behaviours, for both their employing organisation and the profession at large. Seven participants believed that their covert behaviours enhanced the reputation of their employer. This is especially the case when the employing organisation had a problematic public reputation or when individual clients had a difficult history with the organisation that had led to them developing a negative view of it. Participants particularly identified that enhanced reputation resulted from their covert activities within the fields of Child Protection and Income Support. Additionally, participants felt that the reputation of social work within their employing organisation was enhanced when colleagues could see positive outcomes and more satisfied clients, even if they were unaware that covert activities had taken place. Megan felt that the ability to be flexible and creative with rules was only possible for the social workers in her organisation, who were the only group of workers with enough autonomy to be able to work in this way. She felt that this enhanced the reputation of her employer as it allowed for punitive rules to be bent on an individual case by case basis, which in turn influenced the opinion of those clients who had received a service through covert means.

Additionally, five participants felt that the profession of social work experienced an enhanced reputation as a result of more positive outcomes achieved through covert
activism. Abby felt that the effectiveness of covert practice enhanced the social work professional reputation within both her place of work and amongst clients. Janet stated that as a result of successes stemming from her covert activism, non-social work colleagues were learning about the “richness of social work”. Maureen found that the enhanced professional reputation of social work in her organisation had contributed to less professional exclusion, which had previously been the case. Peter believed that covert activities raised the profile of social work as a profession, with the result being that:

Other professions may look at social work as a profession that is able to manage and manipulate risk to the advantage of their client. Sometimes other professions are willing to engage with myself as a social worker to support them in a 'risk' situation. This raises the discussion about ethics in the work place and the assumption that social workers can and do understand the practice of ethics and the fine line that involves.

Rachel felt that the benefits to her profession “are enormous”, in that successes from covert activities demonstrated that social workers were “holistic, compassionate and more capable….than psychs”. She felt that her covert actions and their outcomes raised the profile of social work in her workplace. Megan believed that perhaps the knowledge that social workers were acting covertly to challenge systems afforded the profession a sense of pride in its members, who continued to mount challenges despite the complexities of doing so.

Given that participants also identified the potential risks to the reputation of social work should their covert actions be discovered, the benefits they identified here are perhaps contingent on their covert means remaining undetected.
Continuing to Work Covertly

As discussed in Chapter Two, existing research has established that when confronted with the problems associated with attempting to work as a social worker in a welfare system informed by neo-liberal ideology, workers chose to either stay on and enter a ‘survival mode’, resign or fight back (Gibbs, 2001; Huxley et al., 2005; McAuliffe, 2005; Pickett, 2002; Postle, 2001). Of these three groups, the decision to stay and fight back is the least reported. Fourteen participants in this study reported the intention to continue to practice covertly. This finding adds additional insight into social workers who commit to remaining in a work environment that they themselves identified as problematic, and to do so with the intention of pushing back against a system that they believed was unjust. Not only did participants report the intention of continuing to challenge covertly, they expressed feelings of excitement about the prospect. Hannah “wouldn’t hesitate to do it again”. Imre would “do it again without a flicker of an eye!”. Penny would “absolutely” do it, if it affords her the opportunity to ‘uphold the rights of my profession and the people I work with’. In addition, four participants intended to extend their covert practice. Imre planned to seek out policy work, where he believed he could covertly ensure loopholes were written in that might allow increased flexibility for social workers to interpret policy. Elise planned on undertaking research as a method of growing an evidence base on alternative forms of practice. Penny was seeking promotion to senior management where she felt she would have additional opportunity for covert work. Megan informed that “I’m going to continue and I’m going to look for further ways that I can….I’m always on the lookout for a way that I can increase it”. In articulating her interest in seeking out further ways to act covertly, Megan demonstrated that she enjoyed the process of working covertly. This enjoyment was evident in the sentiments of other participants in this category, who
clearly found rewards in working covertly. It is worth remembering that, as identified in
the previous chapter, participants cited their major motivation for undertaking covert
activism was seeking to benefit their clients. That some of these participants sounded
somewhat righteous in their support of covert practice was tempered by their motivation
to meet client need. Their enthusiasm is better understood when the identities of these
participants is explored in more depth in the next chapter.

Only one participant reported the intention not to continue with covert practice.
June believed that she felt more ‘empowered’ in her practice now and hoped that she
would be able to challenge overtly in the future. This may also be associated with the
fact that June’s covert activities involved a one off action when she was employed in a
short term project. She is no longer with that project and has moved into a different field
of social work. June is also the only participant to specifically regret the covert activity
she undertook, believing on reflection that it might not have been ethical.

Phoebe’s words captured much of the sentiment that participants express when
discussing their future plans for covert activism, “I don’t think I have a choice. I think
it’s integral to the way I practice. It really aligns with my values and with social work
values as far as I’m concerned”.

Given the difficulties reported retaining staff within statutory welfare
organisations, it is interesting to note that only two participants in this study informed
that that did not intend to remain in their workplace (Gibbs, 2001). Of these, one
participant is choosing to pursue a research role. The other participant felt strongly that
statutory practice did not suit her, stating that the thought of it “makes me sick”. She
believed that the job of social work from within statutory organisations was, “Too hard.
Too hard. The wins are too minimal and too far between”.
Despite participants identifying multiple problems that interfered with their ability to do the job of social work and reported on a range of serious emotional, physical and professional challenges, they remained committed to continuing to mount covert challenges.

**Discussion**

Findings in this chapter extend insights into the experience of social workers within statutory welfare organisations. Existing research has established that statutory social workers experienced a range of challenges, which were felt to be more significant than those experienced by their colleagues in non-statutory roles (Balloch et al., 1998). Research also informs on the resultant effect on social workers of trying to do the job in environments that were not congruent with the social work value base, identifying a range of serious emotional consequences that frequently led to workers resigning (Drake & Yadama, 1996; Gibbs, 2001; Huxley et al., 2005; Jones, 2001; Pickett, 2002; Postle, 2001). A smaller number of studies reported on social workers who chose to remain in statutory roles and undertake covert activities in an effort to fight back (Abramovitz, 2005; Aronson & Smith, 2009; Baines, 2001; McAuliffe, 2005; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009; Postle, 2001). This group of studies, although providing insight into the actions that these workers undertake, did not focus on the experience of undertaking such actions. Findings in this chapter therefore extend the existing insights into covert activism within the profession of social work.

The range of challenging emotional and physical experiences that participants in this study reported are interestingly similar to those identified in existing research into the problematic experiences of social workers employed in contemporary statutory practice. Fear, exhaustion, stress, frustration and depression have all been identified in previous research as consequences of attempting to work in the contemporary welfare
environment (Gibbs, 2001; Huxley et al., 2005; Jones, 2001; McAuliffe, 2005; Postle, 2001; Regehr et al., 2002). That these same emotional challenges were identified as the result of undertaking covert activism by participants in this study raises questions regarding whether or not these challenges are specifically associated with covert activities, or result from the wider experience of working as a contemporary social worker in the statutory practice field. In addition to these emotional challenges, participants also identified guilt, regret and uncertainty, which have not been found in existing studies. It is therefore reasonable to assert that these particular emotional challenges relate directly to covert practices.

The range of rewards identified by participants in this study provide a welcome addition to what is essentially a bleak body of evidence on the experience of contemporary social workers under a neo-liberal informed welfare system. To date, no research exists which includes positive experiences, particularly in relation to statutory work. That this group of participants experienced satisfaction, hope, relief and happiness as a result of their work, is the most positive news to come out of explorations into contemporary social work practice in recent decades. That these experiences were connected to their covert activities suggests that these methods of working within the contemporary social work landscape affords more rewards than revealed in other research.

When considering the range of benefits that participants identified for both their employing organisation and the profession of social work, it is interesting to note that some of these benefits were also felt as costs to the individual worker. This situation was identified in Baines’ (2001) study, where participants reported working unpaid overtime as a form of resistance. Although they conceptualised this action as a means of covert resistance, it was also self-exploitive, as workers were not paid for this time or
compensated with time off work. Identifying rewards for others that may be costs for themselves, participants in this study also demonstrated that they may have suffered whilst others reaped the benefits. For example, enhancing the reputation of your employing organisation and reducing client demand and cost whilst you individually place yourself at risk of exposure, loss of professional reputation, potential legal action and loss of job, may not be an equitable situation. Additionally, going out on a limb to promote the profession of social work might prove beneficial to the reputation of the profession as a whole, but may leave workers unsupported and open to retribution should their actions be discovered.

Overall, findings on the experience of undertaking covert activities for this group of participants identified 32 challenges and 39 rewards for themselves, their clients, their employing organisation and the profession of social work at large. That participants reported not only the intention to remain employed within their statutory field, a finding in itself at odds with existing research, but planned to continue to enthusiastically undertake covert activism, despite reporting significant challenges arising from their actions, is worthy of exploration. Some insight into understanding why this group of workers would express such hope for their future practice might be found in the fact that more rewards than challenges were identified in relation to client outcomes. All participants identified client rewards resulting from their covert activities, whilst only five could identify risks. Participants in this study demonstrated a deep commitment to client centred practice, particularly in relation to their covert work, with all participants identifying the main motivation for their covert activism is to improve client’s outcomes and experiences. That they are able to identify significant client reward as a result of their covert activism may be a major indicator in their intention to continue to practice in this way, despite the challenges.
In addition to client reward being a motivator for continuing covert practices, Chapter Seven will present findings relating to the personal and professional identities of this group of participants, providing further insight into why they continue to challenge covertly despite considerable difficulties.
Chapter Seven

Identity of Contemporary Social Work Activists

As discussed in previous chapters, participants in this study demonstrated a commitment to continuing to practice covertly in an effort to enhance client outcomes and deliver on what they believed were the core values of the profession of social work in an environment where overt challenges had not proved successful. They remained committed to covert activism despite having experienced a range of challenges that resulted from their practice. It has been suggested in previous chapters that possible reasons for this may include a commitment to client centred practice, the experience of a range of rewards that stem from covert actions and the belief in the requirement for social work’s value base to be embodied in practice. Findings in this chapter will explore in further depth what it is about this group of social workers that they continued to undertake covert activism, even when faced with increased risk. The first finding is that participants demonstrated similarities in their professional and personal identities. This finding relates to shared values and beliefs, both within participant’s personal and professional spheres. The second finding is that participants articulated the importance of congruence between their professional and personal values. For this group of participants, the need to minimise conflict between their value systems motivated them to continue to find opportunities to reconcile any differences, which at times contributed to their decisions to act covertly. The final finding is that participants identities as activists can be categorised into four distinct types.

As discussed in the literature review, there are two existing studies with self-identified social work activists, however these did not focus on the identity of these workers, exploring instead what activities they undertook and what their activism within the profession meant (Mendes, 2007; Wagner, 1989). The concept of identity is
complex and defined differently across disciplines. For example, a psychological
definition of identity may differ from that defined by a feminist, post-modern school of
thought. Whilst it is recognised that no person has one fixed unchanging identity, a
sociological definition of identity is most useful to this thesis. Lawler (2008) described
identity from a sociological perspective, as both the collective aspects of the set of
characteristics by which a person is definitively recognisable as well as those that a
person self identifies with. She stressed that identity primarily involves identification
(Lawler, 2008). This definition proved useful for this study as when asked, participants
self-identified characteristics that they believed were central to their sense of self as well
as demonstrated characteristics that the researcher used to understand about their
identity.

Findings discussed in this chapter provide new insights into the identity of
contemporary social work activists.

**Similarities in Personal Identities**

The fifteen participants in this study demonstrated and articulated similarities in
their foundational beliefs, values and characters, both in the professional and personal
spheres. Four categories have been identified to capture the personal identities of
participants in this study (See Table 11). These are critical thinker, political, passionate
and spiritual.

The definition of critical thinker is informed by Glaser’s (1941, pp. 5-6) seminal
study on critical thinking, which defined critical thinking as involving three
characteristics:

(1) an attitude of being disposed to consider in a thoughtful way the problems
and subjects that come within the range of one’s experiences, (2) knowledge of
the methods of logical inquiry and reasoning, and (3) some skill in applying those methods.

The category of political identity includes participants whose discussions demonstrated evidence of their interest in and opinions on the social and political structure of society.

Participants in the passionate category expressed their opinions, emotions and experiences with a level of enthusiasm that demonstrates passion. The use of the word ‘passionate’ to capture this aspect of participant’s identities has been chosen by the frequent use of the term by participants themselves.

The final category of spiritual identity includes participants who informed that a spiritual dimension was an important part of both their personal and professional identity. These categories included overlap, as participants demonstrated and articulated thoughts and behaviours that fit into more than one category, however, the choice to house a participant in a particular category is based on analysis which identified that the chosen category best represented the participant’s primary personal identity.

Table 11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity type</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical thinker</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passionate</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Critical thinker.** Overwhelmingly, participants in this study were critical thinkers, demonstrating behaviours that indicated a high level of critical thinking that they applied to all facets of their lives. This reflection included critically examining their own personal identities formed from childhood experiences, the world they live in, relationships between people, how power functions in society and their role in
contributing to a fairer and more just environment. Imre’s critical reflection sought to explore a, “…systematic understanding of social relations: the interaction between one's own thoughts, feelings and behaviour: between the individual and the family: and between individuals, families, organisations and society”.

Janet’s critical reflection included understanding how her experience as a woman in a patriarchal society, living with a number of “covert injustices”, had informed her identity. Maureen explored when her concern for others first became a part of her identity, remembering a childhood experience where she rang Child Protection services because she was worried about the children living next door. She felt that this decision, taken against the wishes of her own mother, impacted heavily on her adult identity. Phoebe critically reflected on power and how it influenced her everyday experiences, and believed strongly that rules were established to protect the powerful and as such, required constant and careful exploration.

The process of reflection included talking with others, writing and thinking. Several participants kept a personal journal and used this for critical reflection. Others built in a formal reflection process that they undertook on a regular basis to review and plan their life path. In addition to these more formal methods, critical reflection functioned as a natural process for this group of participants, at times requiring no set of organised activities, with participants expressing that it was who they were and what they did.

The critical thinking that participants undertook is not solely confined to thinking through their covert actions, but rather was demonstrated in many of their discussions. When dialoguing about the issues they believed cause conflict for contemporary social workers, they critically explored the complex nature of the current welfare landscape and demonstrated considerable depth of knowledge that mirrored that
found in existing literature. Additionally, they applied their critical thinking to explore the ethical dilemmas that occurred in their daily practice.

As discussed in the previous chapter, this level of critical thinking sometimes proved problematic for participants, who identified a range of challenging emotions that resulted from their ruminations. It did however serve to assist them in thinking through their covert actions and ultimately, in reaching a point where they felt able to justify their behaviours.

**Political.** Eleven participants demonstrated and articulated a strong political identity. This finding supports findings in existing empirical research into social work activists, which found that political influences were important aspects of participant’s professional identities (Andrews & Reisch, 2002; Mendes, 2007; Wagner, 1989). Opinions discussed which fall into this category located this group of participants as identifying with left wing politics, concerned with injustices and oppression facilitated by capitalism, inequalities that disempower and disenfranchise marginalised groups and a decreasing focus on human rights. These workers were knowledgeable about contemporary political movements and the impacts they had on society, articulating opinions that identified a range of negative outcomes that resulted from conservative political approaches. How the current political system impacts on welfare service delivery was a popular topic for these participants, who expressed strong feelings about problems associated with a focus on risk management, punitive and unjust policies, stigmatisation of certain groups and individuals and the disempowerment of vulnerable members of society. Phoebe believed that “responsibility for our most vulnerable members of society should return to the State, particularly in our very individualistic society”. In contrast, Penny identified that “government systems/services are, by design, disempowering and disenfranchising for the majority of people”.
Additionally, participants believed that it was necessary to become involved in reforming the political system, believing that they had a duty to work towards political change. This belief informed both their personal behaviours and professional decisions. Personally, participants undertook various political activities, including participating in organised rallies, being members of political parties, being a part of efforts to lobby for change, handing out how to vote cards on election days and signing petitions. These findings support existing empirical research into the political participation of social workers, which included the activities listed above (Chui & Gray, 2004; Domanski, 1998; Gray et al., 2002; Reeser & Epstein, 1987).

Imre believed that he must “work to change society, address inequalities, be a vocal advocate of the disadvantaged”. He further suggested that, “Our young and old need to be politicised, we must demonstrate our commitment to a socially just society. Our schools, universities, workplaces have lost wholesale the significance of questioning our teachers, lecturers, governments, leaders and financiers”.

Maureen believed in “the importance of engagement to improve society, recognition of marginalised individuals and groups, raising awareness and addressing disadvantage of all types”. Megan wanted to “address injustice, oppression and power imbalance”.

The political identities of participants influenced their decision to seek a social work career, as participants believed that this was a means of working towards a more equitable and politically just society.

**Passionate.** Eight participants expressed opinions and demonstrated behaviours that categorised them as passionate identities. Elise was “truly passionate”. Rachel was “known as a boat-rocker and shit-stirrer because I speak out and you can perhaps imagine how often and how passionately I speak to anyone and everyone”. Abby had
“passion and motivation”. Janet had “a passion for ethics”. Passion is also evidenced by the strength and intensity that participants demonstrated when expressing their values and beliefs. Janet shared that “I believe in social justice. I believe it’s worth fighting for”.

In addition to the words and phrases that participants used which demonstrated a passionate identity, several participants utilised the exclamation mark to add power and intensity to their statements. As this research was conducted via the method of email dialogue, this allowed opportunity for participants to signify when they felt strongly about a particular idea. When participants wished to signify how strongly they felt about the information they were sharing, they used multiple exclamation marks at the end of a sentence. Imre demonstrates:

A brief examination of the socio-political context in which social work practice occurs illustrates the dramatic changes that have occurred in the past three decades in Australian society. This country has moved from being one of the most egalitarian industrialised nations!!!!!

Participants who identified being passionate about their beliefs also felt that this passion influenced their personal and professional behaviours. Abby felt that her passion and motivation for social work were born from her sensitivity and her compassion. She felt that “it's the passion in people that makes social workers go beyond what is expected in their work... it's in their innate nature, maybe?” Janet believed that her childhood experiences had contributed to her passionate approach to living and working, explaining that, “I become so offended by (the medical team’s) attitudes/assumptions that they light that fire within me that demands social justice/equity – the fire from my childhood burns within me eternally. I am ‘inspired’ by injustice into my quiet action”.
Participants in this category demonstrated that their passionate identities contributed to both their choice of career and to the ways in which they chose to practice. This passion mobilised them to undertake covert activities when they felt they were necessary.

**Spiritual.** Over the last two decades, the social work profession has been increasingly interested in spiritual dimensions of both social work practice and social workers themselves, with discourse and empirical research exploring what spirituality means for the profession (Canda & Furman, 1999; Furman, Benson, Grimwood, & Canda, 2004; Hodge, 2005; Miller, 2009; Sheridan, Bullis, Adcock, Berlin, & Miller, 1992). To date, no empirical research into spirituality in relation to the identities of social work activists has been conducted.

Three participants self-identified as ‘spiritual people’. This aspect of their personal identity informed their professional role, as they sought to incorporate a spiritual dimension in both their own approach to the work and in considering the spiritual aspects of client’s lives. June hoped to take into account “cultural and spiritual issues” in her life and work. Elise felt that her spiritual beliefs sustained her focus on working with integrity and honesty. June’s spirituality involved a mediation and mindfulness practice which she had utilised with her clients. For these participants, the focus on spirituality enabled them to consider a holistic approach when working with clients and this consideration motivated them to undertake covert actions when they deemed necessary to meet the whole needs of their clients. They found that welfare service delivery informed by neo-liberal ideology had too narrow a focus to incorporate all of the necessary aspects of a client’s life and therefore felt compelled to widen their focus where necessary, even if that meant undertaking actions covertly.
These four broad categories capture the overarching personal identities that participants aligned with. As mentioned earlier, there is some cross over, with participants occupying two or more identities at the same time. For example, a participant might have strongly identified as both spiritual and critical thinker, or passionate and political. These identities are a further key to understanding why this group of social workers were motivated to undertake covert actions to benefit clients, when other workers, equally committed to enhancing client outcomes, might choose not to.

**Similarities in Personal Values**

Moving from the four broad categories discussed above to explore the individual personal values of participants in this study, similarities can also be found. Six values were identified which were held in common by a number of participants (see Table 12). Empirical research into social work activism has not produced any findings relating to shared values amongst activists, however a reading of the quotes contained within these studies is suggestive of a shared value base amongst participants. Participants in these studies spoke of the existence of injustice and the desire to work towards a more equitable world (Andrews & Reisch, 2002; Mendes, 2007; Wagner, 1989). This perhaps demonstrates shared values relating to social justice and equity. The choice of housing a participant within one of the categories below was based on their answers to a specific question about their personal values. A deeper exploration of the shared values of social workers who undertake covert activism is useful to better understand why this group were prepared to move outside of conventional practice territory.
Table 12

*Similarities in Personal Values held by Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief in humanity</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bravery</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valuing diversity</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassion</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Justice.** Ten participants held a personal value relating to justice. This included the desire to work towards achieving social justice for all members of society. Imre expressed a “genuine commitment to end all forms of oppression in whichever guise it appears”. Susan was concerned with “social justice for the most vulnerable groups (those without a voice - children, people with disabilities, people from other language groups)”. Janet reflected on where her passion for social justice originated, citing childhood experiences, “Some of my earliest memories are themes around injustice. Of course, my early memories from childhood are of naive understandings of what I now understand as justice/injustice”.

That participants identified social justice as a personal value is not surprising for individuals who have chosen a social work career. Discourse in the profession on social justice is plentiful, with some sources identifying it as the foundational value, serving as a motivator force in the choice of a social work career (Solas, 2008). In contradiction, findings from Hawkins, Fook and Ryan’s (2000) study identified that despite the profession’s preoccupation with social justice, participants did not readily identify the value as being important. That a majority of participants in this research study did identify with the value of social justice and indeed went beyond identification to explain
how they acted upon it in their personal and professional lives, indicated that it is a strong motivating force in their lives.

**Belief in humanity.** Eight participants identified a connection with the value of a belief in humanity. This category included the feeling that people were intrinsically good, capable and deserving of positive change and that each individual had a unique worth. Additionally, this category included the belief that all human beings should be afforded dignity. Janet believed in, “dignity and worth of each individual and I believe that everyone has the right to participate in determining their own life course”.

Megan valued the “intrinsic worth of all people”, believing that “people are generally good, caring and want to do meaningful things in life”. Participants spoke of how this value underpinned both actions within their private and professional lives.

**Integrity.** Seven participants valued integrity, attempting to ensure that their actions embodied this value. This included being honest, accountable, trustworthy and reliable. Elise referred to integrity as “talking the talk and walking the talk”. Rachel shared that “my personal values encompass, first and foremost, honesty and integrity”. For Peter, the value of integrity meant, “…that the people I come into contact with during my lifetime are not left thinking that I was not worth knowing. I would like to have a sense of being a valuable person in community and private life”.

**Bravery.** Bravery was cited as an important personal value for four participants. These participants believed that demonstrating courage in their personal lives was an essential part of their value base. Behaviours that demonstrated courage included defending refugees and Indigenous people when others spoke badly of them, even if the process of doing so made them socially unpopular. Additionally, these participants reported on events from their childhood and formative adult years where they had courageously stepped forward to defend vulnerable individuals. Janet felt that she was
not naturally a courageous person, but as she values courage, she worked hard to ensure that her actions were brave. She used the arts to inspire courage, sharing that, “written words, song lyrics, novels, poetry especially… I can listen to certain pieces of music, read certain poems/quotes/affirmations etc and I become courageous and focused”.

This allowed her to “step forward bravely”. Valuing bravery also proved useful for this group of participants in their professional lives, particularly in relation to undertaking covert activities, which participants shared demands a great deal of courage.

**Valuing diversity.** Two participants valued diversity in their personal lives. This included an interest in and respect for people of different cultures, religions and life choices. These participants spoke about their interest in learning more about different cultures through travel and learning new languages, having a wide circle of diverse friends and continually educating themselves to appreciate and understand difference. This included getting in touch with their own cultural heritages, to better understand their own roots. Imre had, “A love of people, cultural diversity, embracing difference but also recognising the importance of retaining those differences to ensure cultural practices are not lost”. Phoebe valued diversity by, “…..embracing differences, making sure people are aware that it's okay to be responding to situations/events in a way that is individual and possibly unexpected for them”. Valuing diversity proved useful for these participants in both their private and professional lives.

**Compassion.** The value of compassion was cited by two participants as being personally important to them. These participants talked about living life “from the heart”, responding with human kindness and meeting another with genuineness and warmth. Abby told the story of a recent trip interstate that had an unexpected outcome:
I was at the Sydney airport the other day and this young woman was sobbing uncontrollably. She couldn't get on the plane because she had just received a call that her mother had passed away. I didn't get on my own plane because I wanted to make sure she was okay - that she had somewhere to go and someone to support her. After spending time with her and just listening to her and holding her right there where she had fallen to the ground, I called her sister to come and get her... I think that is basic humanity- we touch, and are touched, by other human hearts. I am the same at work, and this is what makes me do whatever I do, on a daily basis.

These two participants used the word ‘heart’ in their dialogues on many occasions, speaking of how acting compassionately “warms the heart” and how they were “driven by their heart”. Compassion also proved useful for them in their professional lives and influenced their choices to act covertly.

Four of the personal values discussed above were central values in the AASW Code of Ethics (1999) that was in use during the time that the dialogues were undertaken. That these participants used the exact wording used in the Code of Ethics suggests that the Code may have been influential in conceptualising their personal identities. The values of bravery and compassion were not part of the 1999 version of the AASW Code of the Ethics, nor are they listed in the revised 2010 version.

**Professional Identities**

As with personal identities, participants in this study demonstrated similarities in their professional identities. Little empirical research exists on the professional identities of social work activists. Wagner’s (1989) study briefly identified the influence of political ideology, feminism and radical social work theory on his participants. Findings from this research contribute to Wagner’s (1989) findings, providing more
detailed insight into the professional identities of social work activists. Six categories have been developed to capture the professional identities of participants in this study. In accordance with Lawler’s (2008) sociological definition of identity, these categories were developed as a result of both asking participants about their professional identities and through analysis of their comments about their practice frameworks.

As can be seen in Table 13, the first three categories included all participants. This is understandable, as it could be argued that in order to be a critical reflective practitioner, a social worker would also be prioritising ethical work with a client centred focus. Additionally, an individual who states that they identify as an ethical practitioner, is likely to value critical reflection and a client centred focus, as these are part of the ethical requirements of social work practice. These three categories were chosen as participants identified all three of these as representing their professional identity. The remaining three categories included those participants who in addition to strongly identifying as critically reflective, ethical and client centred social workers, also self-identified or expressed opinions that demonstrated the importance of either a structural, human rights or radical approach.

**Table 13**

*Similarities in Professional Identities of Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity type</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical reflective practitioner</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical practitioner</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client centred</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural social worker</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human rights social worker</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radical social worker</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Critical reflective practitioner.** All participants demonstrated and cited the importance of critical reflective practice in their social work practice. Participants believed that being a critical reflective practitioner was an essential requirement of ethical social work practice as opposed to a choice. When discussing their practice frameworks, this group of participants began with critical reflective practice, demonstrating that it served as a foundation for their professional practice. As discussed in previous chapters, this was evident throughout the email dialogue process, as each dialogue contained multiple references to processes associated with critical reflective practice. This included not only deep exploration of the decisions they made in professional practice, but also an interest in self-awareness, with the goal to gain a fuller picture of their social work practice. Abby felt that self-awareness was an important tool for her critically reflective practice and to achieve this she:

…spends a lot of time in self-reflection - I spent a couple of weeks purposefully thinking about who I am, where I have come from, where I wanted to go, what was important to me, what kind of people did I want to work with, what kind of role did I want, what organisation would be congruent with my 'self', etc.

For participants, the process of critical reflection included mentoring, supervision, journaling, art therapy, laying awake at night reviewing decisions, team discussions, undertaking professional development, reviewing the Code of Ethics and utilising ethical decision making models. Janet used reflective questions, asking:

What do I legally have to do? / What are organisational policies and procedures requiring of me? / What does my community have to offer? / What is the research highlighting? / What does my client want? / How important to my client are policies and procedures and the choices available within the community?
Critically reflecting on the role of power in social work practice was also important to this group of practitioners, who included a power analysis in many of their reflections on their work. This was achieved by reflecting on how power operated within society, their employing organisations, work teams and client work. They also critically evaluated their own use of power, in an attempt to ensure that they were not abusing power.

The central importance of critical reflective practice to this group of social workers assisted them in reviewing their covert activities, allowing them to determine if their actions were justified and ethical. This process allowed participants to continue to practice covertly, as they felt reassured that they had critically explored the covert action in depth and found it to be consistent with the requirements of social work practice. As discussed in previous chapters, the importance of reflexivity to critical reflective practice proved problematic to these participants, who were not able to overtly use their reflections to inform future practice. This was felt as a frustration by participants, with several hoping for the day when they could be more overt about their actions and one participant informing that she was keeping fastidious records of her covert practice so that she may build an evidence base for the future.

**Ethical practitioner.** All participants cited and demonstrated that being an ethical practitioner was central to their professional identities. All participants mentioned the AASW Code of Ethics (1999) as being a foundational tool for their practice, and used it to inform and review professional decision-making. As highlighted above, many used the same wording to capture the values they hold in their personal lives. Some participants spoke affectionately about the Code of Ethics, with Janet stating that:
I still remember the very first day I laid eyes on the AASW Code of Ethics. I suspect I will always remember that moment. I remember reading the list of values: Human dignity and worth, social justice, service to humanity, integrity, competence - and feeling liberated.

Participants spoke of the importance of the fact that the Code of Ethics was not “black and white”, but rather required the practitioner to use their professional knowledge and skills to apply the Code to practice situations. These “grey areas” provided participants with the ability to justify some of their covert actions as being broadly in line with the spirit of the Code. Participants found this useful in reflecting on the ethics of their covert activities. Additionally, several participants cited the AASW Practice Standards as an important tool in their social work practice. In contrast, some participants were critical of the Code of Ethics and Practice Standards, finding that it could not easily be applied to some of the complex practice situations that they encountered, but they still felt that the values enshrined in the Code informed their practice.

The relationship between the Code of Ethics and participants in this study was a complex one. On the one hand, they deeply identified with the values espoused in the Code but on the other hand, they chose to not strictly adhere to certain requirements. In particular, they found Section 4.4 Responsibilities in the workplace particularly problematic in the contemporary service delivery environment (AASW, 1999). Section 4.4.1 (a) Service provision, stated, “Social workers will acknowledge and strive to carry out the stated aims and objectives of the employing organisation, agency or service contractor, consistent with the requirements of this Code” (AASW, 1999, p. 31). Due to clashes between the aims and objectives of their employing organisation and the requirements of the Code, participants felt unable to meet what they identified as competing demands. As they identified as ethical practitioners, it was important that
they attempted to reconcile this dilemma. Largely, they did not do this in the way
outlined in the Code of Ethics, which required them to “appropriately challenge”,
“effect change through consultation, using appropriate organisational channels”
(AASW, 1999, p. 31). As discussed in chapter Five, they had tried to do that and it had largely proved unsuccessful and at times, had led to a range of negative consequences. Their covert actions were attempts to deliver on Section 4.4.1 (h), which stated that:

Social workers will uphold the ethical principles and responsibilities of this Code, even though employers’ policies or official orders may not be compatible with its provisions. Attempts to resolve conflicts between ethical principles and organisational policies and practices should be consistent with the values and principles of this Code.

(AASW, 1999, p. 31)

Participants demonstrated the belief that to be true to the Code of Ethics in contemporary social work practice required that they focused on delivering on the ‘values and principles’ of the Code, at the expense of organisational policies and practices. Not doing so would have involved practicing unethically and would not have been tolerated by this group of participants, who identified strongly as ethical practitioners.

As discussed in Chapter Two, existing empirical research has found that conflict between organisational requirements and social work professional ethical requirements was a reality of contemporary social work practice, particularly in statutory fields of practice (Bell, 1999; Gallina & College, 2010; Gregory, 2010; Healy, 2002; Jones, 1993; McDonald et al., 2008). Further, these findings established that this conflict led to a range of serious negative outcomes for social workers (Baines, 2010; Huxley et al., 2005; McLean & Andrew, 1999; Storey & Billingham, 2001). Participants in this study
experienced the same organisational-professional conflict as those in earlier studies and reported suffering a range of negative outcomes as a result, however their certainty that their ethical professional requirements came before those of the employing organisation, motivated them to take covert actions and to feel justified in doing so.

Additionally, participants had a strong belief in the importance of activism as a requirement of ethical practice. In this belief, they were consistent with the requirements of Section 3.2.1 Principles of the Code of Ethics, which required that social workers “promote distributive justice”, “espouse the cause of human rights” and “oppose and work to eliminate all violations of human rights” (AASW, 1999, p. 6). Further, they believed that they were delivering on the ethical requirement to advocate for their clients, described in the Code of Ethics (1999, p. 25) as:

Action for and with an individual or group. The practice of directly representing or defending clients’ interests and ensuring that clients’ rights or entitlements are maintained. Advocacy includes action to empower clients or community groups; to enable self-determination and/or self-advocacy; to promote access to services, facilities or benefits; to achieve representation in decision-making processes.

Working within contemporary welfare services influenced by neo-liberal ideology, they found that to achieve this they needed act covertly. Although these sections in the Code of Ethics were most likely meant to refer to overt behaviours, participants believed they were adhering to Section 4 Ethical Practice of the Code, which allowed that:

Given the complexity of issues that social workers deal with in various settings, the extent of discretion in relation to these duties may vary in certain circumstances, relying on the informed professional and ethical judgment of the particular social worker. In carrying out their professional practice responsibilities, social workers are entitled to reciprocal rights, which include:
the right to exercise professional discretion and professional judgment [italics added].

(AASW, 1999, p. 11)

It is this ‘professional discretion’ that they called upon when justifying their actions and the result was that they believed, on balance, they were committed to and demonstrating ethical social work practice.

**Client centred social worker.** All participants reported and demonstrated a strong client centred focus in their approach to their work, which they believed is consistent with ethical social work practice. Although other priorities were highlighted, participants felt that first and foremost, it was the client’s needs that determined their practice decisions. This category included ensuring clients are active participants in decision making, building strong therapeutic alliances, advocating for clients, putting the needs of the clients above those of the organisation and reflecting on client outcomes. Focusing on client need above all else, provided this group of participants with a method of prioritising competing demands. Additionally, participants found that their covert actions could be justified as long as the motivation for undertaking them was clearly linked to efforts to meet client need.

Participants dialogues revealed a deep respect for clients, fostered by both a belief in the uniqueness of all individuals and an understanding of the structural barriers faced by vulnerable people in society. Megan’s covert actions were “for the client – some of the most vulnerable people in our society”. Janet summed up what happened when she was involved in a one on one client interaction:

I hope this doesn’t sound too corny… when I’m with a client everything around us seems to dissolve away. The noise of the hospital, the reality that a lot of
what we say is not out of earshot of others, the world outside… all get lost to the moment of conversation.

Additionally, participants expressed that they enjoyed client contact, preferring it to the other work tasks that they undertook. They wished for more client time, lamenting the loss of hours spent in direct practice with clients, associated with managerialist practice initiatives.

**Structural social worker.** Eight participants reported and demonstrated utilising structural social work as a foundation for their social work practice. Structural social work is primarily concerned with understanding and challenging the structures within society that contribute to disadvantage, as opposed to focusing on individual pathology and blame (Mullaly, 2006). Further, structural social work acknowledges that social work that operates from within social structures has the potential to contribute to oppression, as its aim is to adjust the individual to fit within that society and in doing so, maintains the status quo (Allan et al., 2009). Existing research into social work activism has not explored the professional identities of participants, however analysis of the quotes of participants in these earlier studies demonstrated that a structural social work perspective had informed their practice approaches (Mendes, 2007; Wagner, 1989). This was evidenced by these participant’s reflections on power, structural disadvantage and the role of social work in overcoming structures that created barriers for clients.

Participants who utilised a structural approach in their practice were highly cognisant of the role of power, including how power was wielded by their employing organisation and by society itself. This included acknowledging the stigmatisation, disenfranchisement and disempowerment experienced by groups and individuals and
the role that social work has played historically in contributing to this. Elise believed that:

…social work has not always had a good legacy, and we need to always remember and keep in mind that we have power, and how we use power, and to understand we would not be coming from an honest place if we say we don’t use power.

She took a structural approach in exploring transgenerational trauma that her Indigenous clients have been subjected to, believing that society had a duty to ‘do everything we can to assist’. Erin explored the marginalisation of people with mental health issues in society and found that social work from a Structural perspective was perfectly matched to work with marginalised people as “one of the core beliefs of Social Work is that such populations should be empowered to have control of their own lives”. Megan felt like her employing organisation operated as a “structural barrier” to her clients and “hinders their ability to get the most out of their lives”.

Also consistent with a structural social work approach, participants shared their understanding of structural barriers with clients, and attempted to empower clients to avoid self-blame and gain awareness of the ways in which structures have contributed to their problems. Susan achieved this through, “… seeking dialogue and shared understanding, raising consciousness in clients to understand structural barriers as well as personal strengths to engage more meaningfully in social interactions”.

Human rights social worker. Five participants identified as Human Rights workers. Social work practice grounded in a Human Rights approach seeks to reaffirm the importance of a focus on humanity (Ife, 2001). This approach sees social workers considering the morality of interventions and pursuing a holistic framework that includes both individual client work and political action aimed at the pursuit of a human
rights agenda (Ife, 2001). Participants who speak of the importance of a Human Rights based social work practice focused on the rights of their clients, believing that upholding these rights was a fundamental part of social work practice. Erin applied a Human Rights approach to working with clients with mental illness, believing that some interventions went:

…against the spirit of the act and the natural rights for all people, including those with mental illness, to have their human rights protected. The issue of control is a big one here- and I believe clients do have the right to refuse treatment or to dictate how and when they have contact with treating people where there is no imminent risk because of them doing this. And clients have the right to make choices that lead to them getting unwell.

Imre cited a number of human rights treaties as being important to his work and believed that these treaties were not upheld in his place of work. Megan felt that access to social support is a human right and as such, her clients should not be made to feel ashamed about receiving this support. Susan’s human rights focus saw her considering global inequality as well as local barriers to social inclusion.

**Radical social worker.** Three participants self-identified as radical social workers. Existing research into social work activism has established that the radical social work perspective has informed activists since its beginning (Andrews & Reisch, 2002; Wagner, 1989). Andrews and Reisch’s (2002) study found that although participants cited the importance of Radical practice in informing their work, they were less likely to publically assert their links with radical practice, finding that to do so led to a range of negative outcomes. That only three participants in this study directly cited Radical social work as informing their practice, even though many of their covert actions were highly compatible with the tenets and methods of radical practice, provides
further evidence that the term ‘radical’ may not be a popular term to describe contemporary practice. This may in part be related to the overt nature of actions typically associated with historical radical social work practices, which participants found were less successful in meeting client need than the covert practices they employed. Imre identified as a “so called radical social worker”, demonstrating that he may not have been completely comfortable with the term. Megan identified as a radical social worker when describing her beliefs that “(social workers) shouldn’t be puppets of the agency. That’s radical”. However, she followed this by laughing, conveying that the term is perhaps a little amusing and old fashioned. Whilst these participants embraced the term, they did so somewhat hesitantly, suggesting that they were not completely comfortable with its use.

**Professional Values**

In addition to similarities in their personal value base, participants identified five shared values that informed their social work practice. Participants were specifically asked to list their professional values. All five values identified were included in the previous AASW Code of Ethics (1999), which was the relevant Code when this research was undertaken (see Table 14). Given that these professional values have historically been significant for social work practice, it is perhaps not surprising that participants should cite them. However, participants in this study moved beyond reciting these values as a list, to demonstrating depth in understanding them and a commitment to embodying them in practice.

The first two categories of social justice and human dignity and worth were self-identified by all participants. The remaining three categories of integrity, competence and service to humanity were additionally cited by some participants. This is not to suggest, for example, that a participant who did not cite competence as an important
practice value is incompetent, but rather that when asked, they did not self-identify this value.

Table 14  
*Similarities in Professional Values held by Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional value</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social justice</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human dignity and worth</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service to humanity</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Social justice.** All participants reported that social justice was a foundation value in their professional practice. This included identification of injustice and unfairness for individuals, groups and workers and efforts to challenge these injustices. Discourse from within the profession has highlighted the difficult relationship that social work has had with social justice, on the one hand embracing it as a professional value and on the other, having difficulty articulating exactly how this value is embodied in practice (Hawkins et al., 2001; Solas, 2008). Participants in this study were able to articulate how they delivered on the value of social justice, citing their covert practices as a means of fighting injustice on a daily basis.

The starting point for delivering on the value of social justice was knowledge of structural disadvantage, which allowed participants to better identify issues of injustice. Once issues pertaining to social justice were identified, participants undertook various actions to challenge these, including both overt and covert attempts. With regards to covert efforts, Susan reported that when faced with a social justice issue she would “step over the line to try to rebalance things a little. I believe I have a responsibility to stand up and take action”. That participants identified their covert actions as a primary
method of delivering on the value of social justice in practice, provides the social work profession with concrete examples of one means of implementing this value in practice.

This group of participants also believed that in order to deliver on the value of social justice, the profession of social work had a duty to challenge injustice and fight for positive change. Janet believed that, “…social work should also simultaneously be engaged on a political level to work toward more client-centred policies and procedures and to educate others and be a constant beacon of light on the inherent rights of individuals”.

Elise quoted the IFSW, arguing that “the social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance wellbeing”. She went on to explain why social work’s value of social justice contributed to the unique approach of the profession:

I think other disciplines may take a more pragmatic approach whereby they may not like the situation, but will work with it and accept it, whereas social workers fume over it, cannot accept the injustice and inequity, and will spend the time it needs to turn blood into wine.

Sharing in common the belief that social justice needed to be more than just a foundational concept, participants demonstrated both the belief that the profession must actively challenge injustice and the commitment that they themselves had a duty to do so.

**Human dignity and worth.** Human dignity and worth was cited by ten participants as a central professional value. As with social justice, participants were able to describe behaviours that demonstrated how they embodied this value in practice. Delivering on this value was primarily associated with actions aimed at respecting the humanity of each individual client, with the goal that doing so fostered enhanced client
well-being and autonomy. In addition, participants were concerned with respecting collective client identities, ensuring that they were knowledgeable about different cultural groups and marginalised groups in society. Peter also believed that behaving with dignity was important for the worker, and he stressed that “I hope I have a sense of dignity from myself and towards others in making difficult decisions for the client”.

Phoebe explained how she embodied the value of human dignity and worth:

I like the idea or working 'with' people rather than 'for'. I also like the idea that great things can happen with peoples' self-belief if you treat them with dignity and respect, if you can show them that there is a little bit of hope and give them the space to consider alternative options.

**Integrity.** Nine participants valued integrity in their social work practice. This included the need to be honest, responsible, non-judgemental and fair when working with clients. Elise informed that “I do not gossip, I do not use passive aggressive means to bring about change, and I try to be a good team member”. In relation to their covert activities, participants had considered how these actions may or may not have been consistent with the value of integrity, exploring how bending the truth or deceiving their employers could be considered as behaving with integrity. This dilemma was largely resolved by participants, who felt that their dual priorities were enhancing client well-being and delivering on the professional values of social work, and that if doing so meant that their behaviour was not entirely honest with regards to employers, then this was an unfortunate result of the constraints of contemporary practice. Maureen confronted this dilemma by focusing on the motivation of her covert actions, ensuring that “the motivation has integrity”. Hannah admitted that if she were to consider the competing demands on her practice as having equal value, then her covert behaviours
could be seen to lack integrity. She was uneasy about this, but could see no way around it, as to deliver on her professional values meant that she must act.

Given that participants did, at times, lie in order to practice covertly, it is interesting to note how participants who valued integrity rationalised this behaviour. As discussed in Chapter Five, only one participant used the word ‘lying’ to describe actions that others titled ‘compromising the truth’. Conceptualising their actions as truth stretching as opposed to lying may have allowed participants with a strong connection to practicing with integrity to justify their actions. Additionally, participants were able to believe that they had professional integrity as they focused on the values of the social work profession, which they believed they were better able to deliver on when practicing covertly, rather than on the lies or ‘compromises’ to the truth that may occur in the process.

**Competence.** Seven participants valued competence in their social work practice. Examples provided by participants of how they embodied this value in practice were largely centred on knowledge acquisition, with these workers committing to undertaking a range of ongoing professional development to ensure that they remained competent workers. Additionally, participants felt that to be competent social workers, they must maintain an interest in and knowledge of the greater welfare system that social work operated within, including understanding policy directions. This group were also committed to providing supervision for other social workers and social work students, and all expressed the importance of accessing their own professional supervision. In this way, participants felt they were able to achieve professional growth. These practices also afforded participants a level of comfort in relation to their covert activities, as being up to date with the latest evidence and practice initiatives assisted them to justify their actions.
**Service to humanity.** Six participants valued service to humanity, identifying it as a central professional value that they wished to embody in practice. This was evidenced by their expressed desire to place the needs of clients above those of both the employing organisation and themselves. In relation to their covert activities, this group felt it important to ensure that their actions were not self-motivated, but rather aimed at serving clients. Additionally, participants identified that their covert activities were at times the only possible way of delivering on this value in practice. Issues of power were once again raised, as several participants in this group believed that serving humanity necessarily involved the ability to deconstruct power and use it consciously, without losing the focus on service.

Findings on the professional values held by participants not only reinforce the role the underlying professional values played in informing practice for this group, but also suggest that being able to articulate how these values are enacted in practice was of central importance to this group. These findings provide additional evidence for the profession on methods of delivering on core social work values in contemporary welfare environments that may be hostile to the spirit of these values.

**Congruence between Professional and Personal Values and Identity**

The findings presented above suggest that the relationship between the personal and professional identities of each social worker was highly congruent, as there was a distinct overlap between personal and professional values and identities. Personally, participants saw themselves as critical thinkers and this was carried over to their professional identity, which was informed by critical reflective practice. A focus on politics in their private lives was represented in their professional lives through the use of the structural, Human Rights and radical social work perspectives. Their personal value of justice was embodied by their stated professional pursuit of social justice. The
belief in humanity that informed their personal value system was upheld through the professional value of human dignity and worth. Valuing integrity in their personal lives was also represented as one of their professional values. Existing empirical evidence into social work activism does not explore the personal identities of participants, therefore little is known about the congruence between social work activist’s personal and professional lives. This finding therefore provides new evidence into the identities of social work activists.

Participants articulated the importance of congruence between their professional and personal spheres, citing that this was an essential component of their ability to continue to do the work. Several participants had left previous positions because they did not feel that their personal values and identity were an appropriate match for the position. Abby “made the decision to leave this previous position as it was too inconsistent with my own personal and professional values”. Additionally, several participants had taken a job because they felt that the match between their personal and professional spheres was a good one. Hannah had chosen a position because “it was going to be a great fit between my personal and professional values”.

Most participants had difficulty separating out their personal and professional value bases, seeing them as intricately linked. Abby informed that, “I cannot say that my personal values are separate from my professional values as my personal values are very congruent with those of my professional (hence the reason I love social work - it is consistent with me)”.

Hannah stated that “I think that my personal and professional values and closely linked and I find it hard to separate them”. Maureen talked about the connection between her personal and professional values, “I don't think my professional values are different from my personal values. I don't think they were different in the early days, I
simply started to develop a language around my existing beliefs and values”. Megan “tries to practice what I practice in my real world” and felt that she would need to leave her workplace if a conservative government came to power as she felt the clash between her personal values and those that would be informing conservative policy would be too great. This interest in bringing their personal selves into their work was stated by several participants, who linked this to living with integrity and honesty. To do otherwise was felt to be unethical and to contribute to too high a level of conflict.

The result of being able to practice with congruence between personal and professional identities was felt by participants to be highly beneficial, not only facilitating their choice to remain employed as social workers, but also providing them with a range of positive feelings and behaviours. Maureen identified benefits as “congruency and integrity, and these are important for me as an individual”. Abby was:

….happy because I can practice according to my values and I enjoy the nature of my job and the workplace opportunities; therefore this leads to higher performance and motivation levels for professional growth and skill development, and longer length of employment.

Additionally, participants informed that their use of covert activities allowed them to increase the congruence between their personal and professional identities, as they were able to deliver on their values and perspectives in a way that they would not have been able to do if they had not practiced covertly.

**Typology of Covert Social Work Activists**

In order to participate in this research, all participants needed to self-identify as social work activists. As discussed in the literature review, most existing empirical research into social work activism provided participants with a definition of activism and did not explore what social workers themselves understood by the term ‘activism’
(Evans, 1975; Mendes, 2007). Two exceptions were found in Wagner’s (1989) and Andrews and Reisch’s (2002) studies, which required participants to identify what they meant by activist practice. Some participants in these two studies had difficulty capturing what they meant by activist or radical practice, however they displayed a commitment to practicing from these perspectives. Although participants in this research did not have difficulty defining what behaviours were linked to social work activism, in commonality with participants in these two earlier studies, participants in this research expressed varying levels of comfort with the term.

As a result of the various approaches to and beliefs about social work activism expressed by participants, four categories of social work activist have been developed (see Table 15). The choice to house a participant in one particular category over another is based on analysis that found that the chosen category best represented the activist behaviours that participants described engaging in.

Table 15

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant’s Identities as Activists</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strategist</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change agent</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quiet activist</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawful activist</td>
<td>2</td>
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**Strategist.** Six participants were found to fit into the category of Strategist. These participants demonstrated a concern for choosing a range of covert tactics that they hoped were most likely to go undetected by the employer and client. In this way, they hoped that their covert behaviours would be more effective and less likely to be halted as a result of being discovered. Strategist activists acknowledged that they could not pursue every opportunity to undertake covert activism, and instead choose only
those that would have the best possible outcomes at the same time as preserving participants own abilities. Self-care was important to this group of participants, who understood their limits and boundaries. Elise believed that employing strategy, allowed her “to work smart so that you don’t burn out”. Additionally, Strategists made use of workplace policy and procedure documents as well as social work documents such as the Code of Ethics and Practice Standards, to provide backup should their actions be questioned. Elise stated that “I will use [legislation] and any piece of departmental policy that I can find to argue a point, and I have never been frightened to take it further”. Maureen called this “speaking the language of the organisation”. Strategist activists looked for loopholes in these documents that might further guide their covert practices.

This group of participants focus on strategic activism was also motivated by a concern for self-protection, as they feared the consequences of losing their job. Fear of losing their job was not only feared as a personal consequence but also as a lost opportunity for future covert activities. Susan acknowledged that, “…covert activities could risk my job and while I would be scared to face disciplinary action, I also think I do a better job fighting the system from within so I don't want to jeopardise that.”

Participants in this category also spoke about the increased opportunities that came from rising to senior positions within an organisation, and sought promotion as a strategy to undertake further covert actions. Penny had a “plan to move into management where hopefully I can effect more change!”.

**Change agent.** Five participants fit into the category of Change Agent. These participants were driven by an intense motivation to drive change wherever possible. They were informed by strong political views and a motivation to challenge unequal power structures and actively searched for opportunities to make changes, both covertly
and overtly. Erin saw herself as “a thorn in the side of the system”. Rachel identified patriarchal structures which disadvantaged women and found these “a gross social and legal injustice” that she is prepared to “go to battle for”. This group expressed a strong focus on working towards social justice and were at times prepared to do so outside of the boundaries of the law. Imre identified that his long past as a political activist provided him with a solid foundation for undertaking covert activism within his social work practice. He had a “steadfast commitment to ideals of social justice and a respect for human rights [and hoped to return] social work back to its radical past”.

When choosing jobs, this group of participants sought out employment based on their perceived opportunity for mounting challenges. Hannah chose her work based on her hope that “it was a way to help a lot of people and to be able to make some real changes to the community”. They were curious about driving and sustaining change and they identified a range of positive benefits that arose from their attempts to do so. Megan found that she felt happy when she had “beat the system” and had a “sense of satisfaction (that) I haven’t let the system get in the way of what I needed to get that client”.

**Quiet activist.** Two participants were identified as Quiet activists, taking an approach that is significantly different to that of their colleagues in the Change Agent category. These participants undertook small, subtle forms of covert and overt activism and believed that their actions contributed to small and incremental changes. Abby identified that her activist behaviours were “not extreme”, as she preferred to move quietly throughout her work, ensuring that her activities did not attract undue attention. In this way, she could “stay under the radar”. Janet shared that:
I think my resistance is quiet, almost so much so that it goes unnoticed – and even when I write up my actions in hospital medical chart entries, very few colleagues ever comment. I imagine many wouldn’t classify it as resistance. She explained that her “little covert interventions are small operations”. These participants held the belief that their activism chipped away at a system rather than challenged it head on.

**Lawful activist.** Two participants are categorised as Lawful activists, demonstrating a concern for only undertaking forms of activism that did not break the law or cross ethical boundaries. Marie “would not undertake any criminal activity or blatant lying to get a desired outcome”. Like Strategist activists, this group looked for loopholes in policy and procedure, however Lawful activists preferred to exploit these loopholes in such a way that no legal or ethical boundaries were broken. Having clear and pre-defined boundaries allowed this group of participants a method of determining which actions they would and would not take, and as a result they were able to clearly articulate what they would not do.

These four categories, which seek to capture the beliefs and behaviours of participants in this study who self-identified as activist practitioners, have been further developed into a typology of contemporary social work activism (see Table 16). This typology attempts to expand on the work of Domanski’s (1998) typology of political participation, which included the category of ‘Activist’. Whilst it is noted that typologies are viewed by some in the literature as old fashioned and unsophisticated, Collier, LaPorte and Seawright (2012) argued that typology remains a well-established and useful tool in the social sciences.
Table 16

**Typology of Contemporary Activism**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Activist</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strategist</td>
<td>Demonstrates a concern for employing tactics that are most likely to go undetected by the employer and client. Utilises the documents of the employing organisation and social work profession to overtly and covertly implement change. Demonstrates a concern for self-protection in choosing activities, in the belief that remaining employed will allow future opportunity for activism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change Agent</td>
<td>Driven by an intense motivation to drive change wherever possible. Actively searches for opportunities to make changes, both covertly and overtly. Chooses employment based on perceived opportunity for mounting challenges. Strong links to left political ideologies. Intense connection with the value of working towards social justice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quiet Activist</td>
<td>Undertakes small, subtle forms of covert and overt activism. Prefers to stay ‘under the radar’. Belief that the activism they undertake chips away at a system rather than challenges it head on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawful Activist</td>
<td>Concern with only undertaking forms of activism that do not break the law or cross ethical boundaries. Looks for loopholes in policy and procedure to exploit rather than directly breaking rules. Demonstrates strict boundaries in relation to what they will and will not do.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Given that the existing research provides little insight into what is meant by the term ‘activist’, findings from this research allow for expanded knowledge on the different types of activist identities in contemporary social work practice.

The process of identifying a typology of social work activists revealed that the fields of practice that participants were employed within are clustered around particular activist types. For example, participants who worked within Child Protection were all
identified as fitting into the same category of activist. This also occurred for participants in the fields of Mental Health, Income Support and Health. Whilst identifying which field of practice fits with which type of activist is not possible due to confidentiality issues, it is interesting to note that participants identified and embraced the type of activism that fitted best with their field of practice.

**Discussion**

As discussed in Chapter Two, discourse from within social work has critiqued the place of radical and activist practice within the profession, suggesting that it has been poorly defined and delivered on (Carey & Foster, 2011; Specht & Courtney, 1994). The limited number of empirical studies into activist practice has contributed to the contested role that activist practice holds within the profession, as little is known about what it is, how it is practiced and by whom. Additionally, discourse and research has traditionally explored activist practice in relation to macro activities that occurred outside of daily practice activities (Hugman, 2009; Mendes, 2007). Findings in this chapter provide new information into the identities of social work activists, whose activities were largely undertaken within micro practice settings, affording new understanding of who these social workers are. This understanding allows insight into why this group of social workers might be prepared to undertake covert actions when others may not.

Similarities in values and identities across both personal and professional spheres build a picture of social workers who claimed to be critical and political thinkers, motivated by strong passions and a the desire to challenge injustice so that each individual’s unique humanity can be maximised. That this identity is highly consistent with the underlying values and principles of the social work profession suggests that these individuals have chosen their careers based in part upon their
personal values. However, the realities of contemporary social work practice within welfare services influenced by neo-liberal ideology, is that it does not necessarily allow for smooth delivery of these underlying values and principles. As a result, discourse and empirical research has found that attempts to embody these values and principles in practice proved problematic (Baines, 2010; Gallina & College, 2010; Gregory, 2010; Rogowski, 2011; Wastell et al., 2010; Weinberg, 2010). Social workers in the contemporary context experienced a range of negative outcomes that may lead to them either deciding to practice in a mechanistic way or to leave their job (Baines, 2010; Huxley et al., 2005; McLean & Andrew, 1999; Storey & Billingham, 2001). This leads to the question of why this group of practitioners are prepared to attempt a third method of delivering on professional values through undertaking covert activities, when others do not. These findings suggest that the answer to this question may be found in the importance for this group of practitioners of achieving congruence between their personal and professional identities. As critical thinkers, influenced by their political knowledge, driven by a passion for change, this group of social workers were not prepared to separate their personal and professional lives to the extent that their own personal identities were not evident in their work. Believing that activist social work practice was as much about who they are as what they do, this group placed themselves at risk rather than choosing to do nothing when faced with injustices. Utilising a range of tactics and demonstrating four distinct types of activist, social workers in this study believed that they had found a method of delivering on both personal and professional values and identities that afforded them the opportunity to remain congruent with who they were as people. As a result, they were able to experience a range of positive outcomes associated with their work, to some extent balancing out the negative outcomes that result from trying to do the job of social work in a welfare system.
informed by neo-liberal ideology. This more balanced experience may explain why this
group of social workers were able to continue to remain employed and resisted the pull
of moving into ways of practice more congruent with neo-liberal welfare service
delivery.

Participant’s focus on power infiltrated many of their discussions relating to
their values in both their personal and professional lives. This focus on how power
operated led participants to embrace social work theories and perspectives that are
consistent with a more activist approach within the profession. Utilising the approaches
of Structural, Radical and Human Rights perspectives provided these social workers
with ideologies that supported their activist practice and provided them with legitimate
theoretical frameworks to make sense of their covert behaviours.

As discussed in previous chapters, participants in this study were able to identify
a range of problems associated with contemporary social work practice from within
welfare services influenced by neo-liberal ideology. Motivated by the need to benefit
clients and to deliver on the values of their profession, they found that they were unable
to do so from within the narrow focus that has become the territory of social work
practice. Existing research has shown that they are not alone in experiencing this
conflict between the requirements of their employing organisations and their
professional mandate (Bell, 1990; Jones, 1993; Pockett, 2002). Existing research also
shows that the result of this conflict causes harm, both professionally and personally
and that many social workers either stay in their jobs unhappily or resign (Balloch et al.,
1998; McLean &Andrew, 1999). Little is known of those that stay and continue to
attempt to deliver on their professional values in hostile environments. Greater
understanding of why this group of social workers pushed back against the system at
considerable risk to themselves, their clients, their organisations and their profession is
gained when their identities are considered. For critical thinkers who are deeply attached to the values of social justice and believe that taking action is a foundation of ethical social work practice, this group found that they were unable to sit back and do nothing when they had identified a means of delivering on these values in practice that enhanced client outcomes. Understanding who they are as private people and social work professionals helps to explain why this group moved into covert territory when their colleagues may not have. Although doing so blurred ethical boundaries or broke them, potentially disadvantaged one client while advantaging another, delivered a range of unwelcome emotions and challenges and increased risk across all systems, the identities of this group meant that they felt they must take on these risks to deliver on the values they held dear, both professionally and personally. Understanding who they are helps to make sense of the risks they take.

Chapters Four, Five, Six and Seven have presented the findings from this research, identifying key themes relating to the context of contemporary social work practice, actions of resistance undertaken by social workers, the impacts of these covert actions and the identities of contemporary social work activists. Chapter Eight will summarise the research project, draw together key findings and identify implications for practice and further research.
Chapter Eight

Implications and Conclusion

The aim of this chapter is to summarise the research project and draw together key findings, implications and conclusions that emerged. A research overview will begin by reiterating the goal of the research, literature presented, research questions and methodology. An overview of the findings will follow, with key themes emerging from the research summarised. Implications for practice will be identified along with implications for further research.

Research Overview

The overarching goal of this research was to investigate the experiences of Australian social workers employed in statutory welfare organisations, in relation to covert workplace activism undertaken to reconcile and challenge organisational/professional conflict. This topic was born of discussions I had with social workers in my role as Career Services Social Worker for the AASW. These discussions allowed me insight into the many challenges faced by social workers attempting to deliver on social work’s value base in contemporary statutory settings which were at odds and at times, hostile to these values. Daily, I heard from social workers in distress asking questions about how they could deliver on principles like social justice and human rights when their employing organisations were not supportive of their attempts to do so. I listened as they raged, despaired and cried. Many spoke of their decision to leave their jobs. Some spoke of leaving their profession in the belief that doing the job of social work was simply not possible in the current welfare service delivery climate. To me, the prognosis for the profession seemed bleak. Curiously, a much smaller group of social workers told a different story and it was in their experiences that my interest was sown. These workers, often employed in child protection, frontline mental health
and income support, what might be referred to as the ‘pointy end’ of the profession, spoke with passion and hope about their practice. They believed they had found a way to fight back against characteristics of a system that they identified as unjust and unethical to deliver on the core values and principles of the social work profession. They told me that their clients were advantaged by their practice and that they were motivated by the successes they had witnessed. Curious about what it was that made the experience for this group so different to most of the social workers I was speaking with, I began asking questions. Their reluctance to provide me with concrete answers fuelled my interest even more. What was going on out there? And why couldn’t they tell me? As my rapport with some of these workers grew, a few began to share with me what they were doing in secret. I began informally asking colleagues and discovered that these workers were not alone. It seemed as though everyone had a story of ‘bending the rules’ or ‘stretching the truth’. This phenomena seemed prevalent in practice and yet undocumented in the professional literature and thus this research was born.

A review of the literature in Chapter Two identified that significant instances of conflict existed between the requirements of the employing organisation and those of the profession of social work. The literature went on to tell of the harm that ensues due to this organisational-professional conflict. Although a small number of studies had begun to explore what social workers do to attempt to push back against this conflict, no research had taken as its goal an investigation into what I had begun to identify as contemporary social work activism. This gap in the literature informed the primary research question: What are the experiences of Australian statutory social workers regarding the types of covert activism they practice, and their reasons for doing so?

The theoretical approach to the research was informed by the literature review and discussed in Chapter Two. It became clear that critical theory, feminist research and
critical reflective practice would provide a three pronged theoretical approach most conducive to affording in-depth enquiry into what was articulated as a very sensitive subject for social work practitioners. Non-representative, purposive, snowball sampling was used and resulted in the recruitment of 15 participants. Data collection was undertaken via Email Facilitated Reflective Dialogue, a method that proved both successful in reaching a depth in the data and affording participants a rich and rewarding research process. Data was analysed both manually and with the aid of the Nvivo computer programme.

**Summary of Findings**

Findings were broken into four categories and presented in Chapters Four, Five, Six and Seven. The first category of findings related to the challenging context of contemporary social work. The second category of findings related to the activities of resistance undertaken by participants. The third category of findings related to the impacts of undertaking covert activism for participants, their clients, the employing organisation and the social work profession at large. The final category of findings related to the identity of participants and how this informed their covert practices.

**Fractures at the frontier.** Participants identified characteristics of the current welfare delivery system influenced by neo-liberal ideology as highly problematic and hostile to the social work value base and this finding was in agreement with findings from existing empirical research (Baines, 2010; Gallina & College, 2010; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009; Rogowski, 2011; Weinberg, 2010). They identified that the current focus on risk management and compliance, increased surveillance and a punitive approach impacted on their ability to do their job. Additionally, they reported on increased demands on their job capacity, such as excessive caseloads, insufficient resources, increased documentation requirements and long hours seriously impaired
their ability to practice. Participants spoke of high levels of conflict within the contemporary model of service delivery, including between people, policies, organisations and methods of service delivery. This conflict played out in daily battles with supervisors and colleagues, many of whom did not understand the role of social work or the value base that forms its foundation. They struggled with policies and legislation, methods and models, under qualified staff, cultural insensitivity and the devaluation of their profession. They told of their experiences with power within the contemporary context of social work, which included instances of power abuse between workers, power abuses of clients and the underlying values and beliefs of society that influence welfare service delivery.

These findings paint a bleak picture of contemporary social work practice in statutory settings influenced by a neo-liberal ideology. For these social workers, the practice landscape is broken and the result is that traditional methods of social work service delivery do not do the job of delivering on the values and principles of the profession. Not content to accept the loss of the social work role, nor inclined to give up and resign, participants instead found ways to push back against the system and in doing so challenge the underlying ideology of contemporary practice. They believed in the aims and values of the social work role and despite the fractures at the frontier, they remained committed to what they believe delivering on the job of social work was supposed to be about.

**Resistance at the frontier.** Attempts to continue to do the job of social work in the current welfare system informed by neo-liberal ideology, have led this group of participants to undertake new methods of practice, aimed at resisting an ideology that they believe runs counter to social work’s value base. In addition to more traditional forms of overt activist practice, such as advocating for change, influencing policies and
public protest, this group undertook a range of covert activities. Some of these covert activities have been identified in the small amount of existing empirical research that exists on contemporary activism (Chui & Gray, 2004; Domanski, 1998; Gray et al., 2002; Reeser & Epstein, 1987). Covert actions undertaken included small instances of rule bending to actions that break the law. Some of the covert actions identified by participants, such as influencing colleagues to benefit a client outcome, seemed a surprising inclusion as they are highly consistent with good social work practice. That these actions are included as examples of covert practice is testament to the difficulty of delivering on the aim and purpose of social work within welfare services influenced by neo-liberal ideology.

No previous empirical research has explored the motivations of social workers who undertake covert actions. Participant’s main motivations for undertaking covert practices can be categorised into three classifications; benefitting clients, as a result of workplace experiences and self-agenda. Overwhelmingly, participants identified that after a deep level of critical reflection, they believed that they were primarily motivated by a need to optimise client outcomes and that as a result, felt it necessary to undertake covert actions to achieve this end. They also informed that past workplace experiences, including the success of previous covert actions and the failure of overt actions, served as a motivation. They were also motivated by the fact that they knew other workers were undertaking covert activities and as a result of time pressures, they felt that covert actions proved most efficient. A smaller group of participants identified a level of self interest in their motivations, discussing how their political ideology, strong emotions, fear of confrontation and belief that sometimes, covert actions provided a path of least resistance, influenced their choice to act in secret. These participants were aware of the shadow side of their covert practice and question the ethics of their behaviour.
A range of tactics were undertaken when acting covertly, including acting alone or in a team, using workplace documents or policies, feigning ignorance and acting with subtlety. Participants demonstrated a high level of critical reflection in exploring the best covert means of achieving enhanced client outcomes and chose their tactics based on what they believed would be the most successful.

Although sometimes acting in isolation and motivated by the need to enhance client outcomes, participants in this study were strongly connected with the bigger picture of delivering on the values and principles of the social work’s profession and in doing so, hoped to affect change in a system they believed is at odds with their professional mandate. They hoped that their covert actions might ‘plant seeds’ which would one day grow to challenge the dominant neo-liberal ideology that informs the contemporary practice landscape.

**Challenges and rewards.** As a result of their covert practice, participants identified a range of challenges and rewards that impacted on their professional experience. All participants experienced decreased well-being, including strong emotional impacts such as fear, guilt, uncertainty, anger and frustration. These emotions caused considerable stress for participants, which corresponds with existing research on stress in contemporary practice (Gibbs, 2001; Huxley et al., 2005; Jones, 2001; McAuliffe, 2005; Postle, 2001). Increased risk was identified as a further challenge of covert activism, with participants identifying risks to clients, themselves, their employing organisations and the profession of social work at large. Participants were not able to actually identify any instances where their covert actions had caused harm, however they were able to speak to the harm that might have resulted should their actions have been discovered or had unwanted client outcomes. Conversely, participants identified a range of rewards that resulted from their covert actions, including increased
satisfaction and well-being and enhanced reputation. They cited real practice examples of instances where they, their clients, their workplaces and the profession of social work had benefitted from their covert actions.

Despite a range of challenges, including serious potential harm to clients, participants found the rewards of covert work outweighed the challenges. Given that no participant was able or willing to identify a case of actual harm to clients, and yet all were able to identify positive client outcomes, participants remained motivated to continue to work covertly. Indeed, four participants were actively looking for ways to extend their covert work by seeking management opportunities, moving into policy work and undertaking research to grow an evidence base of covert work. This motivation and at times, enthusiasm for continuing to practice in statutory social work is not consistent with empirical research and professional discourse which highlighted ongoing retention problems in the sector (Gibbs, 2001).

**Activist identities.** To better understand why this group of social workers moved into covert territory to maximise client outcomes, their personal and professional identities were explored. Similarities were found between the personal and professional value base and identities of participants and this may help to explain their ongoing commitment to covert activist practice. The personal identities of participants revealed a group of critical thinkers, with strong political beliefs, a passionate identity and a level of spirituality that informed their decision making. Participants shared a value base centred on justice, a belief in humanity, integrity, bravery, valuing diversity and compassion.

Professionally, participants identities can be categorised into six identity types; critical reflective practitioner, ethical practitioner, client centred practitioner, structural social work, human rights social worker and radical social worker. Participant’s
identities occupied several categories at the same time. Professional values held by this
group centred around the values espoused by the AASW Code of Ethics (1999); social
justice, human dignity and worth, integrity, competence and service to humanity.

A high level of congruence can therefore be found between the personal and
professional identities and values of this group of social workers and this was important
to their ability to continue to pursue the social work agenda. When participants were not
able to feel congruence between their personal and professional identities, they reported
leaving jobs. Several chose their places of work based on a perceived good fit between
their personal and professional selves. They identified that if they were not practicing
c covertly, they would most likely be unable to continue to feel this congruence as they
would not be able to implement their personal and professional values in practice.

Analysis of the findings relating to the identities of social work covert activists
revealed a typology that seeks to better understand what is meant by the term ‘activist’
in contemporary social work practice. Four categories are identified including strategist,
change agent, quiet activist and lawful activist. Participants fell into one of these
discrete categories with the fields of practice of participants influencing which category
they operated within.

Findings relating to the identities of contemporary social work activists assists
with understanding why this group of workers might be prepared to move outside
traditional overt means of practicing, to undertake resistance in secret. The combination
of their strong focus on social justice in both their personal and professional lives, their
political beliefs, their focus on critical thinking and their identification with the
important role of activism within social work practice, motivated this group to fight
back despite the challenges of doing so. As a result, they felt they were better able to
deliver on the purpose and aim of social work.
Implications

Several key developments have occurred whilst this research has been undertaken that have ramifications when identifying implications from the research. Firstly, there has been little change in welfare service delivery that is influenced by neo-liberal ideology, with the social work literature continuing to comment on the difficulties associated with working in this practice landscape (Lymbery, 2012; Marston & McDonald, 2012; Reisch & Jani, 2012; Rogowski, 2012). With little prospect of change on the horizon, it can be expected that social workers will continue to face the challenges that participants in this research identify result from working in the current statutory practice environment.

In the Australian context, new versions of the AASW Code of Ethics and the Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS) were released during the time that this research was being carried out. As previously mentioned, the revised AASW Code of Ethics (2010) saw a collapsing down of the five values listed in the previous Code, to list three key values. Despite considerable changes to the format of the revised Code, there is no additional information that alters the requirement of social workers to deliver on their professional values and ethical requirements whilst at the same time, meet the requirements of their employing organisation. Using the same wording as the 1999 Code of Ethics, section 5.4 (f) of the revised Code requires that social workers will uphold their responsibilities listed in the Code “even though employers’ policies or official orders may not be compatible with its provisions” (AASW, 2010, p. 33). Beyond mentioning the ethics consultation service available to AASW members, there is however little practical guidance in the Code on how to do this or how the AASW might support a social worker who makes the decision to confront instances of ‘incompatibility’. The revised Code of Ethics therefore
continues to require that social workers deliver on the values of social justice, respect for persons and professional integrity and acknowledges that this may at times lead to conflict. Additionally, a new version of the Australian social work education and accreditation standards (ASWEAS) was published in 2012 and like the Code of Ethics, it continues to require social workers to implement the values of the profession and take action against injustice. ASWEAS will be discussed further when addressing implications for education.

As a result of the findings from this research, implications are identified for practice, education and further research. Practice implications relate to social workers undertaking covert activism, the social work professional association and organisations employing social workers. Implications for education relate specifically to Bachelor of Social Work and Masters of Social Work (qualifying) degrees within Australia. Research implications identify suggested areas for future research.

**Implications for practice.**

*Social work activists.* Findings from this research suggest that social workers undertaking covert activism in their workplaces are at risk as a result of the challenges that arise in relation to their covert work. They risk serious ongoing stress as a result of undertaking covert actions that may impact on their ability to continue to practice. They risk their professional reputations should their activities be uncovered. They risk challenges to their belief that they are practicing ethically should their clients experience an unwanted outcome as a result of their covert practice. This final risk would prove highly challenging for this group of social workers, who strongly identify as ethical practitioners. Practicing mostly in isolation, social work covert activists are making decisions that they believe are informed by their professional judgement. Whilst this may be the case, as long as they are unsupported, they place themselves at risk of
making bad judgements that may expose them to serious professional repercussions. Social workers who practice covert activism may benefit from support to assist them in their decision making process, including but not limited to, support from their professional association and support from Unions. As many Australian social workers choose not to be members of their professional association and there is no specific Union for social workers, social work covert activists may also benefit from a more informal professional support group, made up of others practicing in this way. Such a group may assist with building solidarity that may result in both enhanced support for workers practicing in isolation and opportunities to move individual covert challenges to more overt arenas.

Social work professional association. This research has brought to light the existence of a form of contemporary social work practice that it is important for the social work professional association to be aware of. Participants in this study and those in existing research on contemporary statutory practice identify a serious clash between the requirements of their employing organisation and that of their professional associations. This organisational-professional conflict leaves contemporary social workers at risk and a risk, as they seek to navigate through an ideological landscape hostile to their profession. The professional association may wish to consider how best to respond to covert social work practice, with consideration to their Code of Ethics. The Code currently provides guidance on how to manoeuvre through the ethical dilemmas that arise as a result of organisational-professional conflict; however this guidance does not ameliorate the risks arising from this type of conflict. Asking that social workers deliver on the principles of justice whilst at the same time remain loyal to their workplace policies is not always possible and attempts to reconcile this overtly do not always advantage either client or worker. The suggestion to resolve matters
through the ‘appropriate channels’ and raise issues overtly might result in a social worker being bullied or fired and a client’s need being unmet. This leads social workers committed to delivering on the values of the profession at a loss for how to do this. When the current ideology of welfare services runs counter to that of the social work profession, social workers look for guidance from their professional association and currently, do not find it helpful enough. If social workers are required to put the values of the profession above those of the employing organisation, it is suggested that the professional association provide clearer guidelines on the level of support that can be expected for social workers who overtly do so, including specific information on actions undertaken to challenge the range of negative experiences that participants in this study identify result from their overt challenges.

Further, participants in this study spoke of a belief that the non-prescriptive nature of the AASW Code of Ethics, which they identified as providing them with ‘grey areas’, allowed them movement to undertake covert actions in the belief that they were exercising professional judgement. The revised version of the AASW Code of Ethics continues to encourage practitioner’s professional judgement by avoiding being overly prescriptive, which means that social workers may still utilise them to justify their covert work. If the profession feels that the covert actions undertaken by contemporary social workers are not aligned with ethical practice and would not support workers exposed by these practices, than it would be useful to clarify the boundaries of this professional judgement. The professional association would need to understand that any attempts to reduce options for covert activism may have negative consequences, both in terms of loss of social workers from the profession and inability to meet client needs.

Additionally, if the profession wishes to continue to espouse the important role of activism within social work, findings from this study should provide it with more
information on the range of activities being undertaken to deliver on this goal. In light of the findings from this research, the professional association may wish to reconcile whether the values and principles of the profession can be delivered on overtly within the contemporary welfare system that is informed by an ideology at odds with its core mission. If covert work delivers on the values and principles of the profession in such a way that overt work cannot and if the profession remains committed to requiring its members to take action to challenge injustice, finding a means of supporting covert work may be one method of responding to the challenges of working within welfare services influenced by neo-liberal ideology.

Implications for employers. Findings from this research suggest that social work agencies receive both benefits and costs as a result of covert activism. It is suggested that organisations need to understand the ethical requirements of social work practice and the value base that informs its mission. Further, employers would benefit from being aware that social workers may have difficulty delivering on their professional ethical requirements within statutory work environments. Being aware of the professional values of their social work employees may prove useful in identifying potential conflicts between the policies and procedures of the organisation and the requirements of social work practice. Identifying the potential areas for ethical conflict may assist with reducing potential risks that result from covert work, as social workers may feel more able to raise problems openly. In this way, employers could facilitate opportunities to grow an ethical practice environment, where employer and employee can openly discuss and resolve ethical conflict.

Additionally, the provision of good quality supervision for all social work employees would enhance opportunities for practice guidance and employee support, as well as potentially reducing some of the risks associated with covert practice in
isolation. This may be particularly important for new graduate social workers employed in complex environments.

**Implications for education.** This research builds on existing research which finds that the contemporary practice landscape proves challenging for social workers attempting to deliver on the core values and principles of the profession in practice. It would therefore be useful to include discussion and training for social work university students who will encounter these realities once they graduate. Understanding the likely clash between their organisations policies and principles and their professional Code of Ethics will assist social work graduates to make informed decisions about how to navigate through these challenges.

Additionally, providing social work students with skills in activism may assist them to deliver on their professional requirement to challenge inequity and injustice. Activist training could reflect the realities of the contemporary landscape through training social work students in a range of methods that are consistent with the AASW’s requirement to challenge through the ‘appropriate channels’. In addition, the inclusion of specific activist training that seeks to equip students to understand methods of delivering on the values and principles of the profession in organisations that may be inconsistent with these, is highly consistent with the current Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS). This document includes in section 3.1 Attributes of Australian social work graduates, the requirements for graduates to demonstrate ‘the ability to act in accordance with social work knowledge, values and ethics within a human rights framework’ and ‘the ability to work for change to address inequalities at all levels’ (AASW, 2012, pp. 7-8).

Such training could be housed under existing curriculum for subjects that currently teach critical reflective practice, leadership and/or ethics. It is believed that
specific training in how to work with the realities of the clash between the professional value base and welfare organisations that are informed by neo-liberal ideology, will better equip students to navigate through the ethical dilemmas and professional challenges that such clash produces.

Implications for research. At the completion of this research project, gaps in knowledge have emerged, with several suggestions for future research to better understand contemporary social work activism. This research was undertaken with a small sample of social workers and therefore limits what we can assume and know about social work activism. A study with a larger sample size would provide greater opportunities for generating more knowledge on social work covert activism. Further research is needed to gather knowledge on the prevalence of social workers undertaking covert activism. Despite many practitioners informally reporting that they undertake covert activism and also informing that many of their colleagues did too, it was extremely difficult to find participants for this study who were willing to openly discuss their activities. It is therefore thought that covert activism is not a minor activity limited to a small number of practitioners, but may be a much larger component of contemporary practice.

More research is needed on the experience for social workers of working in statutory welfare settings and in particular on how conflict that exists between the directives of the organisation, legislative requirements and social work professional values are navigated. How power functions for both social worker and client within statutory settings also warrants further attention. As no participants were employed in the field of corrections, further research that includes social workers in corrections would assist with exploring covert activism within this highly statutory setting.
Additionally, this research project was limited to statutory practice settings and it is suggested that further research is needed into the existence of covert work within all practice fields. Research with social workers in non-statutory settings would allow for comparison with statutory settings and this might provide useful insight into the differences between statutory and non-statutory work. Such research would need to take into consideration the need to spend a length of time building rapport with participants in an effort to enhance their comfort levels enough to provide access to their professional lives.

Research into how contemporary social workers believe they are overtly delivering on the values of the profession in practice is needed to explore the fit between the professional value base and welfare services influenced by neo-liberal ideology.

Conclusion

This research has told a story about the challenges of trying to do the job of social work within an environment at odds with the value base of the profession. It has identified a range of covert activities that social workers trying to deliver on this value base feel motivated to undertake to embody what they believe is the heart and soul of good social work practice. It has told of the rewards and challenges that result and the ongoing commitment of contemporary activists to continue the fight.

As a result of these findings, what is really being argued here is that the practice landscape has dramatically changed and as a result, delivering on the values of the profession in a welfare system influenced by neo-liberal ideology requires a new and largely undocumented response. Whilst radical social work practice once meant open and organised challenges at a systemic level, simply trying to deliver on the values of the profession in daily practice has led social workers to undertake a new form of
radical action, that of covert work. Whilst no one ever thought the job would be easy, the profession may never have envisioned the significant loss of opportunity to implement its value base overtly in some practice settings. This loss of opportunity has led social workers committed to the belief that good social work is about challenging injustice, to find new means of doing so.

The profession needs to decide how to respond to this. Although significant risks have been identified with covert activism, attempts to curtail it or judge it will have implications for the future of social work practice. The profession has long espoused its pride in its activist past, pointing to the many times social workers have stood up and taken action to challenge injustice. It educates its next generation of social workers to believe in the powerful values of the profession and charges them with the task to deliver these in practice. It should not then be surprised when confronted with a difficulty to do this overtly, they move underground to find new ways of promoting social justice and of enhancing the human rights of their clients.

How the profession responds to this contemporary form of activist practice may necessitate either backing off from the values and principles of the practice in recognition that they are an ill fit in the current landscape, or supporting the ongoing commitment to the role of activism in social work and those that strive to implement it.
### Appendix A

**IFSW Member Countries Codes of Ethics and Practice Standards Relating to Social Justice Activism and Organisational Professional Conflict**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Document</th>
<th>Social Justice Activism Section</th>
<th>Organisational-Professional Conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Social workers have a responsibility to promote social justice, in relation to society generally, and in relation to the people with whom they work. | 4.2.4 Challenging unjust policies and practices  
Social workers have a duty to bring to the attention of their employers, policy makers, politicians and the general public situations where resources are inadequate or where distribution of resources, policies and practices are oppressive, unfair or harmful. |

5. **Professional Conduct**  
Social workers should work to create conditions in employing agencies and in their countries where the principles of this statement and those of their own national
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code of Ethics, 1999</th>
<th>3.2.1 Principles</th>
<th>4.4 Responsibilities in the Workplace</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) (Cont.)</td>
<td><strong>b) Social Workers act to change social structures preserve inequalities and injustice.</strong></td>
<td>d) Social workers should appropriately challenge, and work to improve, policies, procedures, practices and service provisions which:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>c) Social workers meet their responsibilities to society by engaging in action to: promote societal well-being, advocate for equitable distribution of resources; and effect positive social change in the interests of social justice (p. 6)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>• are not in the best interests of clients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Association of Social Workers</td>
<td></td>
<td>• are inequitable</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• are in any way oppressive, disempowering or culturally inappropriate</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• demonstrate unfair discrimination.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>e) When policies or procedures of employing bodies contravene professional standards, social workers should endeavour to effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Association of Social Workers (Cont.)</td>
<td>National Practice Standards, 2003</td>
<td>Section 3: Organisational Development and System Change</td>
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<tr>
<td>g) Social workers will uphold the ethical principles and responsibilities of this Code, even though employers’ policies or official orders may not be compatible with its provisions. Attempts to resolve conflicts between ethical principles and organisational policies and practices should be consistent with the values and principles of this Code (p. 19).</td>
<td></td>
<td>Standard 2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The social work manager acquaints agency management with the Code of Ethics and its implications for social work practice. The agency head is encouraged to recognise the</td>
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<tr>
<td>Australian Association of Social Workers AASW (Cont.)</td>
<td>applied in such a way that inequalities are identified and appropriate action is taken, with the result that social barriers, inequality and injustice are reduced (p. 6). <strong>Standard 2.1</strong> The social work manager encourages the agency to develop policies consistent with the five basic values of social work practice: human dignity and worth, social justice, service to humanity, integrity, and competence (p. 13). <strong>Standard 3.10</strong> The social worker identifies the need for change in wider societal systems and raises this appropriately for consideration and possible action (p. 20).</td>
<td>principles and objectives of the Code and to eliminate workplace factors that prohibit or constrict adherence to its terms (p. 14). <strong>Standard 4.9</strong> The social worker is able to identify circumstances in which policy requirements or directions in their practice context raise social work ethical issues and is able to deal with this appropriately (p. 24).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) (Cont.)</td>
<td><strong>Standard 4.8</strong> The social worker contributes to increasing public awareness of client needs and social justice issues generally and in specific circumstances when they arise (p. 22).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Canadian Association of Social Workers (2005)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Value 2 : Pursuit of Social Justice</strong> Social workers promote social fairness and the equitable distribution of resources, and act to reduce barriers and expand choice for all persons, with special regard for those who are marginalized, disadvantaged, vulnerable, and/or have exceptional needs. Social workers oppose prejudice and discrimination against any person or</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Code of Ethics, 2005a</strong></td>
<td><strong>Value 4 : Integrity in Professional Practice</strong> An essential element of integrity in professional practice is ethical accountability based on this <em>Code of Ethics</em>, the IFSW <em>International Declaration of Ethical Principles of Social Work</em>, and other relevant provincial/territorial standards and guidelines. Where conflicts exist with respect to these sources of ethical guidance, social workers are encouraged to seek advice, including consultation with their</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Guidelines for Ethical Practice, 2005b</strong></td>
<td>group of persons, on any grounds, and specifically challenge views and actions that stereotype particular persons or groups (p. 5).</td>
<td>regulatory body (p. 6).</td>
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</table>

**Ethical Responsibilities to the Workplace**

4.1.4 Social workers appropriately challenge and work to improve policies, procedures, practices and service provisions that
- are not in the best interests of clients;
- are inequitable;
- are in any way oppressive, disempowering or culturally inappropriate; and demonstrate discrimination.

4.1.5 When policies or procedures of employing bodies contravene professional standards, social workers endeavour to effect
| Canadian Association of Social Workers (Cont.) | change through consultation using appropriate and established organizational channels.  
4.1.6 Social workers take all reasonable steps to ensure that employers are aware of their professional ethical obligations and advocate for conditions and policies that reflect ethical professional practices.  
4.1.7 Social workers take all reasonable steps to uphold their ethical values, principles and responsibilities even though employers' policies or official orders may not be compatible with its provisions (p.16). |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers</th>
<th>Code of Ethics, 2007a</th>
<th>Core Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Members are committed to: action for social change that is necessary to achieve social justice (p. 5).</td>
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</table>

4.2 Social Justice
Working in solidarity - Social workers have an obligation to challenge social conditions that contribute to social exclusion, stigmatisation or subjugation, and to work towards an inclusive society.

Challenging unjust policies and practices – Social workers have a duty to bring to the attention of their employers, policy makers, politicians and the general public situations where resources are

4.4 Responsibilities to Agencies and Organisations
Employer understanding and adoption of the requirements of ethical practice for social work is monitored by members, who also require the inclusion of the standards of ethical practice in the terms of their employment and the expectations of their employers.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (Cont.)</th>
<th>Practice Standards, 2007b</th>
<th>inadequate or where distribution of resources, policies and practices are oppressive, unfair or harmful (p. 17).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9. The social worker constantly works to make the organisations and systems, which are part of the social work effort, responsive to the needs of those who use them. This standard is met when the social worker:</td>
<td></td>
<td>• acts to eliminate discriminatory practices advocates effectively as an individual and as a team member</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• participates in change strategies</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• contributes to policy-making through personal agency and ANZASW processes</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• understands the conflict of interest</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (Cont.)</td>
<td>Principles of Social Work Practice</td>
<td>Preamble</td>
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<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>inherent in actions which challenge agency/government policies (p. 4).</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Principles of Social Work Practice</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social workers will advocate with and on behalf of those whom society excludes and in doing so should engage with service users and facilitate them in contributing their views to such developments. In addition, social workers should use their professional association as a forum for critical debate and dialogue with other professional agencies, the government and the</td>
<td>Because social work often operates on the edge of the individual’s normal social functioning, or the limits that social systems can tolerate, there can be a tension between the social control, social care, social justice and this social change functions of social work. This tension may be resolved by consideration of what is right or wrong; what is good or bad; or the impact on the individual’s happiness—all as determined by the service user, or by reference to a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Irish Association of Social Workers (Cont.)

| public at large, to advocate for and to promote positive social change. | professional standard. Difficulties in resolving this tension may arise where a social worker has to balance the rights and needs of the service user, the sometimes contradictory rights and needs of others, the rights and duties owed to colleagues and other professionals and the limited resources available. However, any decision made must be respectful of a service user’s overriding right to know and challenge the basis on which the decision was made. Members will not: Prioritise the interests of an agency or an employer to the detriment of those who use social work services; (p. 2). |
| National Association of Social Workers (USA) | Code of Ethics, 2008 | Ethical Principle: Social workers challenge social injustice. Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people (p. 7).  
6.04 Social and Political Action  
(a) Social workers should engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully. Social workers should be aware of the impact of the  
3.09 Commitments to Employers  
(d) Social workers should not allow an employing organization's policies, procedures, regulations, or administrative orders to interfere with their ethical practice of social work. Social workers should take reasonable steps to ensure that their employing organizations' practices are consistent with the NASW Code of Ethics (p.19). |
| National Association of Social Workers (USA) (Cont.) | Standards for Health Care Social Work in Social Work Practice, 2005 | political arena on practice and should advocate for changes in policy and legislation to improve social conditions in order to meet basic human needs and promote social justice (p. 23-24). **Standard 9 : Empowerment and Advocacy** Social workers have a special responsibility to advocate for the needs of the disenfranchised or the most vulnerable of the population at both the micro and macro levels. Social workers will identify barriers to services and actively seek to resolve them (p. 24). |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------|
|                                   | (Social) Justice is another code word for social work (p. 9). |                        | The social work professional is required to act to rectify violations caused by methods of work, by colleagues or by clients. Other demands on loyalty are subordinate to this requirement (p.13). |

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<td></td>
<td>They pursue social change particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. These efforts are primarily focused on issues of social injustices like poverty, unemployment, and discrimination. Social workers aim increasing level of awareness and sensitiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td>c. Have to make institutions conscious about ethic principles and standards and perform their applications according to the requirements.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>d. Have to take first steps to put an end to applications where ethic principles and standards are not followed.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| **Association of Social Workers in Turkey (2005)** (Cont.) | related to social problems and work for pursuing effective participation into decision-making processes. | **6.04 Social and Political Action**

b. Have to act for creation of chances and providing choices to all human beings, including sensitive, disadvantaged, under pressure groups. |

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| **Union of Social Workers in Israel (2007)** | **Code of Professional Ethics, 2007** (English version) | **B. Conduct by Virtue of Social Responsibility**

The social worker is committed to act to advance the welfare of society so as to reduce situations of discrimination based on innate or developmental data as much as possible, and opportunities, access |

**D. Relationships with Employers**

The social worker shall conduct himself in his work with integrity and loyalty. He shall work and guide only in a place that operates according to the Rules of Professional Ethics, and shall act to change and warn when this is not so. He must act to improve the work methods of the organization, with |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Union of Social Workers in Israel (2007)</strong> (Cont.)</th>
<th>to resources and to services, and the ability of choice of all of the details shall be expanded, particularly (for) the weak and the deprived among them.</th>
<th>respect and consideration of the clients.</th>
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<tr>
<th><strong>The Union of Social Educators and Social Workers Russia (2003)</strong></th>
<th><strong>The Ethical Guideline of Social Educator and Social Worker, 2003</strong> (English version)</th>
<th><strong>3.2. Social justice and humanism</strong> Social justice and humanism are values of social and social - pedagogical work. <em>Social workers and social educators:</em> c) conduct active work improving the activity of social institutes, political structures, certain political leaders and local heads with the purpose of elimination of</th>
<th>No explicit reference</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Union of Social Educators and Social Workers Russia (2003) (Cont.)</td>
<td></td>
<td>infringements of civil, political, economic, social and cultural human rights</td>
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<tr>
<td>Singapore Association of Social Worker Singapore Association of Social Worker (2004)</td>
<td>Code of Ethics, 2004</td>
<td>Preamble Social work is dedicated to the enhancement of the lives of human beings through the provision and development of appropriate services and through the promotion of social planning and action.</td>
<td>No explicit reference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Association of Social Workers</td>
<td>Code of Ethics, 2004</td>
<td>3.2 Social Justice a) Bring to the attention of those in power and the general public, and 4.3 Responsibilities in the workplace d) Appropriately challenge, and work to improve, policies, procedures, practices and</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>British Association of Social Workers (Cont.)</td>
<td>where appropriate challenge ways in which the policies or activities of government, organisations or society create or contribute to structural disadvantage, hardship and suffering, or militate against their relief;</td>
<td>service provisions which: Are not in the best interests of service users; Are inequitable or unfairly discriminatory; or are oppressive, disempowering, or culturally inappropriate; g) Uphold the ethical principles and responsibilities of this Code, even though employers' policies or instructions may not be compatible with its provisions, observing the values and principles of this Code when attempting to resolve conflicts between ethical principles and organisational policies and principles.</td>
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### Appendix B

**Australian Psychology, Nursing and Counselling Codes of Ethics Relating to Social Justice**

**Activism and Organisational Professional Conflict**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Document</th>
<th>Social Justice Activism Section</th>
<th>Organisational-Professional Conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA)</td>
<td>Ethical Guidelines, 2001</td>
<td>No explicit reference</td>
<td>No explicit reference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Counselling Association (ACA)</td>
<td>Code of Conduct, 2002</td>
<td>No explicit reference</td>
<td>2.1.5.3 Responsibility to Colleagues and Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council (ANMC)</td>
<td>Code of Ethics for Nurses, 2008a</td>
<td>Value Statement 1 : Nurses value quality nursing care for all people 4. Nurses, individually and collectively,</td>
<td>No explicit reference</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council (Cont.)

Code of Professional Conduct for Nurses, 2008b

encourage professional and public participation in shaping social policies and institutions; advocate for policies and legislation that promote social justice, improved social conditions and a fair sharing of community resources;

Conduct Statement 2

3. Nurses’ primary responsibility is to provide safe and competent nursing care. Any circumstance that may compromise professional standards, or any observation of questionable, unethical or unlawful practice, should be made known to an appropriate person or authority. If the concern is not resolved and
Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council (Cont.)

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<td>B.12.1. Where the demands of an organisation require psychologists to violate the general principles, values or standards set out in this Code, psychologists:</td>
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<td>(a) clarify the nature of the conflict between the demands</td>
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Australian Psychological Society (APS) (Cont.)

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<tr>
<td>and these principles and standards;</td>
<td>(b) inform all parties of their ethical responsibilities as psychologists;</td>
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<tr>
<td>(b) inform all parties of their ethical responsibilities as psychologists;</td>
<td>(c) seek a constructive resolution of the conflict that upholds the principles of the Code; and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) seek a constructive resolution of the conflict that upholds the principles of the Code; and</td>
<td>(d) consult a senior psychologist (p. 24).</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Appendix C

Information Sheet and Consent Form

RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET

Research Topic: Social Work Activism:

Resistance from the Frontier

Senior Investigator: Associate Professor Donna McAuliffe

School of Human Services and Social Work

Griffith University, Logan Campus

Student Investigator: Lyndal Greenslade

PhD Candidate

School of Human Services and Social Work

Griffith University, Logan Campus

Contact: s2699671@student.griffith.edu.au

(07) 3382 1070

Why is the research being conducted?

This research aims to explore the experiences of Australian social workers employed in welfare organisations, in relation to conflict that may occur between the social work professional Code of Ethics and the policies and procedures of the employing organisation. Although there is significant discussion in social work professional literature regarding the existence of professional/organisational conflict, there is a lack of empirical knowledge about how social workers challenge conflict between their professional Code of Ethics and policies and procedures of their employing organisation. Recent empirical research has found the existence of ‘covert workplace resistance’ strategies as a method of responding to professional/organisational conflict. These strategies are conducted by the social work employee to maximise client outcomes, without the knowledge of their employer and may include a range of actions that are incongruent with the employing organisation’s policies and procedures. In undertaking these covert resistance strategies, the social work employee is aware that such actions do not comply strictly with their
employing organisation’s policies and procedures. Examples of covert workplace resistance strategies identified in recent research include:

- Acting in opposition to organisational directives
- Looking the other way when client's did not comply with directives
- ‘Creatively’ filling out forms
- Being 'flexible' with rules and laws
- Turning a blind eye' when workers evaded directives from management
- Case by case 'rule bending'

The aim of this research is to gain insight into the behaviours and experiences of Australian social workers employed in welfare organisations, identifying their motivations and means of resistance to procedures and policies that may be incongruent with professional social work ethics. Additionally, this project aims to provide insight into organisational-professional conflict within practice environments and identify potential strategies for achieving greater congruence between social work professional ethics and practice realities.

Finally, this project aims to inform current discussions on the relevance of activist practice methods in challenging contemporary welfare practice and the role of Australian social workers as agents of change.

This research is being conducted as part of the Doctor of Philosophy program of study undertaken by Lyndal Greenslade.

The basis by which participants will be selected or screened

I am looking for Australian social workers who meet the following criteria:

- Eligibility for membership of the Australian Association of Social Workers;
- Current or recent past (maximum 2 years) employment in an Australian welfare organisation, or government or non-government department;
- Have experienced conflict in their place of employment between the requirements outlined in the AASW Code of Ethics and Practice Standards documents and the policies and procedures of the employing organisation;
• Having experienced professional/organisational conflict, have undertaken actions to promote client outcomes that are incongruent with the policies and procedures of their employing organisation, with such actions being unknown to the employer at the time of their undertaking, and are prepared and able to recount and reflect on such actions in detail;

• Have access to password protected Email via a computer not affiliated with or located in a place of employment.

**What you will be asked to do**

You will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview process, which will involve one-to-one dialogue with myself via Email over a four week period. This method is known as Email Facilitated Reflective Dialogue. Guided by a series of questions to assist your account of the experience, you will be asked to describe and reflect on your experiences of utilising covert workplace resistance strategies in the workplace. You will self-determine the length and number of your responses and the style of your dialogue during your 4 week interview process. I will then transfer the data transcripts from Email to a Qualitative Data Analysis package where the dialogue will be coded and analysed.

**Your confidentiality**

As a participant in this study, your identity will be protected in the following ways:

• Demographic information about you (name and age), your field of practice and the name and location of your employing organisation will not be specifically listed nor stored in any form at any time during or after the research process;

• All direct quotes used in publications will be de-identified, with consent to use such quotes sought from you;

• No files regarding this research will be stored on shared computers, and all data stored on the Griffith Email system will be password protected;

• After being printed out in non-identifiable form, all computer files will be permanently deleted from my university Email account at the completion of the research, and you will be advised when this occurs;
All interview dialogues will be conducted via a secure Internet connection between my Griffith University student Email account and an Email account of your choosing, both of which will require password protection.

There are limits to confidentiality. Should it become apparent to me that you or any third party is at risk of harm, confidentiality will be broken. For the purposes of this research, harm is defined as any action that has the potential to result in physical or psychological danger, hurt or injury to the participant or any third party. You may disclose information of criminal activity. Unless such activity meets the abovementioned criteria for potential or actual harm to a third party, I will not breach confidentiality to disclose information of criminal activity. Decisions relating to this matter are based on information presented in the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Manual, which informs that researchers in Queensland are generally not legally obligated to disclose criminal activity.

The information collected is confidential and will not be disclosed to any third parties without your consent, except to meet government, legal or other regulatory authority requirements. A de-identified copy of this data may be used for other research purposes. However, your anonymity will at all times be safeguarded. For further information consult the Universities Privacy Plan at http://www.griffith.edu.au/about-griffith/plans-publications/griffith-university-privacy-plan or telephone (07) 3735 5585.

Your participation is voluntary
Your participation in this research project is voluntary by virtue of your expression of interest to be involved. Up until the stage of analysis of data and write up of participant report and thesis, there will be no consequences if you choose not to participate, or to withdraw your participation. Should you begin participation and then withdraw, you will be guaranteed that the data provided and your identifying information will be securely destroyed, and you will be notified when this has occurred.

The expected benefits of the research
Your participation has a range of potential benefits including:

- The opportunity to contribute insight into conflict that social workers experience due to incongruence between professional and organisational demands;
- The potential for these insights to influence change to policies and/or procedures, both within the ethical documents of the AASW and those of employing organisations;
- Publication of results may generate awareness of the experience of working within contemporary welfare organisations and may provide the AASW with insight into the nature of such work and potentially result in increased support for social workers employed in such organisations;
- The opportunity for you to share and reflect on your experiences may prove personally and professionally empowering;
- The awareness that you are part of a group of Australian social workers who have undertaken resistant strategies to challenge organisational/professional conflict may afford you a feeling of solidarity with fellow social work practitioners who have undertaken similar actions.

**Risks to you**

A range of potential risks have been identified for this research project, and include:

- Reflecting on past actions taken, may result in you assessing that your actions were ethically or legally inappropriate. In such a case, you may feel professionally obligated to disclose ethical or legal breaches to the appropriate bodies, which may result in a loss of professional reputation and potential legal recourse;
- Should you share information that alerts me to potential or actual harm of a third party, confidentiality may not be able to be maintained. For this reason, it is important that you read the limits of confidentiality outlined in the following section carefully;
- Reflecting on your past experiences may prove psychologically and/or emotionally distressing, should these experiences have intense emotional resonance. You will have the opportunity to explore this potential risk during the preliminary interview, conducted via email with the researcher, prior to consenting to participate in this study.

Should you experience psychological and/or emotional distress at any point during the research process,
you are encouraged to discuss this with me. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time during the research process.

**Questions / further information**

Should you have any further questions or need further information regarding the research project and/or your participation, please contact me via Email on s2699671@student.griffith.edu.au

**The ethical conduct of this research**

This study has been cleared by one of the human ethics committees of Griffith University in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council’s guidelines. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the research project you should contact the Manager, Research Ethics on (07) 3735 5585 or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au.

**Feedback to you**

At the conclusion of the data collection period of this research project, a brief 1/2 page synopsis of your contribution will be provided in a project summary report for participants. A brief summary of themes and recommendations emerging from the research will also be provided in this report. This report will be sent via Email at the completion of the project, only if you consent to receive it. The results will also be included in a thesis, submitted to examiners. Results will also be disseminated in submissions for publication in academic journals, presented at conferences and workshops, to relevant regulation stakeholders and bodies, and used in student and practitioner training. No identifying information will be included in any data used in the dissemination of research results. You will have the opportunity to provide feedback about the accuracy of your contributions, and the overall results reported to you in the report to participants.
Social Work Activism: Resistance from the Frontier

CONSENT FORM

Research Team: Senior Investigator:

Donna McAuliffe (Associate Professor) BSW PhD

School of Human Services and Social Work

Griffith University, Logan Campus

Ph: (07) 7 3382 1070

Email: d.mcauliffe@griffith.edu.au

Student Investigator:

Lyndal Greenslade BSW (Honours), Grad. Dip Prof. Counselling, BA

PhD Candidate

School of Human Services and Social Work

Griffith University, Logan Campus

Email: s2699671@student.griffith.edu.au
By signing below, I confirm that I have read and understood the information package and in particular have noted that:

a) I understand that my involvement in this research will include participation in a one-to-one interview dialogue between the researcher and myself via Email for an agreed period of time;

b) I have had any questions answered to my satisfaction;

c) I understand the risks involved;

d) I understand that there will be no direct benefit to me from my participation in this research;

e) I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary;

f) I understand that if I have any additional questions I can contact the research team;

g) I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time, without comment or penalty;

h) I understand that I can contact the Manager, Research Ethics, at Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee on (07) 3735 5585 (or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au) if I have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the project; and

i) I agree to participate in the project.

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<th>Name</th>
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Appendix D
Guiding Interview Questions

1. How do social work practitioners utilise covert resistant strategies within statutory welfare organisations to challenge organisational-professional conflict?

DESCRIBE WHAT

a) What covert resistant actions did you undertake?
b) What sources of information informed your choice of actions?
c) What personal and professional values and beliefs informed your choice of actions?
d) How useful were these sources in assisting you to make decisions on your actions?
e) What information that doesn’t already exist would have been useful in assisting you to make a decision regarding your actions?
f) What people were influential in your choice of actions?
g) Were their actions that you would not undertake?
h) Prior to acting, were you aware of the potential consequences of undertaking covert resistant action?

DESCRIBE HOW

a) How did you plan and implement your actions?
b) What other parties were aware of your actions?
c) What other parties were not aware of your actions?

DESCRIBE WHY

a) What situations motivated you to act?
b) What particular policies/procedures of the employing organisation were involved in your decision to act?
c) Why utilise covert rather than overt resistance?
d) Did you attempt other forms of resistance/challenge prior to undertaking covert resistance?
e) Whose interests were you primarily concerned with?

f) Why did you choose the particular actions that you did?

g) Why did you decide to tell/not tell others about your actions?

DESCRIBE WHEN

a) How long had you been employed prior to acting?

b) What position did you hold in the organisation and do you believe this impacted on your decisions to act?

DESCRIBE OUTCOME

a) What was the result of your actions?

b) Did the result meet your expectations?

2. What is the experience of utilising covert resistant strategies within statutory welfare organisations for social work practitioners?

DESCRIBE BENEFITS

a) Can you identify any benefits for yourself that arose in relation to your actions?

b) Can you identify any benefits for your client(s) that arose in relation to your actions?

c) Can you identify any benefits for your employer that arose in relation to your actions?

d) Can you identify any benefits for your profession that arose in relation to your actions?

e) Can you identify any benefits for society that arose in relation to your actions?

DESCRIBE COSTS

a) Can you identify any costs for yourself that arose in relation to your actions?

b) Can you identify any costs for your client(s) that arose in relation to your actions?

c) Can you identify any costs for your employer that arose in relation to your actions?

d) Can you identify any costs for your profession that arose in relation to your actions?

e) Can you identify any costs for society that arose in relation to your actions?
DESCRIBE THE OVERALL IMPACT OF THE EXPERIENCE

a) Would you undertake the same action in similar circumstances again?

b) Do you plan to remain employed within a statutory welfare organisation?

3. How do social work practitioners utilising covert resistant strategies within statutory welfare organisations define their professional identity?

DESCRIBE WHO

a) What personal values and beliefs inform your practice?

b) What professional values inform your practice?

c) What information/documents/people/ideas inform your practice?

d) What do you believe the role of social work within your employing organisation should be?

e) What is the current role of social work within your employing organisation?

f) What factors contributed to your decision to choose to work in your current workplace?
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