Declaration of Originality

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

All research procedures reported in the thesis were approved by the University of Tasmania’s Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee.

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Sonya Stanford

1st November 2007
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Sonya Stanford

1st November 2007
Acknowledgements

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

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Abstract

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

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