Social Work Activism: Resistance at the frontier

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Abstract

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. This study explored 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 study found that participants undertook a range of covert activities that resulted in both challenges and rewards and that their personal and professional identities informed their covert practices. Findings from this research inform 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.

Keywords

Activism, covert, radical, neo-liberal, ethics, code of ethics

Previous Research

When social and economic systems disadvantage individuals and groups, social workers have historically been amongst those who protest. The social work profession has a long history of supporting activism. This is evidenced by the inclusion of statements in the Codes of Ethics of member countries of the International Federation of Social Workers,
which require the social worker to “act to change”, “promote”, “challenge injustice” and “engage in action” (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2010; British Association of Social Workers [BASW], 2012; Canadian Association of Social Workers [CASW], 2005; National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2008; Swedish Association of Social Workers [SSR], 2006; Union of Social Workers Israel [USWI], 2007). In contrast to other allied health professions in Australia, the ethical documents of social work professional associations explicitly state that social justice activism is a requirement of professional practice (Australian Counselling Association [ACA], 2012; Australian Community Workers Association [ACWA], 2013; Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia [NMBA], 2008; Australian Psychological Society [APS], 2007; Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia [PACFA], 2011).

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, 2009; Allan, Briskman, & Pease, 2009; Bailey & Brake, 1975; Fook, 1993; Ife, 2001; Langan & Lee, 1989). Despite support in the social work literature for the important role of activism in the profession, there is a limited amount of research exploring activism and what does exist conceptualises activism as a form of macro practice. These studies identify a range of macro activist strategies that include political participation, engaging in critical discussions, advocating for client groups, collaborating with others and joining existing
issue groups (Chui & Gray, 2004; Dietz Domanski, 1998; Gray, Collett van Rooyen, Rennie & Gaha, 2002; Reeser & Epstein, 1987).

These studies of social workers who identify as activist reported 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 (Andrew & Reisch, 2002; Wagner, 1989). 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 (Andrew & Reisch, 2002).

Both discourse and empirical research have established that social work practice within contemporary welfare organisations provides ample opportunity for organisational-professional conflict, with findings suggesting that conflict is more prevalent in statutory practice environments (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Balloch, Pahl & McLean, 1998; Banks, 1995; Bell, 1999; Collins, 2008; Dominelli & Hoogvelt, 1996; Ferguson & Lavalette, 2006; Fook, Ryan & Hawkins, 2000; Hough, 2003; Jones, 2001; Jones & Novak, 1993; Jordan, 2004; Lonne, McDonald & Fox, 2004; McAuliffe, 2005; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009; Postle, 2001; Reeser, 1996). Empirical research has reported on a range of situations that cause 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, the domination of evidenced based practice, loss of client time and increased paperwork (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Bell, 1999; Healy, 2002; Jones, 1993; McDonald, Postle & Dawson, 2008; McDonald & Marston, 2006; Postle, 2001). As a result, findings from several studies attested to the rise in ethical dilemmas, as social workers attempt to implement their professional values in environments that are
incongruent with these values and increasingly hostile (Abramovitz, 2005; Banks & Williams, 2005; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009).

The ethical documents of IFSW member countries provide guidance on navigating organisational-professional conflict, with six countries explicitly stating that professional ethics takes precedence over employers’ policies and procedures (AASW, 2010; BASW, 2012; CASW, 2005; NASW, 2008; SSR, 2006; USW, 2007). The existing research provides insight into the existence of organisational-professional conflict, but little is known on how social workers manage to deliver on their professional ethical responsibilities and meet the requirements of their employer’s policies and procedures when the two are in conflict.

The negative impacts on social workers of working in contemporary welfare organisations are serious and concerning, with several studies identifying the existence of severe stress, emotional exhaustion, impaired mental health, frustration, depression, insomnia, withdrawal, anger and despair (Gibbs, 2001; Huxley, Evans, Gately, Webber, Mears, Pajak & Katona, 2005; Jones, 2001; McAuliffe, 2005, Postle, 2001; Regehr, Chau, Leslie & Howe, 2002). One large study found that social workers employed in statutory social service settings experience more stress than workers in other parts of the health and welfare services (Baloch 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 existing research establishes that when confronted with organisational-professional conflict, social workers respond by staying and ‘coping’ or ‘breaking down’ and leaving, with many voicing the intention of finding alternative work (Drake
& Yadama, 1996; Gibbs, 2001; Huxley et al., 2005; Jones, 2001; Pockett, 2003; 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 identify 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 resist when faced with organisational-professional conflict identify 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; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009).

None of these studies explore 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 informs on the growth of informal forms of workplace resistance, reporting that opportunities for more overt traditional notions of resistance have been shut down or limited by neo-liberal systems of management (Clarke, 2004; Thomas & Davies, 2005). 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 establishes that social work activism is a requirement of professional ethical practice, that contemporary welfare organisations create a range of organisational-professional ethical conflicts, that social workers are reluctant to openly challenge their employers in relation to these conflicts and as a result may be utilising 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 Australian research exists which explicitly explores the experience for social work practitioners utilising informal workplace resistance as a form of professional activism.

**The time is ripe**

The professional literature contains reports of a re-imagining of the radical roots of the profession to explore new opportunities for subverting the dominant practice landscape (Ferguson & Woodward, 2009; Lavalette, 2011; Lavalette & Ferguson, 2007). Research into contemporary social work activism within micro practice 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. Knowledge on covert workplace resistance 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.
The current study

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. 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 asked the primary research question of: What are the experiences of Australian statutory social workers regarding the types of covert activism they practice, and their reasons for doing so?

Method

Research Design

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 was needed. The participants’ 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 took 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.
This research utilised critical theory, feminist research and critical reflective practice to 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.

**Sampling and Participants**

Participants were sourced using purposive and snowball sampling methods. In an effort to reach as wide a national sample as possible, recruitment involved advertisement in key AASW documents and targeted emails to senior social work staff employed within statutory welfare organisations identified as appropriate for this research. From a total of 88 emails sent, 32 people requested to receive the Information Sheet and Consent Form, with 15 participants making the decision to participate.

The 15 participants were 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. The original intent had been to include demographic information including age, years of social work experience, the identification of field of practice of each participant 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. Participants did not wish to have their individual 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 Collection

Semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted over a six month period via the method of Email Facilitated Reflective Dialogue (EFRD). 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, Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2006; Gilzean, 2011; Houston, 2008; Ison, 2009; Kazmer, 2007; King & Horrocks, 2010; Klenke, 2008; Leach, Cornwell, Fleming & Haines, 2010; McAuliffe, 2003; McCoyd, 2006; Novick, 2008; Parker, 2008; Price, Richardson & Jelfs, 2007). Interviews were conducted via email and potential participants were asked if they had access to and were comfortable with email communication over the Internet. This method proved both successful in reaching a depth in the data and affording participants a rich and rewarding research process. In addition, two face-to-face interviews were conducted with participants who found it difficult to engage with the email process.

Data was analysed both manually and with the aid of the Nvivo computer programme.

Findings and Discussion

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 is consistent 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. One participant shared that:

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’. (Janet)

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. A participant informed that:
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. (June)

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; Reesor & Epstein, 1987). Covert actions undertaken included small instances of rule bending to actions that break the law (Table 1).
Table 1

*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>

One participant 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. (Maureen)

Another participant 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. (Imre)

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. A participant 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” (Megan). 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. One participant 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, she 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. Another participant described a situation where she had not reported a client using drugs even though she was legally required to do so. She 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 (Susan).
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 participants identified these actions as part of their covert activism 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 (Table 2).

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<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>

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. One participant 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. (Erin)
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 questioned 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 (Table 3).

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tactic</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<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>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One participant 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 (Megan). Another participant enjoyed opportunities to “be covert together”, stating that, “I feel like I’m in a rogue cluster (Phoebe). And that’s one of the exciting things about my workplace now, we have really dynamic conversations about things. So exciting”. Other participants chose to work
independently. These participants practiced covertly in silence, taking measures to ensure that their actions were not discovered by colleagues. One participant informed they worked “in silence, so as little as possible is known about my work” (June).

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 (Table 4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Impact</th>
<th>Type of Impact</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<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>

**Table 4**

*Challenges and Rewards Resulting from Covert Activism*
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). One participant 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!

(Abby)

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 identify any actual 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 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. Participants shared a value base centred on justice, a belief in humanity, integrity, bravery, valuing diversity and compassion.

Professionally, participants identities were categorised into six identity types; critical reflective practitioner, ethical practitioner, client centred practitioner, structural social work, human rights social worker and radical social worker (Table 5).

Participant’s identities occupied several categories at the same time. Professional values held by this group centred around the values espoused by the previous version of the AASW Code of Ethics (1999), which was the code at the time this research was conducted; social justice, human dignity and worth, integrity, competence and service to humanity.

Table 5

*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>

A high level of congruence was 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 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. One participant “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 (Megan). Another participant 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)” (Abby). 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.
Findings relating to the identity of participants have been further developed into a typology of contemporary social work activism (Table 6). This typology expands 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 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Activist</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<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>
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.

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.

**Conclusion**

This research 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 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 told of the rewards and challenges that resulted and the ongoing commitment of contemporary activists to continue the fight.

As a result of these findings, what is being argued 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.
References


Baines, D. (2010). ‘If we don’t get back to where we were before’: Working in the restructured non-profit social services. *British Journal of Social Work, 40*(3), 928-945. doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcn176


