Activist Social Workers in Neoliberal Times:

Who are We Becoming Now?

By

Kristin Smith

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Sociology and Equity Studies
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto

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Abstract

My thesis explores the knowledge, subjectivities and work performances that activist social workers bring to their practice in Ontario, Canada during a period of workplace restructuring that includes cuts to services, work intensification, increased surveillance and the evolving discourses of neoliberalism. A key aspect of my dissertation is the exploration of tensions between the attachments, desires and aspirations of the activist social work self and what that self must do every day to get by. I am interested in how it is that social workers produce and maintain their sense of identities – their integrity, ethics and responsibilities as activists – while also managing to navigate the contradictions of restructured workplaces. My aim is to understand not how power in the form of restructuring policies is imposed on people, but rather, how power acts through subjects who find themselves both implicated in, and struggling to resist neoliberal restructuring. My research lens draws on Michel Foucault’s ideas about governmentality and on feminist poststructural, critical race, and postcolonial theories. I use these theories to see neoliberal strategies of rule as working in diffuse ways through social and health service workplaces, encouraging service providers to see themselves as individualized and active subjects responsible for particular performances that enact specific types of change. My research findings reveal that activist social workers respond to neoliberal
strategies of rule in multiple ways while constituting themselves through a variety of competing discourses that exist in their lives. Social workers subjectivities appear to be produced through a range of discourses drawn from their family histories, unique biographies and the intersections of socially produced distinctions that are based on gender, race, class, sexuality, age and nationalism. My dissertation traces some of the many ways that social workers position themselves within and beyond the changing context of neoliberalism. In doing so, my research reveals tentative pathways for building critical resistance practices and suggests future social welfare measures that are based on social justice and equity.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Our identities are never discovered. They are always constituted, constructed, invented, imagined, imposed, projected, suffered, and celebrated. Identities are never univocal, stable or innocent. They are always an accomplishment and a ceaseless project. For this reason, in the process of constituting them and negotiating them, we discover that we were like we never imagined ourselves to have been. And simultaneously, we discover that we have become or are now something that has little resemblance to what we thought we were. In this play between what we were but did not know we were, and what we have become, and perhaps are reluctant to face, enters another factor: namely, how we get a glimpse or take a glance at that identity that was and that we have become.

Eduardo Mendieta (2003, p. 407)

1.1 Introduction
I wrote this thesis because I am interested in how it is that activist social workers produce and maintain their sense of identities, their integrity, ethics, and responsibilities as activists, while also managing to navigate the contradictions of restructured workplaces. My aim has been to understand not how power in the form of restructuring policies is imposed on people, but rather, how power acts through subjects who find themselves both implicated in, and struggling to resist, neoliberal restructuring.

My interest in social workers’ responses to neoliberal restructuring developed over eighteen years of work experience in social and health services in southern Ontario. In earlier research, I investigated for possibilities of “resistance” by front-line workers who were troubled by the erosion of social programs during the 1990s. I found that social workers’ stories revealed a puzzling mix of accommodation practices and hidden oppositional activities (Smith, 2003, 2007). Developments in Marxist theory helped to explain the presence of worker agency in the face of structural barriers in the workplace (Edwards, 1979; Hodson, 1995). Labour process theory offered more complex accounts for the ways that workers’
subjectivities could shape their oppositional practices (Jermier, Knights & Nord, 1994; Knights & McCabe, 2000). However, I was left with questions about the contradictions found in social workers’ practices within these changing contexts. Why is it that social workers can, at times, deploy creative and innovative tactics to bypass and undermine oppressive policies? Yet these same “resisters” will simultaneously engage in practices that seem highly compliant, obedient, and sometimes even contrary to the needs of service users and their own interests as workers. I am curious about how to make better sense of social workers’ accounts especially when tensions exist between what they imagine themselves to be and what they have to do in order to hold onto their jobs. My sense is that understanding the many ways social workers are living and handling these tensions is key to understanding neoliberal subject formation in the context of restructured services.

As I began to share my earlier research, I noticed that many activist social workers, especially students, were drawn to the findings that revived resistance. It seemed that this particular aspect of my research resurrected an important image for those who harboured strong desires to confront government cuts. Over time, I came to highlight this image in my findings: the “activist hero” who could, even under highly constraining conditions, find ways to “fight back” and “protect” the gains of the welfare state. Admittedly, the positive reactions to these popular images prompted feelings of excitement and pleasure for me as a new researcher. Yet, from a methodological point of view, I was troubled by the ease with which the inconsistencies in social workers’ lives were being ironed out of my findings. Over time, my research dilemma turned into a desire to tell a different story about activist social workers struggling in neoliberal contexts. As a result, I have set out to explore the knowledge, subjectivities and work performances that activist social workers bring to their practice during a period of workplace restructuring that includes cuts to services, work intensification, increased surveillance and the evolving discourses of neoliberalism. The focus of my investigation is the tensions that exist between the attachments, desires and aspirations of the activist social work self and what that self must do every day to get by.

My current research lens draws on Michel Foucault’s ideas about governmentality, and on feminist poststructural, critical race, and postcolonial theories. I use these theories in order to see neoliberal strategies of rule as working in diffuse ways through social and health service workplaces, encouraging service providers to see themselves as individualized and active subjects responsible for particular performances that enact specific types of change. My
research findings reveal that activist social workers respond to neoliberal strategies of rule in multiple ways while constituting themselves through a variety of competing discourses that exist in their lives. For example, I am able to analyse how social workers come to constitute themselves as subjects of transformative change through the power of important emotional attachments found in their social biographies. I also take up how their constitution as helpers within the context of neoliberal restructuring can intersect with their mourning over the lost potential of Canadian social welfare to address social inequities. In other instances, I examine how past performances of “dirty social work” prompt social workers to embrace new discourses of prevention and downplay evidence that their practices continue to be tainted with the narrow confines of prior service models. My research traces how it is that contemporary Canadian social workers are constituted through the “persistent slippage” (Park & Kemp, 2006, p. 729) between their progressive good intentions and practices that are mired in contradictions. As these examples convey, my dissertation highlights some of the many ways that social workers position themselves within and beyond the changing context of neoliberalism. In doing so, my research reveals tentative pathways for building critical resistance and suggests future social welfare measures based on social justice and equity.

1.2 Activist Social Workers
The term “activist social worker” refers to those within the profession who would describe themselves in a variety of ways, including feminist, anti-racist, anti-oppressive, radical, and critical. Typically positioning themselves as “linking the personal and the political” (Hick & Pozzuto, 2005, p. x), this diverse group adopts approaches to practice that borrow from critical and post-structural theories in order to provide a critique of social work’s complicity with existing unequal social arrangements while offering a corresponding emphasis on possibilities for emancipatory social change (Fook, 2002, p. 5). Activist social workers seek not only better ways to understand the world, but also how to change it (Marx, 1972). The subjects of this thesis are those activist social workers who are “insiders” (Smith, 1999, p. 49) within restructured primary health care and child welfare service organizations. They are both frontline workers and supervisors who are caught up in the tensions and dilemmas of changing practice arrangements.
1.3 Neoliberalism and Changes to the Context of Social Work Practice

Rapid and dramatic transformations have been taking place within health and social service organizations over several decades throughout Western countries. These transformations are part of larger processes that many critics describe as neoliberal restructuring (Baines, 2004a, 2004b, 2007; Dominelli, 1999; Fabricant & Burghardt, 1992). Across Canada, all governments, to varying degrees, have enacted cuts to health and social welfare programs. These cuts have prompted rising pressures on social service workers to provide more supports with fewer resources to a population that faces far more complex problems. In response to these growing pressures, service delivery systems have been re-organized, often along the lines of corporate-like managerial practices (Clarke & Newman, 1997). Service providers face new expectations to demonstrate a commitment to “efficiencies” and “accountability” within their work practices (Baines, 2004b, p. 6). In Ontario, one of the most massive social service restructuring initiatives occurred within the child welfare system. The introduction of rigid procedures and standards of practice resulted in a loss of professional autonomy, leaving social workers struggling to adjust to a system that no longer valued their decision-making abilities (Parada, Barnoff & Coleman, 2007). Ontario’s health care system also underwent profound reforms reflecting a reductionist approach to programs and practice. The result has led to practice interventions on the part of health care professionals, including social workers, which largely target individualized notions of illness while ignoring underlying social problems related to poor health (Suschnigg, 2001). As a result, social workers are understood to be increasingly pressed into privileging their social control roles at the expense of their capacities for activist social change (Aronson & Sammon, 2000; Dominelli, 2004).

More recently, a worsening global economic crisis has prompted what many believe to be a leftward shift in terms of Western governments’ willingness to intervene in the economy. Apparently, governments of all political stripes are now distancing themselves from free-market ideology and instead re-aligning themselves with the notion that had Richard Nixon famously proclaiming in 1971, albeit prematurely, “We are all Keynesians now” (cited in Wiesbrot, 2008, p. 1). In the midst of a world economic recession, unlike any since the Depression era, most economists concede that “stimulus” measures - deficit financing, infrastructure spending, and social and economic protection measures - are necessary in these ailing economic times (Clark, 2008; The Associated Press, 2009).
For many Canadian social and health policy-makers and service providers, increased government intervention in the economy could be interpreted as a shift towards more collective models of social provisioning. Elsewhere, some have suggested that rather than a re-discovery of Keynesian economic principles, the apparent leftward swing in the political pendulum could be more accurately analysed as the “morphing” and “adaptive” potential that characterizes new forms of neoliberalism (Peck & Tickell, 2002). For instance, in the United States and the United Kingdom, Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell (2002) identify that there is a deliberate stretching of the neoliberal policy repertoire to include new models of institution-building such as the selective appropriation of “community” and “partnership” modes for public service delivery (p. 390). These authors argue that the new processes effectively extend the neoliberal project through the management of its contradictions. Wendy Brown (2005) reflects on the challenges posed by these new arrangements and recalls observations made by critical social theorist, Herbert Marcuse, over a half century ago. Brown explains that Marcuse believed that the appearance of a growing middle-class meant that capitalism had eliminated the revolutionary subject. No longer could the economic contradictions of capitalism fuel opposition to it; rather, resistance to capitalism would have to be generated from an alternative vision of how to be in the world. Brown elaborates:

That is, the Left needed to tap the desires – not for wealth or goods but for beauty, love, mental and physical well-being, meaningful work, and peace – manifestly unmet within a capitalist order and to appeal to those desires as the basis for rejecting and replacing the order. (p. 57)

Today, argues Brown, the problem diagnosed by Marcuse has expanded from capitalism to current forms of liberal democracy: “oppositional consciousness cannot be generated from liberal democracy’s false promises and hypocrisies” (p. 57). She explains that the space between liberal democratic ideals, such as freedom and equality, and the lived realities of neoliberalism has ceased to be exploitable. This is because freedom and equality have been redefined under neoliberal terms, leaving democracy eviscerated. These observations prompted me to consider how ideals such as collective social provisioning and universal health care have been reshaped within the Canadian policy landscape over several decades of neoliberal restructuring. What does it mean, in today’s terms, to “transform” and “renew” popular social
programs such as child welfare and primary health care, especially when these sectors have been the targets of so much restructuring attention in recent years? I take from the insights offered by Brown (2005) and others, that much like social activists working for change in the late 1950s and early 1960s, contemporary activist social workers are faced with a daunting task in these neoliberal times – that of having to create another vision of being in the world, one that manages to outpace the masquerading versions of political legitimacy and notions of “the common good” currently deployed by neoliberalism.

1.4 My Choice for a Research Site
After years of constraint under previous Conservative governments, in 2005 the Ontario Liberal government announced new plans for the “transformation” of child protection services and the “renewal” of primary health care (Child Welfare Secretariat, 2005; Ministry of Health and Long-term Care, 2005). Primary health care is described as being the site for new collaborative, multidisciplinary teams, including social workers, which will deliver expanded access to comprehensive, patient-centred services with an emphasis on health promotion and illness prevention. Ontario’s child welfare system, the largest employer of social workers in the province, promises to offer more “flexible” and “tailored” programs that emphasize new interventions for early detection of risks for children and the expansion of community capacities to coordinate better services.

Many social workers in Ontario have moved quickly to establish a strong professional presence within these renewed sectors of practice. Citing their abilities to navigate complex service systems, their expertise for working with vulnerable populations and their special knowledge for understanding complex human problems, the provincial social work association has proclaimed that its members are best positioned to provide leadership for change (Ontario Association of Social Workers, 2005a, 2005b). Indeed, they are joined by a chorus of other professional service providers who express relief and state that reform is not only necessary but long overdue (Armstrong & Armstrong, 2003; La Rose, 2006).

Emerging critical commentary underscores some of the contradictions between stated desires for “transformation” and “renewal” in public policy, and the ongoing realities of restructured health and social services in Ontario. One study points to the sobering remnants of prior restructuring measures and paints a disturbing picture of how non-profit community organizations in Ontario continue to be “operating on the edge” (Eakin 2007, p. 52). There is
evidence of ongoing cuts to staffing and expanding administrative burdens on managers (Aronson & Smith, 2009). Eakin (2007) warns that persistent under-funding of community services, in combination with the burden of ill-fitting administrative requirements, will prevent many social service agencies from delivering effective services, let alone fulfilling additional expectations such as the forming of collaborative partnerships and the building of community capacities. Others register similar scepticism. They warn that government plans establish too much physician control in the primary health care system and this will ultimately lead to more corporatized forms of health care (Ontario Health Coalition 2006).

The tensions between desires for change and the ongoing harsh realities of practice pose puzzling dilemmas for activist social workers labouring in child welfare and primary health care in Ontario. What does it really mean to be an activist social worker in these specific practice sites at this particular time? My dissertation takes up questions about how workers in these evolving contexts – both front-line service providers and direct supervisors – make sense of the ongoing changes and contradictions in their practice, especially when tensions exist between desires for progressive social change, and the ongoing constraints of restructured social work.

Following Foucault’s (2000b) reflections on the subject and power, my thesis asks “[w]hat are we” in this particular moment (p. 216)? Moving this question beyond a universal subject and an ahistorical moment, Foucault pushes us to understand a “historical awareness of our present circumstances” (p. 209). He explains that this means we must ask, “[w]hat is going on just now? What is happening to us? What is this world, this period, this precise moment in which we are living” (p. 216)? Todd May (2005) explains that Foucault relied on methods known as genealogies in order to ask these questions. May elaborates, explaining that Foucault refused to ask about a “natural self” that can be revealed through study. Instead, May insists that Foucault questions, “how we have come to be who we are, how the multiple strands of our history have led us to be this being and not another at this particular moment” (p. 69)? Foucault (1998) described his approach as a “critical history of thought” (p. 459) and outlined the focus for scholarship from this perspective: “The problem is to determine what the subject must be, to what conditions he is subject, what status he must have, what position he must occupy in reality or in the imaginary, in order to become a legitimate subject of this or that type of knowledge” (p. 459). Maria Tamboukou (1999) explains that Foucault’s approach to history criticizes the present by reflecting upon how the discursive and institutional practices of the
past continue to be constitutive of the present. Building on these ideas, my goal for this dissertation is to understand how the contingencies of the past and the present have shaped activist social workers’ sense of who they must be, including their desires, imaginings, and aspirations in the changing context of practice.

1.5 “Once Upon a Time” and other Foucauldian Stories about Social Workers
Many of us grew up knowing that the simple phrase, “once upon a time” signalled the beginning of a story and we looked forward to the place it would end (hopefully, happily ever after). Yet, Todd May (2005, p. 67) remarks that whenever a Foucauldian story begins with these words, it is for the opposite reason. As May explains, when Foucauldian stories begin, “once upon a time” marks the place at which the story thread becomes broken, a “point of contingency in the history of who we are” (p. 67). From Foucault’s perspective, there is never a single story to be told. Rather, explains May, stories are always multiple. This thesis builds on Foucault’s ideas about the contingency of history to consider all the multiple ways of “making up” the contemporary activist social work subject. My aim is to take nothing for granted in order to “give some assistance” as Foucault (1991c, p. 83) explains,

> in wearing away certain self-evidences and commonplaces…to bring it about, together with many others, that certain phrases can no longer be spoken so lightly, certain acts no longer, or at least no longer so unhesitatingly, performed; to contribute to changing certain things in people’s ways of perceiving and doing things. (p. 83)

Following Foucault (1988a), this dissertation will argue that, much like our history, our present does not have to take the paths that it does because “so many things can be changed, fragile as they are, bound up more with circumstances than with necessities, more arbitrary than self-evident” (p. 156). It is possible to be otherwise because the project of becoming an activist social worker is always already an unfinished one.

Michel Foucault did not want particular things to be done as a “result” of his research. His approach to research was relentlessly open-ended, refusing ever to be finished. From 1970 until his sudden death in 1984, Foucault shared updates on his investigations of political power during thirteen annual courses at the College de France in Paris. In these lectures, he tirelessly explained and re-explained himself, devoting long periods afterwards to answering questions
from his listeners (Ewald & Fontana, 1997/2003). It has been said that Foucault’s was a process that “constantly ‘reread’, resituated, and reinterpreted his earlier work in light of his later work and, so to speak, constantly updated it” (Fontana & Bertani, 1997/2003, p. 275). Ann Laura Stoler (1995) has written about her strong sense of debt to Foucault for his “reflective insolence” - his impulse to “fold back on what he did, rework old concepts and abandon others, as he pushed his project further” (p. 209). Stoler views Foucault’s approach as an invitation to “go beyond it”, encouraging possibilities that may cause it to “self-destruct” (p. 196). For Stoler, like many other critical race, feminist poststructuralist and postcolonial scholars, Foucault’s methods opened up new directions for investigations, many of which seem to lie beyond the very reach of Foucault’s own imagination.

Foucault seemed keenly aware of how his research approach would continue to give birth to new purposes. In the last years of his life, while reflecting on the value of his work, he offered the following observation:

None of it does more than mark time. Repetitive and disconnected, it advances nowhere. Since indeed it never ceases to say the same thing, it perhaps says nothing. It is tangled up into an indecipherable, disorganized muddle. In a nutshell, it is inconclusive. Still, I could claim that after all these were only trails to be followed, it mattered little where they led; indeed it was important that they did not have a predetermined starting point and destination. They were merely lines laid down for you to pursue or to divert elsewhere, for me to extend upon or redesign as the case might be. They are, in the final analysis, just fragments, and it is up to you or me to see what we can make of them. (Foucault, 1980, p. 78-79)

At the heart of my dissertation is a desire to see what we can make of Foucault’s thinking, particularly his ideas about governmentality, in order to tell a different story about the aims and senses of purpose taken up by activist social workers labouring in the changing context of contemporary practice. My efforts come in the wake of those critical social work scholars who have been turning to the ideas of Foucault in recent years in order to re-examine questions about the taken-for-granted organization of power and knowledge (Chambon, Irving & Epstein, 1999; Fook, 2002; Gilbert & Powell, 2010; Healy, 2000; Margolin, 1997). Taking up Foucault’s notion of governmentality enabled these theorists to see the vast array of
knowledges and techniques used to guide and regulate the everyday conduct of people (Rose & Miller, 1992). As such, governmentality has provided a lens capable of viewing the social control aspects of social work as diffuse and able to emerge in a multiplicity of forms that are frequently hidden (Chambon, 1999). This lens has enabled critical examinations of how social workers produce identities of helplessness in others while obscuring the problem of power and privilege inherent in performances of “helper” (Rossiter, 1996, p. 2). Nigel Parton (1999) explains that governmentality has allowed researchers of social work to both broaden and redirect their analysis of political power:

It recognizes that the exercise of power takes place through an ever shifting set of alliances of political and non-political authorities. Professionals and other “experts” are crucial to its operation, but they also have their own interests and priorities, which means that day-to-day policies and practices are not unified, integrated, or easily predictable. (p. 105)

O’Malley, Weir and Shearing (1997) explain that Foucault’s ideas help us to see the “messy actualities” (p. 509) of governance and can reveal the constitutive role of contestation and social variation. Foucault brings to the forefront, according to these authors, the importance of recognizing the multiplicity of voices both subjugating and being subjectified through the rules of governing. It is my hope that by learning to recognize and study the hidden multiplicity of processes and practices that make us up to be who we are becoming now, activist social workers can imagine a new kind of social work subject, one who is able to work against the grain of our usual ways of being in order to become otherwise.

1.6 A Turn to the Discursive Subject
Foucault’s (1984) approach to the study of history and the human subject is one that “disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself” (p. 82). Applying this theory to my dissertation research involves working within and beyond the tensions between our attachments to Enlightenment’s humanist self – a rational conscious self that is capable of agency and emancipatory social change (Lather, 1991; Weedon, 1987) – and Foucault’s (1994a) notion of the self as an effect through and within discourses – a self constituted
through self-knowledge, practices and institutions. Rooted in the tradition of Gramsci’s (1971) critical theories about counter-hegemony, critical or activist social workers have long relied on notions of an autonomous individual capable of recognizing and critiquing systemic oppressive forces, and acting both individually and collectively to change social conditions for the better. As Chris Weedon (1987) explains:

…the individual assumes that she is the author of the ideology or discourse which she is speaking. She speaks or thinks as if she were in control of meaning. She ‘imagines’ that she is indeed the type of subject which humanism proposes – rational, unified, the source rather than the effect of language. (p. 31)

In contrast, Foucault (1988b) advances the notion that the self does not exist outside of established forms of knowledge and institutionalized practices:

The subject constitutes himself in an active fashion, by the practices of self, these practices are nevertheless not something that the individual invents by himself. They are patterns that he finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group. (p.11)

At first glance, it would seem that finding a balance between the assumptions people make about their own autonomy and the idea that subjects are constituted through discourse is beyond reach. Sharing their observations about the apparent incompatibility of critical theory and Foucauldian analysis, McBeath and Webb (2005) explain:

Critical theorists seek redemption in the face of corruption by concentrations of power, whereas Foucault reveals our collective fate by the dispersion and inescapable fact of power. Critical theorists offer moral transcendence; Foucault offers an analysis of unending flows of power, the implication being that there is no outside of power. (p. 171)

However, I found it both interesting and helpful to know that Foucault himself did not seem overly-concerned about the tensions between emancipatory politics and the self as an outcome
of historical developments. In an essay entitled, “What is Enlightenment”, Foucault (1984d) encouraged his readers to adopt “an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them” (p. 50). Interpreting this passage, Patti Lather (1991) explains that Foucault is leading us from a search for formal structures and universal values and how they impact us to a focus on how we are constituted as “subjects of our own knowledge” (p. 38). For Foucault, such knowledge is always already embedded in discourses and tied to our everyday techniques and practices. Consequently, as Lather explains, such an approach is “neither ‘for’ nor ‘against’ the Enlightenment”; rather, it is “against that which presents itself as finished and authoritarian” (p. 38). These ideas have enabled me to manage the tensions between humanism and Foucault’s approach to the subject. I avoid reducing the subject to a unitary being while carefully attending to the historical specificity of the production of subject positions taken on by social workers as they navigate shifts in their work related to neoliberal restructuring.

1.7 Governmentality as a Lens on Health and Social Service Workplace Change

Drawing on Foucault’s ideas about governmentality, along with feminist poststructuralist, postcolonial, and critical race theories, this dissertation views neoliberal strategies of rule as working in diffuse ways through health and social service workplaces. This perspective directs our attention to the ways in which strategies for the governing of conduct operate through “technologies of governing” (Miller & Rose, 1990, p. 8): “[T]he actual mechanisms through which authorities of various sorts have sought to shape, normalize and instrumentalize the conduct, thought, decisions and aspirations of others in order to achieve the objectives they consider desirable” (p. 8). By paying attention to these strategies of governing, we can gain an understanding of the processes through which individuals come to experience, understand, judge and conduct themselves (Rose, 1996). Miller and Rose (1990) explain that the use of the term “technologies” in this context refers to all the “apparently humble and mundane mechanisms” - the “microphysics of power” (p. 8) - which enable programs of government to act upon and intervene upon those persons, places and populations which are targeted for concern:
...techniques of notation, computation and calculation; procedures of examination and assessment; the invention of devices such as surveys and presentational forms such as tables, the standardization of systems for training and the inculcation of habits; the inauguration of professional specialisms and vocabularies; building designs and architectural forms. (p. 08)

By using governmentality, it is possible to trace neoliberal restructuring as a form of workplace change that draws on the capacities of social workers as living resources to be harnessed and managed in order to optimize their economic efficiency and maximize their capacities for social regulation. Activist social workers are seen to “make themselves up” (Rose & Miller, 1992, p. 174) in order to see themselves and others as individualized and active subjects responsible for particular performances that enact specific types of changes. The activist social work self has assumed the form that it has because it has been the object of a variety of rationalizing schemes which have sought to shape its ways of understanding and enacting its existence as a human being in the name of certain objectives – professionalism, efficiency, entrepreneurialism, flexibility, etc. (Rose, 1996).

My analysis of social workers’ various forms of self-governing suggests that there are questions to be raised about how successful neoliberal governmentality operates as a strategy of indirect social regulation. Consequently, an important aspect of my thesis is my use of additional theories to help me explore whether neoliberalism is fully working or not. These theories also help me to reveal the various intersecting processes that operate paradoxically to mobilize and immobilize neoliberalism’s insertion into our daily lives. Feminist poststructuralism, critical race and postcolonial theorists have worked with Foucault’s ideas about governing to highlight the ways that individuals are not merely the subjects of power in the workplace. They also play an active part in its operations. It has been found that the new vocabularies of neoliberalism such as autonomy, freedom, choice, and enterprise have established “dividing practices” (Foucault, 2000b, p. 208) within and between subjects in the workplace (Adkins & Lury, 1999; Halford, 2003; Leonard, 2003; Walkerdine, 2006). For example, Adkins and Lury (1999) place a focus on gender, class and the body to illustrate the ways in which some workers may be denied the ability to claim their workplace performances as occupational resources. As a result, new workplace hierarchies and associated inequities are emerging on top of already socially-stratified spaces. Nicolas Rose (1996) offers a way to
understand these processes when he explains that the pervasive language of “responsible self-advancement” within new discourses of neoliberalism is linked to a series of perceptions about those who fall outside the realm of “civility” – the excluded or marginalized who, through wilfulness or social barriers, cannot or will not exercise such “responsibility” (p. 145). Other critiques of governmentality suggest a more complex and varied understanding of work discourses, identity formation, and work performances and the possible ways that these can work simultaneously together and/or against each other (Leonard, 2003; O’Malley, Weir & Shearing, 1997). As Leonard (2003) explains, neoliberal discourses (such as those found in restructured social service organizations) can be embraced, negotiated, contested, and re-written by social workers as subjects who are variously positioned within competing discourses, some of which may be autobiographical, cultural and social:

Thus for any given individual, a whole range of subject positions are simultaneously at play, some of these positions may serve to bolster the dominant discourses of work, and one’s subject position within them, whilst others may destabilize and undermine such effectiveness. (p. 221)

Governmentality makes it possible to study the emergence of neoliberal discourses as they circulate within and through the workplace. However, as I will show in this thesis, the discourses of neoliberalism are never all-transforming; rather, they merely add to the complex and frequently contradictory discourses through which social workers are constituted every moment of every day.

1.8 How Do I Actually Produce a Foucauldian Account?
During the writing of my thesis, I have struggled repeatedly with the dilemma posed by the attempt to produce a Foucauldian genealogy which is based on the work-life stories of living, breathing activist social workers. The dilemma surfaces with the expectation that a qualitative study should be able to enter into and reveal knowledge that exists in a particular place and time as it is lived by the research subjects: “there is a ‘there’ to be and ‘beings’ who are there” (Britzman, 1995, p. 133). Britzman (1995) explains that it is a seductive claim that private moments can be made public “within the reach of readers” (p. 134). However, she explains that with the advent of post-structuralism and the “real” to be taken as an effect of discourse, our
understanding of others must become far more tentative. This is to say that despite my good intentions as an author of research, I must be cognizant of the fact that subjects always “mean more than they say and more than we can interpret” (p. 135).

Foucault (1978) believed that confessional truth telling perpetuates humanistic assumptions about “the depths of oneself” (p. 59). Confessing the truth, he explains, “holds out like a shimmering mirage” (p. 59) and reassures everyone involved of the “basic certainties of consciousness” (p. 60). However, working with some of Foucault’s later ideas, Valverde (2004) observes that people can tell stories in ways that produce a perspective on sociological or economic conditions of their situation rather than revealing one meaning rooted in some deep psychological truth. She explains: “Truth telling becomes confessional only under certain circumstances, in situations in which the institutional and cultural context and the speaker’s own analytical tools favour such a move” (p. 83). Taking up similar themes while conducting research on parental involvement in the school system, Dehli (2008, p. 59) explains that there appear to be confessional moments during interviews when participants share secrets about themselves or about others. Yet, Dehli also identifies that during these moments, participants engage in processes of critical self-reflection. Reading her participants’ accounts as “a refusal of the terms that frame normative notions” (p. 59) enables Dehli to see the ways in which people search for alternative terms with which to explain theirs and others’ lives. Dehli suggests that these accounts are examples of Foucault’s (1991) self-government at work. Hollway and Jefferson (2000) suggest that other forms of self-governing may preclude capacities for self-reflexivity, and that these can be explained by thinking about the various ways that some people engage in “defensive activities” (p. 24) when they tell stories about themselves in order to protect the self from feelings of discomfort arising from various contradictions. While considering these conceptual ideas, I have found it helpful in writing a Foucauldian account to use a method developed by Edward Said (1993) known as “contrapuntal reading” (p. 67). Said emphasizes the importance of building an analysis of historical experience around social exclusions and, to do so by connecting the structures of a narrative to the ideas, concepts and personal experiences from which it draws support. Said applies a postcolonial lens to reveal how some stories, in his case certain literary texts, known by their authors to be very real, are also “saturated” with the legacies of imperialism (p. 67). Using contrapuntal reading as an approach to producing research accounts requires that I do multiple readings of social workers’ stories about workplace change, all of which are subject to
history and based on the many vested interests and competing ideas at work in their production.

Accepting that there is no methodology in existence that allows access to the “real”, it can be said that my approach for writing up research treats the data as “second hand memories” (Britzman, 1999, p. 146); that is to say, not only is the data collected by me, but it is read through the various subjectivities and investments of both the researcher and the researched. My aim is to “work with the whole” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p.) of people’s stories by attending to context, links and contradictions found within those accounts. Writing a Foucauldian account of social workers’ lives focuses more on how we come to produce ourselves through the stories – both “real” and “imagined” – that we repeatedly tell ourselves about ourselves and others.

For my dissertation research, I asked activist social workers with extensive experience in either primary health care or child welfare to tell the stories of their working lives. This is a context-specific inquiry that explores in detail their stories about work in these changing times. From Foucault (1984a) I have learned to search for history in some of the most unpromising places. These are the places in our lives that, prior to this research, I would have tended to believe were absent of history. These are the spaces typically found “in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts” and “those instances when they are absent, the moment when they remained unrealized” (p. 76). I have used this insight to establish as the key focus for my study the tensions that exist between the attachments, desires and aspirations of the activist social work self and what that self must do to get by every day. As Tamboukou (1999, p. 207) notes, these are details that tend to remain unnoticed and unrecorded in the stories of mainstream history. In bringing these details about social workers’ lives to light, my research reveals some of the many ways that people work on themselves to both produce and sustain a compelling sense of who they are.

In the following chapters, participants’ stories about their work lives reveal many of the varied ways in which neoliberal logic compels social workers to arrange themselves as self-managing individuals in different spheres of their lives including, but not limited to, their work, health and family. At the same time, it is possible to trace within social workers’ stories those moments of “discontinuities” (Foucault, 1991a, p. 57) where there is the presence of a “counterhistory” (1997/2003). These are the ways of being that can and do interrupt and slow
down neoliberal processes by opening up different political possibilities for economic and social life and what it means to care about each other as human beings.

1.9 Outline and Overview of the Thesis
My thesis is divided into seven chapters. This introductory chapter has situated the study and provided a brief overview of its main theoretical concerns.

Chapter Two discusses problems found in popular “top-down” notions of neoliberalism and provides an in-depth exploration of the possibilities for utilizing governmentality as a frame to analyse current changes in health and social service work. I review some of the literature that draws on governmentality to explore the production of identities and workplace change. I also discuss emerging critiques of governmentality in order to explore possibilities for extending governmentality as an approach to research.

Chapter Three begins with a detailed discussion of the various dilemmas that I encountered while using a governmentality lens for conducting research on live human subjects. In particular, I elaborate on how I grappled with the fluid nature of discourse while at the same time pinning down meaning for the purpose of analysis. Next, I describe the practical, step-by-step details of my research design and I provide information about the methods I used for completing the process of my research.

In Chapter Four, I discuss how “discourses of change” circulating in newly-restructured child welfare and primary health care sectors create alluring attachments for activist social workers. Despite deep reservations about many aspects of the changes emerging in their workplaces, some social workers yearn to find possibilities for resolving the harsh legacy left by the Mike Harris government. Making themselves up as “flexible workers” capable of “teamwork” and “collaborative partnerships”, social workers’ stories reveal some of the powerfully compelling emotional attachments and investments which underpin the desire to become a “transformative subject of change”. I argue that the effectiveness of such a discursive repertoire lies in its association with progressive activist ideals. Recognizing that not all social workers tell the same story about the experience of workplace change, this chapter attempts to trace some of the multiple ways that people respond to emerging modes of governing based on their unique biographical histories and social locations.

Chapter Five explores the themes of loss and mourning as they appear in social workers’ stories about the impact of restructuring measures on their work. Here, my concern is
not limited to a consideration of the origins of deeply felt feelings of loss. Rather, my concern is to analyse the things that our mourning produces: where and how do feelings of loss arise and what are their effects? For some social workers, mourning is based on the losses of social rights over the past decade and is associated with feelings of nostalgia for Canada’s past conduct as a nation. Other stories reveal the racialized aspects of mourning and highlight how, for many, remembrances of Canada’s past is characterized by the pain of exclusion. Mourning is also examined for the ways in which it augments discourses of faith, salvation, rescue and love in the work stories of social workers, especially when they encounter discomfort due to rising tensions and contradictions associated with neoliberal restructuring. As a result of their supposedly unique ability to connect with the pain and suffering of others, social workers constitute themselves as moral and, therefore, are able to avoid a sense of complicity with the negative impacts of neoliberalism. Mourning enables social workers to come to grips with feelings of loss as social welfare measures are dismantled. The mobilization of discourses of faith augment social workers’ mourning and in many instances, they can be seen as a form of resistance to increasing pressures to engage in practices that are based on narrow measurements of care. In this chapter, I discuss how mourning, in many instances, requires positioning on the part of social workers in order to activate “forgetting” and other obscuring gestures. In this way, mourning can conceal many political tensions between the goals of social equity. As a result, social workers’ abilities to fulfill those goals are diminished within practice settings that are increasingly dominated by individualized models of care.

In Chapter Six, I explore social workers’ various positionings in relation to emerging discourses of risk management through prevention in primary health care and child welfare services. I begin with an exploration of earlier forms of risk assessment that dominated child welfare and primary health care during the late 1990s. I analyse this particular period of practice as steeped in the logic of audit and other forms of surveillance. I draw on social workers’ accounts to consider what it means for them to perform “dirty social work” on one hand, while, on the other hand, they endeavour to hold onto their dwindling sense of ethical selfhood. Government documents outlining new expectations related to “transformation” in child welfare and “renewal” in primary health care seem to signal shifts away from such narrow and punitive forms of practice as those past performances of “dirty social work”. Although many social workers perceive these developments as opportunities to engage in interventions aimed at strengthening social protections, their practice stories are interwoven
with contradictions, leaving many to wonder if their purpose remains that of protecting their work organizations against possible risks; i.e. legal liabilities, negative media stories, and financial instability. I analyse these processes as practices of systematic predetection of risk whereby social workers’ attention is increasingly turned away from the context of service users’ problems to the terrain of individual responsibility where the focus is on reducing those factors seen as high risk behaviours. I also examine how discourses of prevention and harm-reduction lead to forms of risk-management that reproduce gendered, racialized and class-based hierarchies of power. Working with Foucault’s later ideas about care of the self, I explore the various ways that social workers work on themselves in order to produce and sustain a sense of ethical selfhood in relation to emerging rules of preventative conduct shaping their practices. Social workers’ stories evoke Foucault’s notion of “the already said” – a so-called “low brow” technology for ethical self-governance. I suggest that these forms of self-governing represent opportunities to both collide and collude with the logics of neoliberalism in the workplace.

The concluding chapter provides reflections on the implications of this research and, in particular, on the ways that activist social workers can respond to the evolving discourses of neoliberalism in their workplace. A key aspect of this discussion will focus on the reconstitution of education and training for social workers in order to encourage an ongoing critique of who we are becoming now in the current context of practice. This involves casting a critical gaze on discourse and deconstructing what it means to do social work in the ways that we all engage in doing it. In conclusion, my thesis will outline possibilities for those working in health and social service sectors to learn entirely new ways for becoming and for being activist social workers in Canada.
Chapter 2

Understanding Neoliberalism Differently: From “Tsunami Effect” to Technologies of Governing

2.1 Introduction
This chapter begins with a discussion of popular ways for understanding neoliberalism and then advances to provide a critique which outlines the shortcomings of a “top-down” analysis of neoliberal restructuring. This is followed by an introduction to key concepts of governmentality taken from Foucault’s later work. Next, I discuss literature that seeks to use governmentality to extend the analysis of neoliberalism. I pay particular attention to the insights gained from this literature regarding the many ways in which individuals and populations are governed and govern themselves at the micro-level of the workplace. Turning to feminist poststructural, postcolonial and critical race scholarship, the chapter concludes with directives for moving forward in order to trace neoliberalism through a context-specific inquiry that is sensitive to social positioning. Within this chapter, I challenge the coherence of neoliberalism. By grounding my analysis in a detailed investigation of the work lives of social workers, I am able to make visible the “messy actualities” (O’Malley, Weir & Shearing, 1997, p. 504) of new forms of governance, including the tensions, contradictions and complexities that characterize emerging forms of neoliberal restructuring. Such an approach emphasizes the historically contingent aspects of neoliberalism and the individual negotiations arising from the dialogical interplay of peoples’ identities (Halford and Leonard, 1999). Consequently, my research opens up new avenues for thinking about resistance in the restructured social work workplace.

2.2 Stories of Global Pressures and Tidal Waves of Change
Popular critical analyses of neoliberal restructuring in the Western world typically describe a tidal wave of top-down processes whereby global powers impose unpopular policies on unwilling national governments (Barlow & Clarke, 2001 / 2002; Bauman, 1998; Chomsky, 1999; Giroux, 2004; Harvey, 2007). These analyses describe a shift from Keynesian welfarism towards a more “right wing” agenda favouring the unfettered operations of capitalist markets. Larner (2000) points out that when critical scholars adopt this approach for interpreting
neoliberalism, they are relying on conceptualizations that frame it as a program of policy reform initiated and rationalized through a coherent ideological framework. This account of neoliberalism tells a compelling story of a global movement involving a tsunami effect that is somehow able to overwhelm national economies as it washes over them and bears down from above.

The story about the spread of neoliberalism from the “policy” perspective typically unfolds in the following way: Critics point to international regulating bodies such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). They discuss how these entities have been able to successfully drag world economies away from classical social democratic strategies such as full employment, high levels of public expenditure and progressive taxation by issuing dictates about the “harsh economic truths” of “good fiscal housekeeping” (Clarke, 2000; Mishra, 1999; Teeple, 1995).

In the Canadian context, the narrative about how globalized neoliberalism has impacted national policies starts in the early 1980s. At the federal level of government, Brian Mulroney’s Progressive Conservatives, under pressure from globalized capital, began to dismantle Canada’s postwar equality agenda through the establishment of free trade agreements (Free Trade Agreement in 1988 and North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994). Mulroney’s regime also made efforts to decentralize national standards with their failed attempts to achieve greater autonomy for the provinces (the 1987 Meech Lake Accord and the 1992 Charlottetown Accord) (Brodie, 2002). Another important moment occurred in 1995 when Paul Martin, then the Liberal Party’s Federal Minister of Finance, ushered in the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST). The CHST introduced a system of block transfer payments from the federal to provincial governments that downloaded responsibility to them to pay for and organize health care, post secondary education and welfare. Critics charge that this dramatic change in policy direction forced open the doors to different provincial governments’ abilities, regardless of political stripes, to implement various neoliberal economic and social agendas throughout Canada in the late 1990s (McMullan, Davies & Cassidy, 2002).
Within Ontario, critical scholars point to the Mike Harris Conservative government of the late 1990s as being a definitive moment in the “rightward” neoliberal shift in policies. Harris’s *Common Sense Revolution* is viewed as having accelerated a downhill spiral in the lives of poor people with its dramatic cuts to welfare payments and other public services, changes to disability criteria, and the adoption of workfare schemes (Jeffrey, 1999). The devastating effects of these policies, particularly on people who were already struggling at the margins of society – women, recent newcomers to Canada, Aboriginal peoples and other minority communities, working poor and people with disabilities – resulted in widening gaps between the “haves” and the “have-nots” in the province (Ricciutelli, Larkin & O’Neill, 1998; Wharf & McKenzie, 2004; Yalnizyan, 2005).

Efforts to understand the impact of Harris’ restructuring policies on social and health service professionals highlight profound changes to how managers and front-line staff experience and practice their work. In response to stigmatizing ideas about welfare as a “drain on the real economy” and “producing dependency”, service managers are characterized as having become preoccupied with efficiencies and narrow accountability measures while racing to refashion their agencies and clinics into “lean work organizations” (Baines, 2004b, p. 7). Baines (2004b) documents the emergence of lean organizational forms in health and social services including amalgamations, downsizing, privatization, and the establishment of part-time and contract work arrangements. Butcher (1995, cited in Clarke, Gewirtz & McLaughlin, 2000) refers to these new work processes as “managerialism” (p. 6). He explains that old forms of bureaucratic administration have been replaced with “a new set of practices and values, based upon a new language of welfare delivery which emphasizes efficiency and value for money, competition and markets, consumerism and customer care” (p. 6).

Critical research with front-line health and social service workers exposed accumulating constraints and increasing tensions as a result of the new models of service delivery. Workers in a study conducted by Aronson and Sammon (2000) report on the intensification and acceleration of their work. As a result, they were constantly pressed for time during their contacts with service users. Administrative procedures that standardized the processing of service users reshaped practice boundaries and resulted in oversimplified

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1 The Conservative’s *Common Sense Revolution* is sometimes referred to as a “neoconservative” or “New Right” ideology. While there were strong elements of a neoconservative emphasis on social control over crime and deviance in the Harris platform, it was their implementation of an aggressive neoliberal agenda - cuts to social spending, the elimination of the regulatory role of government, privatization of state assets, and the restructuring of the welfare state – that led to an association with neoliberalism (Knight, 1998).
approaches and fragmented labour practices. These authors concluded that, “[c]onstrained by
time pressures, by ill-fitting organizational forms, and by the fragmenting effects of divided
labour, workers identified how crucial aspects of what they deemed good practice were
effectively squeezed out of their jobs” (p. 173).

Descriptions of the impact of neoliberal policy restructuring found in the literature tend
to convey one-dimensional views of change that highlight the negative impacts on
marginalized citizens and on the quality of work life for health and social service workers.
Managerial power is narrowly constructed as capable of dominating the will of working
subjects. Deprived of agency, the responses on the part of workers are perceived as forced and
determined from above. As a result, professionals, such as social workers, are characterized as
“losers” under restructuring and managers are described as “winners” (Farrell & Morris, 2003,
p. 137).

Despite the forging of strong alliances amongst organized labour, unionized public
service workers, students and social justice groups aimed at challenging the Harris agenda in
Ontario, effective opposition was largely perceived as a “failure” in the face of the
government’s ongoing attacks on the poor and the services they relied on (See Munro, 1997 for
a description of Ontario’s “Days of Action”; Kozolanka, 2006). Responding to the intense
alarm registered by many “left-leaning” bystanders during this period, Brodie (2002) expresses
how remarkable it was that Canada’s federal and provincial governments were able to
implement these wide-sweeping changes without constitutional amendments. She observes:

[T]he post-World War II consensus about the role of the state, the nature of citizenship,
and popular understandings of the appropriate relationship among the public and the
private and the collective and the individual have been incrementally and progressively
recast into a model of governance which would have been inconceivable a half century
ago. (p. 90)

Mitchell Dean (1999) argues that despite the complexity of the relations between the various
institutions and external players that constitute the state, our taken-for-granted notions about
how shifts in governing occur continue to assume that the state can be addressed as a relatively
unified actor. As the following discussion will convey, this deeply embedded conceptualization
of change places enormous limitations on our comprehension of neoliberalism and foreclose the imaginings of possible critical interventions.

2.3 The Limits of “Top-Down” Notions of Neoliberal Change

Emerging critical scholarship has been able to highlight the limits to depictions of neoliberalism as an overwhelming wave of “top-down” change revolving around state power. This scholarship has relied on the work of Foucault in order to understand how it is that this narrow conceptualization continues to permeate our analysis of neoliberalism (see Mitchell Dean, 1999). Foucault (1991b) argues that there is an excessive value accorded to the role of the state in matters of government. According to Foucault, this overvaluation occurs in two ways. On the one hand, the state is depicted as the unified “cold monster” (p. 103) that is capable of total domination and repression. On the other hand, the state is reduced paradoxically to a mundane number of functions, such as overseeing the development of production and the reproduction of relations of production. Foucault explained that both visions situate the state as an absolutely essential target for attention, and, as a result, other matters are rendered invisible. This is problematic because:

[T]he state, no more probably today than at any other time in history, does not have this unity, this individuality, this rigorous functionality, nor, to speak quite frankly, this importance; maybe, after all, the state is no more than a composite reality and a mythicized abstraction, whose importance is a lot more limited than many of us think. (p. 103)

Building on Foucault’s critique of how the state is conceptualized, Wendy Larner (2000) explains that analyses of neoliberal restructuring as either a policy response to the global economy or the capturing of the policy agenda by the “New Right” run the risk of failing to grasp the core dimensions of change. Although Larner (2000) concedes that “top-down” accounts may be useful as a way to describe the negative consequences of restructuring, she insists that the explanations they offer are unable to answer important questions about the nature of rule and the sets of practices that facilitate governing from a distance. Put simply, top-down notions of change enable people to distance themselves from the negative effects of change because such conceptions ignore the ways in which many of us are implicated. We are
able to ignore how we come to be invested in the terms and categories of change and the subjectivities that neoliberalism provides. Additionally, Larner explains that when our attention is deflected onto key figures, such as Mike Harris, we fail to notice important processes of contestation and struggles that are at play. These oversights divert attention away from potential opportunities to theorize resistance and, consequently, efforts to build progressive social change agendas are diminished. Larner concludes that responses grounded in a policy perspective tend to rely on a return to the more protectionist orientation associated with Keynesian welfarism. Indeed, Keynesian welfarism is seen as the primary solution to the many of the problems generated by neoliberalism. From this perspective, the problem is the shift from a robust welfare state to a minimalist, non-interventionist state. Solutions, therefore, are typically sought in policies that seem to have worked in the past. Of course, this single-minded approach ignores problems that may have existed in the past and diminishes possibilities for re-imagining social welfare on different terms – now and in the future.

Larner (2000) writes that it is a “short step from policy and ideology to discourse” (p. 12) and she insists that this theoretical journey must be embarked upon if we are to understand the complexities of neoliberal restructuring as a form of governance. She is referring to Foucault’s (1991a; 1991b) later work on governmentality in which he explains how neoliberal restructuring is exercised through particular practices and within specific contexts. As Healy (2000) explains, “the focus is less on identifying what or who the oppressor or the oppressed is in accordance with a general overarching principle; what is important is to understand the practices through which power is exercised and locally sustained” (p. 43). However, before discussing how governmentality will be used to understand neoliberalism and the constitution of social work subjects in my dissertation, I explore the emergence of governmentality in Foucault’s later work in order to review some important key concepts.

2.4 The Emergence of Governmentality in Foucault’s Later Work
Michel Foucault delivered a series of public lectures at the College de France in Paris every year from January 1971 until his death in June 1984 (with the exception of 1977 when he was on sabbatical leave). Foucault’s 1975-1976 lectures were entitled, Society Must Be Defended (2003). These set the stage for the 1978 series which was called Security, Territory, Population (2007). Throughout these two sets of lecture series, Foucault began to revise and refine some
of his earlier work and, in so doing, he established new directions for thinking about relations of power, authority, and the issues of self and identity.

In the earlier of the two series, Foucault began with an overview of his previous work on disciplinary power—a type of power that is applied to individual bodies through techniques of surveillance, normalizing practices, and the panoptic organization of regulatory institutions. Next, Foucault moved on to a detailed analysis of power relations that emerged in Europe at the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth century. His genealogy of European states explores the neglected discourse of the “race wars” (Foucault, 2003, p.60); that is, the heroic or embittered tales of conquest written by aristocrats and minor nobles who attempted to curtail sovereign power in order to advance their own interests. The implications of Foucault’s treatment of “race struggles” for critical race scholarship have been detailed in an influential work by Ann Laura Stoler (1995) and will be explored at a later point in this chapter. However, for the time being, as Valverde (2007, p. 166) points out, Foucault’s interest was not a genealogy of race or racism, per se, but rather a genealogy of how early legal and political theory; that is, the social contract theory of Hobbes and Locke, was used to suppress contestation and resistance. Having illuminated these tools of monarchical power, Foucault (2003) ends the 1976 series with a discussion of his notion of “biopower” (p. 243) - a form of power that is applied in more general ways to manage the entire population and the lives of human beings.

It was in February, 1978, during the fourth lecture of his series, that Foucault (2007) introduced the term “governmentality” (p. 108) for the first time. Reflecting some years later, Foucault explained the meaning of the term to be,


During his lecture, Foucault paused for a moment and explained to his audience that the term governmentality actually came to him as an afterthought. Perhaps, he wondered, it would serve as a more precise title for the series. Shifting conceptual gears in mid-lecture, Foucault offered a working definition of his concept:
The ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population, as its principle form of knowledge political economy, and as its essential technical means apparatuses of security. (Foucault, 1991a, p. 102)

Mariana Valverde (2007) reflects on how it was that Foucault could have so suddenly presented governmentality “in full dress form” (p. 171), as a replacement for what in the course summary had been entitled, “Security”. In reflecting on this, she wonders if Foucault wanted to downplay the statist and authoritarian aspects of the word “security”. In contrast, governmentality may have had less police-like connotations. Commenting on Foucault’s innovative and fluid analytical capacity to develop and shape the research, Valverde observes that his approach was “a far cry from what usually counts as theorizing within the social sciences, which consists of plunking ready-made concepts onto real-life situations” (p.174). She adds that Foucault’s sudden change of heart enabled a closer inspection of his work by scholars of liberalism as evidenced by a burgeoning flood of governmentality-inspired studies during the 1990s. Valverde speculates that if Foucault had remained attached to his original title, the innovations and implications of neoliberalism would have remained less visible and far more difficult to critique.

2.5 Governmentality: Key Concepts
Foucault’s later work was increasingly concerned with the analysis of who can govern, who is governed and how the shaping of someone’s activities is achieved. With the concept of governmentality, Foucault moved away from unified notions of the state and expanded the realm of what is understood as political power to encompass a wide range of everyday practices:

“Government” did not refer only to political structures or to the management of states; rather it designated the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed: the government of children, of souls, of communities, of families, of the sick. It did not only cover the legitimately constituted forms of political or economic
subjection, but also modes of action, more or less considered and calculated which were 
destined to act upon the possibilities of action of other people. To govern, in this sense, 
is to structure the possible field of action of others. (Foucault, 2000b, p. 341)

Drawing on his studies of the social and political changes that occurred in Europe during the 
eighteenth century, Foucault (1991b) came to understand how notions of sovereignty or models 
of the family were inadequate for the complex tasks of managing growing populations. 
Demographic expansions, the increasing abundance of money, increasing agricultural 
production and the occurrence of epidemics all presented new opportunities for governing. 
Contemplating the limits of previous approaches, Foucault explained:

On the one hand, there was this framework of sovereignty which was too large, too 
abstract and too rigid; and on the other, the [existing] theory of government suffered 
from its reliance on a model which was too thin, too weak and too insubstantial, that of 
the family. (p. 98)

With an appreciation of the various population-related problems, Foucault challenged the idea 
that the state simply imposed control. Instead, he proposed that the state relied on a diversity of 
actors to shape and administer the lives of individuals in pursuit of particular ends; that is, 
state interests. Elaborating on Foucault’s changing notions of state power, Jacques Donzelot 
(1979, cited in Rose, O’Malley & Valverde, 2006), wrote the following:

We would have then not a power and those who undergo it, but, as Foucault shows, 
technologies, that is to say always local and multiple, intertwining coherent or 
contradictory forms of activating and managing a population, and strategies, the 
formulae of government…theories which explain reality only to the extent that they 
enable the implementation of a program. (p. 88)

Foucault’s concept of governmentality referred to the emergence of political 
rationalities or “mentalities of rule” (Rose, 1993, p. 290) where governing becomes the 
calculated management of the lives of each and all in order to reach certain objectives. Nikolas 
Rose (1996) explains that this perspective is significant because it directs our attention to the
ways in which strategies for the conduct of conduct operate through processes that Foucault called “techniques of the self” (see Foucault, 1994a, p. 87). These techniques include all the ways that individuals experience, understand, judge and organize their own behaviour or performances of self. Miller and Rose (1990) explain that “technologies” refer to the actual mechanisms through which authorities of different kinds have sought to “shape, normalize and instrumentalize the conduct, thought, decisions and aspirations of others in order to achieve the objectives they consider desirable” (p. 8). Linking power relations to processes of subjectification, Foucault (2000b) described modes of action that do not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, they act upon their actions: “an action upon an action, on possible or actual future or present actions” (p.340). An analysis of such technologies of government requires attending to the “microphysics of power” (Miller & Rose, 1990, p. 8) that involves all the complex interdependencies which enable indirect rule from a distance. The microphysics of power includes all the “humble and mundane mechanisms” (Miller & Rose, 1990, p. 8) which enable programs of government to act upon and intervene upon those persons, places and populations which are targeted for concern:

...techniques of notation, computation and calculation; procedures of examination and assessment; the invention of devices such as surveys and presentational forms such as tables, the standardization of systems for training and the inculcation of habits; the inauguration of professional specialisms and vocabularies. (p. 8)

One of the defining characteristics of Foucault’s conception of governmentality is the notion that techniques of governing work through and upon the individual thus constituting that individual as an object of knowledge and as a subject enabled to conduct her/himself in predictable and recognizable ways. From the discipline of social work, it can be said that the primary technique is that of “normalizing judgements” (Foucault, 1977, p. 177). According to O’Malley (1996), normalizing means “creating or specifying a general norm in terms of which individual uniqueness can be recognized, characterized and then standardized” (p. 189). Normalization implies a correction of the individual. This concept was particularly relevant to my research. As I planned this dissertation, I benefited enormously from the rich literature that explores in detail how different forms of expert authority, such as social work, come to operate in the spaces between the state and the individual, seeking to adjust the behaviours of
individuals in order to bring them into line with socially-approved expectations (see Donzelot, 1979, 1991a, 1991b; Garland, 2006).

The ideas of discourse and discursive fields are central to studies of governmentality (see Foucault, 1991a). Within my dissertation, these concepts are important for understanding how it is that social workers come to constitute themselves within the changing context of practice. Writing from the discipline of social work, Adrienne Chambon (1999) suggests that discourses operate as forms of practice and forms of knowledge. Some practices are like codes that prescribe how we should deal with others. Particular forms of knowledge produce formulations of truth. Chambon points out that we come to see things in particular ways through the concepts and theories we develop about them: “how we name, characterize, explain, and predict…[t]hings do not exist outside our naming them. It is this act of naming that creates things” (p. 57). In my dissertation, I concur with those who argue against Chambon’s approach, suggesting instead, that Foucault rejected the overly-deterministic idea that language creates realities and identities (see Miller & Rose, 1990). Rose, O’Malley and Valverde (2006) draw particular attention to Foucault’s later thinking about discourse to elaborate on this argument. These authors suggest that language should be analyzed as a key element but, importantly, as one that is highly dependent on the processes of forming assemblages of networks and groups. It is these networks and groups that are then enlisted through persuasion to identify their own desires and aspirations with others. Thus, they become “allies in governing” (p. 89). In Foucault’s (1991a) own writing, he suggests that his intention was to write a “history of discourse” (p. 59) and he insists that language was not his primary object of study. Rejecting a focus on codes, Foucault sought to ask questions instead about “events” and “the law of existence of statements”: “that which rendered them possible – them and none other in their place: the conditions of their singular emergence; their correlation with other previous or simultaneous events, discursive or otherwise” (p. 59).

Foucault used the term “archive” (p. 59) to describe the set of rules which, at a given period and for a given society, define “[t]he limits and forms of the sayable. What is it possible to speak of” (p. 59)? Mills (2003) explains that Foucault’s use of discourse refers to regulated sets of statements which combine with others in particular ways. However, instead of viewing discourses as coherent, they should be thought of as the paradoxical interplay between complex sets of practices. Some practices try to keep statements actively in play while other practices try to curtail them. An example of this complex interplay of practices can be seen in how
assemblages, networks and groups will mobilize particular sentiments. As a result, some statements will circulate widely and others will be effectively contained. For instance, once the Mike Harris government in Ontario managed to conflate the idea of “budget cuts” with discourses of “common sense”, it became difficult for successive provincial administrations to talk about, never mind enact, new social spending. Budget cuts were ingrained in the public imagination as necessary. Social spending came to be characterized as irresponsible. At the same time, it was seen as perfectly legitimate for government to provide tax-breaks to corporations and some of the richest citizens of Ontario. Foucault would explain that this situation occurs because the discourse of “common sense” is associated with particular relations of power. Foucault (1978) explains that for this very reason, we must conceive of discourse as a series of discontinuities whose tactical functions remain unstable. In other words, it is too simple to say that the world of discourses is divided between acceptable discourse and excluded discourse. Rather, the world of discourse should be viewed, “as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies” (p. 100).

Foucault (1978) explains that we must take into account both the speaker’s position of power and the institutional context in which the speaker is positioned. In The History of Sexuality, Volume I, Foucault (1978) argues:

[d]iscourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. (p. 100-101)

Foucault’s insights about power, identity, discourses and governing are central to the perspective that informs this thesis on social work in restructured workplaces. Drawing on his ideas makes it possible for me to view social workers as one of the many groups of networks enlisted as allies in governing the conduct of others. Social workers can also be seen to be actively engaged in undermining, curtailing, and resisting forms of social regulation through the use of “counter discourses” – those discourses and practices that rely on “ways of subversively using these positions which have been mapped out for us by others” (Mills, 2003, p. 91).
2.6 Using Governmentality to Extend an Analysis of Neoliberalism

In his 1978 and 1979 lectures, Foucault pressed his audiences to use the concepts offered by governmentality to understand the interlinked social and economic processes that came to be known as neoliberalism. Drawing on Foucault’s lectures, Brown (2005) explains that the ‘neo’ in neoliberalism signals that this is more than just a set of economic policies. It also carries a social analysis that, when deployed as a form of governmentality, reaches “from the soul of the citizen-subject to education policy to practices of empire” (p. 39). Neoliberalism, explains Brown, involves “extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action” (p. 40). Brown’s insight shows that neoliberal governmentality, unlike the laissez-faire notion stressed in classical liberalism, must be produced. It “must be directed, buttressed and protected by law and policy as well as by the dissemination of social norms designed to facilitate competition, free trade, and rational economic action on the part of every member and institution of society” (p. 41). According to Foucault, this generalized scope of the economic into the social accomplishes two things. First, social relations and individual behaviour are deciphered using economic criteria and within economic terms. Second, it enables a critical evaluation of governmental practices using market concepts: “a kind of permanent economic tribunal” (Foucault, 1979, cited in Lemke, 2001, p. 198).

By using governmentality to analyse neoliberalism, Foucault was able to establish that the state takes on new tasks and functions by utilizing more indirect techniques for leading and controlling individuals without having to take responsibility for their well-being (Lemke, 2001). The responsibilities for social risks are shifted onto the domain of the individual. In this domain, the individual is responsible for him or herself. Social risks are transformed into a “problem of self-care” (Lemke, 2001, p. 201). Foucault’s conceptualization helps in the understanding that neoliberalism is less about the state losing its powers of regulation and control and more about the restructuring of government techniques and shifting them onto “responsible” and “rational” subjects (p. 202).

During my interviews with research participants, they identified many examples of how economic considerations have become central to the constitution of what is considered “good” health care and child welfare policy in the province of Ontario. Their practice examples resonate with governmentality theorists who are turning their attention to governing practices that shift away from intrusive and costly interventions to more dispersed forms of social
control (O’Malley, 1996; Castel, 1991). In particular, Castel (1991) suggests that interventions on the part of care providing professions will no longer take the form of direct contact between the “helper and the helped” (p. 281). Instead, they rely on the collection of a range of factors that are likely to produce risks to society. In this view, there is a move away from processes of normalization to prevention techniques that are more subtle and efficient in their operation because they are more capable of generating less resistance and requiring fewer political resources (O’Malley, 1996). O’Malley (1996) argues that such interpretations counter Foucault’s insistence that there is a dynamic, triangular relationship between sovereign, disciplinary and governing forms of power and, therefore, we need to consider how dispersed forms of governance interact with more coercive forms of governing.

Castel (1991) refers to interventions aimed at the prevention of risk as new modes of surveillance called “systematic predetection” (p. 288). He explains that these interventions largely dispense with the relationship between the “carer and the cared” (p. 288), and rely instead on “factors” and “statistical correlations of heterogeneous elements” (p. 288). O’Malley (1996) explains that these interventions appear to act technically rather than morally. Consequently, they are presented as being neutral when managing the effects of targeted concerns. As a result, systematic predetection strategies appear to address important problems while they obscure the marginalizing, exclusionary, and coercive tendencies which underpin them.

In my dissertation, I use governmentality to understand neoliberalism as working through subjects in multiple ways, some of which are difficult to discern. An important aspect of my investigation is uncovering how neoliberalism works through activist social work subjects as they passionately take up progressive and desirable discourses such as “anti-racism”, “child-safety”, “social equity” and “universal access to health care”. I argue that the convergence of such progressive discourses produces a paradox. They result in a greater acceptance for many of the Harris-era contradictions which, otherwise, would remain unpalatable for many social justice-seeking activists. As seen through this lens, it is possible to understand how prior forms of governing made popular during the conservative Mike Harris era have adapted over time. In their newest mutations, neoliberal strategies manage to penetrate deeper by working through the very desires, hearts and minds of well-intentioned social change agents. Nikolas Rose (1996) describes this new reach as “governing through community” (p. 331). In other words, while the state retreats from its social obligations, there is a proliferation
of new techniques to remake the “imagined territory” (p. 331) of the social and citizen-
subjects. Importantly, this imagined territory is mobilized through many of the same
discourses which have produce dominant notions of Canadian nationhood, such as “tolerance”,
“compassion”, and “equality rights”. This new form of governing power is not objectifying.
Rather, it is subjectifying because it constructs individuals who are capable of “choice” and
“action” (Garland 2006, p. 359). Rose and Miller (1992) describe the new role played by
“freedom” in this model: “Personal autonomy is not the antithesis of political power, but a key
term in its exercise, the more so because most individuals are not merely subjects of power but
play a part in its operations” (p. 174). Neoliberal political power is no longer viewed as just a
matter of imposing constraints upon individuals but rather as “making up” (Rose & Miller,
1992, p. 174) citizens capable of bearing a kind of regulated freedom, and who align
themselves with a particular set of community values, beliefs and commitments.

2.7 Governmentality, Restructuring, and Social Workers’ Subjectivities

The analytic tools of governmentality have provided insights into the many ways that
individuals and populations are governed at the micro-level and how particular identities and
performances in the workplace are both facilitated and taken up by active subjects to reproduce
a particular ordered society. For my dissertation, I draw on these ideas to better understand the
impact of neoliberal restructuring on identity formation and the day-to-day performances of
work by social workers in child welfare and primary health care services. Examples of
scholarship that I have built on in order to understand the production of subjectivities at work
include Davies, Browne, Gannon, Honan, & Somerville’s (2005) analyses of neoliberalism at
postsecondary institutions. In the face of a range of seemingly pressing choices and
administrative tasks, these scholars examine their changing identities. They describe learning
to become one of the many “pairs of eyes” that watches over others and calculates
performances in economic terms: “we ‘responsibly’ gaze on our own acts and the acts of
others. And we shape ourselves (or try to) as the ones who do have (a monetary) value to the
organizations we work in” (p. 345). My work also builds on Davies’ (2005) exploration of
questions that increasingly haunt her work in academic institutions: “how does neoliberalism
get inserted into our consciousness, into our conscience? And with what effects” (p. 4)? By
subjecting her worksite to Foucauldian analysis, Davies is able to explain that her
understanding of what is understood as possible and desirable is shaped by the persistent, yet seemingly benign, regulatory practices of government through public institutions:

[T]he language of neoliberal government…is more violent than its bland, rather absurd surface might lead us to believe. It is at work here, busily containing what we can do, what we can understand. It is the language in which the auditor is king. It is a language that destroys social responsibility and critique, that invites a mindless, consumer oriented individualism to flourish, and kills off conscience. (p. 6)

Davies (2005) has developed five core processes that are helpful to an articulation of what it means to become a neoliberal subject within restructured health and child welfare work settings. The first of these processes is consumption. According to Davies, the neoliberal self is defined largely in terms of income and the capacity to purchase goods. To lose one’s job, to be without income, is to lose one’s identity. Therefore, in order to hold onto their jobs, neoliberal selves must become “necessarily flexible, multiskilled, mobile, able to respond to new demands and new situations” (p. 09). A second process identified by Davies (2005) involves the taking up of survival as an individual responsibility. Survival involves social independence in combination with the achievement of success for each person who “gets it right” (p. 9). Drawing on Richard Sennett (1998), Davies explains that this process requires the construction of workers as disposable and an acceptance that there is no longer an obligation on the “social fabric” to take care of the “disposed self” (p. 9). Expanding further on Sennett (1998), Davies states that the third process requires a self cut adrift from values. This neoliberal being is a “fearing self” (p. 9). Fear interrupts the ability to fashion a responsibility to and a valuing of the “social” because the self is so preoccupied with issues pertaining to its own individual survival. The fourth process of becoming a neoliberal subject requires learning practices of surveillance. Reporting mechanisms for monitoring and producing appropriate behaviours are mandated. Trust is no longer relevant as each person becomes “one of the multiple eyes spying on each other” (p. 10). Finally, similar to Rose and Miller’s (1992, p. 174) notion of “freedom”, Davies offers that neoliberal systems rely on the illusions of autonomy in order to ensure the gradual adaptation to the new circumstances of less funding, increased surveillance, and shifts to viewing public institutions as market commodities rather than as essential parts of democracy that contribute to the public good.
Davies emphasizes that these processes occur through the instilling of serial fears: “for the survival of one’s country...for one’s own social group...for the survival of the institution one is part of...fear of one’s own survival” (Davies, 2005, p. 11).

As I considered the transcribed interviews with activist social workers in my study, I could see how many of the processes identified by Davies surfaced in their narratives about work and their workplaces. However, social workers’ accounts seemed less deterministic than Davies’ theoretical lens implies. For example, Davies explains that the neoliberal self must relinquish those elements of the liberal humanist self that support the social fabric through a commitment to liberal values and a capacity to critique. These values are replaced with skills for individual survival and specifically the capacity to earn money. It occurred to me that such overly-determined categories allow little room for ambivalence, contradictions or the creative management of new tensions in social workers’ experiences of their work. Drawing on Judith Butler (1997), I critique Davies (2005) for drawing on a “customary model” (Butler, 1997, p. 2) of power. As Butler explains, power from this perspective is seen as pressing on us from the outside: “power imposes itself on us, and, weakened by its force, we come to internalize or accept its terms” (p. 2). From Butler’s perspective, an over-determined view of power, such as that found in Davies (2005), results in a limited view of subjectivities.

Other critical scholars have also used governmentality techniques only to find overly-determined implications for identities within restructured work. For example, Sennett (1998) found that restructured workplaces not only alter the relations of production but also “corrode the character” (p. 142) of people. du Gay (1996) discovered that new organizational identities are increasingly viewed as taking on “proactive” and “entrepreneurial” (p. 156) traits and virtues and are also seen to be associated with increased economic efficiency without affecting “traditional public service values” (p. 156). du Gay’s new subject of organizational change is seen as inherently malleable and perpetually adapting to modifications and demands in the environment. In other words, suggests du Gay, new managerial governance “makes up” the individual as a particular sort of person – an “entrepreneur of the self” (Gordon, 1987, cited in du Gay, 1996, p. 156). Foreclosing possibilities for alternative outcomes, du Gay concludes that the entrepreneurial self is less likely to pursue the goals of equity and fairness; i.e., those things that are not necessarily served by commercial enterprises.

A more nuanced and complicated account of subject formation can be found in Catherine Casey’s (1995; 1999) examination of how day-to-day power arrangements operate
through subjectivities shaped by new workplace practices. In particular, Casey (1999) identifies that the metaphor of “team” (p. 156) has become a pivotal practice within new organizational culture. Casey argues that the use of teams is a deliberate instalment intended to assert a reasonable incontestability and universal attractiveness to neoliberal practices in the workplace. Teams elicit feelings of bonding, belonging, and caring and, consequently, team members are implicitly discouraged from raising contentious issues or potentially divisive issues. Similar arguments are raised in Newman’s (2005) exploration of new leadership models which rely on an array of “therapeutic technologies” (p. 721) such as 360˚ performance appraisals, coaching groups, and action learning sets. Casey’s (1999) study reveals that a deeply discordant outcome can result from the installation of teams. Despite the feelings of warmth and belonging, teams also function as regulatory and disciplinary devices. This is achieved when the discourses of “teams” are conflated with notions of “flexibility”, “cooperation” and “customer satisfaction.” As Casey (1999) explains, [t]he rewards to the employee for relinquishing old work styles, attitudes, and attachments and for participating in pan-occupational teams…are the feelings of a greater sense of involvement, commitment, and “empowerment” (p. 161). Casey (1999) uses the phrase “discursive colonization of the employee self” (p. 159) to describe the processes by which dominant organizational values and behaviours displace or transpose former practices, including affective experiences such as anger, cynicism, or resistance. The effective colonization of employee selves transforms any feelings of ambivalence about a project into the successful production of the preferred type of employee: “Consequently, resistance, while always possible, is often truncated and circumscribed by private survival” (p. 174).

Casey’s (1995, 1999) work stands out from the critical literature because she attempts to understand the emotional effects of social institutions on individuals. However, at times her findings tend to replicate the same tendency towards determinism observed in the other the critical literature. In particular, Casey is overly-deterministic in suggesting that new forms of work management ensure that a worker’s values, attitudes and general orientation will correspond with those promoted by the organization. Along these lines, Casey (1995) argues that an implicit censorship is at play so that employees are expected to learn the subtle rules of governing discourse and internally regulate themselves: “ Appropriately acculturated, self-censored employees will know automatically the difference between welcome speaking up and troublemaking speaking out” (p. 141). Casey concludes that processes of self-colonization in
new work organizations offer promises of bonding and belonging while obscuring contradictions. As a result, employees are seduced into becoming participants in their own self-production and, consequently, their collaboration with the corporate processes is produced:

What is happening here is more than an assumption of a corporate organizational role; it is the internalization of the values and practices of the new culture and identification with the company over and above previous occupational identifications as those older forms of identification are displaced. The new culture produces “designer employees”. (p. 143)

Findings from governmentality-inspired studies of restructured workplaces have described a variety of new emerging subject positions, including “colonized selves” (Casey, 1999), “corroded selves” (Sennett, 1998), the “designer employee” (Casey, 1995), the “neoliberal subject” (Davies, 2005), and the “entrepreneurial self” (du Gay, 1996). During the course of producing this thesis, I had the opportunity to talk with and listen to many work-related stories about changes taking place in the lives of social workers who identify as social activists. Their narratives certainly resonate with many findings noted in the literature reviewed above. Yet, a close examination of the interview transcripts also reveals the presence of other dynamics. When faced with evidence that the changing conditions of work had impacted their sense of purpose and identity, many activists acknowledged that they struggle with discomfort, loss and other painful feelings. However, in the face of questions about their changing role, they sought ways to distance themselves from the negative effects of restructuring and attempted to minimize the possibility that their contributions to progressive social change could be rendered useless in the current context of practice. Still others resisted the view that conditions of work could disturb what they felt was their core sense of self. Their refusals were often tied to deeply-held ethical commitments and attachments rooted in diverse biographical histories and a sense of connectedness to the lives of others. Almost all of the accounts were riddled with desires to negotiate and attempts to contest workplace change. At the same time, social workers were actively collaborating with the changes observed in their practices. Social workers’ stories generated questions about the nature and extent to which changes at work interact with the making of selfhood. Their stories demonstrate how processes of
subjectification are varied and complex, and often tied to emotionally charged family histories and other important attachments in peoples’ lives.

Social workers’ narratives about change at work bring to mind Halford and Leonard’s (1999) concerns about how many analyses persist in emphasizing the larger picture of change while neglecting individual negotiations that arise from the dialogical interplay of peoples’ own identities. In their study of education supervisors, these researchers found that there are differences which appear between individuals. They note that some are “switched on” by the new work changes and identify with them while others withdraw and retreat from the changes. Although changes can be significant, people with different intentions and resources will interact differently with the structurally-determined conditions that confront them. Clearly, work does not “make up” people completely. The accounts provided by social workers in my research signal that there are important extensions required within theories about how identities are transformed through the changing discourses of work. Unexpectedly, there may be “fractures” or “disruptions” that occur in discourses of workplace change (see both Halford & Leonard, 1999, p. 112; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p. 70). Similarly, there may be discourses operating in the workplace that are “sticky” (Ahmed, 2004b, p. 11) and saturated with affect, resulting in varying levels of emotional investment on the part of different people. As Sarah Ahmed (2004b) argues, we need to understand how we “feel our way” (p. 12) through our everyday work lives. Central to this understanding, according to Ahmed, is a critique of models of social structure and agency that neglect the power of emotions and an analysis of how subjects become invested in particular discourses. Bringing together these ideas within a study of governmentality of the workplace can provide this understanding.

Governmentality studies of restructured workplaces suggest that new performance requirements are being made of workers and that these elements of work profoundly impact on their identities. However, activist social workers’ stories raise questions about the extent to which this is happening and suggest that processes of subjectification are varied and complex. My research subjects’ stories suggest a more open and contested set of social relations at work, rather than a narrow, confined response to discourses and governmental techniques. Identities and meaning appear to be constructed from a range of discourses drawn from their ideas about what it means to be a professional and the unique culture of our individual workplaces. Additionally, social workers’ sense of who they are is rooted in family histories and a variety of social processes based on the intersection of gender, race, class, sexuality, and age. Social
workers also reference their ideas about the nation of Canada and what this means for global citizenship. Included in all of these discourses and processes are the desires, aspirations and beliefs about social workers as ethical human beings. Keeping all these factors in mind, the concluding section of this chapter will explore the emerging critical interrogations of Foucault’s work that have proven to be helpful for thinking about how new work requirements interact with the multiple and complex aspects of subject-making processes.

2.8 Expanding Governmentality: Feminist Poststructural, Postcolonial and Critical Race Theories

Since Foucault first introduced his ideas on governmentality during the late 1970s, critical scholarship has identified and worked productively with tensions and gaps found in his theories. In particular, feminist, poststructural, postcolonial and critical race theories bring together emancipatory ideas with questions about governmentality to better understand how racialized and gendered subjects emerge in relation to state power and in other realms of social life that are seemingly unrelated to state power (Butler, 1997, 2004; Said, 2002; Stoler, 1995, 1999; Walkerdine, 2006). Specific criticisms aimed at governmentality have included: Foucault’s effacement of gender, racism and colonialism (Stoler, 1995); a tendency towards political neutrality (O’Malley, Weir & Shearing, 1997); and an orientation that ignores the role of agency, diverse experiences and resistance to government programs (Ong, 2006; Rose, O’Malley & Valverde, 2006).

Innovative scholarship continues to draw on governmentality as a lens for analysing the potential for new managerial discourses to shape workplace experiences. However, scholars also articulate ways that complex, multiple, competing and often contradictory discourses can affect individual worker’s sense of self and the meaning ascribed to work. These scholars interrogate Foucault’s (1991a) notion of rules – “the limits and forms of the sayable” (p. 59) – and ask,

in what sense am “I” spoken into existence through these discursive practices? …Is it just a fragmented, discontinuous series of positionings through which we simply become that which various discourses make possible, or do we each in some sense take control of the “I” and the words through which it is spoken into existence? (Davies, 2000, p. 60)
In the following sections, I will review the specific criticisms of Foucault and how
governmentality studies are taken up by scholars. Subsequently, I will discuss how I address
these concerns in my dissertation.

2.9 Addressing Foucault's Effacement of Gender, Racism and Colonialism
In Ann Laura Stoler’s (1995) important critique of Foucault’s lectures at the College de France,
she asserts that his accounts of technologies of sexuality so pervasive in Western Europe’s
nineteenth century bourgeois order contained an effacement of colonialism. Consequently,
Stoler argues, Foucault was unable to grasp the imperial effects of that particular order. Stoler
underscores the contradictory impulses contained within Foucault’s work. For example, while
he focuses frequently on racism, he also manages to elide it. As an explanation, she suggests
that Foucault’s gaze was significantly curtailed by his limited focus on Europe. She argues that
Foucault’s particular view of discursive formations circulating in Europe obscured colonial
genocide. Generously, Stoler (1995) speculates that perhaps it was a French post-World War
II episteme that defined Foucault’s understanding of racism in rather predictable and limited
ways. Nazi Germany was his central reference point. He did not focus on the discourses of
decolonization that were transforming the face of many countries in Africa during his lifetime.
As a result, Foucault’s focus on Nazi racism prevented him from seeing other brutal
manifestations of racial ideology and led to significant gaps in his ideas.

Extending her critique, Stoler (1995) raises what she feels is the other glaring omission
within Foucault’s analysis: the eclipsing of gender in his accounts of sexuality. She believes
that an implicit racial grammar underwrote the sexual regimes of bourgeois culture in more
ways than Foucault was willing to explore. Using the Dutch Indies to make her point, Stoler
analyses how the cultivation of a European self was affirmed in discourses surrounding
parenting, servitude, children’s sexuality and tropical hygiene. These are all micro sites, where
designations of racial membership were constantly subject to gendered appraisals. Arguing that
state racism is never gender-neutral in the management of people, Stoler explains that instead,
“gendered assessments of perversion and subversion are part of the scaffolding on which the
intimate technologies of racist policies rest” (p. 93).

As a white, female-identified, middle class researcher of Western European heritage, I
found Stoler’s (1995) insights about Foucault’s limited understanding of racism and gender to
be very relevant for my dissertation. In particular, I want to avoid reproducing theories about
social work that are based on modes of governmentality predicated on exclusions. I am mindful that such exclusions work as underpinnings for contemporary “hegemonies of whiteness” (Hook, 2005, p. 1) and can, consequently, reinforce and reproduce Canadian social welfare institutions as compassionate and innocent (Razack, 2007). Therefore, I must be attentive to the “insidious processes of disqualification” (Hook, 2005, p. 5) in which some subject positions are marginalized in relation to discourses that serve the emotional and material needs of those Canadian social workers who make up the privileged majority.

Critical race scholars (Ahmed, 2004; Hook, 2005; Razack, 2007) have provided important ideas for resolving some of the glaring omissions in Foucault’s work as identified by Stoler (1995). Hook (2005) suggests attending to those forms of “undeclared attachments” (p. 5): those “lop-sided versions” (p.5) of historical accounts where there is a selective idealization of the past and an effective erasing of other accounts. Hook explains that such selective aggrandizement and amnesia about different aspects of the past yield contradictory representations. Among these is an outward commitment to anti-racism on the part of the nation-state which occurs alongside the expansion of exclusionary rhetoric. He argues that it is possible to trace those contradictions in which powerful exclusionary assumptions belie declarations of tolerance found for instance, in the characterization of the nation as benevolent. Sara Ahmed (2004) also takes up the idea of attachments to the nation by challenging our assumptions that emotional attachments are simply private matters. She rejects the notion that emotions simply belong to individuals, or even that they come mysteriously from within people and then move outward towards others. Instead, she argues that emotional reactions actually do things – they align individuals with particular communities and not with others. Ahmed asserts an economic model of emotion whereby emotions do not reside exclusively in the subject. Instead, they work through “sticky associations” (p. 20) to “bind” (p. 119) some subjects together in a sense of belonging that simultaneously excludes others. Walkerdine (2006) explores how those bodies labelled “other” can become immobilized by such associations in the workplace because they are unable to activate privilege based on the pervasive intersection of raced, classed and gendered social processes. Her work can be used to analyse how many commonly accepted practices in health and social service workplaces deploy the “mundane versions of whiteness” (Hook, 2005, p. 2) and, in effect, come to symbolize powerful strands of attachment and belonging as well as exclusion. Hook (2005) reminds us that such practices exist tacitly with other historical forms of overt racism, sharing
many of the same patterns of identification, aggrandizement, and objectification. Hook refers to mundane practices as a “silent denominator of whiteness” (p. 2) because these are understood to be unconnected to the more explicit forms of racism. Razack (2007) has worked productively with these ideas to show how Canadian nationals come to see themselves as good, compassionate people with unique sensibilities, tuned in to the pain of others. According to Razack, this sense of goodness is activated despite our collective history that shows how we are implicated in colonial atrocities both here and abroad.

I build on the scholarship of these authors in order to address omissions in Foucault’s work. In particular, their theoretical advances allow me to consider how social workers produce themselves as “defended subjects” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p. 19) through positioning themselves within some discourses and not others. In my dissertation, I explore how it is that social workers manage to protect a notion of ethical selfhood through positioning, attachments and investments in particular discourses, and the disavowal of others.

2.10 Governmentality Studies and the Importance of Critique

Some commentators have observed that despite the clear potential for linking governmentality approaches to critical politics, scholarship in this area has not consistently realized this aim (O’Malley, Weir & Shearing, 1997). To underscore this problematic tendency within governmentality, O’Malley, Weir and Shearing (1997) point to the “Introduction” in the special issue on neoliberalism in the journal, Economy and Society:

> These studies do not seek to provide a “critique” of various liberal and neoliberal problematizations of government. The papers do not seek to draw up a balance sheet of their shortcomings or to propose alternatives; they are concerned to diagnose the varied forms of rationality that govern our present rather than simply to denounce or condemn them. (Barry et al. 1993, cited in O’Malley, Weir & Shearing, 1997, p. 506)

Arguing that such a neutral approach to research is a serious limitation for a literature that professes a broad critical agenda, O’Malley, Weir and Shearing (1997) state that when genealogy is juxtaposed against critique, the result is a “history of the present that downplays interpretations of history as systemically antagonistic and violent” (p. 506). Citing a 1978
lecture by Foucault which is entitled “What is Critique?”, they insist that he argued for the need to practice critique in order to trouble truth claims. Elsewhere, Foucault (2000c) wrote:

To do criticism is to make harder those acts which are now too easy. Understood in these terms, criticism (and radical criticism) is utterly indispensable for any transformation...as soon as people begin to have trouble thinking things the way they have been thought, transformation becomes at the same time very urgent, very difficult, and entirely possible. (p. 456-457)

O’Malley, Weir and Shearing (1997) point out that fulfilling Foucault’s intentions requires a passionate engagement with social movements in order to ensure that a critical agenda remains a central aspect of research. They observe that this is especially crucial at a time when other bodies of critical literature are under pressure from the ascendance of neoliberalism.

In a related criticism, Wendy Larner (2000) suggests that governmentality has drawn criticism because of its tendency to neglect politics. She observes that governmentality scholars tend to emphasize broad themes rather than the finer details of particular programmes and policies. Arguing that these tendencies weaken the power of governmentality, Larner warns that governmentality theorists risk reproducing the generalizing accounts that they seek to avoid. An important solution, she offers, is to include analyses that are drawn from the discourses of oppositional groups. In order to incorporate Larner’s suggestion, as well as the critique provided by O’Malley, Weir and Shearing (1997), my dissertation draws from the knowledge gathered from a diverse group of self-identified activist social workers, many of whom have been involved in a variety of social movements. Following Larner, this is not to deny the pervasiveness of neoliberalism, but to take seriously the idea that new welfare arrangements emerge out of political struggles rather than simply being imposed in a top-down manner.

2.11 Finding Agency after Governmentality
A third and related criticism of governmentality studies has focused on the lack of attention paid to the roles of agency and resistance to government programs and policies. It has been pointed out that governmentality typically centres on discourses and programmes of rule where the programmer’s vision is privileged over the role of contestation (O’Malley, Weir &
Shearing, 1997). O’Malley, Weir and Shearing (1997) observe that where resistance is highlighted, it is often seen as an obstacle to rule and is not given the constitutive role that Foucault would have called for. These authors argue that the methodological emphasis on texts of government rather than on the “messy actualities” (p. 504) of governance leads to the generation of ideal typifications that can obscure the constitutive role of contestation and social variation. They explain: “In this we refer not only to recognition of the multiplicity of voices and discourses subject to government but not aligned with it, but equally to the multiplicity of voices within rule itself” (p. 505). O’Malley, Weir and Shearing call for a rejection of views that see programs as if they were “written with one hand” (p. 513). To help counter this tendency, they suggest seeking accounts of work-life that are “multivocal, internally contested and thus, in a sense, always in change and often internally contradictory” (p. 513). The orientation of this work should always be an empirical mapping of rationalities and techniques: “…the contingent and invented (and thus always mutable) nature of governmental thought and technique” (Rose, O’Malley, & Valverde, 2006, p. 99). According to Rose, O’Malley and Valverde (2006), once this close mapping of the local context is recognized, concerns about the denial of agency evaporate. However, they caution that finding the heroic meta-subject is unlikely. The analytic framework of agency versus structure that pervades so much of contemporary social theory is rendered mute under governmentality: “if freedom is not to be defined as the absence of constraint, but as a rather diverse array of invented technologies of the self, such a binary is meaningless” (p. 100).

Particularly later in his life, Foucault’s analysis of the techniques of governance deeply troubled the opposition between structure and agency. In fact, as Mariana Valverde (2004) observes, Foucault harboured a deep suspicion of everything seen to be “original” (p. 77) and of the ability to cleanse oneself of corrupting influences. Valverde explains that Foucault showed us how the very same techniques that produce conformity, such as school examinations or medical diagnoses, will also produce individualization. Providing a simple yet instructive example, Valverde points to the fact that we can all take the same exam, yet after we receive our grades we derive a unique inner sense of individual identity from knowing our apparent capabilities. I take from this the idea that although social workers will be exposed to many of the same discourses of neoliberal restructuring, we will not necessarily incorporate them into our work lives in the same way. While these discourses aim to produce conformity, social workers, just like everyone else, draw from the deeply compelling idea that we all have a
unique inner self and a sense of ethical selfhood that guides our day-to-day decision-making and work practices. How we see ourselves in the world – our identities – matters greatly to us because this elaboration of who we are influences our interactions with others and shapes the attitudes with which we make choices about how to live and work every day. As the stories provided by social workers in my research convey, our senses of self are deeply tied to our unique biographies, family histories, and powerful life experiences. Valverde (2004) draws on Foucault’s later work to reassure scholars that this idea of an inner self need not prompt post-structural anxieties about the subject of humanism. Rather, it can be seen as a “flexible, de-centred, less territorialized ethical self” (p. 71). She argues:

[W]e do not have to denounce authenticity, personal autonomy, and sincere truth telling in the name of postmodern parody – a move that would simply reinscribe the old debate that bored us so thoroughly in the early 1990s. We can instead consider the possibility that there are many different practices of truth telling and, therefore, many different kinds of selves, and that these can easily coexist, even in the same person. (p. 73)

Valverde’s helpful interpretation of Foucault’s later emphasis on ethics and care of the self assisted me to understand that our processes of self creation are by no means unitary or univocal. This lessened my anxiety about the need to sort through the many contradictions apparent in social workers’ stories and enabled me to better listen to people’s reflections as constitutive of the “self”.

2.12 Conclusion
As discussed in the introductory chapter of this thesis, the methodological aim of my research is to build on governmentality and the critical extensions of Foucault’s ideas in order to grapple with inconsistencies, contradictions and tensions that appear in individual social worker’s stories about their work lives under the conditions of neoliberal restructuring. This goal is based on my desire to tell a different and more complicated story than that which was told in my previous research. In my previous research, “activist heroes” found creative ways to confront neoliberalism (Smith, 2007). However, theoretical advances in the study of how we are governed at work disrupt this unified subject position. These advances suggest that while it
appears there are considerable pressures on people to conform to workplace change, this process can be unsettled by the power and allure of competing discourses.

My thesis takes up the ways that our meaning-making practices as activist social workers are always both deeply personal and profoundly political. These practices are the consequences of complex interplays between attachments, investments and identifications which arise out of our most intimate desires at work and in life. Bronwyn Davies (2000) suggests that it is these complicated patterns of desire that constitute a sense of being held in one place. She insists that looking to the organization of desire in order to unleash the multiple possibilities of meaning and for developing a sense of being as a person is an important place to start our research endeavours. Turning to the importance of language and discourse in this process, Davies writes: “…through recognizing the constitutive force of discourse, rather than seeing it as merely a tool for describing the real world, we can see ourselves as being spoken into existence” (p. 41). Insisting that this is not an individual but rather a collective task, Davies urges us to find new ways of speaking that allow us to articulate the multiplicity of our experiencing selves, “our subjectivities”:

It is possible to imagine locating ourselves not as halves of a metaphysical dualism, not as divided off from each other…each half taking its meaning in opposition to the other, each needing / desiring the other to fill its own lack, but rather as beings capable of developing new storylines, new metaphors, new images through which we live our lives. (p. 41-42)

Foucault’s ideas, along with the extensions generated through feminist poststructural, postcolonial, and critical race interrogations of governmentality, are applied throughout my dissertation in order to explore the diversity of knowledge, subjectivities, and work performances that activist social workers bring to their practice during periods of workplace change.
Chapter 3

A Research Design for the “Messy Actualities” of Restructured Social Work Lives

3.1 Introduction
The research for my dissertation is based on a series of in-depth interviews with activist social workers who have extensive experience working in restructured health and/or social services. The participants all work in either the child welfare or the primary health care system in Ontario. In addition to participant interviews, I draw on documents issued by the Ontario government describing recent changes to policies and programs related to provincial child welfare and primary health care. The interviews and documents are examined in order to understand the knowledge, subjectivities, and work performances that activist social workers bring to their practice during a time of workplace and social change. The central question I want to explore through this research is this: How do social workers “make themselves up” (Hacking, 2002, p. 99) in relation to their sense of purpose, identities, and experiences of contradictions at work, especially when tensions arise between who they imagine themselves to be as activists, and what it is that they must do every day to get by. In this chapter, along with describing the methods of research that I have used to explore this question, I identify various theoretical quandaries that I encountered while assembling these methods. I anticipated being able to share how I resolved these quandaries in my research process. However, I have since discovered that this is not an easily-accomplished task, and perhaps it is not one that is entirely possible. Nor am I convinced that this is a desirable end point. Instead, I have chosen to focus on those methods which I have come to believe are more capable of embracing, rather than eliding, the tensions between the humanist self and Foucault’s notion of the discursive self. To begin this chapter, I discuss various nagging theoretical concerns that were uncovered when I conducted my “field work” with living, breathing research subjects while using a governmentality lens.

How do social workers “make themselves up”? By design, my research question points to its own answer. What I mean by this is that it signals an ongoing critical interrogation that can never be definitively resolved. My question suggests a continuous testing of the limits of reflexivity in the human subject. The idea that people’s insights, interpretations and narratives
about themselves are limited and incomplete was simply assumed in my other life as a “non-academic”. During my everyday, informal, interactions with colleagues in social service workplaces, it was a common occurrence that we did not take each others’ accounts of work completely at face value. It was expected that we would disagree, interpret things differently, or wonder silently about how “hidden agendas” and “personal baggage” played out in people’s perceptions and decision-making in their work worlds. However, in the field of qualitative research, it is quite another thing to problematize the idea that research participants are reflexive agents in relation to their experiences of workplace change. Discomfort abounds when questions are asked about whether research participants are always able to give a “valid” and “trustworthy” account of their reasons for doing the things that they do as social workers. Hollway and Jefferson (2000) call this the “transparent self problem” (p. 3) and explain that the discomfort is rooted in the assumption found in qualitative research traditions that research participants are always “telling it like it is” (p. 2). However, as these authors point out, even if we accept at face value everything that our research participants tell us, are we satisfied that we have been told everything that is relevant? What assumptions do we make about the effect of people’s motives, memory and investments on their narratives? What effect do I have as an interviewer on the answers given to me? How do gender, sex, race, age, class and other identity markers interact with the answers that are given, and the interpretations that are made? And, finally, what are we as researchers to do when the answers we are given, however limited and incomplete, are also riddled with inconsistencies and contradictions?

From a research perspective, my question questions the existence of a unitary and knowledgeable subject, and, therefore, it contains both epistemological and ethical implications. Who am I to challenge whether others always know why they are doing what they are doing when they do it? As Joan Scott (1992) observes, “what could be truer, after all, than a subject’s own account of what he or she has lived through?” (p. 24). However, as Scott goes on to explain, when we are talking about “experience” in these ways, we are led to take for granted the existence of experienced individuals who have knowledge generating capacities. She explains:

When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject (the person who had the experience or the historian who recounts it) becomes the bedrock of evidence upon which the explanation is built. Questions about the
constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one’s vision is structured – about language (or discourse) and history – are left aside. (p. 25)

Scott makes the point that our research subjects’ unquestioned accounts, along with our desires to pin down these accounts as “real”, results in knowledge that is likely to hide more than it reveals. Therefore, for the purposes of my dissertation, I am particularly interested in finding this “left aside” knowledge about which Scott speaks – the “messy actualities” of “what actually happens” (O’Malley, Weir & Shearing, 1997, p. 509) in my research subjects’ dealings in the workplace. How do I create space and opportunity in participant interviews to allow room for this hidden knowledge to emerge? How do I encourage accounts of ethical choice-making on the part of research participants? How do I capture accounts of impulsivity and of the contingencies based on participants’ expectations, desires, and feelings (Hoggett, 2001)? Chris Weedon (1987), along with other feminist poststructuralists (Butler, 1990; Davies, 2000; Scott, 1992), argues that we can extend our readings of subjects’ accounts with the following idea:

How we live our lives as conscious thinking subjects, and how we give meaning to material social relations under which we live and which structures our everyday lives, depends on the range and social power of existing discourses, and our access to them and the political strength of the interests which they represent. (p. 26)

I understand Weedon to mean that our existence as persons, and the patterns of desires that we take to be key indicators of our essential selves, are reflections of the discourses and subject positions that are made available to and around us. Through these discourses, we are constituted and through them we constitute ourselves.

Davies (2000) explains that the concept of “positioning” (p. 70) is central to an understanding of the ways in which people are constituted through and within discourse. Because positions are discursively constituted they are open to shifts and changes: “Who I am potentially shifts with each speaking, each moment of being positioned within this or that discourse in this or that way” (p. 71). Taking up these ideas through a Foucauldian lens, Bansel, Davies, Gannon and Linnell (2008) examine their everyday practices of academic
writing within educational institutions in order to consider how they personally, as students and academics, position themselves as appropriate subjects in the context of a neoliberal, productivity-audit-driven culture. These authors explain that “discursive analysis” (p. 675) draws attention to the ways that discourse works on and through people, to produce not only particular kinds of subjects, but also the actions that they engage in and the feelings that they experience. Noting that these actions and feelings tend to be seen as reflections of “real selves” (p. 675) rather than of discourses, these authors suggest that attention should be shifted away from the individual speaking subject and instead focused on the various discourses at work thus enabling both the visibility and interrogation of the constituting power of discourses. I find these insights to be valuable as theoretical devices, generally, and also as the basis for considering one’s own positioning. However, Bansel et al.’s (2008) suggestion to “turn away” from the individual speaking subject raises ethical and political questions for me as a researcher who is expected to interpret other’s positioning. Specifically, I am concerned about how such a “turning away” from the individual speaking subject can potentially activate a misuse of power and authority in the social and textual relations between the researcher and the researched (Gonick & Hladki 2005). In other words, how do I ensure that my research practices are ethically responsible – that there is both “reciprocity” through the mutual negotiation of meaning and power, and “validity” resulting from the trustworthiness of the “data” (Lather, 1991, p. 57)?

3.2 Bringing Analytic Concepts into My Research Practices

At some point in my dissertation process, it became important to me to recognize that although Foucault was the subject of many interviews over his life as a scholar, he did not conduct interviews with live subjects for his own research. Instead, he drew on historical documents found in the archives of prisons, clinics, and also in ancient texts. As Middleton (2003) explains, Foucault’s focus was “not on ‘living breathing persons’, but, rather, on the ‘subject-positions’ that apparatuses of administrative and professional surveillance, regulation, and monitoring made available” (p. 42). Nevertheless, there are important ideas contained within Foucault’s approach to genealogies that have been helpful to me as I consider the ethical issues related to researching the discursive lives of living subjects. I have also drawn additional analytic concepts into my research practices in ways that I believe are complementary to Foucault’s notions of the genealogical approach.
3.2.1 Genealogy. Foucault (1984a) adopted the term “genealogy” (p. 76) to describe his later scholarship. He describes genealogy as “gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary. It operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times” (p. 76). Foucault (1984a) believed that genealogy conveyed the idea that truth cannot be examined separately from the procedures involved with its production. In other words, what social workers say about their work lives cannot be simply accepted without considering the multiple discourses circulating through their workplaces. Tamboukou (1999) explains that in keeping with Foucault’s concept, the researcher’s task is to “criticise, diagnose and demythologize ‘truth phenomena’” (p. 202). Therefore, doing a genealogical study involves an engagement with the “processes, procedures and apparatuses by which truth and knowledge are produced” (p. 202). This approach presses us to a new understanding of the role of thinking subjects by recognizing the “historical dimension of all human reality” (p. 203). Genealogy conceives of the human realities experienced by individuals as an effect of the interweaving of particular historical and cultural practices and it attempts to trace those effects (Tamoukou, 1999). Judith Butler (1997) suggests that it is important not to conflate the individual or the person with “the subject” (p. 10). The subject, she explains, rather than being identified strictly with the individual, ought to be designated as a category or a “placeholder” (p. 10) that individuals have historically come to occupy but will also change over time and place.

Importantly, Foucault’s notion of tracing history does not cast it as a linear evolution; in other words, who we are today is not the result of development and progress. Rather, history is seen as a series of struggles within the relations of domination. The task of the genealogist, therefore, is to uncover these struggles. Foucault (1980) argues that within these relations of domination, individuals can always find spaces of resistance for the production of “subjugated knowledge” (p. 82) – “those blocs of historical knowledge which were present but disguised within the body of functionalist and systematising theory and which criticism...has been able to reveal” (p. 82). Genealogy focuses attention on the “local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges” (p. 83) and, consequently, calls into question the claims of a unitary body of knowledge. As Foucault concludes, “genealogies are therefore not positivistic returns to a more careful or exact form of science. They are precisely anti-sciences...the insurrection of knowledges” (p. 83-84).
In his essay “Who Needs Identity?”, Stuart Hall (1996) criticizes Foucault’s genealogical approach on the basis that it does not adequately explain why it is that certain individuals occupy some subject positions and not others. Hall observes that when a subject is viewed as having been produced as an effect through and within discourse, too often the result is a one-dimensional account where positions become established as categories which individuals seem to occupy in an unproblematic fashion. Hoggett, Beedell, Jimenez, Mayo & Miller (2006) attempt to address this impasse in Foucault’s work, citing Beverly Skeggs’ (1997) findings. As these authors explain, Skeggs’ scholarship on the formation of class and gender demonstrates that an individual can adopt a variety of relations to a subject position including refusal, identification, dis-identification, perversion, corruption and even transformation of the subject position. Working with these ideas, Hoggett et al. (2006) developed a psycho-social approach to interviewing live subjects which seeks to understand how internal/psychological and external/social factors interact. Through detailed interviews, these authors argue that they gain a better understanding of how a work role gets personalized. It is through these personal stories that the authors reveal work-related dilemmas and the various ways that different professionals respond to them: “a source of despair for one, a source of fascination and an opportunity for learning for another” (p. 691-692). Drawing on Hoggett et al. (2006), I designed interview formats that would draw out biographical material in addition to social workers’ perceptions about tensions related to the changing nature of their work. In addition to these methods, I found it helpful to borrow from Hoggett’s (2001) suggestion that the self is not unitary but rather a number of selves who are often in conflict with each other. Hoggett emphasizes that this model of the subject is not intended to imply that the idea of identity is an illusion. Rather, it points to processes whereby people create coherent narratives about their lives in ways that are reflective of the many discourses they live through. It is important to recognize how these narratives can both sustain people in the present and provide a guide for navigating the future. At the same time, Hoggett (2001) points out that our capacity to be reflective agents is often constrained by the difficulties we encounter in facing our own fears and anxieties: “Some ideas and experiences are just too painful to think about, even with the support and solidarity of others, and they therefore get split off” (p. 42). Also, Hoggett observes that reflectivity often requires courage and, at times, people may lack the courage to think certain things about themselves and others. Perhaps, suggests Hoggett, we need to contain our tendency to equate agency with constructive forms of managing. He observes:
“Just as we can be destructive agents so also at times we can be constructive in our dependency and powerlessness” (p. 43). Drawing on Hoggett’s work has encouraged me to design methods of research with live subjects that make room for non-reflective as well as reflective forms of agency, for acting on impulse as well as conscious, intentional choice-making.

There are other scholars who suggest possibilities for translating Foucault’s genealogical approach in ways that are useful for life-history interviews with live subjects (Dehli, 2003; Middleton, 2003; Tamboukou, 1999). For example, Dehli (2003) turns to Foucault in her research on parental involvement in the education system in order to explore the different ways that people move through and around discourses and the positions that parents offer or withhold. To do this, she works with one of Foucault’s main objectives: to create a history of the different modes by which human beings are made subjects. Dehli explains that this means “tracking” (p. 141) or tracing all the ways that people come to think of themselves within the historical terms available to them in their current circumstances. In order to track the practices of self-formation, Dehli builds on David Scott’s (1999, cited in Dehli, 2003, p. 141-142) work to interrogate the power of colonialism and its various subject-effects in the Western domain of education. Dehli conceptualizes power beyond the binaries implied in notions of sovereignty versus freedom, domination versus resistance, or guilt versus innocence. At the same time, she attends to positions within power struggles taking place within contemporary schooling. Her point is that power, and all the ways we are constituted through it, takes many forms. In schools, this can include sovereignty and domination, as well as normalization, expertise and bureaucracy. Power can also be about care, love, freedom and choice. Furthermore, argues Dehli, each of these forms is constantly changing, as are their relations to each other. Therefore, she concludes, it is important to find different ways to ask questions in order to map these practices that are intended to secure membership, recognition, and belonging through these various forms of power. It is also important to track exclusions from these forms of power in order to understand processes of self-formation.

Middleton (2003) also draws on Foucault’s approach to genealogies in her research on the work and life experiences of fifty-seven doctoral students. This scholar found it helpful to focus on the details of her research participants’ lives which included “the minutiae of the management of everyday life” (p. 43). Her interviews explored how students had come to “set themselves rules of conduct” (p. 43) in their research, writing, domestic, and professional lives, along with the internal changes each student had to make in order to produce a scholarly piece
of work. Middleton found that life history interviews can uncover those stories of “self regulation told from within” (p. 43). Middleton’s description about the productive capacities of the stories we tell about ourselves resonates with Foucault’s (1990) “techniques of the self” (p. 11):

...those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria.” (p. 10-11)

Dehli (2003) and Middleton (2003) are especially relevant to my research because their work recognizes that it is not enough to view live subjects as simply produced through disciplinary and regulatory processes; there must also be a corresponding response from an active subject. These scholars attempt to understand the mechanisms by which individuals as subjects do or do not identify with positions that are made available to them, how they fashion responses to these positions, or why they may do so in only partial ways. Following Middleton (2003), I have found it helpful to think about my research method as a genealogy where the tasks involve researching the “rules of conduct” (Foucault, 1985, p. 10) set by individual activist social workers as they attempt to make sense of their experiences of changes in work. This includes both attending to and honouring the ways that research participants make sense of their “singular being” (Foucault, 1985, p. 10), their aims, purposes and desires in the changing context of work. But also, like Dehli’s (2003) interests related to the context of education, I am concerned about how to ask questions of social subjects that can reveal the historical and social relations into which “they/we are inserted, through which they/we are produced” (p. 142) and through which we are all made intelligible as subjects. Joan Scott (1992) explains that this is a research process that historicizes our experiences by making visible the assignment of subject positions:

...not in the sense of capturing the reality of the objects seen, but of trying to understand the operations of the complex and changing discursive processes by which identities are ascribed, resisted, or embraced and which processes themselves are unremarked, indeed achieve their effect because they aren’t noticed. (p. 33)
Scott argues that to do this assumes that our identities are not inevitable or determined. They are not simply inside us waiting to be expressed. Nor will they necessarily exist in the same form from one particular historical moment to another. As she explains, “[e]xperience is a subject’s history” (p. 34).

3.2.2 Contrapuntal Readings. In addition to working with Foucault’s genealogical approach as described by him and explained by others, I found it helpful to draw on Said’s (1993) concept of “contrapuntal readings” (p. 66). Said borrowed the term, contrapuntal, from music. In music, it refers to the art of combining melodies to produce a richer and more interesting texture composed from the various melodic lines. Said adapted this approach to his study of literary texts in order to “draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present, or ideologically represented” (p. 66). The use of contrapuntal readings provided Said with a way to search for openings in situations where there are tensions and discontinuities within and between discursive positionings. I apply Said’s practice as a research method in order to draw attention to the multiple layers of inclusion and exclusion that are produced through story-telling – “both what went into it and to what its author excluded” (p. 67). Jane Austin’s Mansfield Park becomes the site of Said’s classic example of a contrapuntal reading. Said reads Austin’s novel against the writings of Franz Fanon in order to reveal the shadow of Antigua’s slave plantations that is present in her text. Said’s reading reveals how European imperial powers derived their authority from the devaluation and the brutal exploitation of the outlying colonial “possessions” (p. 59). His contrapuntal analysis exposes how the poise and beauty of Mansfield Park is made only possible by rendering invisible the back-breaking work and unimaginable suffering of millions of slaves who were kidnapped and transported across the Atlantic Ocean for the sole benefit of those in power. Applying this method to my research with social workers provides a more detailed reading of my interview transcripts and is able to reveal the bleak shadows lurking within my participants’ positioning. Without this reading, these shadows may have otherwise remained hidden. In particular, I am referring to how people organize workplace, professional and personal discourses and produce a sense of self through the process of disassociating themselves from specific social and historical events. Social workers are, therefore, able to portray themselves as “good subjects” and members of a well-intentioned profession by effacing Canada’s colonial history and their profession’s complicity in that history. Consequently, as a researcher, I am called upon to
uncover the limits, inclusions and exclusions of social workers’ insights, interpretations and accounts as research participants.

3.2.3 The Defended Subject. Hollway and Jefferson (2000) explain that the concept of the defended subject allows a researcher to attend to how and where subjects may become invested in particular positions within discourses in order to protect vulnerable aspects of the self against the discomforts associated with contradictions that they encounter in their daily lives. In other words, the defended subject allows for an understanding both of the effects of social discourses and the unique emotional defences found in the stories that people tell about themselves. For example, understanding social workers as defended subjects enables me to see the ways that their positioning mobilizes discourses of innocence in the face of child welfare and primary health care restructuring. Their innocence is grounded in the belief that they are non-complicit with the negative effects of restructuring. Jane Flax (1993) describes this kind of innocent knowledge as an unwavering belief in some sort of truth that can guide us in the world:

Those whose actions are grounded in or informed by such truth will also have their innocence guaranteed. They can do only good, not harm, to others. They act as servants of something higher and outside (or more than) themselves, their own desires, and the effects of their particular histories or social locations. (p. 133)

Davies (2000) points out that within liberalism, people must rely on illusions of autonomy in order to ensure successful adaptation to whatever new circumstances are presented. It is possible that social workers draw on this illusion of autonomy as a defence that allows them to position themselves as beyond the reach of regressive policies in the workplace. Paradoxically, social workers may also position themselves as constrained by those same policies and able to stand out from the collective – the “heroes who engage in specific tasks and conquer the difficulties that the world puts in their way” (Davies, 2000, p. 56).

As I conducted interviews with social workers, the analytical concepts referred to in this section provided a conceptual “tool box” for reading interview transcripts in order to theorize the constitutive effects of neoliberalism. I became more adept at paying close attention to discourses and practices as they appear in social work subjects’ talk about themselves, their life-histories, and their experiences at work (Davies & Bansel, 2007). This is an approach to
reading people’s stories that tries to avoid the fragmentation and decontextualization that can occur with the more traditional methods found in qualitative studies. Nonetheless, many questions remained unresolved for me as I assembled the methods available for my research. Perhaps, I should emphasize that my “method”, following Foucault’s (2000d) own claims, is not closed or in any way finished. As Bronwyn Davies (2005) observes about researching the discursive, this is a “realm not readily pinned down with words, not readily amenable to logic and rationality” (p. 13). Throughout the writing up of my research, I have paid particular attention to the fluid nature of discourse. Yet at the same time, it has been important for me to find ways to anchor discourses – to take strategic snapshots, if you will – so that I can research and productively write about social workers’ lives. From this very practical point of view, I have organized the subsequent sections of this chapter in order to address the following: Who did I recruit to my study? How? Why? What questions did I pose to my research participants? How and why? How am I implicated in the research? What other sources of information did I draw on? How did I use them? With these questions in mind, I provide the following description of my research design.

3.3 How I Invited Research Participants into the Study
In order to locate research participants who were available, accessible and knowledgeable about processes of restructuring, I decided to focus attention on two sectors of social work that have been the targets of considerable restructuring plans over the past decade in the Province of Ontario – child welfare and primary health care. I circulated an invitation to activist social workers that provided information about my research goals and invited individuals to participate in my study (See Appendix A). A snowball technique (Bryman, 2001) enabled me to reach out to social workers who were either known to me through my professional ties in Ontario or recommended to me by colleagues in primary health care and child welfare. In many cases, colleagues passed along to me the email addresses of other social workers who they believed would be interested in the study. Guidelines for inclusion in the study were listed in the Invitation Letter (See Appendix A). I viewed this method as an opportunity for potential participants to self-select theoretically (Glaser, 1978) – meaning that they would volunteer to participate in the study if they believed that they had experience and knowledge that was relevant to the purpose of the research. In order to participate in the study, social workers were asked if they:
1. self-identified as activist social workers; i.e., they used a feminist / anti-racist / anti-oppressive approach to practice and incorporated advocacy and social change into their work.
2. had worked as a social worker in front-line service provision or supervision in social services or health care for ten years or more, and were currently employed in either primary health care or child welfare.
3. have been troubled by tensions or contradictions arising in their practice due to the impact of changes; i.e., funding cuts or alterations to service delivery model.

The Invitation Letter (See Appendix A) also contained information about the purpose of the study, proposed procedures (i.e., individual interviews, along with examples of the kinds of questions they would be asked to consider), and information about their rights as participants (i.e., to confidentiality; to leave the study at any time). The letter outlined information about the ethical research review process. I concluded the letter with the provision of my contact information.

Over a period of three weeks, I was able to generate a list of approximately forty social workers and their contact information. I contacted each social worker by email and attached a Follow-up Letter (See Appendix B) asking if they would consider participating in my study. For those who agreed to participate, I sent an electronic copy of my Consent Form (See Appendix C) which contained formal details about the study procedures, and advised that we would review and sign the procedures for consent at our first interview. Potential research participants were advised that the interview would take place at a location and time of their choosing.

When several potential research participants unexpectedly dropped out during the early stage of the study, I began to consider some of the possible road-blocks that could interfere with recruitment efforts for a critical project on restructuring in the workplace. One woman who had exhibited a high degree of interest during several initial phone calls suddenly, and unexpectedly, declined to arrange an interview. She explained, apologetically, that she was simply too overwhelmed by the demands of her work. Later, I noted that several other participants placed limits on their involvement in the study for similar reasons. One woman in particular indicated the possibility of joining the study later. She took care to reassure me that
her decision was not related to the demands of my study per se. Instead, she insisted that she was just too angry and too hurt to talk about her work at this time. She indicated that she felt some trepidation about what she might say if given the chance to express her thoughts and feelings in an interview. I encouraged her to contact me again if she changed her mind. After struggling with a decision on whether to reach out again to the woman who was so overwhelmed at work, I decided to let this contact go, although I suspected that she harboured much that would have lent considerable insight to my research. Sadly, she never followed up with me.

Other concerns cited by potential participants revolved around fears about confidentiality and the potential for punitive reprisals by employers. The concerns expressed by potential research participants drives home the fact that research participation is never a neutral, objective or disembodied activity. Research has the potential to create fear and anxiety and, possibly, material effects in the lives of participants. In future, I will deal with these concerns by asking the initial contact persons to reach out and enquire if the person would be willing to allow me to contact them directly. I will make it clear that not all “leads” will be followed up. I will also make an explicit reference in the initial invitation that participants will have the right to delete any information they provide from the interview, and that the identities of participants will not be divulged at any point. These methods are intended to help potential research participants feel a higher degree of safety and security through the creation of a stronger privacy shield to protect their identities.

In the end, my recruitment efforts resulted in the confirmation of participation by seventeen (17) self-identified activist social workers. Within this group, all seventeen participants completed a first interview and eleven people completed a follow-up interview. Four subjects declined a follow-up interview due to employment work-load demands. Two participants provided written responses to follow-up questions. Two others stated they were simply too busy to follow-up at this time (See Appendix D).

3.4 Who are My Research Participants?
Of the seventeen social workers interviewed for my study, fifteen identify as women and two identify as men. Their ages range from 26 years to 65 years with the majority of participants falling in the age range of 36 to 55 years. Two participants were below age 35 and three were older than 56.
In terms of employment status, eleven participants were currently working in the child welfare sector and six were employed within primary health care. The number of years of work experience in health or social services ranged from 10 to 34: 7 had worked from ten to fourteen years; 4 had worked from fifteen to nineteen years; 3 had between twenty to twenty-four years of work experience; 2 had worked from twenty-five to twenty-nine years; and one person had work experience spanning more than thirty years. At the time of the study, six participants were currently working as managers/supervisors and eleven identified as front-line workers.

When interviewed for my research, all participants were living in southern Ontario. In terms of racial identity, three participants self-identified as Aboriginal/Indigenous; two participants self-identified as Black/African/Caribbean-Canadian; and twelve participants self-identified as White/Eastern/Western European. Five participants identified that either they or their parents were first-generation new-comers to Canada. Seven people shared that they grew up in families that could be described as poor or working-class. Two indicated that they were raised with very high degrees of economic and social privilege. Eight participants identified their middle-class backgrounds. Four participants identified strongly with Christian religious beliefs, and two described themselves as being deeply connected to Indigenous spiritual beliefs. Seven participants indicated that they had been raised in Christian-based families but that they did not currently belong to any organized faith group. One participant was raised in an orthodox Jewish tradition but that they no longer practiced those beliefs. Three participants identified no connections whatsoever to religion. Four participants indicated that they were raised by a single parent, usually by a mother. One participant was raised in a collective parenting model based on traditional Indigenous cultural practices. Seven participants shared stories about having come to the attention of social work as “clients” at some point in their lives. These experiences included various incidences of violence or abuse in childhood, witnessing abuse against a parent, mental health crises, or other serious family problems.

3.4.1 Troubling Conventional Identity Inventories. As I set out to write this section describing my research participants, I became aware of my urge to present them to the reader within conventional qualitative research forms. To that end, I have drawn on what Gonick and Hladki (2005, p. 290) describe as the “grid of identities, similitudes and analogies” (p. 289) that researchers rely on in order to sort out differences and similarities in their research. These authors explain that conventional methods for introducing research participants usually include
a series of ready-made, familiar, identifying categories such as race, gender, class, ethnicity, age, etc. People are assumed to belong to these categories in an uncomplicated and straightforward way. However, I was deeply disturbed by how much of my research participants’ lives were hidden by these methods of categorization. Indeed, I found that their lives literally spilled over the edges of these ready-made categories. Gonick and Hladki (2005) validate my impressions. They argue that relying on such practices re-affirms uncritical assumptions about those categories. Those categories are assumed to represent an “authentic voice” (p. 290) and we are distracted from questioning how they were produced in the first place. Gonick and Hladki caution researchers about the hazards of reproducing the exclusions and marginalizations of research subjects who speak from outside the imagined authenticity: “In the same moment that difference is named, it is also contained” (p. 290). Capturing the urge I felt to produce these conventional inventories despite my concerns, Gonick and Hladki explain that such an approach dissipates anxiety because while difference is acknowledged through this technique of containment, it is also made commensurable. Pinning things down provides a “zone of comfort” (p. 291) for both the writer and the readers of research. Yet, as I read through my interview transcripts, one thing was made abundantly and consistently clear: the actual lived lives of my research participants rarely conform to the comforts of my initial summaries. Instead, participants’ accounts of themselves reveal complicated intersections, fluidities, over-lappings, and inconsistencies that cannot be contained within the simplistic and pre-determined categories of identity. As Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) explains: “Despite our desperate, eternal attempt to separate, contain, and mend, categories always leak” (p. 94). According to Mendieta (2003), identities can never be “discovered” (p. 408). They are never univocal, stable or innocent but rather, he explains, identities “are always an accomplishment and a ceaseless project” (p. 408). I take from this that my research subjects are fluid subjects. They are constantly at work on themselves within conditions that are often beyond their control and that are endlessly shifting. Given their multiple and complicated positionings, how then can I introduce my research subjects to the reader of this dissertation in a way that does justice to the complexities of their lives?

Taking up similar questions about how research participants become knowable in research writing, Gonick and Hladki (2005) draw on Foucault’s (1970) notion of “heterotopia” (cited in Gonick & Hladki, 2005, p. 288) in order to think through ways for representing the space that resides “outside of safe and secure means of knowing” (p. 288). Foucault (1986)
describes heterotopias as “counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (p. 23). Gonick and Hladki work with this idea to suggest learning to see research subjects as paradoxical: “where the logic of naming, of categorizing through division and designation, are shattered” (p. 289). According to these authors, the task for researchers involves exploring the contradictory and ambivalent ways that people come to tell their life stories, recognizing “that they may never be fully known or representable” (p. 291). This involves taking into account how research participants have historically been misrecognized by the identities and categories used by powerful others, while also manoeuvring around the desirable selves people wish to be, and the social, political and economic constraints that govern their lives. Simply put, the researcher’s job is to find “new ways of speaking and listening that both acknowledge difference and work against the othering gaze” (Gonick & Hladki, 2005, p. 293).

3.4.2 “Working with the Whole” and Pen Portraits. In order to put Gonick and Hladki’s (2005) ideas to work as a method in my research, I borrowed an idea from Hollway and Jefferson (2000) called “working with the whole” (p. 5). According to Hollway and Jefferson, working with the whole of my research data requires that I attend carefully to context, links and contradictions within that whole. Putting this into practice involved an intensive process of detailed and repeated readings of transcripts. I sought out and identified places in the transcripts where participants positioned themselves in a particular way. Next, I made summaries of the transcripts and highlighted the ways that different positionings were revealed to contain contradictions. I developed a binder for the summaries so that I had easy access to my findings. My binder became a valuable tool as I returned to the summaries countless times throughout the process of writing up my findings.

In order to make full and effective use of the detailed information I had compiled about my research participants’ lives, I utilized a concept developed by Hollway and Jefferson (2000) known as “pen portraits” (p. 70). Pen portraits are biographical accounts that reveal, rather than iron out, inconsistencies, contradictions and puzzles found in the stories people tell about themselves. Using the detailed biographical information provided by my research participants, I created a “portrait” for each research subject, to be used, not only as a source of information for analysis, but also as a method for introducing the reader to my research subjects (See Appendix E). This method is intended to provide the reader with access to the conditions of
participants’ life and work stories, along with the stories about how they have come to know themselves as particular kinds of subjects at different points in time. The following example of a pen portrait demonstrates how this method can highlight the context and the complexities of people’s lives in powerful ways.

**Carrie**

Carrie is 28 years old and for the past six years she has worked as a case manager in child welfare at a Native Services branch of a children’s aid society. Before that time, she worked in a group home for troubled youth. Carrie identifies herself as Aboriginal, frequently invoking the phrase, “I’m an Indian” but, she also notes that her paternal great-grandparents immigrated to Canada from the Ukraine during the 1930s.

When I asked Carrie about any early influences that led her to social work, she shared some painful stories about her mom’s life. She was with her mom each day during her agonizing death from cancer when Carrie was only 19 years old. Carrie was raised by her mom and she identifies her as having played a major role in the development of her own identity. She struggles to put words to what this difficult loss meant for her life:

> She bled to death at home. It was very traumatic. And I think that helps me because you know when people say I am young and yes, I don’t have kids, but I can say I have a lot of life experience for being so young...

Carrie shared memories of harsh forms of racism that she encountered during high school where Aboriginal kids were segregated in grade 9 and put into separate classes. This policy was rationalized by the belief that elementary schooling on the reserve where Carrie’s family lived was of an inferior quality. She explains how the emphasis on difference, the elevation of white students’ achievements, and the marginalization of those whom she had previously identified with, all led her to distance herself from her own community. Carrie understood a dynamic where excelling at school meant certain rejection. She describes being taunted: “...you’re not Native anymore, you speak like a white person”...By grade eleven, she became known by the other kids as simply “white-washed”.

The theme of not fitting in anywhere combined with a desire to erase the past circulates in Carrie’s work-life story. She describes her efforts to be seen as modern at a time when many members of her community are reclaiming their spiritual and cultural traditions: “I wear eye contacts and dye my hair and I wear make-up.” Carrie experiences tensions between herself and some of the older, more traditional women she works with in child welfare on the reserve. She recognizes that Aboriginal social workers are treated differently by white social workers at the main agency in town. She understands that to be a Native Services branch worker entails being defined as one of the “outcast people”. However, she notes that her own capacity for upward mobility has improved recently. Now, she believes that she offers desirable characteristics because of her ability to “pass as white”. As far as workers who “look Aboriginal” are concerned, she confides, “They just aren’t taken seriously”. When asked if she thinks this will ever change, Carrie makes a sweeping gesture with her arm and says, “…the whole Government of Canada… (laughter)…It always looks good on paper (laughter)”.

I found that writing pen portraits of each of the social workers in my research made the research participants come to life for me as a writer. I use pen portraits as a method in the hope that they provide the reader of my research with a richer and more layered glimpse into the complexities that are woven in and throughout social workers’ work-life stories. For example, Carrie’s pen portrait manages to hold intact what she has described to be important to her during our interviews – significant people, life events, major influences – and, consequently, it reveals various intersections of identities as well as her multiple positionings within competing discourses. For instance, Carrie openly embraces discourses of “Indianness” while also leaning on discourses of whiteness, femininity and modernity to position herself as “successful” within her workplace. Simultaneously embracing her “Indianness” and distancing herself from her older, more traditional Aboriginal colleagues, she rejects those bodies because she believes they will be positioned as inferior by her white colleagues working off-reserve. Carrie’s pen portrait brings to the forefront the impact of pain and loss on the constitution of one’s subjectivities. Her emotional description of her mother’s death, along with painful accounts of racism confronted in her schooling, provide new openings for thinking about how she has learned to draw on multiple and contradictory subjectivities to position herself as buffered from pain and the material effects of racism in the workplace. As a research method, her pen portrait
counters dominant qualitative research tendencies which force participants into essentialized and totalized units where they are perceived as having little or no internal or social variation.

My use of pen portraits in this study has revealed the uneven and varied biographical histories that influence social workers, along with the unpredictable and, at times, tenuous experiences of work within a context of neoliberal governance. O’Malley, Weir and Shearing (1997) have called this the “messy actualities” of governance: “In this we refer not only to the recognition of the multiplicity of voices and discourses subject to government but not aligned with it, but equally to the multiplicity of voices within rule itself” (p. 505). Pen portraits are sensitive to issues of social heterogeneity, and, consequently, as methods of research, they provide better access to the multiplicity of voices existing within participants’ accounts of themselves. As a result of using pen portraits, my findings build on extended ways of knowing that emphasize paradox and go beyond the safe and bounded practices of conventional qualitative research.

3.5 What Questions Did I Ask and Why?
In the first round of interviews, I continued to puzzle over my key analytic concern of reconciling the paradox between honouring people’s accounts while reading them as the effects of discourses. Hollway and Jefferson (2000) argue that interview techniques should work from the premise that research subjects are both meaning-making and defended; i.e., participants have unique biographies that are constituted through various discourses which support a person’s notion of self-identity. These authors suggest that researchers approach the design of questions for their interview participants with the following set of assumptions:

- Interview participants may not hear the questions through the same meaning-frame as that of the interviewer or other interviewees;
- Participants are invested in particular positions in discourse to protect vulnerable aspects of the self;
- Participants may not know why they experience or feel things in the ways that they do;
- Participants are motivated, largely unconsciously, to disguise the meaning of at least some of their feelings and actions (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p. 27).
Additionally, Hollway and Jefferson (2000) suggest using the following four principles to design questions for the purpose of facilitating the interviewee’s meaning-making as much as possible:

1. Use open-ended not closed questions – the more open the better.
2. Ask questions in ways that elicit stories.
3. Avoid using “why” questions.
4. Follow-up the questions using the participant’s own ordering and phrasing (p. 34-36).

Working within the broad themes of my analytical research question, my approach for interviewing participants was to ask questions in a way that elicited their biographies as social workers: What kinds of life or work experiences drew them to social work as a career? I was also interested to find out the kinds of tensions, contradictions and paradoxes that participants encountered in their practices, both in times past and more recently. I wanted to encourage social workers to talk about the kinds and sources of knowledge, skills and techniques that they draw upon in order to manage tensions in their practise. I was interested in knowing what being a social worker meant for each participant in the past as well as in the current set of working conditions. Finally, I wondered what kind of advice participants would give for managing the current context of practice to new social workers in the field. I planned to let the interview follow directions determined by each participant’s own emphasis as discussions unfolded. To this end, I developed a set of open-ended questions that merely served as a guide for our conversations (See Appendix E).

At the end of their first interview, participants were invited to participate in a follow-up interview. Before we met for their second interview, I provided participants with the transcripts of their first interview. I made sure that there was ample time to digest and critically interrogate the material generated in the first interview since the goal of this method was intended to foster a collaborative approach between me and the participants, and to highlight the importance of participants’ critical reflections on their experiences of restructuring in their everyday work-lives. I asked participants to think about what was said and how it was said. For example, I probed for any changes in emotional tone used, and asked them to consider the presence and meaning of any contradictions or inconsistencies. Participants were invited to join with me in developing follow-up questions to address emerging themes so that we could
further explore any tensions and contradictions that were found in their initial accounts. Examples of emerging themes included the relationship between participants’ social and family biographies and their own identities; their understanding of tensions and their abilities to reconcile tensions; ethical concerns in their practice of social work; inner struggles and doubts; the meanings attached to important catch-phrases in the current context of work; i.e., “partnerships”, “teams”, and “change”. Out of these mutually-reflective practices, I developed an open-ended question guide to be used for all follow-up interviews (See Appendix F). The length of time for the first and second interviews was about the same: from one to two hours long. For those participants who declined the second interview but agreed to provide responses to my questions in writing, the technique I used was similar to their first interview. However, instead of face-to-face discussions about emerging themes, we corresponded in writing over electronic mail.

3.6 My Role: Intersubjectivity and the Active Interview
It was during the process of reviewing the transcripts from the initial interviews that I became aware of the presence of my voice during conversations with participants. It occurred to me that at times my role went beyond that of elicting their narratives. Sometimes, I responded to particular aspects of participants’ stories and not others. I began to wonder about how my conduct as an interviewer shaped participants’ accounts and what they could and could not say back to me. I became concerned about how my interactions during interviews impacted my findings. The following example highlights these concerns and provides some tentative pathways to follow in order to understand an interview as relational and occurring between two co-creators of meaning.

It is possible to see how, in my interview with Anne, a Mohawk woman and member of the Turtle Clan and a front-line service provider at a Native Services Branch of a child welfare agency, “my voice” becomes part of “her story”. In the following excerpt from her interview transcript, Anne has just finished telling me about a horrendous experience where she witnessed first-hand, the desperate poverty of the inner city of the Downtown Vancouver East Side. Then, she says to me, “(Pause)...I never want to see...I’ve never seen anything like that in my life (Pause)...and I would say half of them were between the ages of twelve to sixteen. I’ve never seen anything like that. I cried.” I reacted immediately to Anne’s tears and began to draw on my own experience as an anti-poverty and anti-violence activist as well as my knowledge
about this particular neighbourhood in Vancouver. I add to her narrative, saying:
“(Pause)…Yea. And so many of them are Aboriginal kids…” Anne moves quickly to affirm my
narrative, stating emphatically, “That’s all I’d seen…the majority of them. That’s all I saw.”
Leading her interview further, I observe: “It makes me think of the missing women…” Anne
responds by letting me know that she also thinks about these women: “Five hundred. I’ve seen
the articles done by the Vancouver Sun. I know about that.” In this example, my response to
Anne was to intervene in her account and to encourage her to say more about what I thought
she was getting at. At this research moment, I became implicated in her account and was far
from being the “objective and neutral” listener required by conventional scientific methods. I
remember feeling anxious at the time about Anne’s tears, and also feeling a sense of
responsibility to support and validate the significance of what she was telling me. In reading
this exchange later, I worried about the possible implications it had for seeing Anne’s account
as “valid”.

As I considered the implications of what could be considered my intrusion into Anne’s
narrative about what she witnessed, I found it helpful to begin thinking about both the
researcher and the participants as anxious and defended subjects. Hollway and Jefferson (2000)
explore this idea and argue that both sides in an interview will be subject to “projections and
introjections of ideas and feelings coming from the other person” (p. 45). Additionally, these
theorists believe that what gets said in interviews is always mediated by our internal fantasies
and desires as derived from our unique histories and significant relationships. As a result, they
argue that the narratives produced are always a product of “intersubjectivity” (p. 44) and the
relationship that gets established through the interview. In other words, what was said in the
interview with Anne is mediated by social discourses, and by our unique biographies, but also
by our coming together with shared knowledge and investments as activist social workers. I
have no doubt that aspects of my intervention in the interview with Anne reflect my political
beliefs, my values, and my work history, but also, how I produce myself as an ethical
researcher and a compassionate colleague. When I look back on it now, it is difficult to
conceive of how I could possibly conduct an interview without the presence of these important
parts of who I am. Holstein and Gubrium (1997) suggest a method that they call an “active
interview” (p. 121) whereby both the interviewer and interviewed are seen as active producers
of meaning. These authors argue that through the interview process itself, both the researcher
and the participants are actively producing their subjectivities. They conclude that, “the
objective is not to dictate interpretation, but to provide an environment conducive to the production of the range and complexity of meanings that address relevant issues” (p. 123). Working with these ideas, I decided that it is both impossible and undesirable for me to be “neutral” in an interview, especially around subject matters that are important to me as a person and as a social worker. Just as Walkerdine (1997) explains, “as a researcher, I am no more, no different from the subjects of my research” (p. 73). Walkerdine’s advice is to remain aware of one’s own feelings as an interviewer and to recognize how researchers can come to influence the account told by participants. Throughout the process of interviewing research subjects as well as the reading of their transcripts, I endeavoured to use critical self-reflection as a method of analysis (Heron, 2005). I borrow this technique from Heron (2005) who uses this approach as a pedagogical tool for helping social work students learn to recognize how power and oppression shape their sense of self and their approach to practice. Heron suggests a series of self-reflective questions can serve as the guide for this approach (p. 349). My adaptation of critical self-reflection is intended to guide me in thinking about how my various investments in particular subject positions will play out in the interviewing relationship: What subject positions do I occupy? What subject positions do my research participants occupy? What do my various investments do – what do they enable and foreclose during my interviews with participants? It is important to ensure that my interactions with participants are beneficial equally to them and to the aims of my interview process. I found it helpful to check in with participants during our interviews, frequently asking them if they felt I was hearing and understanding their stories. Intersubjectivity and the active interview are methods that help me remember that I, too, am part of the meaning-making process as a research interviewer. Keeping this in mind, my interventions with participants must, at all times, be used to improve rapport and enhance the stories that may be told by participants.

3.7 Other Sources of Information: Government “Texts”

Throughout my dissertation research, I have consulted with key government documents that are related to the changing policies in child welfare and primary health care in Ontario. The documents I examined are readily available to the public and were obtained through the Ontario government websites. They are the following: Introduction to Family Health Teams (Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-term Care, 2006) and Child Welfare Transformation 2005: A Strategic Plan for a Flexible, Sustainable and Outcome Oriented Service Delivery
Model (Child Welfare Secretariat, 2005). I view these documents as “texts” in the cultural studies tradition (see Barthes, 1977; Hall, 1980). Within this tradition, texts are examined in order to determine how they produce meaning, rather than searching them for any actual meaning that is hidden within the text until the scholar comes along to reveal it. Key to understanding texts in this way is the notion that meaning is a social production, and the language that gets used is central to the production of specific meanings (Hall, 1982). However, as Hall (1982) explains, for one meaning to be socially produced, it must win “credibility, legitimacy or taken-for-grantedness for itself” (p.63). Meanings produced in this way can take on a sense of shared assumptions consistent with what is generally known as “common sense” (Hall, 1985, p. 105). From the discipline of Sociology, Dorothy Smith (1999) refers to texts as becoming “active” (p. 135) through our reading of them. She explains that although the text can be seen as detached from its historical and material setting, “its making was work done in actual settings by one or more people and as part of a course of action” (p. 135-136). In this way, texts have the capacity to extend social relations through coordinating the activities of many. These ideas are congruent with Foucault’s (1991b) notion of governmentality whereby conduct is shaped through a range of tactics and techniques. However, in viewing texts in this way, I am also resisting the idea that they are all-determining and that people exposed to them will all interpret and make sense of them in the same way. Nevertheless, as signifiers of government policy intentions, the mass dissemination of government documents for the purposes of consumption by members of the public, generally, and, professional service providers more specifically, can be seen as part of a process of manufacturing consensus and manufacturing consent (Hall, 1982). My examination of government documents provides an important context for understanding the working lives of social workers in the Province of Ontario. But more importantly, public policy documents can be seen to be instrumental in organizing and administering the work settings of social workers employed in the sectors targeted by those policies (Pare, 2004). They establish, in Ball’s (2001) terms, “the existence of an attitude and an ethical framework” (p. 211) within which social workers are encouraged to think about what they do and also who they are. As an example, front-line and supervisory workers from child welfare frequently made reference to the well-publicized government document commonly known as “Transformation” (Child Welfare Secretariat, 2005) during my interviews with them. Several participants noted how this document had become a “template” of sorts for their current practices. Although the texts did
not determine their practices, they can and do provide significant meaning against which their practices may be measured. Similar to Ball (2001), I am interested in how government documents as texts work to “make us up” (pg. 211) through the establishment of what it means to be a “successful child welfare worker” at this particular time. Viewing the documents as “texts” encapsulates the evolving discourses of reform and change within the primary health care and child welfare systems in Ontario. However, following Mankekar (1999), my approach is to highlight the idea that the meaning implied throughout government documents, when seen as texts, is highly unstable and, as such, it can be incorporated or contested by individuals who are positioned differently within competing discourses.

3.8 How I Used the Government “Texts”

The government documents chosen for analysis and examined as texts in my research represent examples of technologies of government which help to produce and shape social workers’ sense of self and their purpose on a day-to-day basis. In order to “read” the government texts as discursive productions, I draw on the method known as “critical discourse analysis” (Fairclough, 1995). Fairclough (1995) describes critical discourse analysis as a three-dimensional framework where the aim is to understand how each of the three separate realms intersects and interacts with each other. The dimensions include analysis of either spoken or written texts, analysis of discourse practice (how the texts are produced, distributed and consumed), and analysis of how discursive events emerge as sociocultural everyday practice. When used as a research tool, critical discourse analysis allows me to focus on government documents not only for what they contain in terms of information, but also for what they produce through their public circulation and interpretation. In reading the texts, I ask questions such as: what views of primary health care or child welfare does this text reveal to the reader? What kinds of broad themes run through the text? How do these themes intersect with each other? What issues are highlighted and which ones are absent? What contradictions are present in the texts? How are these resolved? The written texts are read by me against the data produced through the individual interviews of research subjects. As I collect themes found in the government documents, I listen to interview participants’ accounts and carefully read their transcripts for the appearance of similar themes, but also for themes that may seem contrary to what I read in the textual representations of their work. Davies (2005) explains that a particular feature of subjectivity constituted under neoliberalism is that hopes, ideals and fears have been
shaped in such a way that individuals take up desires to be morally-worthy and responsibilized individuals who can perform effectively and efficiently at work. The analysis of documents in this study will pay particular attention to how the discourses of neoliberalism circulate beyond their textual representations. An example of this can be found in the consistency with which health and social service agencies begin to reflect similar discourses of efficiency and flexibility in their expectations of workers’ practices and within their emphasis on performance outcomes. I also analyse how these discourses of work can both converge in, and collide with, social workers’ talk about their work. For example, at times social workers will adopt the language used in government documents to describe their practices while also identifying tensions or contradictions between what is expected and what is possible on a day-to-day basis in their work. This analytic method provides additional opportunities to consider the pressures that influence how social work subjects position themselves within competing discourses in order to manage tensions and contradictions found in restructured social and health service work.

In the following chapter, I begin to analyse those findings that result from the applications of these methods. I explore the ways that the discursive repertoires circulating around notions of change produce a variety of subject positions that are available to social workers in their newly-restructured work settings.
Chapter 4

The Allure of Change and other Fantasy Moments

4.1 Introduction
Significant policy changes in two important care sectors that employ social workers were announced in 2005 by the Ontario Liberal government. The new programs resulting from these changes would be known as Child Welfare Transformation and Primary Health Care Renewal. At first glance, these two programs appeared to be long overdue breaks from the legacies of the previous two Conservative governments. The glaring monuments of prior reform measures—long wait lists, huge case loads, and “cookie cutter” approaches to care—were expected to be remedied through improved access to an expanded array of flexible service interventions. This background is the context for my research. In this chapter, I draw on in-depth individual interviews with activist social workers in order to explore and reflect on questions of power, identity, knowledge and critical practices during a time when the terrain for debate and struggle has shifted—what some have called a “pendulum swing” (Dumbrill, 2006, p. 6). What does it mean to be an activist social worker when hope for change is seemingly on the rise? What kinds of subjectivities, knowledges, and work practices do we bring to a context characterized not by regressive reforms, but by the allure of transformative renewal?

I first became aware of Transformation and Renewal when I was working as a social worker in a primary health care setting. Like many others, I had struggled through Premier Mike Harris’ so-called “Common Sense Revolution”. Promising to be rid of “big government”, to get “tough on crime”, and to fix all that was wrong with health and social services, Harris unleashed a torrent of cuts, downsizing and privatization measures, and other regressive reforms (Jeffrey, 1999). As a result of Harris’ attacks on the public sector and equity-seeking groups, spaces for social activism were also diminished. Social and health services were restructured to produce cost-cutting “efficiencies”, and many of us were left grappling with a lost sense of ethical purpose as social workers. Coming at the end of such regressive times, the idea of a fresh start encircled by narratives about new ways of working seemed irresistibly alluring.

Described as a “total transformation” of the health care system, the new primary health care program known as Renewal promises 50 multidisciplinary teams located in 112
communities across the province. These Family Health Teams, consisting of networks of social workers, doctors, nurses and other health care professionals, would eventually serve as many as 2.5 million Ontarians (Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-term Care, 2006). Government documents describing the new program are available on-line at the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-term Care website. These documents emphasize the need for “flexibility”, “choice” and “equity” within health care services. They promise that the 50 multidisciplinary teams will work “collaboratively” with local “community partnerships” in order to provide expanded access to patient-centred care located close to where people live, and that their focus will be on effective “health promotion” and “illness prevention” (Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-term Care, 2005, 2006).

At the same time, Ontario’s child welfare system is also undergoing “a significant shift in culture” (Child Welfare Secretariat, 2005, p. 23) under the program known as Child Welfare Transformation. As outlined in a government document available on the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services web-site, this program promises more “flexible” approaches that emphasize differential responses to child welfare concerns. The various responses include kinship arrangements, mediation and family conferencing which are all designed to “build on family and community strengths” (Child Welfare Secretariat, 2005, p. 8). Mirroring changes in primary health care, child welfare has adopted more “collaborative” approaches with families and community partners while placing greater emphasis on early detection and prevention of risks to kids.

The promise of change for social workers in these important sectors is undeniably desirable. Yet, nagging questions remain. What if the embrace of programs such as Transformation and Renewal leads to the belief that we can overcome the ongoing legacies of prior restructuring measures simply through new collaborative ways of working? Is it possible to address the chasm of major social problems facing many in the province of Ontario including poverty, homelessness, under-employment and lack of childcare merely through better “partnering” with community services? Furthermore, what do we do with the knowledge that so many “community partners” in the entire non-profit sector continue to struggle with severe under-funding and administrative burdens that push them to be “operating on the edge” (Eakin, 2007, p. 52) of viability?

Throughout the summer and fall of 2008, I interviewed seventeen self-identified, activist social workers from Ontario’s child welfare and primary health care sectors in order to
explore their responses to recent work-related changes. Three years had passed since the introduction of *Transformation* and *Renewal* to their agencies and clinics, and although the programs were at varying stages of implementation, social workers were able to share observations and concerns about emerging tensions, conflicts and contradictions experienced under these initiatives. Specific examples will be explored at length below; however, for the purpose of this introduction, social workers’ concerns revolved around three major areas. Firstly, much of the new funding had not materialized as promised, nor was the available money being directed in an accountable and transparent fashion. For many in the study, the lack of transparency led to doubts about whether funding would be used to fulfill promises of expansions to direct services. Secondly, stringent government-driven audit and accountability-review systems continued to be applied in ways that increased top-down surveillance, control, and decision-making over front-line practices. It was believed that these command and control processes prioritized financial efficiencies, narrowed creativity and diminished innovation at the local level of care, and that they fostered dispiriting forms of competition between agencies and individual service providers. Finally, participants described the variety of ways that the new practice interventions continued the “Harris legacy” by downloading the provision of public services onto the private realm. In other words, in this new era of “transformed” health and child welfare, responsibilities for care increasingly fell to the individual, family and community. In the words of one child welfare supervisor:

> It reminds me of the Mike Harris thing back in the 90s, where he cut, right? Told people to go to their families…told them to go to their extended family, as well. It’s the same thing with Transformation. Go back to the extended family. Go to the communities. But there’s no funding…

Based on their own direct observations, a majority of social workers who took part in my research expressed serious doubts about the ability of the new programs to achieve the promise of change. And yet, to date, public debate and criticism of *Transformation* and *Renewal* remain curiously muted even though the harsh legacies of Harris continue to persist in the province.

The absence of public criticism directed at *Transformation* and *Renewal* seem puzzling. Yet, as Judith Butler (2008) observes while commenting on the post-Bush era’s “Obama Effect” in the US, “many of us ‘set aside’ our concerns in order to enjoy the extreme un-
ambivalence of this moment, risking an uncritical exuberance even when we know better” (p. 1). If, as Butler suggests, an enthusiasm for change requires that social workers set aside our critical analysis skills in order to enjoy a fantasy moment, then how do we manage to mask or deny the conflicts and contradictions that also reside in that moment? And what are the personal, professional and political costs for doing so?

In this chapter, I suggest that social workers’ responses to the contradictions experienced under Transformation and Renewal can be analysed, in part, as emerging forms of self-governing identified by Michel Foucault as “neoliberal governmentality” (Lemke, 2001, p. 201). Lemke (2001) explains that Foucault viewed neoliberalism as the emergence of more versatile forms of governing where the state retains its traditional functions but also develops “indirect techniques for leading and controlling individuals without at the same time being responsible for them” (p. 201). Foucault’s (2000b) notion that neoliberalism is a form of governmentality is based on some key assumptions about power and its effect on subjects. Foucault believed that power is not so much a matter of imposing constraints upon people as it is a process of “making up” selves that are capable of bearing forms of regulated freedom (Rose and Miller, 1992, p. 174). The exercise of power is not simply a relationship between people; it is the way in which certain actions work to modify others. According to Foucault (2000b), power is:

[A] total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult...it is nevertheless always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action. A set of actions upon other actions. (p. 341)

Governing, from this perspective, can only ever happen over free subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving may be realized. Consequently, the regulatory functions of the state are extended to “responsible” and “rational individuals” (Lemke, 2001, p. 201). As Lemke (2001) explains,

[the strategy of rendering individual subjects ‘responsible’ (and also collectives, such as families, associations, etc.) entails shifting the responsibility for social risks such as illness, unemployment, poverty, etc., and for life in society into the domain for which
the individual is responsible and transforming [italics added] it into a problem of ‘self-care’. (p. 201)

In this way, neoliberal governing acts through people to extend and disseminate market values to all institutions and forms of social interaction (Brown, 2005).

Paul du Gay (1996) works with Foucault’s ideas about governing in order to explore how identities are organized through emerging neoliberal changes in the culture of public services. Much of du Gay’s discussions resonate with the changes taking place in child welfare and primary health care in Ontario. For example, he explains that the constitution of new managerial identities draws on “proactive” and “entrepreneurial” traits and virtues seen to be associated with efficiency. du Gay argues that a key feature of “enterprise” is the central role it allocates to the “commercial enterprise” (p. 155) as the preferred model for organizing services. Of equal importance, is the way in which the term signals the habits and actions that display or express “enterprising qualities”: “initiative, risk-taking, self-reliance, and the ability to accept responsibility for oneself and one’s actions” (p. 155). From du Gay’s perspective, the new subject of enterprise is an inherently malleable creation and manages to perpetually adapt to modifications in the work environment. Based on du Gay’s interpretation of Foucault, social workers in my research could be seen as indirect agents of government. They are charged with the tasks of reducing social and health care spending, generally. More specifically, they encourage self-reliance and self-regulation among individuals throughout the population who are the targets of concern in primary health care and child welfare.

Although du Gay’s (1996) ideas about the constitutional effects of neoliberal managerialism are compelling, I take issue with his argument that the production of new work identities are shaped predominantly through new managerial discourses. My interviews with activist social workers labouring under Transformation and Renewal reveal that in addition to self-managing, entrepreneurial subject positions, there are other forms of self-governing at play. For example, some social workers’ stories about their experiences of work under the new programs reveal ways that they are constituted as a “subject of transformative change” – a self that is capable of “teamwork”, “partnerships”, and “collaboration”. While these subject positions can be analysed simply as emerging forms of “enterprise” whereby social workers perform those traits valorized under neoliberalism such as “innovation” and “flexibility”, this analysis fails to grasp how discourses of “change” intersect with other important subject
positions in social workers’ lives. This failure obscures the regulatory effects of discourses of change. Furthermore, du Gay does not explain how it is that some social workers position themselves in opposition to emerging discourses in the workplace. The findings I discuss in this chapter provide an alternative interpretation of Foucault’s ideas about neoliberal governance, one in which the making up of the social work self results in far less determined outcomes.

Following this introduction, I explore how the success of “change” as a discursive repertoire lies in its association with socially progressive ideals and aspirations that are consistent with many desirable goals held by activist social workers. I discuss how the appeal of such an association draws on social workers’ desires for renewed services, especially in light of the years of regressive reforms under the Mike Harris regime. Yearning for interventions that can make a difference in people’s lives, social workers enthusiastically embrace the emerging programs, making themselves up to be “subjects of transformative change”.

Next, in a section entitled, “Sticky Discourses”, I discuss how “discourses of change” that circulate throughout Transformation and Renewal are “sticky” and “saturated with affect” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 11). Such discourses are effective precisely because of activist social workers’ deep emotional attachments to the very things the discourses of change allude to: “strengthened communities”, “equity”, and “strengths-based practices”, to name a few. In this way, “stickiness” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 11) can work to augment forms of self-governance that I call “subjects of transformative change”. Consequently, a neoliberal economic vision of the world is both advanced and obscured through its ability to “bind” itself to associations with more socially progressive visions of being. I also explore how this stickiness interacts with different social workers’ emotional attachments and particular social histories and results in varied positioning. I argue that it is within these variances that we can find a more detailed understanding of the effects of emerging forms of neoliberal governing in health care and child welfare.

Subsequent to my discussion about the “stickiness” of discourses of change, the next part of the chapter explores what happens when things fail to “stick together”. This discussion includes a detailed examination of how social workers experience and respond to emerging contradictions and tensions found in Renewal and Transformation. I analyse how social workers adopt a variety of techniques for self-regulation, many of which are difficult to pin down due to complex and sometimes contradictory positioning. I highlight the ways that social
workers endeavour to make themselves up as coherent beings within a context riddled with tensions. I next discuss what it means to re-arrange oneself in order to become a subject of leadership, teamwork and collaboration. I explore the various discomforts experienced by social workers as they struggle to find forms of self-governing capable of resolving feelings of ambivalence, anger, resentment and betrayal over perceptions of broken promises in the workplace. The process of coming to grips with limitations and disappointments sees some social workers re-assemble to become transforming subjects that exhibit greater “flexibility of the person” (Scourfield, 2007, p. 107).

Recognizing the barriers faced by some social workers, I next focus on the positioning amongst those social workers who frequently find themselves unable to navigate the emerging requirements under Transformation and Renewal. I explore how those forms of self-governing which require defiance place these social workers permanently at the “border” (Walkerdine, 2006, p. 13) in their workplaces. These “border” spaces are reserved for “outcasts” and others whose lives embody “difference” within contexts that are dominated by whiteness and demand particular classed and gendered performances of service.

In the concluding section, I discuss how social workers’ narratives about work can reveal messy, complicated forms of self-governing that will variously collude with and, at times, collide with emerging discourses of neoliberalism. I consider how the idea that power acts through people in the context of work has too often been limited to considerations of how work organizations produce people as subjects who “make up” their identities (du Gay, 1996; Sennett, 1998). I suggest that the findings discussed in this chapter challenge this overly-determined idea that work manages to make people up completely.

Throughout this chapter, I draw on social workers’ accounts to show that workplace changes required through Transformation and Renewal are not always met with compliance, nor do they result in an automatically re-shaped sense of self. Throughout the interviews, social workers share how they struggle at work with doubts, regrets, anger, and a sense of betrayal. In many instances, the “stickiness” of neoliberalism is never completely guaranteed. Rather, people’s emotional investments vary and will intersect differently, sometimes unpredictably, with new work discourses depending upon their unique biographical histories and social locations. Within these “messy actualities of governance” (O’Malley, Weir & Shearing, 1997, p. 504), one thing becomes clear: Activist social workers do not all tell the same story about the impact of new organizational changes on their work-lives, their aspirations, and their
identities as activists. In this chapter, I trace some of the multiple ways that people respond to changes in the workplace. None of these stories are complete. Nor are their contours neat and tidy or easy to follow. However, they all have something important to say about how to manage the tensions of new “transformative” service arrangements. From these stories, we can learn more about who we might be becoming now as activist social workers. Perhaps more importantly, we can envision possibilities for who we might become as future agents of critical social change.

4.2 Subjects of Transformational Change
Social workers employed in either child welfare or primary health care recall how their work sites were immediately flooded with themes of change as soon as the new programs were announced. Inundated with new procedural directives and training initiatives, one child welfare manager likened it to a “tsunami that was going to sweep us all out to sea”. Social workers eagerly anticipated the new ways of working that were outlined in the programs, including more flattened team arrangements and the development of collaborative networks involving service users and other service providers in the community. In the beginning, social workers were clear: Partnerships, teams and collaborative work arrangements offered greater opportunities for their input into policy and procedural decisions, as well as creating more room for innovative case planning and management. Many expressed hope that through better integration of community supports and enhanced resources, social workers could offer more comprehensive solutions to the problems faced by service users and their families.

Despite feeling overwhelmed at times, the themes of change held significant appeal for many. Some felt the new programs conveyed a distinctly emancipatory agenda that reminded them of why they went into social work in the first place. As one front-line child welfare worker shares, “it was the whole feeling of when I first got into social work in school, ‘we’re going to change the world, we’re going to make it better!’ And I thought WOO-HOO! This feels great!” Social workers anticipated that the new programs signalled renewed commitments to “front-end” interventions in the lives of service users, including interventions aimed at expanding opportunities for the prevention of crises, many of which had been virtually shut down during the repressive Harris years. Recalling the constraints imposed on her practice throughout those years, Joy explains:
I think that was a period for me when activism was impossible because it was so difficult to do our job. It was so difficult to go see the client who had no money. It was so difficult to help when there’s no services…it was just one thing after another. You were inundated with trying to keep your head above water.

Many social workers described how they believed that the new work arrangements represented a break from past practices when top-down surveillance and tick-box approaches were emphasized over more comprehensive care practices. Expressing relief and exuberance about the new forms of care work, Anita, a child welfare worker, exclaimed “Differential Response has really allowed me to come out of the closet! It’s really about letting me practice the way I’ve always wanted to, the way I envisioned it would be, and it’s a partnership!” Lydia, a social worker with many years of experience in health care services, believes passionately that primary care is an ideal site for mental health care services because, unlike many other services in the post-Mike Harris era, primary care is universally available. Lydia describes the “phenomenal potential” of interdisciplinary teams for solving many persistent social problems and for simultaneously minimizing the strain on an already overburdened provincial health care budget.

We have social workers, we have dieticians, we have pharmacists, we have a lactation consultant, we have nurse practitioners, and there are a lot of potential resources that you can draw upon. And we are more and more working together. Like the dietician is supposed to do a weight loss programme, and she said “weight loss alone doesn’t work”…this is not a good thing. So now we’re doing a self-esteem / body image group together. That makes so much more common-sense.

Social workers also expressed similar relief about leaving behind the standardized models of care that had come to dominate practice in the 1990s. Frank, a thirty-eight year-old, white man who works as a supervisor in child welfare reflects on the use of standardized assessments in child welfare and explains that as an activist, he found such tools to be narrow and insufficient for understanding the broader context of service users’ lives. Although he’s glad to learn that
government regulators will be introducing more flexibility to these tools, Frank worries about the harm that has been already done. He explains:

I think the more we reflect on what we’ve done in the risk assessment days, the more I think we’re starting to realize how rigid our thinking has been…it’s easy for us to remind ourselves that we made the best choices we could and we really did, you know. I’ve even likened it to historically where social work has made shifts around the residential schools in the ‘50s and ‘60s, and even into the ‘70s when the last one closed down. Some of the people teaching us to be social workers were actually social workers at that time. They believed that they were doing the best service they could for Aboriginal children…And then, you know, came the regrets.

There was a palpable yearning observed in social workers’ narratives that indicated a desire to return to forms of practice that they believed could make a real difference in people’s lives. In many instances, it was apparent that social workers labouring under Transformation and Renewal were enthusiastically making themselves up to be subjects of transformative change. One child welfare supervisor expressed this positioning in the following way: “We were going to try and be more family-based, family-oriented, least intrusive measures are best, kind of thing…working with families instead of against families”. Another front-line mental health service provider recalled thinking that her move to the new program in primary care would mean a return to creativity and patient-centred care. She believed that people would receive better care with fewer stigmas in less bureaucratic settings. For social workers in my research, the themes of change so prevalent in Transformation and Renewal programs represented a long overdue and welcomed shift in service arrangements. And, they embraced these themes with great enthusiasm.

Catherine Casey (1999) writes about how the new organizational culture depends on the deliberate instalment of incontestable and universally-attractive discourses that are designed to signal the sharing of skills and labour directed toward the attainment of shared goals. In particular, she takes up the increasing use of teams in the workplace and considers the psychic effects of these institutional practices on individual employees. She argues that the discursively constructed notion of “team” manages to elicit and simulate warm feelings of
belonging while simultaneously serving as a regulatory and disciplinary device in the workplace. Casey describes this process as a “discursive colonization of the employee self” (p. 159). Missing from Casey’s analysis is how teams and partnerships can obscure differences between individuals based on social hierarchies of power. The success of teams requires that we forget how the workplace, much like the world around us, is materially organized. In the following section, I build on Casey’s analysis to explore how activist social workers position themselves within the discourses of transformative change while simultaneously drawing on alternative discourses related to important emotional attachments and investments in their lives. My analysis reveals the ways that discourses of change, such as teams and partnerships, manage to hide important social processes based on historical contingencies of power and oppression.

4.3 Sticky Discourses
Throughout our interviews, social workers expressed strong emotional attachments to many aspects of work found in the new modes of organizational change, including “partnerships”, “community”, “collaboration” and “team-work”. Many spoke at length about how a renewed focus on the values of progressive social change would enable them to engage in the kinds of interventions that would support service users and contribute to desired social changes within the wider community. At the same time, social workers’ stories about changes at work were informed by complicated patterns of attachments, many of which are bound up with identifications that are outside the boundaries of the workplace. I was interested to explore how new discourses of work interact with social workers’ identifications beyond work.

A close examination of their biographical histories provides insights into why activist social workers find the discourses of Transformation and Renewal compelling, how it is that they are drawn into these new ways of working, and what it is that gets projected once social workers experience the programs firsthand. For example, Marie’s commitments to better community partnerships are informed by her mom’s experiences as a survivor of domestic violence and her own professional knowledge about the ways that child welfare has “failed miserably”. Marie states that she has been involved too many times with cases in which there was a threat that children would be apprehended from their mothers due to the risks associated with violence against women; in other words, abuse perpetrated by fathers or male partners towards mothers. She believes that if women’s shelters, police services and child welfare
authorities somehow found better ways of working collaboratively, then children and their mothers would be safer from harm and less vulnerable to state-imposed separations. Similarly, Hannah recalls her own experiences of being apprehended by child welfare and taken from her father’s care when she was a child. Instead of being placed with her mom as Hannah had desired, the authorities returned her to her dad’s care because “he had better lawyers than she did”. Hannah harbours strong feelings of betrayal because of this event in her early life. These feelings drive her fierce desire to embrace changes to professional practice that promise to put children’s needs in the centre of case-planning and decision-making. In another situation, the scars of racism inform Pauline’s strong beliefs about the power of networks, alliances and community collaborations to make the changes she desires for strengthening community supports for newcomers to Canada. Having immigrated to Canada herself as a young woman, Pauline recalls what it was like to be both racialized and isolated for the first time in her life: “I couldn’t sleep. I was having nightmares. I was alienated because of the culture shock that I was experiencing. And, I couldn’t find anyone who could understand what it’s like not to belong.” Now, many years later, Pauline is passionate about helping other newcomers feel supported, and she believes that her role as a social worker in primary health care provides the ideal pathway for making that happen. Didi shares that her desires to make transformative change are very much tied to her experiences while growing up in a working-class family in Southern Ontario. Her dad left school to join the army when he was sixteen. Didi recalls that for most of her young life, her father worked long hours at two jobs. As a result, she remembers seeing him only rarely at home. Didi’s mother has a grade nine education and also worked long hours in a factory. Didi believes that her mom’s and dad’s hardships shaped expectations for her own life-trajectory from the time she was very young: “I always tell people that the expectations that I grew up with were that I was to graduate high school and I was not to be pregnant before I did that”. As she grew older, the idea of “moving up in life” through post-secondary education became more important. However, Didi recalls how difficult it was for her to obtain the self-confidence that she needed to pursue this goal:

It took me a long time to feel like I had the confidence to go into university… I was an overweight kid and that has all kinds of impacts when you’re a teenager. But I had a friend who was very, very smart and she was the one who basically said, “What do you
mean you can’t do this? This is crazy, you can do it” And it sort of started the ball rolling.

Eventually, Didi obtained her Master’s degree in social work. She very much hopes that opportunities within Renewal will enable her to share knowledge and skills she gained from watching her parents’ hardships, as well as navigating her own uphill battles.

Like many others in the study, Marie, Hannah, Pauline and Didi anticipated that the new modes of change would potentially open up spaces for socially progressive, activist agendas. Also like others, their hopes and desires for change are forged and shaped through pivotal life experiences from their pasts. I draw on Ahmed (2004a) to describe these life histories as “affective economies” (p. 119) in that social workers’ hopes, desires and attachments work as forms of capital. The analysis provided by Ahmed is that rather than seeing emotions as merely psychological dispositions, we need to consider how they work in concrete ways. Ahmed states that emotions “do things” (p. 119). They produce things by aligning individuals and communities through the intensity of their attachments. Accordingly, affect works through the circulation of discourses and “the more they circulate, the more affective they become, and the more they appear to ‘contain’ affect” (p. 120). To explain how this works in practice, Ahmed draws on examples in the UK where through their everyday talk, public figures manage to produce the nation as a welcoming and generous place, but also as a space that is “swamped” and “flooded” with “asylum seekers” and “international terrorists” (p. 122). As Ahmed observes, “[h]ere words generate effects: they create impressions of others as those who have invaded the space of the nation, threatening its existence” (p. 122). The example provided by Ahmed shows how affect can work as a sticky discourse by creating the effect of solidarity as white nationals come together around a shared idea. The passion of the negative feelings evoked through such insidious phrasings about others is redefined simultaneously as a positive attachment to the imagined white subjects who become consolidated through discourses associated with being overwhelmed. Commenting on Ahmed’s analysis of the rhetoric of hate, Hook (2005) observes that the force of love should also be emphasized when thinking through how emotions are put to work. He notes that this is particularly so “within strategies of liberal democratic governmentality, where one cannot express, indeed conduct hate in any other terms” (p. 16). Adapting Hook’s notion to social workers’ lives left me considering the ways that our desires for transformative change
frequently circulate through the register of “love” for others. One needs to look no further than our commitment to social welfare measures and their associated policies and practices. These are undeniably regulatory in their effect. As Hook (2005) explains, “[o]ne cannot but be struck by the ‘ethical’ quality of much of this language, the degree to which so much of its central thrust requires loving attachments” (p. 16).

The idea that there is a binding effect through the sticky associations between and among discourses resonated powerfully for me as I reflected on my interview with Theresa, a white, primary health care social worker. As I arrived at the busy health care clinic that day, Theresa greeted me in the main reception area. Before making our way to a private office for an interview, she pointed out how staff at the clinic - primarily white, middle-class, health care professionals - had volunteered to wear “red and white” on that particular day in celebration of Canada Day. In Theresa’s mind, her decision to wear the colours of Canada’s flag was a conscious way to demonstrate a “positive sense of togetherness” with her other colleagues at the clinic. Ahmed (2004a) explains that the flag is an important “sticky sign” (p. 130). Its stickiness enables the flag to bind with associated signs in order to give the impression of coherence; i.e., the nation as “sticking together”. Ahmed observes that flags generally serve as a reminder of historical conquest as well as patriotic love for the nation, and together, these ideas produce the notion that one is “with others” and “against other others” (p. 130). As seen through Ahmed’s lens, Theresa’s and the other staff’s wearing of coordinated flag colours can be seen as a technology of governing which works to produce the medical clinic as a place which consolidates particular types of subjects – white, middle-class, Canadian subjects – and marks that same space as exclusionary of all others.

Both Ahmed (2004a) and Hook (2005) analyse affective economies in terms of how these can consolidate white subjects; however, I also want to extend their ideas to subjects who come to occupy non-dominant positions within social hierarchies of power. In the case of Marie, Hannah and Pauline, discourses of transformative change intersect with their passionate commitments to care and justice, as well as a valuing of the notion that it is possible to “do good” through the building of broad community solidarity. My examination of these social workers’ biographies reveals meaningful life experiences and a deep desire to repair the damage that had been inflicted on them or on others with whom they identify. Hoggett, Mayo and Miller (2006) call this desire a “reparative impulse” (p. 763) and suggest that it can be carried throughout one’s life in the form of a straightforward desire to end social suffering.
Ahmed (2004b) describes this desire as the “rippling effect of emotions” (p. 45) that move sideways through “sticky” associations that bind ideas together. They move forward where we imagine and fantasize about the future. And, they move backward where the presence of our histories always “leaves its trace in our present” (p. 45). Working with these ideas enables me to see how new work discourses contained within Transformation and Renewal can become “sticky” when applied to the affective economies mobilized by activist social workers’ desires. It becomes possible to see how an emerging emphasis on workplace partnerships, teamwork and community collaborations can produce a form of self-governing whereby discourses of transformative change become associated with the affective economies found in social workers’ biographical histories. Transformation and Renewal as new government programs are produced through social workers’ affective economies to be imbued with desires for, and fantasies about, the possibilities of a better future.

Over the course of the interviews, it became apparent that traces of history can leave their mark on social workers in different ways. Although many social workers felt excited and renewed by the new programs in their workplaces, not everyone who participated in the research found themselves so similarly seduced by the promises of change. In fact, far from being “stuck”, some social workers seemed to be repelled by the discourse of transformative change. For example, as an anti-colonialist Aboriginal activist, Anne positions herself in opposition to the new work discourses. Anne, a fifty-five year old Mohawk woman, is a member of the Turtle Clan and a proud mother and grandmother. She has worked in front-line child welfare services located on First Nations territory for several decades. Anne’s identity as a social worker is tied securely to her sense of responsibility to her family and her community, and to her central role as a mother and grandmother. She refers to her workplace as a “second family”. Of her work-role, she explains, “it’s not something that you just pick up and try on and discard or anything like that. It’s just something that’s so much a part of you”. During an interview, Anne talks about the staggeringly dire conditions for Indigenous children in Canada – incessant poverty, lack of housing and clean water, and understaffed and run-down schools. She describes constant worrying about the skyrocketing rates of teen-suicide in Aboriginal communities. In one of our discussions, Anne describes a recent trip to British Columbia where she had an opportunity to visit Hastings Street located in Vancouver’s Downtown East Side. As she explains, the Downtown East Side is a place that is known for extreme poverty and hardship, mostly due to discriminatory city planning and provincial policies that create
deepening inequities. At this point, Anne’s voice on the interview tape grows quiet and reflective: “(Pause)...I never want to see...I’ve never seen anything like that in my life (Pause)...And I would say half of them were between ages of twelve to sixteen. I’ve never seen anything like that. I cried.” As Anne discusses her time in Vancouver, together we make the link between the impoverished conditions of Aboriginal children’s lives and the missing Aboriginal women now known to have been stalked, kidnapped and murdered across Canada over several decades as federal and provincial authorities refused to take any effective action (Cameron, 2010). Anne reflects:

Five hundred women. I’ve seen the articles done by the Vancouver Sun. I know about that. Now, there’s another little girl out here…we’re going to look for her as soon as we finish meeting. One of our kids in care has been missing since last Thursday. She’s only fifteen years old. We’ve got no idea where she is. We’re going to check where her family is...we’re going to check the high school to talk with one of the other girls living in the same foster home…Just trying to do what we can, that’s all we’re doing.

For Anne, the horrifying possibility that a child in care has been lost in her community is directly linked to the over five hundred missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada. Her keen sense of what is going on locally in the downtown neighbourhood of the City of Vancouver connects to her political analysis of what is happening in the larger picture of Canada as a nation.

As Anne reflects on the enormous losses suffered by people connected to her community, she returns to the discussion about the promises offered in newly-transformed child welfare in Ontario and angrily dismisses them as “empty words”. She makes reference to a 1979 government document entitled A Starving Man Doesn’t Argue \(^2\) which details the decades of appalling child welfare practices imposed on Aboriginal communities in Ontario. Anne knows firsthand that governments and funders have never been able or willing to repair the harmful effects of white racism and the colonial legacy, and she holds little trust in the

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\(^2\) A tripartite review of social services delivered to Native residents as a result of the 1965 memorandum was begun by representatives of the federal and provincial governments and Native organizations in Ontario. One of these reports, ‘A Starving Man Doesn’t Argue’ was phase one and would later lay the foundation for planning, administration and service delivery of an ‘Indian controlled system of child welfare’ (TAP Associates, 1979).
current promises for change. When asked to reflect on the potential for collaborative teamwork and partnerships to make positive changes in her community, Anne’s voice chills:

The rhetoric that they throw around…that’s just endless. That’s all it is. It’s just somebody else’s words. As soon as you started talking, I blanked out. I really did. I don’t have really any response to it because I just blanked out.

Anne “blanks out” because she holds little faith or trust in the current promises of change. Her notion that teams and partnerships reflect “somebody else’s words” can be seen as a reference to the “talk” of change which hides ongoing inequities based on racism in Ontario. Having produced a distinctly social, political and historical account of child welfare as it relates to the ongoing oppression of First Nations’ communities, Anne’s narrative reveals little evidence of the neoliberal forms of selfhood (Davies, 2005). By shielding herself against a history of empty government promises, Anne eludes being constituted as a “subject of transformative change” and, instead, she signals a form of self-governing that is more reflective of “self-sovereignty” (Foucault, 2001, cited in Valverde, 2004, p. 82). Anne’s narrative, grounded in a history of colonization, racism and resistance, also signals that sometimes when things are meant to stick together they can also begin to fall apart.

4.4 When Things Don’t “Stick” Together

Once the Transformation and Renewal programs were well underway within their workplaces, many social workers began to observe a troubling disconnect between promises of change and the realities achieved. For instance, in the child welfare sector, social workers were shocked to learn that the Ministry of Children and Youth Services suddenly froze the new funding for Transformation. Some observe how this abrupt change in plans occurred after intense negative media scrutiny following the release of a report by Ontario’s Auditor General revealing questionable expenditures by several children’s aid societies (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2006). One supervisor expressed the belief that the real reason for the disruption in the plan’s funding was that Ministry personnel had gravely miscalculated how expensive it would be to implement the kinds of transformative changes that would keep kids out of care.

According to her, the roll-out of Transformation began, “and then they found out ‘oh my god, this Transformation funding was going to be billions and billions of dollars to make these
things happen.’ And suddenly, it wasn’t there”. In her version of what happened, the negative publicity over allegations of inappropriate spending by a few children’s aid societies provided the Ministry with the necessary cover to rein in spending for the Child Welfare Transformation program across the entire province.

Concerns are also expressed about the inexplicable contradictions in which the new funding model in child welfare “rewarded” apprehensions and “penalized” innovative care plans that could potentially keep kids out of care. Participants explained that such regressive models of care surfaces in two ways. Firstly, agencies continue to receive the most funding when a case involved high risk and intrusive apprehension measures. In contrast, and perhaps most puzzling, efforts to ward off apprehensions through “front-end” counselling or other forms of ongoing therapeutic work with families are deemed to be “mandate drift” and, therefore, discouraged. These efforts to minimize crisis events in the lives of families are defined as falling outside of the parameters of the funding contracts by Ministry officials and some senior child welfare directors. Secondly, children placed with foster families are covered by publicly funded medical benefits and caregivers are provided with financial support to help offset day-to-day living expenses. In sharp contrast, and contrary to the spirit of Transformation, extended family members who agree to care for children within the new kinship care agreements receive nothing by way of financial assistance. Many research participants who worked in child welfare point out that this produces a double standard, and has the effect of shifting responsibilities for publicly-funded care arrangements over to the private realm. Those who shoulder the burden include family members, typically women, who are themselves often already struggling to make ends meet financially.

Child welfare workers are also bothered by the ongoing, dominating presence of Ministry-led audits and service reviews. Social workers complain that evaluation methods are too narrow and that the government-inspired rating systems capture little by way of service quality issues. Citing the inevitable competition between agencies to secure “best performance outcomes”, Rita, a supervisor in child welfare, observes that pressures to comply with thin standards established through audits and reviews leads to a “race to the bottom” that discourages innovation and creativity on the part of service providers. As she explains, “the problem is you’re always going to get that agency or group of people that always meet all the compliances. And then that’s what the Ministry focuses on – ‘Well, if they can do it, why can’t you?’”
Within the context of primary health care, similar questions are raised about the transparency and accountability of the new funding arrangements. Several social workers voice concerns that the *Renewal* funding is being diverted to costly renovations to physicians’ private clinics. Although physicians’ offices serve as the workplaces for the new family health teams, social workers observe that renovations to these spaces seem excessive, especially given the lack of resources being directed towards expanding existing health services for patients. Social workers also note that in the Ministry’s high priority quest for electronic health records, expensive computer equipment was purchased for their new record-keeping processes. Concerns are expressed about the lack of meaningful consultation throughout the process of transitioning from paper to electronic records, especially related to patient privacy and confidentiality issues. For instance, social workers worry that patients are uninformed about how, with “the click of a button”, sensitive mental health information can now travel electronically across large networks of health-care providers. Their point is that when information is so freely and widely shared, the process seriously jeopardizes any notion of informed consent. As Didi explains:

I think people come in and they don’t have a clue to the fact that information they share with me is going to be in their e-chart for the rest of their lives and that just terrifies me…everybody in the office sees the note. I have tried to fight that battle and basically, I’ve been told over and over again, “we work as a team”. And I’m thinking but the receptionist doesn’t have the right to know what’s in that note. And they look.

Although research participants from primary health care express appreciation for upgrades in workplaces where publicly-funded care takes place, they voice doubts about whether these particular advancements actually improve patient access and quality of services. Some wonder if the private business interests of physicians and computer consultants are eclipsing the growing crisis of access in primary care. Social workers describe how their concerns became magnified in the spring of 2009 when the news media broke the so-called “e-health scandal” in Ontario. In news reports, it was alleged that agents, commissioned by the Ministry of Health and Long-term Care, neglected standard hiring and accounting policies and practices, and that this failure in oversight resulted in extensive conflicts of interest and massive over-spending on private consultancy fees (Priest, 2009). As they read about these alleged misappropriations,
social workers in my research observe that meanwhile, their wait-lists became even longer and their large caseloads became even heavier.

In response to pressures created by the lack of resources, it is not uncommon for social workers in primary health care services to rack up extensive overtime hours in vain attempts to protect the meagre access to services that exist, especially for patients seeking mental health care. Referring to the unrelenting pace of her working conditions, Didi decries the negative impact on her direct service with patients. “I’ve had days where I’ve booked 9 people. I can’t see 9 people! By the ninth person, I feel very bad for them, that they’re getting me at that point…I mean, I book every hour that I’m there”.

Social workers in primary care explain that they faced growing pressures from managers to engage with the new model of care known as chronic disease management. These standardized group interventions are based on the premise that patients can learn to manage their own “illness” through a variety of self-management strategies (Cruikshank, 1999). Didi captures how these emerging pressures create tensions in her workplace for her. On one hand, she desires to be an agent of social change, yet, on the other hand, she knows the importance of being seen to accommodate the new program expectations. In the following excerpt, she explains how this tension manifested in the potential for conflict between her and another social worker:

We seem to be going backwards to this cookie-cutter model of care…I mean first of all, everything is medicalized…[for example,] I had a conversation with another social worker and we were talking about depression…well I know that when someone comes in and they’re showing symptoms of depression and their relationship is failing or they have no money, well I don’t see those things as the same thing. But this woman turned to me and said “but if someone has symptoms, what difference does it make how they got there?” I mean really!

What becomes striking in Didi’s account is how this exchange with her co-worker triggered an overwhelming amount of anxiety and fear as she began to realize the implications of these tensions:
I was like...I had that silencing thing happen. I felt, “okay, don’t say anything else.” Because, I’m now working in this medicalized model of chronic disease that means we’re going to merely chart everybody and see what’s recurring and see how many sessions it takes to “fix them”. And to think, this was one of the other social workers talking! All of a sudden, it was like, I wasn’t expecting that! What happens then is that you start to second guess yourself. And now I have anxiety over how often I see patients.

Didi’s account resonates powerfully with Davies’ (2005) discussion of what it means to be a neoliberal subject. Didi clearly struggles with anxiety about how new work practices conflict with her values. She also fears that the developing practice expectations will interrupt her capacity to engage in “good” critical social work. However, there is a reflexive quality about Didi’s accounts that conflicts with Davies’ notion that the capacity for critique is curtailed in the new context of work. While Didi seems painfully aware that she is expected to practice self-surveillance in order to ration care, she resists doing so, choosing instead to search for ways, including silence, to manage the anxiety of knowing she is increasingly out of step with other social workers in her workplace. Importantly, it seems that Didi draws on her powerful attachments to a family history woven with injustice, in order to measure where she desires to position herself within the changing conditions of her work. Butler (1997) describes this as a history of “passionate attachments” (p. 6) that are a source of ambivalence at the site where the subject emerges. Following Foucault, Butler suggests that various competing forms of power not only act on a subject but enact the subject into being. Therefore, she argues, power acts on the subject in at least two ways: “first, as what makes the subject possible, the condition of its possibility and its formative occasion, and second, as what is taken up and reiterated in the subject’s ‘own’ acting...the willed effect of the subject” (p. 14). I take from Butler’s analysis that our passionate attachments as social workers to other sources of meaning in our lives can provide important alternative discourses, some of which can effectively push back and counter the powerful discourses of neoliberalism. As I considered how Didi and many of the other social workers responded to changes in their work, especially how their accounts were intertwined with important attachments, feelings and desires, I began to appreciate how their stories could resolve gaps in the governmentality literature on workplace change. Changes at
work are not always met with compliance nor do they result in an automatically re-shaped sense of self.

The majority of social workers from the study express growing concerns about the lack of accountability and transparency found in the plans that are intended to transform their sectors of care work. One child welfare supervisor conveyed the bitter sense of betrayal felt by many colleagues as they perceive that government has reneged on important aspects of the promised changes:

…at least with Mike Harris, you knew what you were getting, right? Whereas, I feel with this, you’ve gotten sucked into this wonderful theory generated by social workers for social workers; for families that will serve families. But the funding and the community capacity-building isn’t there. Like you know, again, ‘put your money where your mouth is’. There’s nothing behind it. There’s no foundation to the bridge. The bridge is great, it looks fabulous…but if you step on it, it’s just falling apart.

As social workers accumulate growing knowledge about the gaps and contradictions within the new programs at their workplaces, they respond in a variety of ways in order to re-arrange, manage and preserve their identities as transformative subjects of change. My interviews reveal that they adopt an array of techniques for self-regulation that defy easy explanation. Some hold onto hope and call for patience with the pace of change. Others embrace leadership roles and seek ways to be perceived as cooperative, helpful and constructive. Many social workers volunteer for extra duties, or in some cases, comply reluctantly after being “volun-told” to sit on committees in order to advance the new agenda in their workplaces. I was struck by how social workers’ stories of “cooperation” were frequently laced with difficult feelings, including doubt, regret, anger and a deep sense of betrayal. Clearly, workplace change had an impact on social workers, producing subjects who appeared flexible and cooperative; however, these performances were frequently partial and incomplete. For example, Frank, a child welfare manager, knows that within the context of Transformation, he is now expected to provide expanded clinical leadership to his staff. Yet, he harbours self doubt about his efficacy as a leader: “There’s this feeling like I should know what I’m doing…there’s a sneaking suspicion that I’m a crappy supervisor…what am I doing for
people?” Similar to other social workers, Frank endeavours, through acts of self-governing, to produce the performances of leadership, cooperation, and collaboration that are now so highly valorized under the new programs. At the same time, he reflects on the illusion created by such performances, especially within a context riddled with contradictions. Frank’s reflections call attention to the fragmentary nature of his experiences as a leader under *Transformation.* Newman (2005) suggests that such fragmentation can be explained by the tension between empowerment and control in the dispersal of power of new managerial programs. On one hand, new organizational leaders are positioned to engage in more proactive forms of agency; yet, on the other hand, these same leaders are constrained by new strategies of control which result in feelings of confusion and a pervasive sense of failure.

Interestingly, when asked to reflect on the ways that these points of tension and contradictions in the new programs impact their sense of identities, purposes, and aspirations as activists, most social workers insist that these things remain unaltered. Social workers seem to want to defend and distance themselves from the negative effects of contradictions in their practices, as if they are unimplicated in these processes. For example, Frank maintains that nothing can come between him and his commitment to respectful, client-centred practice. Rita expresses an unshakeable belief that she continues to “do good” despite admitting that on many days she struggles to find concrete evidence to support this claim. As she says, “I think one of the biggest things I have learned is that we may never know of the good that we’ve done. It feels good to see it, but don’t assume if you can’t that you didn’t have an impact”. It is as if social workers have found ways to erect protective barriers to separate contradictions in the new service arrangements and their core identities, desires, and aspirations as agents of social change. In these moments, social workers can be said to be performing as “defended subjects” (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, p. 155) whereby they find ways to protect a core sense of self within contradictory circumstances that are profoundly uncomfortable. Through their varied positionings, activist social workers perform self-governing in a way that encases their hopes for the future and ensures that their cherished self-images remain safely uncontaminated by the contradictions experienced in the new programs. As John Updike (2009) observes, “[f]antasies defeated in reality can be fully indulged; tendencies deflected by the cramp of circumstances can be followed to an end” (p. 15). The following section will explore, in more detail, the various ways that different social workers come to manage their misgivings and doubt,
especially in those moments when there are tensions between how they imagine themselves as agents of change, and what it is that they must do to get by everyday in their work.

4.5 Becoming Capable of Leadership, Teamwork and Collaboration: Transforming Subjects

Many social workers are tenacious in their efforts to position themselves as enthusiastic supporters of the changes introduced under Transformation and Renewal. They do so even as they harbour inner doubts. Key to being seen as cooperative with the changes is the ability to successfully demonstrate traits associated with leadership (both formal and informal), teamwork, and collaboration. Although it seems at times that those who are in more privileged positions, or aim to be so, can manage these outward performances of change more successfully, this was not always the case. Frank, a white, male supervisor in child welfare who describes himself as having “loads of social privilege”, is a case in point. As Transformation rolled out in his agency, Frank quickly volunteered to sit on as many new work committees as possible. As a supervisor, Frank understands that there is an expectation that he be involved in policy decisions, and that he is seen to be visibly involved with Transformation “on many levels.” However, despite taking on these active roles, Frank is open in sharing his misgivings about Transformation. He challenges more senior managers, citing inadequate resources in combination with rising pressures to “do it all with less”. It is possible to see Frank as someone who can draw on the power of middle-class masculinities and whiteness to protect him from the consequences of conduct that would otherwise be perceived as a career-limiting move. However, Frank’s vocalized struggles at work can also be seen to produce him as an “ambivalent subject” (Casey, 1995, p. 155), someone who feels rising levels of frustration and confusion due to the rhetoric of Transformation. Rather than moving “up the ladder” of success, Frank finds himself beginning to think about leaving child welfare to pursue his goals as an artist. Although Frank positions himself as a leader who is capable of teamwork and collaboration, his positioning within these discourses can only be considered as partial. Davies, Browne, Gannon, Honan and Somerville (2005) insist that workplace constitution has become more ambiguous under the demands of neoliberalism and, therefore, cannot be resolved through the use of limited identity categories. These authors suggest that studies of constitution must account for multiple discourses that include people’s complex social histories and recognition of “the flexible individual who acts ‘responsibly’ in relation to the market and who is valued in market terms” (p. 347). Rejecting the common practice of separating out one
discourse from another, Davies et al. (2005) assert that the task at hand is to show the possible “leakage of one discourse into another” (p. 347).

It is possible to see other social workers’ responses to new work discourses as filtered partially through gendered forms of self-governing. For instance, Lydia explains that she values being seen as a “collaborative team role-model”. She uses this image to promote the benefits of shared care among social workers, other health care professionals and physicians at the primary health care clinic where she works. While reflecting on existing tensions, Lydia describes her feelings of disappointment at the physicians’ attitudes of superiority in relation to other team members who work at the clinic. She knows that these mindsets pose huge obstacles to establishing meaningful collaboration in her workplace. Nevertheless, Lydia remains determinedly optimistic, bolstered by her belief that, “rain does beat away even granite…respect and listening will change most things”. At another medical clinic, Sylvia adopts different strategies. She takes up practices of “mindfulness” and other meditation techniques to manage a workplace that has come to resemble, in her words, a “mobile mental health M.A.S.H. unit”. Like other social workers in primary care, Sylvia expresses shock and anger at the lack of supervision and other supports for direct service providers under the new plan. However, she is hesitant to openly criticize managers due to her fear of being seen as “too” negative. While she hopes that her work conditions will improve over time, Sylvia points out that there is scant evidence that the hectic pace will slow down anytime soon. For the time being, she clings to methods of “self-care” in order to get by: “I’ll take a couple minutes between sessions, even if it means I’m doing my case notes later, to just completely decompress, come back into my body, and re-centre myself before I go on”. Both Lydia and Sylvia can be seen as the “flexible” workers required under neoliberal conditions (Walkerdine, 2006). Their practices can also be analysed as mobilizing particular performances of femininities that are highly valorized in these emerging economies of work (Adkins, 2005). Adkins (2005) explains that worker competence in neoliberal economies is measured not in terms of quality of products but in terms of customer satisfaction, appeased customers, and customer loyalty. This is achieved through the proliferation of audits, bench-marking, surveys, focus groups which all foreground customer care, comfort, pleasure and contentment. Ultimately what counts is the “audience perception” (p. 122). Lydia’s and Sylvia’s self-governing can be characterized by a “diminishment of the self” (Adkins & Lury, 1999, p. 608), whereby they rely on traditionally feminine behaviours to manage situations that seem
untenable. Although Adkins and Lury (1999) describe such performances of femininity as “virtuous behaviour” (p. 608), Sylvia, in particular, performs her virtue in a complicated and partial way. Her expression of inward anger towards her particular “customers” (the doctors and managers who benefit from her service), along with her willingness to put off administrative demands, suggests that such performances are more about self-care than any type of altruistically-inclined idealism or self-sacrifice.

As they contend with gaps and contradictions found within the new programs, social workers no longer endeavour to constitute themselves as subjects of transformative change, but rather, as “transforming subjects of change”. These flexible selves can convey notions of equity, community and inclusivity through their effective performances of “teamwork”, “partnerships” and “collaboration”. However, in light of their frustration, confusion, and anger, social workers’ accounts demonstrate an uneven willingness to make up selves that convey the necessary flexibility and adaptability to be entirely successful within the new discourses of change. In his research on teachers, Ball (2003) suggests that the ability to be successful at these work adaptations can be seen as the ability to “add value” (p. 222) to oneself in order to improve the impression that one is being productive. From this perspective, social workers in my research seem to position themselves along a continuum of “value-added” practices rather than a wholesale commitment to impression management. They activate varying degrees of tolerance for risks that can lead to being labelled as defiant. Ball explains that when workers concede to become “flexible” enough, what is really being produced under these terms is a spectacle, “game playing” or what Judith Butler (1990) has called an “enacted fantasy” (cited in Ball, p. 222). Noting that such changes can contribute to confusion about purposes and motivations in the workplace, Ball found that over time, teachers begin to sacrifice their commitments to public service, personal judgements and authentic engagements in exchange for impression management and performances of “excellence” (p. 220). While the partial positioning of social workers in my research may suggest a degree of confusion over purpose, their ability to critique existing problems in the new arrangements suggest that their personal judgements and commitments to social change ideals remain intact. These aspects of my findings lead me to argue that social workers manage tensions in their practice through forms of self-governing that enable them to live with themselves. The process of coming to grips with doubts and misgivings is less about “game playing” and more about distancing themselves from complicity with “the game” of Renewal and Transformation. An example of this process
can be seen in Didi’s pragmatic account about coming to terms with the fact that it has become more difficult for her to address inequities and social exclusions in health care, despite government promises to the contrary:

The social justice piece takes time and it’s the first thing to go when you’re booked back to back. And you know, you can bring the analysis into your workplace but in terms of actually going out there and trying to bring about change...well, it’s harder to do that when there isn’t a spare minute in the day.

Social workers’ stories suggest that there is a difficult line to walk between acknowledging the accumulating erosions of practice under *Transformation* and *Renewal* and defending their identities as activists capable of making social change. Salvaging one’s identity seems to depend not on transforming the workplace, but rather, on the ability to *transcend* the conditions of work. Pauline, a primary health care social worker, describes how she works at achieving a recognizable identity:

Whatever it is, just stick by what you believe you could be and you can make a difference...Be passionate about it because even when we are confused, if we are passionate about something, our ears are open. We start finding information for ourselves here, there, everywhere…and we start thinking.

Pauline’s conviction that even in circumstances that are “confusing”, we can find ways for “thinking”, resonates with Foucault’s (1994c) insistence that critical change is possible, even under the most tainted circumstances: “as soon as people begin to have trouble thinking things the way they have been thought, transformation becomes at the same time very urgent, very difficult, and entirely possible” (p. 457). Davies, Browne, Gannon, Honan, and Somerville (2005) argue that the demands of neoliberal workplaces, including ongoing audits, time pressures, funding constraints, and the discourses of flexibility, place pressures on working bodies that are difficult to oppose. Many of the accounts provided by social workers in my research reveal that striving to make oneself up as “successful” in the workplace does not necessarily result in transformative change such as improved flexibility in services but, rather
in the constitution of greater “flexibility of the person” (Scourfield, 2007, p. 107). In many cases, this means the making up of selves capable of tolerating a high degree of contradiction.

This section of the chapter has explored what it means for those social workers who, more or less, find ways to navigate what it means to be a successful team-member and collaborator under the new service arrangements. The following section will explore other work-life stories where social workers are confronted with significant barriers to performing the necessary flexibility to be “successful” under Renewal and Transformation.

4.6 Conduct Un-Becoming of “Teamwork” and “Collaboration”

In the emerging culture of work organizations where there is a reliance on teams, it is often assumed that employees will bring their knowledge, skills and experiential expertise to all aspects of the productive enterprise (Casey, 1999). It seems fair to assume that this culture also nurtures empowerment and, subsequently, high degrees of tolerance for differences in opinion. However, contrary to these assumptions, some social workers in my research find that there is a steep price to pay for deviating from what it means to be a “good team player” who is by necessity, compliant, loyal, and unquestioning. Consequently, those social workers whose work performances can be perceived as un-becoming of teamwork confront barriers that place economic survival at risk and increase their exposure to stressful work conditions.

Social workers explain that some of the most painful and difficult circumstances they encounter take place when the new modes of service assume regulatory functions in ways that collide with their sense of ethical being and purpose at work. One social worker in primary health care refers to these circumstances as “the point at which I go into moral crisis.” This collision of values is exemplified by Rita’s observation about major power and philosophical differences across so-called community partnerships involving women’s shelters, child welfare, and the police. She worries that forced partnerships under these conditions silence critical views that challenge dominance and systemic forms of oppression. Increasingly Rita, a white woman who refers to herself as a survivor of domestic violence, expresses concerns about her own capacity to speak out on these terms: “I now know what to say and what not to say”. Although she tries to proceed in her work more carefully, Rita worries about how long she will be able to remain at her agency if “playing the game” requires her silence and complicity. Rita feels betrayed by her managers and shares that, on one occasion, she came close to losing her job because “one of the worse things you can be at this time is a bad team
player”. Similarly, another social worker shares that, despite the rhetoric of teamwork, a willingness to speak up with even mild criticism at her agency could jeopardize her ability to advance in her career – the equivalent of becoming “benched on the sidelines”. Casey (1995) explains that in the new participatory culture and diminished hierarchy of the transformed workplace, speaking up and making contributions is apparently valued and encouraged. Yet, in her study of a large multinational corporation, Casey highlights how workers must learn the difference between acceptable and unacceptable verbal commentary under these new conditions. An implicit censorship operates and workers are expected to learn subtle rules governing discourse and internally regulate themselves: “Appropriately acculturated, self-censored employees will know automatically the difference between welcome speaking up and troublemaking speaking out” (p. 141). Citing her own experiences of being tagged as a “trouble-maker”, Marie, a racialized, front-line child welfare worker, was shocked at how her efforts to raise issues of systemic racism in police services were met with disapproval from senior managers who warned her against public criticism of a partner organization:

I feel that we are in position and in a place to start to challenge…if we’re really, truly looking at being an anti-racist organization, to move beyond tokenism…we then have to start to also challenge the other systems that oppress our clients, you know? And I feel that we don’t. We get slapped on the hand when we want to challenge the police for being oppressive and abusive in some instances to women. We get in trouble for that.

Pauline, a racialized primary health care social worker, has recently started to boycott team meetings. She explains that she decided to avoid these meetings after concluding that they were essentially opportunities for management to ensure that employees are “toeing the line”. Pauline explains that she finds similarities between expectations in her workplace and her earlier life experiences when she lived under a repressive military regime in a South American country. From that earlier time in her life, Pauline has learned to be deeply suspicious of any processes that are not inclusive, transparent and open to challenge. As Pauline describes her work meetings, her disdain and anger are palpable:
There’s something about how those meetings are conducted…I find things go from top to bottom. They don’t use the resources of people. There is no room for looking at the talents that all of us have…I call it a funnel meeting…you open up your mouth and they are going to throw all this information in and you swallow it.

Like many other social workers in the study, Rita, Marie and Pauline worry about punitive reprisals if they openly criticize the new work arrangements. They find various ways to “swallow” or outwardly mask their conflicts and tensions so that they can continue to be recognizable as “appropriately” transformative social work subjects. In some cases, these social workers take risks and challenge the new arrangements. However, these risks always pose potential costs and, consequently work life begins to feel like a series of double binds.

Rita, Marie and Pauline carry biographical histories which intersect with the new requirements of work in ways that make them feel trapped between the need for survival at work and loyalty to communities with which they feel a deep affinity. As Marie explains: “A lot of times, clients will look to me and say, ‘this is what’s happening. Is there anything that you can do?’ And then I feel like, no, there isn’t. And who do I go to? Who do I go to? It’s really frustrating!” Valerie Walkerdine (2006) writes thoughtfully about how those who occupy subject positions deemed “Other” can work in fear of becoming “caught at the border” (p. 13) within new workplace restructuring arrangements. Walkerdine conceptualizes the border as a site of pain, loss, and exclusion. She explains that those who are rendered unable to perform the embodied flexibility required for success under neoliberalism often struggle at this border due to conflicting emotional investments that are tied to racialized, gendered and class-marked histories. When applying Walkerdine’s ideas to my research participants, it is possible to see how social workers who bring biographical histories and social locations from the margins find themselves persistently caught at a point of conflict. The point of conflict is between a workplace characterized by “transformation” and the knowledge that employment conditions work against meaningful, transformative change. Walkerdine describes this as tension between “what is supposed to be produced and what is not supposed to be there” in the new workplace (Walkerdine, 2006, p. 13). For some social workers, especially those whose lives embody “difference” in a setting dominated by whiteness, this experience of being stopped at the border of their workplace leaves them feeling permanently on the outside. As
Carrie, an Aboriginal child welfare worker observes about Native Services workers, “we’re like the outcast people.”

Success, for workers such as Rita, Marie, Pauline and Carrie demands a willingness to leave important parts of themselves at the door, and as Walkerdine (2006) suggests, an acceptance of conditions that make them resigned to feeling like “imposters, always on the edge of being found and cast out” (p. 18.). Self-governing for these social workers is often about managing the tensions between maintaining stable employment and living with the risk of betraying important commitments to families and broader communities.

4.7 Conclusion
In this chapter, I have discussed the various ways that activist social workers in my research grapple with the tension between their desires for progressive changes under Transformation and Renewal, and their growing awareness that those changes are being betrayed in practice. Most social workers in the study worked hard to defend and protect their identities as social activists despite the limiting constraints on their practice. These constraints continued to make the possibility of developing meaningfully transformative practices unachievable. Some continued to hold onto hope. Often, the allure of change was seductive and compelling, even to the point that people were willing to deny and minimize evidence that change was illusory. Still, others drew on powerful biographical life experiences and found ways to recognize that many of the changes represented not “renewal” and “transformation” but rather, an extension of prior patterns of exclusion and marginalization. However, almost all of the social workers found ways to perform a messy, complicated mix of self-governing and identity work that enabled them to walk a fine line between outward compliance and inward defiance.

The work-life narratives shared by social workers demonstrate the many ways that people negotiate, collude, and sometimes collide with new work discourses circulating within Transformation and Renewal, as they variously position themselves within competing discourses generated from their diverse biographical histories and intersecting social locations. They reveal how some people find themselves moved to “stick” to the new work arrangements while others remain unmoved largely due to attachments, commitments and priorities forged throughout their life histories. Despite variations in self-governing, the narratives explored here reveal how social work selves become constituted as “subjects of transformative change” – individuals who hold onto hope after a harsh decade of decline in social provisioning under
successive conservative regimes. Social workers’ work-life stories also reveal pressures to perform as “transforming subjects” who are willing to adapt, to be flexible and to absorb tensions and contradictions in the new programs. Žižek (2008) insists that the most dangerous narratives emerging after a crisis event, such as the Harris years faced by Ontario social workers, are those that enable us to continue to dream. This chapter reveals how dreams for change following a difficult time can contain the seeds of danger. Our dreams can obscure how neoliberalism continues to evolve, mutate, and adapt, in order to more effectively, and efficiently, extend market principles into “practices of care”.

Paul du Gay’s (1996) work on new organizational identities alerts us to some of the implications when notions of change begin to circulate within the discourses that shape our working selves. While assumed to represent a positive change in organizational development terms, du Gay points out that this assumption is misleading and fails to address how the change really involves a re-imagining of the social as a form of the economic. When social workers facing similar conditions constitute themselves as collaborators, partners and team-members, they risk engaging in what du Gay refers to as the “performative principle” (Lyotard 1984, cited in du Gay, 1996, p. 156). Those who engage in the performative principle are capable of adapting to modifications and demands made in the environment of work. When performing in this way, social workers become particular kinds of persons who are more likely to pursue goals valued by commercial interests and less likely to pursue the goals of equity and social justice. However, the stories shared by social workers in my research convey varying levels of discomfort with the idea that they are participating in processes that extend rather than remedy prior regressive restructuring projects. At times, social workers seem content to live with dreams of change, despite knowing that these dreams will not be actualized in practice. Yet, social workers also strive to reconcile the breach between what is desired and what is known. They find ways to succeed and to move forward with the goals of their work. Others struggle to overcome disappointment as they absorb guilt, remorse and regrets. In the following chapter, I pick up the emotional threads of remorse, guilt and regret and explore how it is that social workers perform self-governing through mourning, and in the process, find ways to come to grips with feelings of loss in their work.
Chapter 5

Loss and Mourning

5.1 Introduction: The Emergence of Mourning as a Theme
When I began meeting with social workers to conduct research interviews, I decided to ask a “warm-up question” about what factors in their lives had influenced participants to enter the profession. Though my aim was to explore their relationship to more recent changes in their work, I wanted my interview questions to be an invitation to story-telling where participants could reflect more broadly on their lives. As social workers began to share stories of how they came to be social workers, my attention was drawn to the recurring presence of highly nostalgic memories about the past, especially on the part of participants who identified as female and white. Having situated their dreams within the context of the post-World War II advances of the welfare state, these participants provided wistful accounts of their early years in social work. Where many had entered the profession with a determined sense of optimism, hopefulness and a belief that they could help to “change the world”, their reflections on the changes that had occurred in their practices since the mid-1990s were filled with despair. Their nostalgia about the past “glory days” contrasted sharply with their disillusionment over cuts to services, downsizing and organizational restructuring.

Rather than setting aside these so-called “warm-up” discussions, I found myself dwelling on them. And, in retrospect, I am not at all surprised by the fact that other social workers’ stories resonated with my own feelings of sadness, intermingled with moments of exhilaration, about my work during the 1990s. For instance, I remember feeling exhilarated by a series of province-wide protests in the mid 1990s known as the “Days of Action” (Kozolanka, 2006; Munro, 1997). Yet, much like the participants in my research, these brief moments of reprieve were quickly and completely overshadowed by the painful sense of regret that I experienced over my perceptions of all that had been lost by “the left” by the end of decade of downsizing and restructuring.

When the interviews were completed, I turned my attention to reading and re-reading the transcripts of our talks. It was then that I noticed that there were discrepancies and tensions within and across different social workers’ stories about the losses in their work-lives. Having expected to find a more coherent “community of sentiment” (Stoler, 2009, p. 88), I was at first
puzzled by these inconsistencies. At times, it was possible to trace social workers’ accounts along the lines of social relations produced through class, gender, ethnicity and race politics, but this was not always the case. Instead, my analysis was often confounded by the unstable, mobile and complex characteristics of social categories and identity-markers that my research participants described to me (Martin Alcoff, 2003). As Linda Martin Alcoff (2003) observes, these things about ourselves which we believe to be stable are instead,

both imposed and self-made, produced through the interplay of names and social roles foisted on us by dominant narratives together with the particular choices families, communities, and individuals make over how to interpret, and resist, those impositions as well as how to grapple with their real historical experiences. (p. 3)

Despite these contingent and transient social processes, I found that different social workers’ placements in social categories has a material impact on their lives, often shaping their unique experiences of workplace change, the availability of spaces for their deployment of power and resistance, and the amount of visibility and credibility one is accorded at work and elsewhere. Additionally, as Donna Jeffery (2005) points out, one of the most critical material distinctions found in social work is the paradox of whiteness that must be managed by social workers who are marked as “other”. Jeffery explains that this paradox is based on the fact that “whiteness as a set of practices very much resembles social work as a set of practices” (p. 410). Therefore, when social workers are self-reflective or critical of whiteness and other forms of exclusion and inclusion, they are perceived to be critical of what has been known historically as “good” social work. As social workers’ accounts in this chapter will convey, this critical positioning can create tensions between colleagues and fears and anxieties about job security. But also, this critical positioning produces discrepancies in terms of social workers’ targets of mourning. How do different social workers manage this paradox if the mourning of social work means, for some, the mourning of whiteness? My interest was in exploring how these “discrepant experiences” (Said, 1993, p. 32) of mourning based on racial markers intersect with social workers’ other social locations, with their subjectivities, as well as with their experiences of changes in their work.

Around the same time that I identified mourning as a theme to be reckoned with in my research, I found an article written by American historian of social work, Allen F. Davis
(1964). I could not help but notice that many of the themes that presented themselves in my research interviews were identifiable in Davis’ article. In the article, Davis documents the experiences of social workers in the Progressive Party from 1912-1916 in the United States. The Progressive Party emerged briefly on the American political scene after Theodore Roosevelt bolted from the Republican Party in 1912. Having been influenced by many social reformers, Roosevelt and the Progressives adopted a political platform that contained, among other things, an eight-hour workday, a six-day work week, the improvement of housing conditions, the prohibition of child labour and the promotion of women’s suffrage. Additionally, the Progressives advocated boldly for universal old age and employment insurance. To many social workers across North America, including well-known social activist, Jane Addams, the Progressive Party became the climax of twenty years of struggle for social justice. In the words of one social worker: “The Roosevelt platform…embodies all the dreams and aspirations which have been a large part of our lives” (cited in Davis, 1964, p. 676). Davis goes on to explain how, after four short years, factional strife caused by the infiltration of business interests resulted in the Progressives being defeated decisively at the polls. Social workers were described as having become completely demoralized and disillusioned by their inability to advance cherished social justice platforms. In the end, the disbanding of the Progressive Party in 1916 was described as a “burial” (Davis, 1964, p. 688), a collapse of dreams for social reform.

As I read about the losses experienced by social reformers who “buried” their dreams at the beginning of the twentieth century, I began to notice that loss and mourning are predominant themes in the critical literature on welfare state restructuring in Western countries during the past two decades. Observing from the United Kingdom, Nikolas Rose (1996) explains that the emergence of neoliberal forms of governing has rendered a “death of the social” (p. 328). According to Rose, the themes of society and the concerns with social cohesion that were so central to political programs in the U.K. since the mid-nineteenth century are no longer the target and objectives of governments. Instead, he argues that we are witnessing the rise of rationalities and techniques that seek to govern without governing society. Governance now takes place through the regulated choices made by autonomous individuals independent of each other. Echoing this bleak assessment in the United States, Wendy Brown (2005) suggests that neoliberalism in her country means the “end of liberal democracy” (p. 37). She argues that democratic notions and institutions such as civil liberties,
a free press, fair elections, government accountability, and accessible public services are now viewed as largely irrelevant and possibly even as impediments to neoliberalism. Therefore, they have been “gutted, jettisoned, or end-run” (p. 51) in the pursuit of a market rationality. In Canada, Janine Brodie (2002) describes the decline of social welfare as “the great undoing” (p. 92) of Keynesian liberal progressivism. Brodie explains how, during the 1980s and 1990s, notions of group equality and social rights were completely erased from the Canadian public policy agenda and replaced with the aims of a neoliberal state in which government progress is measured by “its capacity to commodify and displace the public either onto the market or onto the individual” (p. 97). Janet Siltanen (2002) observes that the predominant perspective in the critical literature on the current state of social rights would lead one to conclude that indeed, “paradise has been paved” (p. 395). She explains:

That there was a post World War II “golden age” in welfare state development in Canada is widely reported. There is an equally general sense, in both political and academic discussion, that this age has now passed and that we have moved on to something very different. (p. 296)

Yet, argues Siltanen, there is a longing for a past as we would have wanted it to be rather than how it actually was. She points to extensive scholarship on the history of Canadian social policy, and demonstrates persuasively that past government policies and practices have shown minimal, if any, adherence to Keynesian welfare principles. If anything, according to Siltanen, the shifts mourned by the Canadian left, as well as by the social workers in my study, would be better described as an intensification in the loss of social rights: “from mean and lean, to meaner and leaner” (p. 397). Siltanen concludes with a thorny question about Canada’s venerated commitments to social rights:

Talk of equality and rights may have been more tolerated, even welcomed, in the “golden age”, but the proof in principle, especially on the part of governments, must be in actions and results. On these latter criteria, there does seem sufficient grounds to question whether the establishment of the social rights of citizenship ever grounded the welfare policy regime of the immediate post World War II decades in Canada. (p. 402)
In this chapter, I use Siltanen’s (2002) discussion about the “talk” (p. 402) of social rights in Canada as an anchoring point from which to consider the mourning expressed by social workers. In particular, I am interested in how mourning that is based on the talk of social rights intersects with nostalgia about Canada’s past conduct as a nation. If, as Siltanen suggests, Canada’s prior commitments have been “just talk” that has not been backed by actions and quantifiable results towards equitable social rights, what is it that “we” as social workers have lost? What else might the talk of social rights in Canada produce, and how have we come to invest ourselves in the terms and subjectivities that circulate around these things?

My aim for this chapter is to look at what different social workers do with their mourning, and in a related way, what their mourning does for them in these neoliberal times. My concern is not with trying to locate an “origin” of social workers’ mourning but rather, following Foucault (1984a), I engage an analysis of “descent”, one that “disturbs what was previously considered immobile” and “fragments what was thought unified” (p. 82). What does it mean to disturb all the unifying assumptions underneath our mourning? What lies beneath its taken-for-granted status in our lives? Tamboukou (1999) explains that an analysis of descent, as used by Foucault, requires that we look directly at what people do: “The aim is to strip away all the veils that cover people’s practices, by simply showing how they are, and where they came from, describing their complicated forms and exploring their countless historical transformations” (p. 209). In order to achieve this analysis, I ask the following analytical questions: where and how does our mourning as activist social workers arise? What does it produce? I pose these questions to avoid taking our mourning as a given and, instead, to suggest that our mourning has been produced and shaped by the histories that have formed us (May, 2006).

Following this introduction, section two of the chapter explores discrepancies and tensions found in social workers’ accounts of loss as it relates to their experiences of restructuring in their places of work. Social workers produce varied and complicated accounts of loss. Some focus on the devastations of the “Harris regime” during the 1990s. Others’ stories point to longer histories of loss that results in a lingering and unresolved melancholia that compounds itself as new losses occur. In some instances, social workers were able to draw on their more distant histories of loss and mobilize individual opportunities for career advancements during the Harris years. A common theme revolves around anxieties produced as social workers experience challenges to their abilities to provide “care” for others. It is
through their stories of mourning that social workers reveal how contradictions experienced in practice produce threats to cherished identities as compassionate “agents of change”.

In section three, I trace different historical lines of mourning that appear in social workers’ stories about their motivations to enter social work as a career. Social workers’ reflections show varied subject positionings along these lines. Nostalgia for prior times characterized by a belief that “everyone could have a chance” is countered by racialized stories from the margins of the Canadian social welfare state where life was circumscribed by the pain of exclusion. Here, I draw upon critical race scholarship to analyse how the mourning of a romanticized Canadian social welfare history intersects with white privilege. White privilege draws on and makes possible fantasies which obscure aspects of the past. Obscuring fantasies include all the ways of viewing ourselves and the nation that render invisible, or make “forgotten” (Lowe, 1996), the ongoing histories of white supremacy, racism and Western imperialist projects that are central to Canada’s national formation. The ability to forget produces grief as a differential act where some lives are worth valuing and preserving while others do not even qualify for recognition (Butler, 2004).

Section four examines how mourning can play a key role in the constitution of social workers as “defended subjects” (Hollway & Jefferson, p. 23) who draw upon varied discourses in order to maintain a sense of ethical and moral selfhood with an unquestionable passion for goodness. I argue that the doing of this form of mourning is only performable by “the liberal individual” (Boyd, 2004, p. 9) who is characterized by rational choice-making capacities and intentional agency. Mohanram (1999) explains that this subject position implies the idealized dominant, hegemonic, white male body – a body that is unmarked and produced at the intersection of all that is valorized in terms of race, sex, sexuality, age and ability. Discourses of liberalism enable social workers to position themselves in relation to this subject in order to establish the self as compassionate, caring, innocent and unimplicated in the face of the pain experienced by others as a result of restructuring in social and health services.

Section five examines the ways that some social workers’ mourning is the basis for their innocence. This innocence is augmented by discourses of faith, salvation, rescue and love within contexts that are riddled with tensions and contradictions associated with neoliberal restructuring. Faced with dwindling opportunities for social activism, social workers infuse their desires for social change with individualized frameworks for care, often drawing upon connections to faith-based movements. By producing themselves as the liberal humanist self –
an exceptional being who is able to transcend neoliberal restructuring – some social workers
re-affirm their positioning as heroic and innocent, and consequently, beyond the reach of
workplace restructuring. Once disassociated from the negative effects of restructuring, social
workers constitute themselves, and are constituted as, agents of “love”, “rescue” and
“salvation”. Through the activation of their innocence, activists produce themselves to be in
intimate solidarity with service users and able to share in their pain and suffering. It is through
the discourses of mourning and nostalgia connected to an illusory past that many social
workers are able to stand on seemingly unassailable ground. Their complicity in the hardship
done to service users becomes obscured. Their innocence remains intact.

The chapter concludes with an analysis of how mourning in some cases can do the
work of concealing the contradiction between the stated goals of social equity, democracy and
social rights, and the persistent failure to fulfil them in practice. By grounding the
discrepancies of social workers’ mourning within the historical frameworks of gender, racism
and colonization in Canada, it becomes possible to see white social workers’ grief as a form of
self-governing that enables their amnesia. The history of violent colonization and racism in the
settlement of Canada is disappeared, and the regulatory role played by social workers in this
white nation-building project is obscured (Thobani, 2007). I discuss how some activist social
workers are able to produce memories of a more inclusive history. Their accounts of a more
inclusive past provide important sites for the development of critical knowledge for activist
social workers. These accounts suggest ways for expanding our subjectivities and our critical
capacities to analyse, plan and respond to the current demands of neoliberalism.

5.2 Stories of Loss: Discrepancies and Tensions
The stories conveyed by social workers about their experiences of workplace change during the
1990s are characterized by a profound sense of mourning and loss. Many of the white, female,
older social workers in my research were quick to reference the election of Mike Harris’s
Progressive Conservative government as a time of crisis in their lives. Their stories about work
during this socially regressive period allow for the charting of feelings that began with a
foreboding sense of worry about the prospect of his election, followed by shock and
powerlessness as his winning platform began to be implemented. An uneasy sense of anxiety
over the shifting political climate in the province is well-captured by Joy, a sixty year old,
white, middle-class child welfare supervisor:
When Mike Harris was coming on board, when he was campaigning, I was telling people I worked with “I’m really scared, if these Conservatives get in, I’m really scared”…and of course we couldn’t know…I had no idea at that time that it was going to get that bad…but it was the sign of something very negative in the province, something that wasn’t going to be helpful for me as a liberal – somebody who cares about people, who feels people’s rights are very important.

After Harris’ successful election in June, 1995, Joy recalls that it took approximately one year for the effects of his regressive policies to be felt in her workplace. Although she had braced herself for the coming changes, Joy remembers feeling absolutely stunned by the rapid unravelling of important social programs. Suddenly, when trying to arrange for urgent referrals for families, such as emergency housing or legal aid, Joy faced long wait lists or she was told that prior service arrangements were no longer in existence. In many instances, eligibility criteria became so narrow that access to programs for children on her caseload became impossible. Describing herself as entering a state of “permanent numbness”, Joy reflects on how others in her workplace began to observe changes in her temperament:

I started using the F-word and that had such an impact because that’s something I hadn’t ever done before. That’s how bad it came to be…You see, no matter how bad it got, it always got worse…yea, just using that word was so freeing because that’s probably the one thing you could never say at work. Well, I’ve said it and I’m still here…Sometimes you just have to say “Fuck!” ‘cause nothing else works.

Other participants also struggled to capture the overwhelming magnitude of changes and how their sense of loss intensified over time. For example, Didi, another white, female social worker shares that while working in a hospital during the mid-1990s, she would arrive at work each day only to hear about the closure of more community programs, some of which she had fought for and helped to establish as far back as the 1980s. Her disillusionment peaked one day when she heard that a valuable daytime drop-in program for young moms had been discontinued due to funding cuts. Didi believes that these types of services can proactively alleviate the very “risk” factors that often lead to larger crisis events in the lives of family
members. She wonders sarcastically about what kind of “common sense” lay behind the cuts of such valuable “front-end” services. To this day, she is embittered by the loss of this particular program, and compares it to an earlier Harris cut in 1995 that reduced welfare benefits by over 21 per cent, along with his government’s policy of kicking people off welfare. These changes to social welfare, in her mind, amounted to a “war on poor people” whereby the “weapon” of choice was to “slash the social safety net to beyond recognition”.

For many white, female social workers, the 1990s represents a terrible time during which regressive policies came to dominate the political landscape in Ontario. Concerns are expressed about how the sweeping reductions in the social safety net had particularly grave implications for groups that are most typically served by social work – female-led families, recent newcomers to Canada, Aboriginal peoples, and other minority communities. It became apparent through my readings of interview transcripts, however, that the experiences of white, female social workers stood apart from many of the stories shared by Aboriginal social workers or social workers who were from poor or working-class backgrounds, or who were newcomers to Canada. For these social workers, many of whom had firsthand experiences with poverty, the focus was less specifically on Harris’ regime and more about how the 1990s restructuring measures represented a complicated layering effect that made already difficult situations in their lives and workplaces even more untenable.

Although in general, mourning is a dominant theme in social workers’ lives, it became apparent that discrepancies exist in terms of what is deemed to be lost. For instance, Marie, a twenty-nine year old black social worker, remembers entering the child welfare job market in the immediate aftermath of the Harris government restructuring measures. She recalls holding an unshakeable belief at that time that her social work education would enable her to pursue the goals of social justice while also earning a good salary as a single mother. It is at this point that Marie’s narrative fills with despair. Shaking her head, she discloses that working as a social service provider has involved repeated shocks and betrayals. However, Marie’s reference point for mourning is not necessarily the effects of workplace restructuring on service users. Rather, she references her own encounters with long-standing, pervasive and systemic racism in her workplace – a large child welfare agency in an urban setting:

Coming out of school, I thought I’d know all the answers…I thought this was going to be like strengths-based practice, anti-oppressive work, and I was going to get in there
and really be a cheerleader for clients from my community…And then I came into child welfare to work and I’m like, ‘ohhh, no…’ It was a shock! And what was most stressful for me wasn’t the stress of the situations my clients were in; it was dealing with the agency.

Marie’s narrative is characterized by a sense of loneliness as she expresses dismay at the absence of supports to deal with racism at work. Translating this as a larger and more long-term systemic problem that has implications for her agency’s accountability within a large, culturally and racially diverse city, Marie asserts: “We have never represented the population we’re serving. We don’t represent them at all. And the higher you go, there’s no one like me…there’s no supervisors, there’s no management…there’s nothing.” Marie’s story of loss conveys that she mourns not for what was lost due to Harris’ restructuring measures. Rather, she mourns the lost hopes for what might have been in terms of a potentially transformative career in social service work - a chance to finally “make a difference in peoples’ lives”. In particular, Marie mourns the loss of hope when confronted by the fact that the profession of social work offers so very little to her as a racialized women and to members of the community to which she belongs.

Additional contrasts came to light when some social workers described having found positive opportunities to advance their career interests as a result of Harris’ restructuring measures. One recurring theme involved the renewed ability to find stable employment during this time – a period that was otherwise characterized by funding constraints in the social services. For instance, Adika, a thirty-eight year old black child welfare worker, who emigrated from a country in West Africa to become a Canadian citizen as a young man, recounts that life for him in his adopted country, even before the 1990s, was always filled with pressure, anxiety and stress. Adika tells a painful story about being a financially-strapped law student in a large urban Canadian city during the late 1980s. Suddenly, part way through his studies, he found himself evicted from his apartment after a series of racist incidents in which he was the target. As a result, Adika found himself to be homeless for the first time in his life. Horrified by the realization that he had lost his home, Adika recalls thinking to himself: “I couldn’t believe I was in Canada. I didn’t expect that in Canada. It was so unsettling.” In order to survive this ordeal, Adika reached out to other members of the African-Canadian communities and gratefully accepted emotional support and practical assistance. After becoming aware that
others faced similar dire circumstances, Adika decided to return to school to become a social worker in order to give back to his community. After graduation, in 1998, Adika entered the social services employment market. He learned quickly to target his job-hunting activities to the child welfare sector where there was a boom in employment opportunities due to policy reforms and the subsequent rise in child apprehensions across the province. Now, years later, and with a young family of his own, Adika feels grateful for the employment stability he found in child welfare. He explains that he has never forgotten what it was like to be homeless. It is the memory of how easily this event happened in his own life that drives his current passion to help other families in crisis, especially newcomers to Canada. Similar to Marie’s experiences, Adika’s sense of loss in relation to social welfare is not focused on restructuring in his workplace. Rather, it is based on mourning the loss of an ideal place in his mind – a Canada where anything was possible and where everyone had an equal chance in life.

In contrast to other white, female social workers, Anita, herself a white, fifty-two year old woman who identifies as working-class, recalls how difficult it was to make ends meet in the early 1990s. At that time, she was underemployed in a sparsely-funded, community-based organization mandated to help people commonly referred to as the “hard to serve” – persons with multiple social and health problems who also face poverty and homelessness. Anita moved into child welfare work in the late 1990s when it became clear that her small community agency was about to lose its funding due to the Harris cuts. She recalls marvelling at the lucrative financial opportunities in child welfare work which, she feels, are taken for granted by the people who work there: “I get paid obscenely well!” Yet, Anita shares that she longs for the creativity and innovation fostered by her work at the grass-roots level, a space where it seemed possible for her to “make a difference in people’s lives every single day”. At the same time, Anita acknowledges that it has been far easier for her to raise a family on her child welfare salary.

The accounts of mourning provided by Marie, Adika and Anita highlight what is sometimes missing in the narratives provided by white social workers, especially those who have had access to middle-class upbringings. Unlike this latter group, stories of loss told by Marie, Adika and Anita point to the fact that, in many instances, restructuring, especially in child welfare, became a shelter against joblessness during the 1990s. As will be discussed more fully later in the chapter, their sense of loss also points to deeper and longer-term problems existing within the social and health services system. Their losses are rooted in problems that
pre-date the losses mourned by white, male or female, and middle-class social workers in my research.

Despite the discrepancies and tensions found in social workers’ accounts of restructuring, it was possible to discern shared concerns about the increase in contradictions in their practices that emerged during the late 1990s and early 2000s. One common theme revolved around anxieties about the irreconcilable relationship between day-to-day practice realities and social workers’ desires to be agents of progressive social change. New work practices that emphasized power and authority over service users left many social workers feeling uneasy about the loss of activist aims in their work. For instance, child welfare workers observed how their new work roles emphasized the immediate apprehension of children deemed” at risk”. Frank, a child welfare supervisor, suggests that such guidelines enacted during the late-1990s were politically motivated, and that they were designed to appease public anger over high-profile scandals involving several child deaths. Describing an “act now and sort it out later” mentality, he reflects sadly on the many instances where unnecessary separations were imposed on families by social workers who were expected to simply “follow orders”. Similarly, primary health care social workers saw themselves as being shaped into service providers who emphasized the management of marginalized people rather than providers of care and compassion. In the words of one primary health care worker, “we went from helping to policing the poor.”

Research participants expressed a high degree of anxiety about how the changing context of practice would negatively affect their abilities to give expression to important activist values and political identities in their work. Grappling with a loss of meaning in their work, social workers’ opposition to the government cuts was situated in the belief that the public sphere in a democratic society is a “value-saturated sphere”, and that the organization of this sphere should embody the “ethos of public service” (Hoggett, Mayo & Miller, 2006, p. 761). Many social workers feared losing the powerful and compelling notion of a public service ethos where day-to-day practice was underpinned by the principles of equity and justice. As a result of funding cuts, downsizing and the re-organizing of social and health services during the 1990s, they began to fear that a growing lack of institutional support would put the goals of equity and social justice out of their reach. Consequently, doubts about their activist credentials began to creep into social workers’ identities. Capturing these emerging tensions, Marie describes a total recalibration of her practice goals. Faced with narrow and
“senseless” accountability standards that force her to document every minute amount of service activity, along with the increased surveillance of her compliance with those standards, Marie explains, “I learned to put the needs of paper over people”. She contemplates the loss of doing what she dreamed would be important to her as a social work student:

My files can be pulled at any time and they’re looking for compliance…it means a growing list of ‘oh, I have to do this, I have to do that’…it doesn’t reflect the care work anymore. It definitely doesn’t. I really don’t know how to manage it.

Sara Ahmed (2007) observes that these changes mean that people become practised at showing how processes are being followed: “you become good at audit by producing auditable documents” (p. 597). For Ahmed, documents become a way of performing compliance with policies and she explains that over time, the act of creating a document becomes the single most important measure of good work performance: “you end up doing the document rather than doing the doing.” (p. 599). This is a harsh reality that is not lost on social workers as they recount stories of their social work practices and workplaces. More importantly, they recognize how “doing the document” rather than “the doing” has a significant material impact on the lives of service users.

Trends towards compliance and narrow accountability measures in social and health service work during the late 1990s resulted in social workers struggling with doubts about their identities as social activists. Discussing these practice realities prompted some social workers, especially older, white women, to speak movingly about their sense of longing for prior service arrangements. Their practice stories convey a strong belief that before the cuts and downsizing of the 1990s, social workers could exercise more discretion to do the helping work that mattered to them. The period before the cuts is seen by many as a time when social and health service organizations were a better fit for social workers’ ethical commitments to social justice. Their accounts of mourning these prior times are compelling because of the ways that they tap into popular narratives about the post World War II advances of social welfare. An important point emphasized in this next section is that the mourning of this popular narrative about the Canadian social welfare state enables some social workers to sustain their desirable identities as compassionate “agents of change”. It is through these desires for identification with progressive change that it becomes possible to see the productive capacity of mourning. As
Butler (2004) explains, “[grief] furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility” (p. 22). She makes the point that mourning brings us together in the name of caring for and about others. Yet, as some of my research participants demonstrate, not all social workers are able to access the shared political community implied through the mourning of the dominant narrative of the Canadian welfare state. Mourning in some cases is constituted not through the relational ties that delineate collective responsibilities but, rather, through a relationship of permanent “non-belonging”. Consequently, social workers are mourning very different histories in relation to the Canadian social welfare state.

5.3 Tracing Historical Lines of Mourning in Social Work

As social workers reflect on their experiences of loss in relation to government cuts during the 1990s, their stories move from descriptions of material changes in the context of their work to expressions of worry and fear about losses at another level. What did the changes to practice mean for their identities as “activists”? That their attachments to activism could be severed was deeply disturbing to social workers in my research. The mere suggestion of this possibility prompted many to seek comfort and re-assurance through the sharing of stories about what inspired them to enter social work in the first place.

For every participant, the choice of social work as a career was based on identifications with social justice and with feelings of empathy for the pain experienced by others. Memories about their early years in the profession highlighted the influence of popular social justice movements including protests against the Vietnam War, the women’s liberation movement, the civil rights movement, the Aboriginal rights movements and anti-poverty campaigns. In many cases, social workers were proud to share stories about family histories that were permeated with long-term commitments to social change. For instance, Theresa, a white, fifty-nine year old primary health care social worker, shares that after World War II, her Western European maternal grandmother organized Salvation Army volunteers to feed people who had no access to food in the early days after the Armistice. On her father’s side, Theresa recalls stories about her grandfather marching in socialist parades during the 1930s. She imagines his hand raised in a clenched-fist salute as he sang the socialist and anarchist anthem, *The Internationale*. 
Inspired by this legacy of social activism, Theresa decided to enter a school of social work in 1969 when she turned eighteen – a point in time she refers to fondly as “The Magic Year”:

It was the year of the revolution. Lots of things were changing. People were standing up in a way that the world really hadn’t seen before. It wasn’t that people hadn’t protested before because you know they had…but as the Vietnam War carried on…and the music and growing your hair and bucking authority and going against the establishment… I was gravitating towards people having those conversations. So, social work reflected very much for me that we were about making a difference…we pushed the boundaries.

Theresa’s stories are similar to those told by some of the other older, white, female social workers whose memories of their early careers are laced with images and ideas related to feminist struggles during the 1960s, ‘70s and ‘80s. As women who grew up during the second wave of the Canadian women’s movement, their lives have been shaped by, and they have benefitted from, the burgeoning welfare state and its progressive liberal philosophy of governing so seemingly evident at that time.

Theresa’s and others’ memories and inspirations encapsulate ideas that gained traction in Europe and North America after World War II. As people learned about the horrors of Nazi Germany, advocates for social change in the West began to embrace emerging discourses of human rights and conceptions of citizenship based on the idea of a “shared humanity”. In 1950, T. H. Marshall famously adopted the term “social rights” (Marshall, 2009, p. 153) to describe a bundle of rights and obligations that defined the identity of members of a political community, thereby regulating access to benefits and privileges of membership or citizenship. In Canada, these ideas evolved into a concept known as the “social minimum”. This term was defined by social science scholar, Leonard Marsh, at the Canadian Conference on Social Work in 1950 as, “the realization that in a civilized society, there is a certain minimum of conditions without which health, decency, happiness and a ‘chance in life’ are impossible” (Marsh, 1950, cited in Guest, 1985, p. 3-4). For decades after WWII, social workers concerned with social reform joined with members of social movements, church and civic groups, and trade unions in order to advocate for the conditions under which everyone could have “a chance in life”. They advocated Keynesian economic and social welfare policies to encourage full employment, universal social programs, and a state that fully embraced its redistributive role. Through these
notions, white Canadian women, such as Theresa and others in my research, were mobilized as a previously marginalized group and they made increasing claims on the state as citizens with entitlements. As a result, by the 1980s, the women’s movement could claim credit for a proliferation of provincial and federal social programs aimed at the goals of gender equality and social progress.

Having entered social work at the height of this so-called “golden age” of the Keynesian welfare state in Canada, many of the white, female social workers in my research reflect on their work-lives before neoliberal restructuring with a great deal of nostalgia. Their stories describe an immensely hopeful time when work was fuelled by optimism, dreams of freedom, and social change. Theresa explains,

For me, social work…was about dealing with the poor and the disenfranchised, empowering them. It was about equality and equity, about making a difference politically and at the community level; it was about changing the world so that we could live in a better world.

Standing on a record of advocacy and social change devoted to protecting and advancing people’s rights provides Theresa and others with the basis to assume and sustain desirable identities as “change agents” and “altruistic helpers”. As they struggled with anxieties and misgivings about the impacts of restructuring measures, social workers would refer frequently back to these important times as if to re-assure themselves that they continue to possess what Anita calls the unwavering “passion for goodness”.

When juxtaposed against the losses of social welfare entitlements in the 1990s, nostalgic references to the legacies of social reform and the post-war expansions of social programs manage to resurrect powerful mythologies about both Canada’s history as a rights-seeking nation and the role played by activist social workers within that project. For Canadian citizens generally, Keynesian post-war social welfare reforms have been a source of pride. They are seen to be a defining feature of who we are as a people, marking out important distinctions between us and the rest of the world and, in particular, our neighbours to the south. How we have come to know ourselves, and be known by others, as a gentler, kinder nation striving towards equality, has relied heavily on this image. For activist social workers, specifically, this image has come to embody the “progressiveness” that marks us as somehow
different from the more conservative arm of the helping professions. Mourning this particular image produces activist social workers as deeply compassionate and caring individuals who are profoundly committed to a vision of social justice.

If the Canadian post-war expansion of social programs and the strengthening of the social safety net targeted women such as the white social workers in my research and their children, as the primary beneficiaries, the same cannot be said of Aboriginal women or other women in my study who were either newcomers to Canada or the daughters of newcomers. Rather than nostalgia for times past, many of these social workers describe intense forms of mourning over the losses experienced by both past and present generations and their heightened fears about the futures of their communities. For example, Kathy, a forty-five year old Mohawk woman, member of the Bear Clan, and a Native Services child welfare manager, describes how from the very beginning, her social work role has been focused on trying to ameliorate the harsh social conditions experienced by members of her family, her friends and her neighbours, many of whom struggle with persistent unemployment and poverty while living on First Nations land in Ontario. She acknowledges that her role in the community became more challenging during the 1990s when the reforms to child welfare were ushered in. Yet, in Kathy’s recollections, the reforms were overshadowed by the lingering backdrop of hardship suffered for many decades by members of her community. Kathy emphasizes, again and again, that problems faced by her community began many years before the Mike Harris regime came to power in Ontario. For instance, she recalls with sadness how her parents passed on knowledge about the damaging impact of residential schools on their lives and the lives of her many aunts and uncles. Over the years, they have shared with Kathy many stories about the multi-generational traumas imposed by a hostile and dominant white Canadian culture and about the harm that resulted from the near erosion of traditional systems of caring for each other in her community.

Kathy’s dramatic accounts of loss and hardship are supported by Thobani (2007) who observes that, historically, Canadian social policies were designed to disintegrate and dissolve Aboriginal families and communities in the name of “progress” (p. 119). Ironically, Thobani points out, these same policies have consistently been considered by Canadian nationals to be “humanitarian options for ‘saving’ Indians” (p. 119). In Canada, the imperative to “save” Aboriginal people became official state policy with the implementation of the residential school system. This system required the removal of thousands of Aboriginal children from
their communities during a period that lasted from the mid 1880s to the mid 1980s (Fournier & Crey, 1997). Thobani (2007) explains that the state-supported schools were administered mostly by Christian organizations throughout the country with an aim to “civilize” (p. 119) Aboriginal children away from their Indigenous way of life. Later, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples would describe these so-called schools as being more like “internment camps for children” (Thobani, 2007, p. 120) rather than places of “salvation”.

Sharing additional first-hand knowledge about the generational impact of Canadian government policies on Aboriginal communities, Carrie, a twenty-seven year old child welfare worker explains that her mother was a victim of the so-called “60s scoop”. The “60s scoop involved the widespread, state-sanctioned apprehension of Aboriginal children by Canadian child welfare authorities – a practice that started in the 1960s and lasted well into the 1980s (Fournier & Crey, 1997). Carrie’s mom was taken from her relatives’ care after both of her parents died when she was four years old. Later, she was adopted by a white family in a town that was far away from her family’s ancestral community. Recalling her mother’s anguish over her lost childhood, Carrie believes that child welfare authorities ignored her mom’s interests and that her adoptive family failed to provide her with a loving home. The layered impact of these double failures helps Carrie to understand how her mom’s life came to be filled with pain, how her mom could abuse her own children, and how it is that alcoholism would eventually cause her mom’s early death:

She was never accepted by that family…and she wanted better for her own children but at the same time, she didn’t deal with those issues of anger and tended to take it out on the people that she loved, the people that were closest to her.

On the surface, Kathy’s and Carrie’s sense of frustration and despair over child welfare restructuring over the past two decades is similar to that expressed by many of the white women in my research. They also worry about the shattered social safety net. However, as their accounts unfold, it becomes apparent that each social worker’s state of mourning is constituted differently through Canada’s colonialist past.

Critical race scholarship has analyzed how longing for a “better time” in social welfare arrangements relies on romantic assumptions and outright fantasies about the Canadian nation’s inherent “goodness” and “sense of compassion” (Bannerji, 1997; Razack, 1998, 2002;
Thobani, 2007). Looking beyond such obscuring fantasies of social welfare reveals how social entitlements have been fused with the history of racial inequality in Canada as a white settler society where only some find belonging and “others” are left living permanently beyond what can be known as being “Canadian” (Bannerji, 1997, p. 25). Thobani (2007) demonstrates how access to social programs in Canada has always been regulated through the institution of citizenship. Since its inception in 1946, the Citizenship Act of Canada has distinguished between classes of citizens resulting in unequal access to rights and entitlements. Consequently, those European immigrant groups fluent in French and English, and racially marked as white, have typically experienced easier access while others have been left in a permanent condition of statelessness even after they achieve legal citizenship. Thobani’s analysis certainly resonates with Adika’s story, recounted above, where he became racially targeted, suddenly homeless and vulnerable in a large Canadian urban centre despite his citizenship status. Similarly, Marie’s narrative testifies to the effects of pervasive racism at her child welfare agency as it also highlights what it means to be a perpetual “outsider”. Despite the overwhelming social variations that are rooted in racism and colonialism, Thobani (2007) observes that the organization of welfare has managed to firmly establish perceptions of the Canadian state as “compassionate” and “progressive” (p.140). She explains:

If the welfare state strengthened the sense of entitlement of nationals and deepened social bonds among them it simultaneously magnified the sense of disentitlement and expulsion from the national community for those whom it excluded. The welfare state has never been quite as compassionate or as universal as has generally been presumed. (p. 109-110)

When the racist and colonial underpinnings of Canadian social welfare are normalized and naturalized within a system of racial hierarchy, white subjects come to experience the state as an enabling power that advances their interests. Meanwhile, for racialized subjects, the post-war expansions of social programs resulted in a situation where, in Thobani’s (2007) words, “welfare became the extension of warfare, and the manner of waging this war further exalted the nationals on its front lines as compassionate and caring” (p. 125). In a parallel process, white social work subjects can tap into a long racial legacy of social work. Jeffery (2005) explains that this legacy is based on the production of the bourgeois subject in combination
with the rigid categories of racial difference and anxieties over “proper conduct” (p. 410). The result of these processes enabled the prototypical early social work subject – “the respectable helper” – to emerge with the necessary authority to regulate the “dangerous classes” (p. 411) comprised of the impoverished, criminalized and racialized “other”. It can be argued that Thobani’s and Jeffery’s analyses address Siltanen’s (2002) question about the “talk” of social rights in Canada as discussed earlier in this chapter. As demonstrated by the stories of social workers in my research, the “talk” of social rights has not only produced substantial gains for those groups deemed “exalted” (Thobani, 2007, p. 3), it has provided the discursive backdrop for extending exclusionary practices while simultaneously producing a national identity, as well as professional social work identities, based on compassion. It is these same identities, cloaked in compassion and benevolence, which are attached to many white social workers’ accounts of mourning over the demise of social welfare.

Due to the effects of Canada’s colonial history, neither Kathy nor Carrie is able to draw on the nostalgia associated with prior activist victories and social welfare gains. Having been excluded from memories of a prior “better time”, Aboriginal social workers in my study grieve the losses of land, language, families, communities, and traditional cultural practices. At the same time, for others, especially those identified as white, longing for a romanticized past continues to be a seductive fantasy enabling them to identify readily with progressive projects and, through their work-life, they are produced as “change agents” within those same projects. Understanding themselves to be compassionate “helpers”, social workers describe how in the past they enjoyed a high degree of autonomy within organizations where fairness and justice prevailed. As Didi explains:

When I first got out of school, I worked as an employment counsellor with youth in a big city, and the supervisor I had really recognized that these kids weren’t working because they had a whole slew of issues. So I was really allowed to do whatever work was needed to help them. Later, I worked at a welfare office where, really, for being a big bureaucratic organization, it was all about helping women and children, primarily. It was amazing, and you know, the goal of the organization was to help people that were in need. And then, the cuts happened...
In Didi’s account, as in others’ stories, there is a sense of longing for older forms of service arrangements. This sense of longing does the work of constituting those workplaces (and the work practices undertaken there) as spaces where subject positions adhered more easily to social workers’ ethical commitments to social justice.

Many social workers shared that throughout the 1990s, they experienced diminishing autonomy, the loss of professional discretion, and fewer opportunities for social activism. They found it necessary to grapple with now-heightened tensions and contradictions between their desires and aspirations for producing a “good self” and what social workers needed to do every day to get by in their jobs. As the following section will describe, the work of mourning plays a key role in constituting social workers as ethical and moral selves, even as they work under conditions that increasingly contradicted those imperatives.

5.4 Managing Threats to a Cherished Identity - The Defended Subject
For social workers with identities tied tightly to a “passion for goodness”, the restructuring of their work in the 1990s came to represent a period of loss where their concerns with social equality and social justice were deemed irrelevant. Dreams of social change deteriorated into a blur of stressful encounters as social workers struggled with ill-fitting mandates, reduced resources, and diminished capacities to provide good-quality care. Conflicts and struggles over their changing work roles resulted in uneasy positioning and deepening doubts about their chosen profession. It can be said that some social workers entered a period of mourning where their previous roles as “agents of social change” were overshadowed by emerging subjectivities around which they positioned themselves as powerless professionals under siege. For instance, sharing a collective sense of grief with her colleagues, one child welfare supervisor reflects on her fears about how she and her co-workers had come to embody professional helpers that had lost their ethical way: “…we weren’t helping each other, we were just commiserating with each other…we were all kind of sinking together and we realized how bad it was for everyone else. We were just kind of hanging on to each other.”

In some cases, changes at work prompted desires to disassociate oneself from a once-cherished profession. For example, Theresa points to the organizational changes adopted by the large inner-city hospital where she was employed. She explains that the results were less like health care and more characteristic of business-like models of service. She rages at the hypocrisy exhibited by senior managers who she feels were ignoring their mission to care for
people: “I felt bitter and angry…everything they came up with just pissed me off!” After several years of trying to navigate the changed terrain of her work, Theresa states that she began to harbour anxieties over her own submission to narrowed practice margins and individualized approaches for care. Out of a desire to preserve her “honour”, Theresa consciously made a decision to distance herself from a profession that she felt had come to betray her. She admitted, “as much as I hate to tell you this, I don’t even call myself a social worker anymore, which hurts me, like it pains me to even say it.” The manner in which Theresa manages to reframe her identity at work is noteworthy given how it contrasts with some critical theorizing on workplace change and identity. For instance, Sennett (1998) warns that restructured workplaces over time will not only alter the productions of work but will also “corrode the character” (p. 24) of the people who work there. Similarly, Casey’s (1995) study of workplace change describes how shifting organizational values can lead to a “discursive colonization of the employee self” (p. 138) whereby any feelings of ambivalence about changes at work will be gradually absorbed until contradictions in peoples’ identities are obscured. Unlike the subjects described by Sennett and Casey, Theresa’s technique for managing her anxieties allows her to keep her sense of integrity intact while she distances herself from the tensions created through restructuring of her work as a health service provider.

Social workers in my research draw on particular discourses in order to maintain an unwavering sense of a moral self despite the changes in the context of their work. Their narratives highlight that they possess unique skills for critical thinking, strong commitments to social justice and strong empathy for others who suffer. As Frank, a child welfare supervisor, explains, “people do need support in life regardless of where they’ve come from and I’ve got a really deep feeling around that. You know, what I can do in this life is somehow support people or care about them. Maybe that’s at the core. It’s caring.” It is through producing themselves in this way that Theresa and Frank engage in the kind of moral work described by Boyd (2004) as only performable by “the liberal individual” (p. 9). According to Boyd, the liberal individual possesses rational choice-making capacities along with intentional agency with which social change can be made to happen. Applying these ideas to activist social workers such as Theresa and Frank enables us to see how they produce the possibility of moral progress as flowing directly from their abilities to transcend and step outside the circumstances faced by others, including the cuts and downsizing of services. Unlike others, Theresa and Frank are free to imagine how they might change things for the better and they also manage to
exercise the necessary agency to act on it. Mohanram (1999) explains that a subject position able to mobilize such agency can only be achieved by placing “the body” (p.32) outside of its historical context. In other words, Theresa and Frank enjoy privilege that is obscured by ignoring important historical events such as colonialism, slavery, and unfair immigration policies. Imagining the self as a change agent implies the idealized dominant, white, male (in some cases, female) body that is unmarked by the material conditions of these historical events. In this way, Theresa and Frank produce themselves as beings who are able “to transform, to grow, and to develop” (p. 31) as they respond to changes in their workplace. Discourses of liberalism enable positioning that produces social workers as compassionate and caring despite the eroding conditions caused by service restructuring.

The unique ability to connect with the pain and suffering of others is a key aspect to how social workers constitute themselves as moral even as they mourn losses in the context of social welfare restructuring. In one example, Hannah, a thirty-six year old, white child welfare supervisor, explains that it is her ability to feel for others that enabled her to do the “tough gig” of child apprehension work during the 1990s. She declares, “If you don’t have empathy or the ability to put yourself in another’s shoes, you can’t do this job.” Hannah acknowledges the enormous power placed in her hands during a time when the system emphasized “removal” over “prevention”. She acknowledges the risks for doing harm when working in a “very oppressive machine”. Drawing from an example where she appeared in court as part of a child apprehension process, Hannah demonstrates the ease with which she is able to avoid complicity with a harm-inducing system through the mobilizing of discourses of both empathy and liberalism:

I just took this family to court. I know that it’s hard on them. But it’s about seeing it in the perspective of court where everybody is made equal, right? That’s the idea behind it and I can empower my clients to accept that equality through their own lawyer.

As a first step, Hannah inscribes provincial family court as a space where laws are universal and, therefore, power imbalances are reconciled. She goes on to portray her role as empathic and, as a result, she is absolved of any conflict of interest between the interests of justice and control over the lives of family members who are her service users. Hannah advances the idea that symmetrical positioning is accessible to anyone who desires it. In this moment, similar to
the positioning work undertaken by Theresa and Frank, Hannah can be seen to be producing herself as a “defended subject” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p.19). As a defended subject, Hannah mobilizes the discourses of empathy and liberalism to resolve any potential conflicts she may feel as a result of tensions and contradictions in her work. Rather than struggle with self-doubt, social workers come to organize themselves in a way that is mindful of power imbalances but empathetic enough to avoid complicity with any potential injustice.

Razack’s (2007) work on Canadian humanitarian responses to global crises can be used to analyse the empathy projected by some activist social workers in their narratives about the self under the conditions of workplace restructuring. She argues that empathy on the part of human rights activists can be seen as somewhat “slippery” (p. 376). What she means is that the pain experienced by others becomes a source of morality for the helpers, while simultaneously obscuring the relations of power between them. Applying these ideas to the narratives provided in my research makes it possible to see how, through the pain of others, social workers manage to establish their innocence in the face of workplace restructuring. Through establishing innocence, such positioning enables social workers to defend and sustain their cherished identities as activists. The suffering of others, rather than unsettling a sense of ourselves as social activists, becomes a life-affirming event in our lives because, “the hero of the story is us” (Razack, 2007, p. 385).

During interviews about their experiences of changes at work, social workers would occasionally convey ambiguity about their abilities to maintain an activist identity after restructuring. In these cases, the tensions between new demands at work and organizing oneself as ethical and moral become almost irreconcilable. For instance, Hannah shares her fears about burning-out at work and sometimes wonders “Why am I here?” while reflecting on whether she can make it through another day. Kathy ponders the dilemmas involved in her dual positioning as a child welfare worker and a proud member of her Aboriginal clan. She knows that others view her social work role as contentious and sometimes this knowledge makes it difficult to maintain her sense of being a “whole person”. She experiences times when she feels “torn between two worlds.” Kathy describes the complex process of “putting herself back together again”: “When I experience inner conflicts, I’ve always been taught that it means I’ve forgotten who I am. And the way to resolve that is to go back to who I am and what that means.” In Kathy’s eyes, the process of sustaining her identity means staying rooted in the
culture and traditions of her own community. Yet, Kathy acknowledges sadly that even among her own family and neighbours, many don’t always see her as belonging there:

It doesn’t matter that I’m part of this community. It doesn’t matter that they know me in this community. I walk in as CAS [Children’s Aid Society]. And as soon as you walk into anybody’s home as CAS, you’ve got power over them…You could totally destroy that family.

Kathy’s process of constituting herself as a social worker in restructured child welfare could be described as precarious due to the contradictions inherent in subject positions that are at the same time “empowered” and also subject to strategies of control (Newman, 2005, p. 718). On the one hand, Kathy believes that her professional skills can provide help and support to families in her community. On the other hand, she is mindful of how the government-legislated mandate dictates the parameters of her practice. Halford & Leonard (1999) describe the varied forms in which people can come to see themselves in contexts characterized by contradictions as a “splitting of the self” (p. 112). The result, argue these authors, is an uneasy mixture of old and emerging identities within the same individual. The continued strength of Kathy’s primary identity as a member of her community is reflected in her feelings of guilt, fear and mourning over the potential loss of this important role in her life.

The drive for ethical self-governing in the context of restructuring requires activist social workers to manage rising tensions between notions of the “good self” and what is expected of them in terms of fulfilling new work roles. As this next section will demonstrate, participants’ accounts reveal how, in many cases, the management of these tensions involves forms of self-governing that can address increasingly precarious arrangements in the workplace.

5.5 Innocence Augmented by Discourses of Faith
For many of my research participants, the ability to sustain an activist identity during the 1990s was fraught with challenges due to the rising tensions associated with restructuring. Social problems that were once understood as structural or collective concerns were being reframed narrowly as the deficiencies of individuals. Concerns were frequently expressed about the rise of managerial models of standardized services that emphasized technical tasks, risk assessment
and risk management. Their concerns underscored their fears as social workers about a lost ethical purpose within social and health welfare systems. In the context of these shifts, perhaps it is not surprising that efforts towards maintaining a coherent sense of a “good” and “ethical” self were made possible by fusing activist ideals to more individualized frameworks of care. Interestingly, in a number of cases, individualizing frameworks were made available through social workers’ long-standing connections to faith-based movements. In trying to understand the prevalence of faith-based attachments, I wondered if the language of “charity” and “benevolence” that is associated with faith became more palatable during a time when spaces for radical activism within social services were shrinking (Bonisteel & Green, 2005).

However, social workers’ stories about connections to their faith indicate that these deep ties provide far more than a mere “cover”. They also work as powerful personal reminders about desirable political identities during times of ambiguity, doubt and uncertainty.

For a surprisingly high number of social workers in my research, prior experiences with Christian-based development work, conducted by their parents or by themselves during earlier points in their lives, provided initial windows into the lives of the poor and socially-marginalized. For instance, Sylvia recalls how moved she was as a young child when her father showed her a poster from a “Save the Children” promotion:

> The first time that you see something like that as a kid, you’re completely blown away. You’ve been raised in this Western world, this little cocoon. I was completely devastated and as a little kid began to think, ‘okay, I need to do something…like, it’s not okay to live with this.

Several social workers describe how their experiences of witnessing the images of poor, starving and often racialized “Third World” children served as a powerful spiritual exercise, compounding their awareness about the pain and suffering of others. The act of witnessing that occurred through faith-based development work mobilized people in ways that made them want to work for change. For example, Frank describes how his exposure to poverty as a young person doing missionary work in a West African country produced an internal drive to help people who are less fortunate. Later, when he made a decision to leave the Christian Mission, it seemed logical to him that a career in child welfare would provide a secular pathway for doing similar work:
Just the idea of seeing and visiting children and families made me feel this was a good fit for me, this is like a calling…and the idea of being a social worker fit with that path. The idea of being a social worker allowed me to not have to be confined to a church organization. In fact, I totally separated myself from any church organization. But the spiritual connection to others for me is at the core…one of the reasons why I am in social work and continue to be.

Similarly, Sylvia describes how witnessing others’ struggles can continue to inspire and motivate her in her own work:

I cannot believe how much some people suffer and still walk on this earth. It’s amazing to me. Personally, I’m amazed at my capacity to hold stories because there are so many of them. I continually feel so impressed with people’s resiliency and strength and courage. Witnessing this – journeying beside someone – is definitely part of what we do.

Razack’s (2007) ideas about the positioning of witnesses can be applied to the stories of Canadian social workers who infuse their social change goals with knowledge gained from previous involvements with Christian-based development work. According to Razack, the notion of “witnessing the pain of others” (p. 381), especially for white Canadians, becomes a key aspect of national identity. The act of witnessing helps shape Canadian citizens into images of compassionate but un-implicated observers of injustice. In analysing witnessing as related to the politics of rescue, Razack suggests that this process involves a “theft of pain” (p. 389) as the suffering of another is sentimentalized in order for us to believe something good about ourselves. It is a way of confirming our deeply humanitarian character. Yet, as Razack points out, witnessing the pain of others who are located in the so-called “less developed” parts of the world is often an act supported by the racial logic that underpins the material system of white Western privilege. I would argue that Razack’s analysis of racial logic is also applicable to the so-called developed contexts. For instance, within the Canadian context, the witness has professional, class, and race-based privilege. A similar analysis is found in Heron’s (1999) description of the desire to view others’ pain in the context of development work as a manifestation of “colonial continuities” (p. ii). For Heron, as for Razack (2007), the act of
white witnessing is often based on an individualistic imperative to conceive of the self as moral. Heron explains that such “narratives of the moral self” (p. iii) are prevalent in development work where there is a long history of Christian story-lines embedded in the work of social change. Similarly, my research participants made reference to the ways that experiences with development work intersected with their relationship with faith-based movements and how both of these elements augmented life-long passions for social justice.

The connections between faith and social change found in contemporary social workers’ stories are reminiscent of early Canadian social reform groups comprised mostly of church activists. These initiatives became known as the “social gospel movement” (Valverde, 2006, p. 120). Valverde (2006) points out that while the social gospel movement was concerned mostly with matters related to political economy, there were overlaps in both personnel and ideas with what is commonly-known as the “social purity movement” (p. 120). This latter movement focused on the sexual and moral aspects of social life. Consequently, the social justice aims of the social gospel movement were infused with ideas about white, Christian supremacy. Paula Butler (2005) explains that these movements co-existed at the height of British colonialism and imperialism in Canada, during which churches provided the ideological and practical support for the great “civilizing enterprise” (p. 139). Coleman (2006) explains that the process of “civilizing” undertaken by early church activists required the continuous discovery of “outsiders” (p. 132). Outsiders were seen as morally weak and in need of rescue and salvation and, consequently, they would be assisted to assimilate into the normative values of white, British, middle-class masculinity (p. 132). Butler (2005) points out that in the narratives of salvation, the typically white Christian is always produced as a “good person” (p. 139) and, ironically, the association with goodness lends legitimacy to and motivation for the harsh interventions into the lives of those who are considered to be in need of saving.

An awareness of the overlap between the social reform movement and the social purity movement is critical to an understanding of the historical underpinnings of contemporary Canadian professional social work. In addition, there are important connections to be made with Davis’ (1964) description of the short-lived political traction gained by social reform activists in the United States during the early twentieth century. In the beginning of this chapter, I discussed the setbacks that confronted these reformers. Davis described these setbacks as the burial of the dreams for social change. He traces how the outgrowths of social
reform would again rise in prominence during the 1920s and 1930s, with advocates of both the social purity and the social gospel movements playing lead roles throughout North America. In Canada, their combined efforts resulted in the establishment of many government-funded programs that would eventually evolve into the “social safety net” (Butler, 2005, p. 139) that defined the modern social welfare state. Park and Kemp (2006) explain that the remnants of these two movements continue to be seen many decades later in the “persistent slippage” (p. 729) between the good intentions of progressive social workers and their intrusive and controlling practices. Perhaps there is no better example of such “slippage” as that seen in the decades-long “saving” practices exercised in relation to Aboriginal children. In the face of their undeniably oppressive results, these efforts to “save” are now known as Canada’s “genocide” (Downey, 1999, p. 56). Examples of progressive notions of “reform” being translated into oppressive practices brings to mind Derek Hook’s (2005) contention that liberal democratic governmentality relies heavily on the register of love to implement many forms of social regulation. Hook observes that “it is difficult to imagine a more effective discursive warrant than that of love to do the job of exclusion” (p. 16). Mitchell Dean (2002) argues that governing liberally is quite compatible with forms of the state that adopt law and order as a primary objective. Calling it the “dirty secret” (p. 57) of many contemporary liberal governmental discourses of social inclusion, Dean notes how the story of diminishing national state sovereignty coincides with “the deployment of sovereign and coercive powers over the lives of a substantial majority of the world’s inhabitants” (p. 57). Dean offers examples of liberal governments that have deployed intense security measures against their own citizens. His examples include the 1999 “Battle for Seattle” and the similar crackdown on anti-globalization protestors in Genoa, Italy in 2001 (p. 58). It is likely that Dean would also add to this list the draconian security measures imposed by the Ontario provincial government against peaceful protesters during the 2010 G-20 Leaders’ Summit held in Toronto (Canadian Broadcast Corporation, 2010). These ideas and actions demonstrate that governing in the name of freedom involves a full range of technologies and that the proximity between love and domination can be very dangerously close.

In my research, social workers’ stories reveal the close connections between religious faith and projects of social reform – connections which produce many paradoxes and tensions. As I trace these various elements, it is possible to see how social workers weave the contradictory strands of their restructured social work roles into coherent stories about their
lives as “good” social activists. For many, discourses of faith become important elements for augmenting notions of innocence and transcendence within restructured workplaces. For example, Lydia, a white primary health care worker, echoes Frank’s belief that social change, much like social work, is a “higher calling”. When I asked Lydia to explain what she means by the idea of a “calling”, she refers to a notion of “doing God as a verb”:

Your faith experience is not lived in the context of church or even in a church community. Your faith and how you are as a person is lived in the context of how you live your life and how you respond to the world. And I think we all are reflections, at our best, we are all reflections of the Divine and the Divine ideal lives in all of us…my work is my calling and that’s fine. I’ve found my place in people’s lives and that’s good enough.

Lydia’s explanation of “doing God as a verb” highlights the presence of a powerful inner spirituality that appears capable of transcending the constraints and contradictions that are produced through neoliberal restructuring of primary health care.

For some social workers, their beliefs about the unique aspects of the self become the most important inner resources that they have for dealing with rising tensions and contradictions at work. In the following example from my interview with Lydia, it is possible to identify how desires for justice and discourses of faith in the face of cuts to social welfare benefits coalesce with discourses that refer to unique capacities for love, rescue and salvation. This complex positioning enables Lydia to augment her defence of a highly-valued activist identity while obscuring her complicity with those socially-regressive reforms in services that ultimately result in hardships for service recipients. In this part of our interview, Lydia’s narrative begins with descriptions of the horror that she felt upon learning of the suicide of a long-time service user. Lydia explains that the woman’s suicide coincided with the staff at the Ontario Works Office (the agency charged with administering welfare benefits) informing her that the small amounts of cash her mother had been sending her for years had resulted in an overpayment charge. As a result, deductions would be applied to the woman’s monthly welfare cheque. Lydia assumed that this extra burden was the “last straw” in this woman’s life. After learning about her service user’s tragic death, Lydia asked the woman’s family if she could speak at her funeral, “as a way to let her mom know that helping her daughter was the right
thing to do”. Lydia finds comfort in the fact that her actions as a social worker, while perhaps not “systems-altering”, became an opportunity to bear witness and make visible the struggles of a marginalized life in the face of a brutalizing system. She felt that this was one way to do the healing work of spreading “love and kindness”. Mobilizing discourses of “love” and “caring”, Lydia and others describe their work as enactments of a “higher power”. Their Christianity is a key element in the fight against welfare cuts. It enables and strengthens their engagement in the project of rescue and inclusion. As Lydia explains: “Jesus was the one who invited the marginalized to be part of the community and that whole concept for me is the message of Christianity; we are all parts of this whole; there are no parts that should ever be cut off.” Through the taking up of the discourses of love and caring, Lydia and other social workers in my research produce themselves to be in intimate solidarity with service users and their families. From this position they are situated as blameless in causing their pain and suffering.

Evasions of complicity can also be found in Anita’s account as she draws on discourses of “saving” that are underpinned with pragmatism. According to Anita, this pragmatic position is necessary for managing the “realities of the job” in child welfare. Anita observes that these realities have increasingly put her role at odds with the felt-needs of families. In fact, she explains that she now spends most of her time intervening in parents’ and children’s lives against their wishes. Despite these intrusive practices, Anita manages to maintain a coherent identity as a compassionate saviour and social change agent. She explains:

Oh, man, I’m out to save the world! (laughter) What else can I say? Out to save the world. I’m just there to help everyone and anyone, whether they wanted me to or not. I am there. They’d have a problem and I’m like, ‘tell me your problem. I can help’. You know, and then slowly you realize, ‘just a minute here; you cannot change the world. You can try and make it better but the energy that’s involved in changing the world is tremendous. Making the world a kinder, gentler place where you’re a little piece of it, now that’s a more realistic goal.

Joy can also be seen to adopt discourses of love and forgiveness in her child welfare work as a way to reconcile contradictions and tensions. However, unlike some of her peers, Joy experiences less success. Joy describes harbouring unrelenting anger at some of her co-workers
and senior managers who she believes have become co-opted by restrictive government policies. In order to cope with these feelings, she turns to her Bible studies in order to find a sense of love and forgiveness. In what can be analysed as a “fracture” (Halford & Leonard, 1999, p. 112) in Joy’s deployment of these discourses, she shares a story about a time at work when it became impossible to contain her rage:

I remember one day that I felt so angry at other social workers at [Child Welfare Agency]. I yelled at them, “Why are you doing this meaningless job? And why are you giving them clothes when there’s so many more important things you should be doing?” It may have been meeting the needs of their clients’ at the time, but it wasn’t meeting the needs of what I thought were the bigger issues.

Despite her attempts to maintain a coherent identity, Joy’s account, echoing those relayed by other social workers, is remarkable for the ease with which it positions her as an innocent bystander in relation to the realm of professional child welfare known for its emphasis on social. As it is with some other social workers, such innocence is achieved and augmented through the mobilization of a variety of discourses which work to re-affirm identities that are associated with “justice”, “love”, “rescue” and “salvation”. Having fully embraced the use of liberal humanist discourse, social workers produce themselves as “exceptional beings” who are insulated against the discomfort that is associated with enactments of social control measures. Activist identities remain intact when the self is infused with commitments to certain moral imperatives and ethical judgements. Meanwhile, social workers’ relationships to power are effaced. Bronwyn Davies (2000) points out that this view of the person is an individualistic model where persons are conceived of as being pitted against something known as society. Closely linked to this idea is the notion that celebrates the individual who manages to stand out from the collective: “heroes who engage in specific tasks and conquer the difficulties that the world puts in their way” (p. 56).

The mobilization of faith-based discourses can be analysed as a form of self-governing that offers defence against culpability in matters related to social welfare cuts, downsizing and other forms of restructuring under neoliberalism. However, from a different angle, it is possible to analyse social workers’ use of faith-based discourses as a form of resistance against the encroachment of a managerial culture in which everything is subjected to measurements of
efficiency and risk management. A turn to faith and the associated ideas of randomness, chance and uncertainty simply flies in the face of pressures to demonstrate control and an adherence to standardized procedures. Under these terms and conditions, notions of faith and spirituality are a basis from which commitments to broadened social provisions can be made. Hoggett, Beedell, Jimenez, Mayo and Miller (2006) have described these commitments as complicated manifestations of altruism that can assume many different forms including a desire to “do good” but also, more complex desires to repair damage that people have witnessed to have been inflicted on others – a “reparative impulse” (p. 763). Compassion is harnessed with anger at the “social suffering” (Bourdieu et al., 1999, cited in Hoggett et al. 2006, p. 764) of others. For many of the social workers in my research, discourses of faith seem to take on a double movement whereby they work to defy standardization and also give expression to their identities as innocent subjects in the context of neoliberal restructuring. Despite the rising limitations in their work, social workers’ sense of how they have come to know themselves continues to be pinned on a set of ideals about building a better world and an obligation to somehow make that reality happen.

5.6 Conclusion
In this chapter, I have explored the themes of mourning and loss in the making up of activist social workers’ subjectivities within the context of restructured work environments. This exploration reveals a multiplicity of subject positionings where discourses of loss and mourning intersect with social workers’ unique biographical histories. The analysis of mourning that I provide in this chapter shows how commitments to social activism, much like the “talk” of social rights in Canada, can be used discursively to secure social workers’ sense of themselves as compassionate, innocent and morally-transcendent. However, by grounding mourning within the historical frameworks of oppression and privilege in Canada, it becomes possible to see white social workers’ grief as a technology of self-governing whereby a state of loss also enables a form of forgetting (Lowe, 1996). The history of violent colonization and racism in the settlement, social and moral regulation of Canada is disappeared, and the oppressive role played by social workers is rendered invisible (Thobani, 2007). As Judith Butler (2004) observes, we begin to understand how certain lives become grievable and others become understood as ungrievable because they are perceived as being outside a sense of natural belonging in the nation. As a result, grief becomes a very public act of nation-building.
Elaborating on grief as an act of nation-building, Butler (2004) explains that “maybe when we undergo what we do, something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us” (p. 22). As our mourning becomes more historically-situated, it becomes possible to reveal our complicity – to “see who we are in terms of that situation” (May, 2006, p. 12). An analysis of contextualized and historicized mourning enables social workers to implicate themselves in relation to social welfare restructuring.

This chapter also explores how some social workers, especially those who have first-hand experiences with poverty and other forms of marginalization, are able to draw on memories of a more inclusive narrative of social work and history of social welfare in Canada. These varied narratives reveal differences in social workers’ positionings. Social workers organize a sense of self by drawing on unique social biographies, available counter-discourses, along with the “fractures” (Davies, 2005, p. 1) that exist in their lives. For example, Joy’s failure to contain her anger at work captures how cracks appear when tensions between faith and a need to take action become untenable. Marie, Carrie and Kathy, either unable or unwilling to draw on nostalgic discourses of social welfare, remind us that there are multiple, contradictory and hidden layers to the popular story-lines about the advances of social welfare and the role of professional social workers in Canada. It is possible, through these more inclusive accounts of loss, to see how it is that social workers’ mourning is historically contingent.

The analysis developed in this chapter seeks to shed light on what gets produced when social workers’ mourning enables them to forget the history of white supremacy, racism and Western imperialism in Canada. Attachments to highly-selective versions of the past enable social workers to constitute themselves as “innocent”, “good”, “compassionate” and “caring” even in the event of our complicity. As Adam Phillips (1997) suggests, our “[m]ourning is immensely reassuring because it convinces us of something we might otherwise doubt; our attachment to others” (p. 153). Phillips cautions that the desire to ease the self in this way also comes at a cost: “Mourning slows things down” (p. 159). When applied to social workers’ narratives in this chapter, his point is that it is not adequate to simply long for a “better time” in the midst of cuts, downsizing and the re-structuring of services. We have responsibilities to move past emotional blockages to embrace a more inclusive form of mourning, one that
enables us to respond critically and effectively, both to what went on before and to the current context of practice. As Todd May (2005) explains:

If we are told that there are no moments other than this one, if we are caught up in the urgency of our present at the expense of understanding how we arrived at it, then perhaps this is not because the contingencies of our history have become irrelevant to us now but because those contingencies have led us here. And because they are contingencies, we can understand the paths that brought us here and, in their wake, construct paths that may lead us out. (p. 73)

It is by learning to historically situate our grief over the losses in social rights, that social workers can keep our capacities for critical analysis and critical practices agile in these neoliberal times.

In the next chapter, I further explore how social workers position themselves as ethical beings in the context of work that is increasingly defined by standardization and efficiencies associated with narrow forms of risk management.
Chapter 6

After Risk Management: “Prevention” and the Production of Ethical Selfhood

6.1. Introduction
At the end of the previous chapter, I discussed how the adoption of faith-based discourses can be understood as a performance of defiance in the face of managerialism – a form of resistance to the idea that all elements of work can come to be measured and subjected to processes of standardization, efficiencies and regularization in order to “manage” risk. By contrast, a turn to faith positions the self as willing to embrace uncertainty, elusiveness, randomness, chance and ambiguity. A faith-based self conceives of the world as being governed by a power beyond human comprehension and, therefore, not amenable to human intervention. Embracing the unpredictable and the incalculable simply defies the idea that everything must be identified, defined and measured, what Ian Hacking (1991) calls “the avalanche of numbers, the erosion of determinism and the taming of chance” (p. 189). The purpose of this chapter is to further explore the various strategies that social workers develop in response to the insertion of managerialist forms of risk management into their work. I draw on Foucault (1984c, 1988c, 1990) to examine some of the ways in which social workers continue to work on themselves in order to develop and maintain a sense of ethical selfhood in relation to the emerging rules and values of risk prevention that govern them in restructured child welfare and primary health services.

In his later work on ethics, Foucault was concerned with the practices of daily living that revolve around care of the self. He examined ancient Platonic, Hellenic and Christian texts to explore how the care of the self required a constant and determined commitment to self-creation. The texts he wrote about were often minor works that had been originally written for the purposes of offering opinions and advice on how one should live:

[T]hey were designed to be read, learned, reflected upon, and tested out, and they were intended to constitute the eventual framework of everyday conduct. These texts thus served as functional devices that would enable individuals to questions their own
conduct, to watch over and give shape to it, and to shape themselves as ethical subjects. (Foucault, 1990, p. 12-13)

Todd May (2006) explains that Foucault had no interest in the legacy of these ancient texts as such, and he rejected any notion that they could somehow provide us with models for better living: “Rather, studying them loosens the grip our present has upon us. It allows us not only to conceive but imaginatively to inhabit a different way of living. It opens the door to our asking the question of who we might be” (p. 99). Foucault (1990) believed that the ancients took up care of the self as a commitment to “straying afield” of oneself (p. 8). Straying afield is important, according to Foucault, because “[t]here are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all” (p. 8). These ideas are highly relevant for activist social workers as we seek to establish new strategies and renewed critical practices in the face of neoliberal cuts, downsizing and re-organizing of services. Care of the self, or to “stray afield”, requires careful attention to how one is constituted by the world around us. It is a commitment to somehow becoming different. In other words, the proper care of the self requires that one reject the so-called “normal” social practices in favour of those that do not conform. As Foucault (1988c) explains,

This work will have to be more than a test for measuring what one is capable of, and something other than the assessment of a fault in relation to rules of conduct; it should have the form of a steady screening of representations: examining them, monitoring them, sorting them out. More than an exercise done at regular intervals, it is a constant battle that one must take towards oneself. (p. 62-63)

Foucault’s notions of “care of the self” and “straying afield” can be seen as the means by which we can continue to work on ourselves, even under the challenges posed by neoliberalism, in order to emerge as ethical subjects in the contemporary context of practice.

In order to achieve my purpose in this chapter, I draw on documents, or what I refer to as texts, that are issued by the Ontario provincial government regarding its restructuring of child welfare and primary health care. I also rely on my research interviews in order to explore how the centrality of risk management through prevention has come to shape the terms and
conditions under which social workers think about and organize themselves at work – both their sense of purpose and the various ways that they are held accountable to that purpose. Risk management refers to “organizational and professional strategies for responding to perceived risks, including the processes of identification, analysis, assessment, prevention and reduction of risk” (Green, 2007, p. 401). In referring to government documents as texts, I am trying to establish the presence of an emerging ethical framework – a framework that revolves around particular notions of risk prevention. It is this framework that governs how social workers and other care providers must work and must think about what they do and who they are at this particular moment in time (Ball, 2001). My interest is to explore how the texts contribute to “making us up” (Hacking, 2002, p. 99) as ethical beings and moral selves. But I am also interested in examining the mutually-constitutive interactions between these texts and the ethical practices that are produced by those of us who are shaped by these discourses. How is it that we are shaped by, and how do we manage to push beyond, above and below, the “limits and forms of the sayable” (Foucault, 1991a, p. 59)? From these perspectives, texts can be seen as “active” (Smith, 1999, p. 135) in shaping practices, but it also seems possible that texts “miss their mark” and that even authorized texts are often read “against the grain” or subversively by their intended targets or users. In that sense, I argue that faith offers an alternative grid of intelligibility to risk management because it can increase the capacity for agency on the part of social work subjects as they “make up” their own version of selfhood.

In the next section of this chapter, I draw on social workers’ accounts to discuss the rise of risk management in child welfare and primary health care services in Ontario during the 1990s. Determined to be viewed as “tough on crime” and strong fiscal managers, the Harris Conservative government introduced a political platform that specifically targeted child abusers and a bloated health budget as major planks of their provincial policy reform plan. Their reforms included government-instituted standardized risk measurement procedures designed to regulate services in both child welfare and primary health care. As a result of these measures, social workers in child welfare and primary health care services experienced many of their day-to-day work practices as being increasingly shaped by the neoliberal logic of auditability (Levi, 2008; Munro, 2004; Power, 1996). Under a neoliberal regime, the use of audits to manage risks is promoted as a neutral mechanism concerned with accountability and performance, and with attempts to improve efficiencies and effectiveness (Parton, 2004). However, social workers explain that the processes of making child welfare and primary care
services “auditable” are based on simplistic notions of practice that require that both managers and front-line service workers follow inflexible procedures with little regard to service user outcomes. The result is a form of “dirty thinking” that leads to highly intrusive measures with potentially devastating results on the lives of families and social service users. Green (2007) suggests that the rise of risk management promotes forms of “defensive social work” (p. 400) where there is an expectation that workers can effectively control and show visible signs of being in control of institutionally-designated risks. I analyse these expectations as pressures to prioritize and defend against “institutional risks” (Rothstein, Huber & Gaskell, 2006, p. 92). Consequently, the attention of social workers is focused on managing or preventing those potential threats to regulated organizations that include service delivery failures, budget over-runs, legal liabilities and damage to professional and organizational reputation. As social workers focus more on institutional risk management, their attention is drawn away from service and support to clients.

In the third section, I analyse government documents related to the more recent forms of restructuring known as Transformation in child welfare and Renewal in primary health care. Textual analysis reveals that a key purpose set out for social workers is no longer centred on risk management practices aimed at intrusion and regulation but rather, towards the prevention of those risk factors that pose a threat to the well-being of members of society. An emerging emphasis on prevention across both sectors signals a desire to move away from a “rule of pessimism” (Dumbrill, 2006, p. 6) towards that of “systematic predetection” (Castel, 1991, p. 288) of risk. As a result, social workers will shift from “dirty thinking” towards an embrace of the “myth of absolute eradication of risk” (Castell, 1991, 289). I argue that as a result of this shift, social workers’ interventions will no longer be limited to simple concern for an individual or family. Rather, intervention will be concerned with detecting and preventing all those combinations of factors that are liable to produce risk.

In section four, I discuss and analyse social workers’ observations about changes to the context of practice in light of the recent shifts towards prevention as articulated in government policies. Social workers share how they anticipated a renewed emphasis on interventions aimed at diminishing what is known as “risks to the social” (Donzelot, 1991a, 1991b, Garland, 2006, Rose, 1996, Parton, 2008) under Transformation and Renewal. Rose (1996) describes “the social” as those spaces of care and control where interests are pursued in the name of “social protection, social justice, social rights and social solidarity” (p. 329). Social workers’ accounts
about their emerging interventions highlight how new notions of prevention and harm reduction can be seen not as opportunities to renew the social, but rather as the expansion and dispersal of power to penetrate poor and racialized communities for the purposes of governing through individualized empowerment. I argue that social workers’ purposes are constituted through these processes in order to bring them into line with broader systemic arrangements which regulate marginalized communities as threats to national security and economic recovery.

In section five, I discuss how social workers’ stories about their actual day-to-day work practices under Transformation and Renewal convey ongoing tensions. These tensions emerge as social workers’ desires to prevent threats to the social collide with persistent demands to prevent and eliminate errors and adverse incidents. Consequently, social workers are called upon to demonstrate strong abilities to manage a range of risks in order to protect the institutions within which they work. Rather than offering opportunities for developing narratives about service users’ lives that take into account the complexity of contexts, these new risk management tools continue to shape social workers’ practices into narrow, “measureable” behaviours. Many of these processes manage to create the appearance of accountability, but in the minds of social workers interviewed for my research, this form of accountability is largely symbolic and produced mainly to satisfy the demands of audit, protection against legal liabilities and the production of professional and public comfort. I argue that within the context of neoliberalism, emerging notions of risk prevention within restructuring measures such as Transformation and Renewal work towards shaping social workers’ practices in ways that produce a “rational” and “responsible” individual who is capable of assuming risks on his/her own behalf thus freeing government from its prior social obligations.

In section five of the chapter, I explore how social workers shape their own conduct in response to the demand to defend against institutional risks as a key organizer of their practice. I highlight a series of personal and spiritual exercises performed by social workers which can be seen to serve the purpose of producing an ethical selfhood within the neoliberal context of risk prevention. These exercises on the self are comparable to Foucault’s (1984c) notion of the “hypomnemata” (p. 363) which he discovered while he was exploring ancient Greco-Roman texts. Although the precise meaning of the term, hypomnemata, translates as a copybook or a notebook, Foucault explains that it can also mean brief verbal expressions that are often
borrowed from others. Foucault describes these exercises as a form of “training of oneself by oneself” (p. 364) through the collection of ready-made phrases or the “already said” (p. 365). Mariana Valverde (2004) argues that such practices on the self create a strong link between individual biographical stories and larger collective issues (p. 82). Similarly, I argue that the use of these technologies of the self by social workers within the current context of practice can have the potential to be radically subversive. This radical potential resides in social workers’ outright refusal to accept rigid measures of risk management in favour of discourses of faith, fate, elusiveness and chance. Yet, many of the small anecdotes, comments and borrowed reflections – the hypomnemata – are also noteworthy for their paradoxical ability to reproduce the logic of neoliberalism.

In the concluding section of the chapter, I discuss how learning more about the small utterances of the “already said” (Foucault, 1984c, p. 365) on the part of activist social workers can contribute to critical knowledge about the ways in which social and health service providers position themselves within the emerging context of risk prevention. Social workers’ positioning of the self as ethical within the context of risk prevention can both collide and collude with the logics of neoliberalism. Emerging discourses suggest opportunities to expand social provisioning in ways that can advance equity-based social agendas. However, given that there is a persistent emphasis on disciplinary and punitive regulatory measures aimed at the lives of many service users, social workers need to critically analyse how their efforts to expand the social can also collude as a technique for justifying the downsizing of social welfare. As a result, the responsibility for managing risks is shifted back onto the individual. It is this shift that activist social workers must constantly attend to in their work.

6.2 Defensive Social Work and “Dirty Thinking”

In 1995, when the Ontario Progressive Conservatives were elected to power, there emerged a growing perception that a crisis existed in both the child welfare sector and throughout the health care system generally. A series of child deaths and subsequent coroner’s inquests were given extensive coverage by the media and absorbed the public’s attention. Consequently, then-Premier Mike Harris declared a “war on child abuse” (Donovan & Welsh, 1997, p. A1). Dumbrill (2006) suggests that the public’s concern at the time about child abuse appears to have been used opportunistically by a government keen to be known for its law and order agenda and for its ability to “get tough” on “abusive parents” (p. 9). As part of their reforms
package, the government instituted new standardized and highly-intrusive risk measurement procedures in child welfare along with strict regulatory measures to ensure compliance by child welfare workers. The introduction of computerized tracking systems ensured that supervisors could monitor front-line workers’ compliance with these new regulations at the same time that new auditing processes gave the state the ability to regulate the types of interventions done with families. As Dumbrill (2006) explains, during the 1990s, “reform instituted a system in which parents were regulated by workers, workers by supervisors, supervisors by managers, and managers by government-imposed procedures” (p. 9).

As the new reforms in child welfare began, the Harris government also launched a major restructuring of the province’s health care services under the guise of addressing spiralling health care costs. A key part of reforming the health care system involved a shift in spending from large-scale institutions such as hospitals to smaller and, apparently more manageable, primary health care clinics in the community (Suschnigg, 2001). Echoing observations made about child welfare reform at the time, Armstrong and Armstrong (2003) explain that health care reforms in the 1990s operated under a “top-down” approach to service delivery where “quality” was defined as the extensive deployment of risk measurement. In other words, “if you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it” (p. 118). These authors explain that an “engineering model” (p. 20) of health care was adopted where it was assumed that the human body functions much like any other machine. According to this model, the body is made up of a series of parts that can be fixed through the use of standardized procedures. Health, from this approach, is seen to be biological, or even mechanical. But it is not seen to be socially influenced. Therefore, care comes to be defined narrowly and is primarily about curing illness. By adopting such a narrow focus on health, according to Armstrong and Armstrong, health care restructuring under the Harris regime meant the implementation of unpopular cuts to service rather than an expansion in the quality of care. The basis for these changes relied on statistical thinking which included rigid formulas, standardized methods for treatment, filling in forms, and ticking off boxes instead of taking in-depth patient histories (Armstrong and Armstrong, 2003). To be readily counted, it seemed that emerging child welfare and health care services in Ontario had to be organized into pre-packaged, highly determined packages of care. As a result, both service systems began increasingly to manage risk through standardization and auditing of service provision.
Front-line service providers and supervisors of direct service interviewed for my research were united in their impressions that the reforms of the 1990s were about cost-cutting efficiencies and managing the associated risks. Standardized models of care, narrow risk assessment formats, and the downward surveillance of service delivery personnel reflected an over-all shift in the province towards treating higher numbers of people while simultaneously trying to rein in social spending. Of particular concern was how the restructuring of services based on risk assessments and standardization meant that important factors in people’s lives were ignored in favour of quick and superficial interventions. Frank, a child welfare supervisor recalls how in the beginning, the promise of efficiencies had appeal because he believed that the legal system needed to work faster for families. He explains:

I was basically quite new to the job when risk assessment fell into our laps and we were all trained to use it. I remember thinking parts of this are good because this is going to allow us to get cases through court faster. That was what I thought then.

With time, Frank discovered that his reliance on risk-based practices led to outcomes that made him feel personally and professionally uncomfortable. For example, he recalls the case of distraught parents who took their teenage son, suffering from acute mental illness, to the hospital and left him there because they could not keep him at home as long as he posed a risk of harm to their other children. After being contacted by hospital emergency department staff, Frank conducted an investigation and eventually wrote up family court documents claiming that these parents had essentially abandoned their sick child. The outcome of these actions led to foster care arrangements for the boy and an endless series of legal battles for the parents as they worked to regain custody of their son. By way of explanation, Frank points to the standard procedure in use at the time which required that he apply a narrow risk assessment tool as a method to determine a plan of action for the family. Looking back now, he struggles with the knowledge of how this ill-fitting intervention erased any contextual understanding of the parents’ actions: “In their minds, they just wanted a doctor to review his meds...they had a sick child, there was no way that they could take care of him at home, and they were protecting their younger kids...I had to fit that situation into this system and it was impossible.” Frank wonders if he will ever come to terms with his feelings of guilt over the fact that a vulnerable child was apprehended from a set of loving, albeit distressed, parents. He understands that the
family needed support and advocacy to deal with their son’s health care problems. Instead, Frank’s reliance on an overly-narrow, risk-based tool compelled him to define their highly-complex problem as a simple case of “parental abandonment”.

Social workers’ stories about work during the reforms of the 1990s convey how their day-to-day practices were increasingly shaped through the neoliberal logic of auditability (Levi, 2008; Munro, 2004; Power, 1996). Within a neoliberal regime, the use of audit to manage risks is said to be a neutral mechanism concerned only with improving indicators of “economy, efficiency and effectiveness” (Munro, 2004, p. 1080). However, social workers in my research point out that the processes of making social and health services “auditable” are based on simplistic notions of practice where a strict reliance on procedures is favoured over other indicators; for instance, whether there were positive or negative outcomes for service users. As an example, Anita, a front-line child welfare worker, discusses problems with what she calls the “root formula” for assessing risk:

I started in intake and I remember when you called your supervisor, you literally went through the entire safety assessment because if you left out one thing, you know it was like, “oh, my goodness, we need to go back and ask about that”. And you know I didn’t like that. That to me, just impeded the whole idea of how you build a relationship with someone.

After moving from her intake job to a direct service position, Anita recalls observing other workers conducting assessments where clearly there was little emphasis on engaging authentically with clients:

I was horrified because I’m there to try and assist a family and I’m watching this one worker literally pull out a sheet, she’d go like this (demonstrating), she’d sit down at the table and this is how she would interview people – ticking this, ticking that, “yeah, talked about that.”...And I’m thinking these kids don’t understand what you’re asking them! Yeah, horrifying. Absolutely horrifying.

The practice stories shared by social workers in child welfare reveal that changes to practice during the 1990s created pressures to defend against what Rothstein et al. (2006) call
“institutional risks” (p. 92) to organizations that are charged with regulating and managing risks to members of society. These authors suggest that examples of risks faced by institutions include service delivery failures, budget deficits, legal liabilities and damaged reputation in the public eye. From this perspective, Frank’s use of narrow risk assessment tools to complete court documents can be seen to serve the interests of funders and a service delivery system that had become wary of being seen to be “soft” on “abusive parents”. Anita’s observations about the reliance on “root formulas” by supervisors and front-line service providers signals that employees in her workplace are focused on protecting the organization from the risk of litigation and/or criminal culpability should the discretionary judgement of professionals fail to detect a risk of harm to a child. Both examples of practice activate what Dumbrill (2006) refers to as a “rule of pessimism” (p. 6) whereby social workers focus their attention on family deficits and move quickly to remove children when risks are perceived.

In the primary health care system, the turn to institutional risk-based care can also be observed in the practice stories told by social workers. Specifically, social workers described how restructuring during the 1990s narrowed services so that they became specific and pre-proscribed treatments. Services that fell outside those definitions included consultations with colleagues, information-sharing, comforting patients or following up with additional referrals. These activities were simply eliminated because they posed short-term economic costs to the institution. Illustrating how this process worked in practice, Pauline, a primary health care social worker recalls how her clinic manager directed her to stop engaging in inter-agency collaboration in order to deliver community-based group work. Instead, she was instructed to focus on new formats where service delivery took place within the confines of her clinic. In addition to restrictions on location, Pauline’s service was now being measured in short, easily-defined sessions geared exclusively to individual clients. Most distressing for Pauline at the time was her growing experience of isolation. She also worried about the loss of opportunities for service users to learn from each other within the context of group formats. No longer able to draw on the expertise of colleagues in the community, Pauline believes her practice aims shifted from serving patients with complex mental health needs to simply serving the financial bottom lines imposed by her managers. Other primary health care social workers expressed similar concerns about how restructuring in health care led to the loss of resources for long-term counselling. Instead, the new emphasis on short-term interventions was aimed at managing patients who were seen as “high risk”. Although there were varying definitions of
what it meant to be “high risk” in primary health care, social workers generally understood
their role to be managers of risks for people who exhibited signs of escalating mental health
crises such as suicide, severe depression, psychosis, etc. The problem for many social workers
became one of justifying their ongoing involvement in a patient’s care when he or she was no
longer deemed “high risk”. Often the pressures to close cases quickly contradicted service
providers’ definition of good quality practice. To make matters worse, social workers were
mindful of how their practices were being increasingly monitored for compliance with
“efficiencies” and standardized models of care. Didi, a primary health care social worker,
discusses how surveillance by her program managers began to induce anxiety whenever she
had prolonged contacts with patients. She offers an example from her practice at the time:

I worked with one guy for two years and he came in pretty much every other week. So
my anxiety about the fact that he’s still coming in that often was really high. Then in
spring, when I was finally feeling, “okay, he’s doing okay”, then he had this big
incident at work and now he’s off work. And his wife...they’re going through a
separation...and every time I fill out that little time-sheet with his case number on it,
I’m thinking, okay, who is looking at this and thinking that I’m doing a bad job.

Didi’s expression of anxiety about time-sheets reflects the frequent references made by others
in both child welfare and primary health care. Increasingly, during the restructuring measures
of the 1990s, social workers became aware that surveillance measures, adopted by efficiency-
driven and risk-minded managers, would result in pressures to account for even the smallest
unit of time required in the course of day-to-day practice decisions.

Rothstein et al. (2006) explain that the rise of institutional risk management is related to
the increasing dominance of the “regulatory state” (p. 94). This development is described as
the consequence of a shift in policy emphasis from redistributive welfare towards the
improvement of economic efficiencies. Due to a range of constraints, institutions have a
limited capacity to manage their objectives and to satisfy the range of demands placed upon
them. Yet, regulatory institutions are also under growing pressures to justify their actions in the
face of increased political and legal scrutiny. As a result, social and health service providers are
subjected to “an ever tightening grip of audit and target cultures” (p. 96). In other words, social
workers bear the brunt of pressures felt by funders to eliminate errors and to demonstrate
control over an ever-expanding range of risks (Green, 2007). One problem with this approach to managing risks, argues Rothstein et al. (2006), is that there are limits to the knowledge we can hold about unpredictable and unmanageable events in the day-to-day operations of institutions. Therefore, institutional risk management, according to these authors, attempts to “compensate for the inherent uncertainties of decision-making by transforming decision-making into a probabilistic assessment of success or failure” (p. 99). Green (2007) points out that under such conditions, social workers’ practices are shaped by standardized assessment tools and rigid adherence to procedures. Social workers become apprehensive about making mistakes rather than achieving desired outcomes for service users. This results in a rise in what Green calls “defensive social work” (p. 400) whereby there are expectations placed on service providers to not only control, but to be seen to control, risks to the organization for which they work.

Defensive social work in the context of neoliberalism can be viewed as a form of ethical self-governance where it becomes imperative to protect the interests of funders, administrators and other dominant stake-holders over the interests of service users. Ethical conduct in this case is framed by one’s responsibilities to these various interests. Joy’s account provides an example of this dynamic. Joy is a child welfare supervisor with over thirty years experience on the job. She describes how during the child welfare reforms of the 1990s she developed a chronic fear of making mistakes in her work. Joy recalls how the impact of high-profile child deaths in the province during that decade resulted in high anxiety on the part of service providers. As a result, she and her peers found themselves fixated on following exact procedures. Underscoring her point, Joy refers to a well-publicized story about a Catholic Children’s Aid social worker, Angie Martin, who was charged in 1997 with criminal negligence causing death in the starvation death of five-week-old Jordan Heikamp. In Joy’s eyes, Ms. Martin’s only crime was her failure to “think dirty”, a reference to a well-known protocol established in 1995 by Dr. James Cairns, Ontario’s Deputy Chief Coroner. She explains that Dr. Cairns’ child abuse investigations protocol was sent to all coroners,

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3 In 2001, a Coroner’s jury in Ontario ruled the death of Jordan Heikamp was a homicide. He starved to death in 1997 while his teenage mother, Renee Heikamp, was living in a woman’s shelter. Catholic Children’s Aid social worker, Angie Martin, who was assigned to Heikamp’s case while he was alive, was also charged with criminal negligence causing death – charges that were later dropped. Of the forty-four recommendations produced by the jury, one recommended that there should be weekly, face-to-face visits between social workers and babies less than four months old (Canadian Broadcast Corporation, 2001).
pathologists and police chiefs in Ontario, and that his approach quickly became the standard of care for every professional direct service provider when dealing with children in suspected cases of abuse. After interviewing Joy, I sought out a copy of the protocol produced by Ontario’s Deputy Chief Coroner. It contained the following statement:

Unfortunately, in this day and age CHILD ABUSE IS A REAL ISSUE and it is extremely important that all members of the investigative team “THINK DIRTY”. They must actively investigate each case as potential child abuse and not come to a premature conclusion regarding the case and manner of death until the complete investigation is finished and all members are satisfied with the conclusion. (Office of the Chief Coroner, 1995, cited in Bala and Trocme, 2007, p. 22)

Joy maintained that if Angie Martin had positioned herself as more aggressive, and less trusting of the mother and the shelter staff she would not have been charged – even under circumstances where the child died.

The concept of “dirty thinking” emerged during another interview with Frank, a child welfare supervisor. Frank explains how, as a supervisor during the 1990s, he was always expected to “think dirty”. He describes how this approach worked in practice:

If you interviewed somebody, if you had a kid making a disclosure, a parent denying it, you would definitely not put a lot of stock into whatever was being denied. Thinking dirty would be like, “it’s probably true so we need to intervene first to make sure the kid’s safe, and then sort it all out later.

Frank describes the outcomes of this practice as having produced a Crown Ward population in Ontario that added up to a “mid-sized town”. He reflects on the consequences of this period in child welfare: “The results were that a lot of people were very, very upset; kids would be in foster care and us trying to sort it out after the fact. It was the use of the hammer to get the job done”.

Joy’s and Frank’s reflections demonstrate how the shift to “dirty thinking” occurred through intrusive technologies of governing that were based on instilling fears in service

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4 The CAPITAL LETTERS were used by Dr. Cairns in the original for emphasis.
providers. The result was less about child safety and more about an emerging emphasis on defending against risks to professional and institutional legal liabilities. As Joy explains:

On top of everything else was fear for their own self, their own safety...the social worker’s terrified that somebody’s going to arrest them. There’s real fear...that they’re seen to not be doing their job...that they hadn’t put something on paper.

Joy makes a compelling argument that so-called dirty thinking, more often than not, resulted in errors that impeded good practice. Echoing comments made by Frank, Joy explains that errors occur because dirty thinking relies on a process where social workers act first and “ask questions later”. As she elaborates, Joy recalls how she and many of her colleagues in child welfare felt betrayed by the Deputy Chief Coroner when they learned that one of his most trusted staff members, Dr. Charles Smith, a leading child autopsy pathologist in Ontario, was found to have made questionable conclusions of foul play in twenty out of forty-five cases that he personally conducted during the 1990s. Thirteen of those questionable cases resulted in criminal convictions that often involved a parent or a guardian (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2009). In Joy’s opinion, Dr. Charles Smith represents the utter failure of so-called dirty thinking when it came to protecting the lives of vulnerable children. Rather than reducing the prevalence of child abuse, this particular mind-set managed to create chaos in the lives of many individual parents and families. It also induced fear in the minds of front-line workers, many of whom were haunted by the possibility of making errors when it came to managing risks.

Although dirty thinking is associated with child welfare trends during the 1990s, I argue that the rise of risk management in the context of primary health care also promoted similar fears in front-line staff and led to various forms of defensive social work practices. As was the case with their child welfare counterparts, primary health care social workers in my research shared stories about rising pressures to privilege the interests of funders and administrators over the health and welfare of patients. In many cases, the emphasis on narrow,

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5 Dr. Charles Smith worked for twenty-four years at Toronto’s Hospital for Sick Children in the paediatric forensic pathology unit where he conducted more than 1,000 child autopsies. An Ontario Coroner’s inquiry reviewed 45 child autopsies in which Smith had concluded the cause of death was either homicide or criminally suspicious. The coroner’s review found that Smith made questionable conclusions of foul play in 20 of the cases. Later, a public inquiry into the doctor’s practices concluded that Smith “actively misled” his superiors, “made false and misleading statements” in court and exaggerated his expertise in trials (CBC News, 2009).
standardized approaches to care based on the medical model of illness had the effect of shifting social workers’ focus away from social factors underlying poor health. Managers no longer granted permission to focus on advocacy around broader social issues such as poverty, lack of affordable housing, racism, and violence against women. Highlighting how the prominence of standardized and risk-based approaches to care caused shifts in her practice focus, Sylvia, a mental health counsellor, shares the following concerns:

To me, it seems so much like managed care and I have a problem with that. And I guess my problem is with the instrument itself and how we’re going about it is that we’re not seeing whole people. I don’t know if I’ve ever met someone who’s just got a simple, uncomplicated depression (laughter)...there’s whole life issues, there’s stage of life stuff and we’re not treating whole people...we’re treating one little class of symptoms with the hope that somehow that will spill over into the rest of their lives. So, that’s part of my concern. I understand the need for efficiency but I want to help people that may be suffering.

Didi, another primary health care social worker, also believes that the insertion of risk-based assessment tools began to erode her ability to provide good quality care. She struggles with a nagging sense that she is no longer helping people. At times, she even wonders if such narrow models of care actually contributed to more harm in patients’ lives. Highlighting the tension between desires for better quality care and the realities of work, Didi observes: “What was considered ‘doing a good job’ versus how I felt about the work I was doing...well those two things were often worlds apart”.

Despite the Ontario government’s efforts to manage risks through intrusive regulatory frameworks neither the child welfare nor the primary health care sectors showed much evidence of improvement or cost containment by the end of the 1990s. In child welfare, complex case planning diminished as workers removed children from their families at the first sign of risk. From 1998 to 2004, the number of children apprehended in the province rose by 65 per cent – from 11,609 to 19,105 – with a cost increase of 100 per cent (Ontario Children’s Aid Societies, 2004). In the provincial government’s 2000 budget, health-care funding rose to a staggering $22 billion, by far the largest amount in Ontario’s history (Ontario Minister of Finance, 2000). Not surprisingly, popular opinion throughout the province continued to
convey the belief that there was a growing problem within each of these service systems
(Suschnigg, 2001; Trocmé and Chamberland, 2003).

6.3 Systematic Predetection
In 2005, the Ontario government, now led by Premier Dalton McGuinty and the Liberal Party, decided to take another try at “fixing” the child welfare and primary health care systems. For this round of restructuring, however, the government adopted a distinctly different tone and approach for making change. Textual analysis of key government documents related to new forms of restructuring in these two sectors reveal that a key purpose set out for social workers and other professionals was no longer centred on practices aimed at intrusive measures to “correct” the errant individual or to manage risks to institutions. Rather, the focus was on the prevention of those risk factors that pose a threat to the well-being of members of society. In the words of one child welfare supervisor interviewed for my research, “the emphasis was now supposed to be on front-end services, not just fixing problems after they become bigger problems”.

The “core of Ontario’s vision” to be implemented under new Liberal reforms for child welfare is described in a government text as resting on the belief that:

[Early intervention will reduce the need for more intrusive and costly public services later and will lead to better outcomes for children and youth. While continuing to provide services that address the immediate and critical needs of children and youth today, the ministry will increasingly focus on prevention, early detection and intervention. (Child Welfare Secretariat, 2005, p. 2-3)]

Transformation in child welfare is promoted by provincial government texts as being focused on prevention through “differential response”. Responses to child abuse will now be modified so that low risk situations will require social workers to focus less on intrusive evidence gathering and “more on engaging families during the investigation” (Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-term Care, 2005, p. 9). However, rather than intensive case work with families, there is a new emphasis on utilizing existing family supports in order to prevent more intrusive forms of monitoring by child welfare. Kinship Care is one example of this new approach. Kinship Care refers to the full-time care of a child or youth by a relative, community
member, or other adult with whom the child has an existing relationship. The Ministry
document states: “In these cases, a formal admission to care may be prevented through the use
of kin as a temporary care provider” (Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2005, p. 14).
This new model recognizes that within many families there are no immediate safety concerns;
nonetheless, it is believed that the long-term effects of chronic maltreatment can be more
severe than in those more acute cases that receive a full protection investigation. In the vast
majority of these “low risk” cases, it is expected that social workers will emphasize strength-
based assessments, identification of community resources and working alongside families,
“where possible, on a volunteer basis” (p. 9). Transformation in child welfare works on the
premise that there is a particular kind of community surrounding any given family, one in
which other family members, and possibly other community members, are ready and able to
take on the role of monitoring their loved ones and neighbours. Government texts suggest that
the management of risks to children will occur not by intruding directly into the lives of
families, but by mobilizing family, friends and members of the community to do the work of
surveillance.

Similarly, in a government document entitled, “Introduction to Family Health Teams”,
newly re-organized primary health care is said to “[e]mphasize health promotion, illness
prevention” and “early detection/diagnosis” (Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-term Care,
2005, p. 2). The government text describing Renewal in primary health care emphasizes that
the prevention of ill health can best be achieved through professional collaboration,
transparency, reliance on evidence-based practice models and self-care programs. The
government Ministry’s objectives for renewal in primary health care rely heavily on better
coordination and improved access to services. This emerging model leans heavily on patient
participation as a driving force. Within this framework, the “patient is a key member of the
team and uses information and support to make informed decisions on how to manage his/her
self-care needs” (Ministry of Health and Long Term Care, 2005, p. 2). Examples of new
programs available to patients under Renewal include increased immunization for targeted
populations, life-style counselling, healthy living and wellness programs, smoker cessation
programs and screening for the early detection of illnesses such as breast and cervical cancer,
diabetes and colon cancer.

Clearly, the trend towards prevention through early detection is noticeable throughout
the documented government claims about newly-restructured child welfare and primary health
care. Each government document articulates desires for reform that move away from a “rule of pessimism” (Dumbrill, 2006, p. 6) and shifts intrusion toward that of “systematic predetection” (Castel, 1991, p. 288) and the reduction of risk factors. Robert Castel (1991) explains that systematic predetection is a form of surveillance that relies on the anticipation and prevention of the emergence of some undesirable event: “a grandiose technocratic rationalizing dream of absolute control of the accidental, understood as the irruption of the unpredictable” (p. 289). Castel points out that systematic predetection is different from the classic disciplinary and therapeutic techniques analysed by Foucault during his studies of the new human sciences; namely, those traditionally found in medicine, psychiatry, criminology and social work. In particular, Castel explains, this emerging form of surveillance dispenses with the relationship between the caregiver and the care-receiver. Rather than the individual being under scrutiny, the new technologies increasingly attempt to measure factors liable to produce risks to the population. For Castel, this is not necessarily a shift from the individual to the population but rather the introduction of new methods for measuring individual risk factors in relation to calculations of probability of risk for the rest of the population.

Viewing government documents as texts enables me to understand how they work to produce meaning both in the working lives of social workers and in the larger realm of public discourse. As texts, these documents shape discursive notions about “common sense” (Hall, 1985, 105) and arrange an ethical framework within which social workers are expected to operate. The shift in discourses found in government texts indicate that child abuse and poor health are no longer understood as matters of personal pathology in need of intrusive face-to-face interventions but, rather, as a set of risks that are more or less inevitable and clearly predictable. Therefore, they are seen to be manageable through the use of a variety of organizational, professional, and personal strategies. In the following section, I discuss how social workers understand, experience and respond to the emergence of the discourses of prevention in their work.

6.4 Prevention through “Empowerment”
Many of the social workers that I interviewed anticipated that an emphasis on prevention strategies under Transformation and Renewal would represent a refreshing return to interventions that targeted “risks to the social” (Donzelot, 1991a, 1991b, Garland, 2006, Rose, 1996). Rose (1996) describes “the social” as those spaces of care and control where interests
are pursued in the name of “social protection, social justice, social rights and social solidarity” (p. 329). The “social” represents opportunities to advance collectivized social welfare in ways that “strengthen the bonds of inclusive membership by trying to nurture reciprocity, sharing and small-scale redistribution between individuals, in households, groups, communities and so on” (p. 255). In the words of Joy, a child welfare supervisor, the move towards combating risks to the social means that, “we’re going back to the way we used to engage with people – pre-1995 – yeah, going back to what we know how to do, to be better at what we used to do...we’re going backwards to something that was good”. Parton (2008) defines social workers’ investments in the social as a desire to mediate between those who are excluded and the mainstream of society. As such, the social is an intermediary zone between the household and the public sphere of the state (p. 254). Social workers’ interventions within this realm can be viewed as a positive solution to a major problem confronting a liberal state. As Parton explains, this problem involves the matter of how the state can sustain the healthy development of individual family members, especially those deemed vulnerable or dependent, while promoting the family as the normal sphere for caring for those individuals. The challenge, therefore, is how to accomplish these goals without intervening in every family. While this task for social workers has traditionally involved both care and control strategies, social workers in my research understood the emergence of a new focus on prevention in their work as signalling more opportunities to exercise capacities to “care” and less emphasis on requirements of “control”.

Social workers’ stories frequently convey how they approach their jobs with compassion for service users and a will to understand the essential humanity of individuals. A turn towards prevention in service delivery fits well with their desires to focus on their clients’ strengths and to address systemic problems in their lives. Offering an example of how her practices under Transformation have expanded to take into account the context of people’s lives, Marie explains that her child welfare case-notes are now based on broader assessments, including positive aspects of parenting capacities: “We have our summaries now so I try to highlight the strengths of the family and what it is that they’ve been working on, and what gains they’ve made. So instead of being risk-focused, I really try to work on the strengths”. Similarly, Theresa describes how a shift towards prevention as a program goal enables her to emphasize harm reduction in her counselling work within primary health care patients. She believes this approach allows her to build better and more trusting relationships with patients.
Theresa considers more intrusive and controlling measures as ultimately ineffective because their outcomes often diminish a patient’s autonomy and dignity. To drive home her point, Theresa shares a story about a recent case where she introduced harm reduction techniques with a patient who had been flagged by doctors and other health care professionals as “high risk” due to concerns about her conduct as a parent:

She’s a woman that’s got three kids, three husbands, and a long history of drinking. I say to her, “Are you drinking?” You see, she’s losing custody of one of her children. She said, “Well, I’m drinking every day.” I said, “How much?” “About a bottle.” I said, “A bottle of what?” “Well, a bottle of scotch.” I said, “Do you think that’s a lot?” She says, “Well, I’m drinking less.” I said, “Okay, I’m on it...We’re moving in the right direction”. And then she starts laughing, and she says, “You know, I guess I should cut down”.

In Theresa’s mind, the adoption of harm reduction with “hard to serve” service-users can result in far more meaningful and sustainable changes in behaviour over time because they encourage people to define their own goals. Yet, what is also noteworthy in Theresa’s account about the positive potential of harm reduction is how she draws on gendered, raced and class-based discourses to frame her service-user as someone in need of guidance and correction. Although not made explicit, Theresa’s reference to “three kids, three husbands, and a long history of drinking” is associated with discourses of sexual promiscuity, illegitimate pregnancies, irresponsibility and instability. These can be viewed as gender-based discourses which lead to a process in which the woman’s entitlement to full personhood is taken away. And while race and economic status are not visible in Theresa’s account, bodies that engage in “deviant” sexual conduct in the context of a white-settler society such as Canada are racialized and classed as “other” regardless of their actual race and social positioning (Razack, 2002). In terms of Theresa’s self-governing, such framing produces her as morally and racially superior to her service-user and, therefore, capable of teaching and re-enforcing change and self-mastery in this woman’s conduct. Jeffery (2002) explains how this form of self-governing, so prevalent in Canadian social work, rests on a long racial legacy involving the production of the white bourgeois subject. According to Jeffery, this subject shares the characteristics of the modern Western moral subject who historically has been seen as a free and rational sovereign
individual capable of authority over others deemed less civilized. Stoler (1995) describes how throughout the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, rigid taxonomies of difference emerged due to anxieties over proper conduct. The bourgeois subject requires “managed passions, self-discipline over unruly drives and the education of sentiment and desire as well” (p. 130). According to these ideas, Theresa’s willingness to engage in the monitoring and disciplining of her service users’ sexual morals positions her as a “manager of difference” (Jeffery, 2002, p. 36) whose activities give shape and observable content to gender, race and class-based hierarchies of difference.

The notion that risk prevention strategies produce gender, race and class-based distinctions can be found in other interviews with social workers. Shelly, a supervisor in child welfare, is enthusiastic about how the front-line service providers at her agency have embraced the emphasis on prevention. Having successfully argued that prevention measures require an approach that is more community-based, Shelly’s offices are now located in a neighbourhood that has been found by her agency to have a higher proportion of families that are deemed to be “high risk” for child abuse. Shelly makes the observation that this same neighbourhood is home to a high number of poor families, female-single-parent-led families, newcomers to Canada, and urban-based Aboriginal families. She recognizes that her agency’s targeting of this neighbourhood is a form of racial and socio-economic profiling, and that there is a risk for heightened stereotyping and discrimination as a result. Yet, Shelly is convinced that prevention measures undertaken by her staff will actually lessen the intrusion into the lives of poor people. Furthermore, Shelly was able to gain her director’s support by arguing that such approaches actually save program money because they reduce the numbers of resource-intensive investigations. To make her point, Shelly explains that due to the closer proximity of their offices in the neighbourhood, Shelly and her staff are now able to process referrals in ways that avoid intrusive protection investigations. She explains:

We’ll get a referral and we’ll look a little bit deeper to understand what is going on in the family. I literally just have to look out my window and I know what’s happening, who the person is and whether the parent is at home. So instead of immediately becoming a protection investigation, someone from our team goes right on over. We know right away that the reason the mother’s not there is that she’s had twelve teeth removed and she’s obviously challenged in terms of caring for her kids that day. So,
instead of saying, “We just got a call and where have you been?” we go over and say, “What do you need? How are you feeling?” It doesn’t get documented as an abuse investigation.

Shelly describes how direct service providers working under her supervision are able to now respond quickly as problems come up in people’s lives. It is not lost on Shelley that residents of higher socio-economic status neighbourhoods are not subjected to the everyday probing presence of social workers. She does make the observation that many issues in neighbourhoods where she works could be dealt with as matters of public health and not child welfare. To support her point, Shelly explains that it is common for office staff to receive referrals for investigation because families are unable to afford lice treatments for their kids. Due to the shift in her program focus, workers at her unit are no longer directed to launch protection investigations based on lice infestations, but rather, to provide families with vouchers for decontamination: “We’ll get a case of lice treatment and if somebody comes in looking for it, we’ll just hand it out instead of opening up that family as an investigation”. In another example, Shelly illustrates how a focus on prevention encourages interventions that are based on critical reflexivity rather than simplistic “knee-jerk reactions”. In this example, she describes stopping and chatting with an adult couple on the street after observing that they were smoking a marijuana cigarette in front of their young child. Shelly explains:

Some would say automatically, “That’s substance abuse! And they’re exposing their children so that’s an investigation!” Well, as I stand there and talk to them about it, it becomes very obvious to me that their capacity to parent is not compromised in the least. They’re talking about school, accessing supports, they’re lucid, interacting with their child and the kid is responding very positively. Where’s the problem? So I don’t document that as an investigation, it’s an intervention.

Shelly expresses frustration with the ways that child welfare systems blame parents for risk factors that are beyond their control. For example, it is commonly believed that when police records indicate a high prevalence of crime related to drugs, sex work, violence and gang activity in a neighbourhood, the neighbourhood will be defined as an “at risk community” according to child welfare standards. When a family comes to the attention of child welfare,
their residency in that particular neighbourhood can be used as evidence that their children are at risk by virtue of living in the “wrong part of town”. Rather than challenge such practices of social profiling and the associated negative stereotypes, Shelly insists that a focus on prevention through child welfare means that families can gain the necessary tools in order to secure a safer community. As an example, Shelly explains that in the past, her agency received referrals for an investigation based on the fact that a child was observed riding a bike without a safety helmet. Before Transformation, social workers would launch an investigation and remain involved with the family until the parents could demonstrate that their children were in compliance with helmet bylaws. As part of the new emphasis on prevention, however, Shelly’s agency entered into a partnership with a local commercial retailer to obtain donations of free bicycle helmets for all school-aged children living within her office’s neighbourhood district. She organized an outdoor barbecue and invited parents and children to participate in a bike rodeo where members of the police service provided education about helmet safety. Each child who participated received a free helmet. Shelly maintains that the most successful aspect of this prevention project is that the entire community is “buying into” the notion of bicycle safety and, consequently, they are working together to ensure kids are riding safely:

It’s not me that’s saying these things to them; it’s the next door neighbour. The next door neighbour’s calling on the other neighbour to say, “Did you know that he’s out there without his helmet again?” You help develop these tools, you help empower the community to call each other and be responsible for helping each other be safe.

Parton (2008) would interpret Marie’s, Theresa’s and Shelly’s efforts towards prevention as relying on the technology of “the relationship” (p. 258). This technology of work engages professional social workers’ knowledge and understanding of human relationships in order to render individuals as knowable to others. The effect of such an approach is the indirect social regulation of people’s lives. It is a form of “government at a distance” (p. 257). Margolin (1997) refers to such practices as “empowering social work” (p. 9) and explains that the appeal of such an approach, especially for care providers, is its apparent refusal to rely on more aggressive forms of intervention into people’s lives. Indeed, Maria’s, Theresa’s and Shelly’s practices are conducted with utmost friendliness, supportiveness and kindness. In each practice example, their efforts seem to be welcomed by the people who are the targets of their attention.
Yet, Margolin argues that it is precisely because of these qualities that social services are able to intensify and disperse social workers’ capacities to penetrate into the lives of people who are racialized, poor and otherwise socially marginalized. In the situations described by Maria Theresa and Shelly, their practices, when analysed from Margolin’s perspective, achieve heightened access into the most intimate details of people’s lives. Under the guise of preventing risks, social workers engage in surveillance and targeting practices and provide demonstrations on proper forms of living to members of an entire neighbourhood. This heightened access also enables social workers to then share their detailed observations with networks of other professionals. Foucault (1977) describes such dispersal of information to others as forming a “carceral network” where the “judges of normality are present everywhere” (p. 304). The idea that social workers are “everywhere” is perhaps best captured by Shelly’s notion that the best child welfare services are community-based ones enabling social workers to circulate freely into people’s lives because they are embedded in the very centre and fabric of a neighbourhood. From this standpoint, the social worker is ever-vigilant over the population targeted for prevention. Prevention shapes social workers as ethical beings just as it obscures how this coherent sense of self is patched together with notions of moral and racial superiority.

It is possible to view the prevention practices undertaken by social workers in *Transformation* and *Renewal* not as kinder, softer forms of governing aiming to expand social entitlements, but rather as practices that make it possible to bring governing power to the most intimate elements of people’s lives at the lowest possible cost through individualized empowerment (Margolin, 1997). Prevention enables political concerns about social problems to be increasingly packaged as impartial strategies. For instance, one social worker explained that it was not uncommon to receive referrals in child welfare following a city-sponsored dental hygiene program. This program targets schools in low-income neighbourhoods and involves day-long visits to the school by dental health professionals who provide subsidized check-ups and recommendations for follow-up care for a child if needed. Child abuse investigations would be launched on the basis that a family had not followed up with recommended dental work for their child. In this way, public health strategies are used to produce a problem of child abuse. Similarly, in the primary health care sector, mental health strategies are used to re-frame and individualize a host of other social problems, including poverty, woman abuse, and homelessness.
Prevention through predetection techniques such as community-based practices is a form of pre-emptive regulation that targets entire communities of racialized, poor and otherwise marginalized people. As Razack (2008) points out, the logic is a colonial one whereby a state of exception is justified because targeted spaces are seen to be ungovernable solely through the rule of law. Measures of predetection are rationalized based on the idea that racialized poor people are by nature irrational and unpredictable and, therefore, in need of assistance and guidance. As social workers practice from this perspective, they manage to blur the boundaries that would otherwise separate regulatory institutions from the surrounding community. What makes these approaches seem so effective is that penetration is not necessarily imposed on the population but is apparently welcomed from the inside. Yet, as Margolin (1997) points out, governing through empowerment relies on a subject/object binary that is produced accordingly: “Members of the dominant group are active, and members of the subordinate, passive: one party sees, the other is seen; one writes, the other is written about; one purveys knowledge and direction, the other gracefully absorbs and obeys” (p. 176). However, Shelly provides a story from her community-based practice that raises questions about the stability of unequal power relations as described by Margolin. In her account, Shelly describes arriving to work one morning just a few weeks after her office opened to find a paper bag of human faeces on her door step. She understood immediately that the bag reflected the obvious discomfort felt by some members of the neighbourhood over her presence there. She recalls picking up the bag, holding it up and yelling: “Okay, I got it. You shit on my step and I hear you!” Shelly explains that she continually uses this episode during training sessions with new staff in order to highlight the fact that not everyone in the community welcomes child welfare with open arms. I would extend her analysis to suggest that this event unsettles Margolin’s (1997) arguments about the predictability of subject/object positions within processes of professional helping. As Cruikshank (1994) argues, “[d]espite the good intentions of those who seek to empower others, relations of empowerment are in fact relations of power in and of themselves” (p. 30). Cruikshank’s point is that we need to assume that the relationship of empowerment is also a site of political struggle. Shelly’s experience of finding the bag on her porch highlights the fact that social workers will not encounter unanimous compliance. Less intrusive forms of governing through prevention can generate strikingly bold acts of resistance on the part of target populations.
6.5 Fabrications and the Production of Comfort

Despite identifying varying degrees of success with the new emphasis on prevention in their practices, social workers also express frustration with persistent institutional barriers, many of which seriously impede their efforts to make change. For example, social workers described how steps taken to build trusting relationships with service users are often derailed by pressures to implement organizational policies that are more in line with protecting institutional risks. Additionally, they point to how social workers are expected by their agencies to adopt disciplinary measures in those cases when service users fail to comply with service plans. Highlighting this problem, Anita explains that under Transformation in child welfare, her agency continues to impose a narrow, punitive standard of practice whereby abstinence is demanded from parents who have any kind of substance abuse problems. She explains why this particular approach to working with service users is unhelpful:

I have huge issues with it because people are using substances to cope with things and sometimes abstinence is not the best. I understand it can provide issues around child care; however, my experience is that if it’s a woman that’s using and she has children, she’s ensuring that her children are safe…she’s willing to put safeguards in place. Trying to get people to understand that here [in child welfare]…well it’s easier to actually keep bumping my head up against the wall.

Theresa explains that although she experiences opportunities to broaden her own practice in primary health care, she continuously struggles with a majority of physicians and nurses who remain stubbornly fixated on rigid formulas for assessing risk:

They go through the list – they all call it that, you know, the list in their head – ticky boxes. They’re all getting caught up in the fact that she’s smoking pot every day. You know, “Well, what about her addiction and da, da, da?” And I say, “Well, you know, let’s put it into context, okay? This woman might be smoking pot every day but six months ago, she was doing crack every day...So if you look at that, would you not say that she’s doing better?” It’s that judgemental approach, not seeing the context, not going for people’s strengths and saying, “you know this woman is doing the best that
she can. She’s telling you that even though she’s struggling and feeling depressed, she really loves her child, she wants to do the best thing for her child.”

In a similar example, Marie describes how her efforts to implement differential responses to low risk cases of child abuse are stymied by the rigid adherence to a standardized risk assessment tool. Although it is generally understood that risk assessments are used to identify “red flags” in a parent’s history, in Marie’s experience, they can be used in ways that are unduly punitive and discriminatory. This is especially the case when a parent under investigation also happens to have been the subject of a child welfare apprehension in their own childhood. According to Marie, individuals will come under immediate suspicion by investigating social workers just by virtue of having been a client at some point in their history. Marie expresses her frustration with such unfair and systemic discrimination:

I can’t stand our risk assessment especially when we ask about history, because we know that the system does a lousy job at raising children. We do a horrible job. We pull a child out of a home; raise them in the system because for whatever reason they can’t go back to that home. Then, they become parents and we use it against them.

In many instances, social workers describe situations where their own practices aimed at preventing social risks would be juxtaposed with persistent pressures to prevent and eliminate potential errors, adverse incidents and to demonstrate abilities to manage a range of risks to the institutions within which they worked. In the case of child welfare workers, these tensions frequently arose around issues pertaining to file disclosure during family court processes. For example, Anita recalls a case where she attempted to engage a young mother in a collaborative helping model by encouraging her to add personal journal notes into the case file. Later, she learned that under the rules of file disclosure, the woman’s personal notes would be included with all other official documents going to court for a contentious custody hearing involving her abusive ex-husband. Anita describes her subsequent confrontation with agency lawyers:

“Oh, please!” I was in tears; I was on my knees in this lawyer’s office saying, “You cannot do this. Her partner’s going to read this. Oh my God!” It made me physically ill.
I don’t cry in public but I was in tears, you know, “You cannot do this...no...no, no, no!”

Anita now understands that this incident was related to her agency’s defensive response to negative media attention following several high profile child abuse cases in her region. Having grown wary of possible liabilities, not to mention a sullied public profile, agency directors were pressing the legal team to follow an amplified version of institutional risk management. In this case, Anita’s service user’s journal notes became evidence in a bid to protect the agency from liability should the father re-offend and cause future harm to his child. The fact that the mother did not consent to her personal journal being used as leverage against her ex-spouse in the custody proceeding was patently ignored. The possibility that her personal safety, as well as the safety of her children, could be compromised as a result of these actions was seen as a non-issue by the child welfare legal team.

The rise in institutional risk management has left Anita and her front-line colleagues frustrated by the increasing curtailment of their discretion when it comes to casework with parents. Furthermore, they are subjected to “wrist slapping” by their own legal teams if it is determined that their behaviours are not sufficiently risk averse. Facing such obstacles within their agencies, many social workers express doubts and uncertainties about what is expected of them under the new restructuring measures in child welfare and primary health care. As Hannah, a child welfare supervisor explains, “I feel if something goes wrong, it’s not going to be my agency that wears it, it’ll be me. I’ve had to face a lot of finger-pointing by senior management...it doesn’t feel safe to make mistakes within.” Social workers’ experiences of having to continually defend against institutional risk suggest that the prevalence of high-profile policy failures; (that is, the widespread media attention to public spending scandals, the negative public response to child deaths in the province and the low public tolerance for expanding public service budgets), has prompted ongoing “anxieties of control” (Power, 1996, p. 291) on the part of funders and senior managers. Amidst government’s new emphases on prevention and a turn to the community in child welfare and primary health care services, there also seems to be a general loss of faith in service providers to achieve desired outcomes. As a result, there has been an accompanying diffusion of audit technologies for achieving compliance and control over direct service workers.
My research participants observe that “best practice” requirements under both Transformation and Renewal continue, rather than interrupt, the need to satisfy narrow, audit-based evaluations of their services. These practices are most evident when social workers consider the steady expansion of electronic information and communication technologies (EICTs). In particular, social workers express concerns that EICTs promote the gathering of thinly-defined “objective evidence” which then becomes a poor source of information with which to make important decisions regarding casework. For instance, in the context of child welfare, Marie observes that, regardless of her intentions, she faces pressures to document case interactions in ways that are blunt and lacking in complexity, leaving the lives of clients to be vulnerable to distortion in her case reports. Regardless of her professional opinion, the computerized reporting system adopted at her agency only recognizes a pre-set, formulaic approach based on the number of contacts without providing any context for those contacts. Marie explains that one result of this process is that even when she assesses a case as “low risk” and, therefore, appropriate for discharge, the computerized data system that she depends on refuses to let this happen. She explains how this process leads her to resort to creative “number games” in order to complete her filings:

A lot of times we’re trying to close a file but the number’s too high and I’m like, trying to fiddle. “Is ‘minor’ too low...?” Sometimes it’s ‘border’...sometimes it’s just because of the number of case openings. “Well, he assaulted her four times so there’s been four openings in the past and that makes the numbers too high to close the case.

Most frustrating for Marie, in the case example she refers to, is how the use of audit and narrow risk-based assessments manage to create the false impression that child welfare is acting in the interests of the safety of the children in this family. From her standpoint, rather than producing safety, this process furthers gender-based inequities which can lead to increased risks of abuse against women. To explain her point, Marie points to the fact that it is standard practice in child welfare to open a case file under the mother’s name because they are automatically seen as the parent that has primary responsibility for keeping children safe, regardless of the circumstances surrounding risks. In the case Marie refers to above, an investigation was launched on the basis of a father’s behaviour towards a mother, not the mother’s conduct as a parent; however, the risk assessment tool is unable to distinguish and
capture the specific nature of risk – in this case, the gendered violence of an ex-husband against his ex-spouse. Consequently, the case remains open as a child welfare investigation involving the mother even though the children – the subjects of concern on the part of child welfare – are living safely under her care. From Marie’s perspective, this situation places needless additional stress on the mother at a time when she needs support and advocacy. Furthermore, observes Marie, the father’s conduct as a parent remains a non-issue for her agency because he is positioned as the non-custodial parent and, therefore, not responsible for the children’s safety.

The shifts related to service audits experienced by Marie and other social workers in this research have been described as a “move from a ‘tell me’ to a ‘show me’ world” (Rothstein et al. 2006, p. 96). In this “show me” world, social workers are now expected to constantly collect, share, classify and store particular kinds of information about their encounters with service users. As social workers aim to provide expanded details about service users in their social context, their practices continue to be shaped in ways that move them away from coherent causal accounts towards the gathering of information in order to classify clients for the purpose of judging the nature and level of risk they pose to institutions and for the allocation of scarce resources (Parton, 2008). As Carrie, a child welfare worker in a Native Services Branch, explains,

The recordings are just so minimal now...there are a lot of tick boxes and you know, we have statistics people figuring out how you can do this in less time and less work, and you know that’s great, but sometimes, I think you’re missing out on that whole narrative part of it.

Parton (2008) explains that many of the emerging changes faced by social workers in restructured organizations involve the introduction of a variety of technologies, such as evidence-based practice models, digitalized information and other communication formats that are designed to provide “reliable, standardized services and predictable outcomes” (p. 260). He observes that technologies of governing within social work increasingly rely on the formation of a “data base” (p. 261). This data base becomes a collection of elements about service users that do not tell a social narrative but rather provide the basis for standardized services with predictable outcomes. Rothstein et al. (2006) describe such processes as fostering
a growing emphasis on “protocolization” (p. 97) whereby numerical and calculative rationales augment the legitimacy of decision-makers who are then equipped to provide defences when faced with demands for accountability. Yet, as social workers’ practice stories convey, it can be argued that the appearance of accountability established through electronic processes of information gathering is largely symbolic and produced mainly to satisfy the demands of audit, the purpose of legal defence and the production of both professional and public comfort. Most troubling about this process is the erasure of knowledge about the context of service users’ lives and the narrowing of the range of human interactions that can be experienced and accounted for within the audit culture. Katja Franko Aas (2004) succinctly captures these changes:

Categorizing human identity into axis grids and risk instruments is an act of deconstruction of subjectivity. It is an act of taking unique, whole individuals apart, and then putting them together according to requirements of the system. Identity is deconstructed into separate factors that are then evaluated in order to acquire a “score”...The process requires minimal narration, communication or interpretation of social life. (p. 387)

Haggerty and Ericson (2000) explain that the deconstruction of complex lives into separate factors is part of an emerging “surveillant assemblage” that operates by “abstracting human bodies from their territorial settings and separating them into a series of discrete flows. These flows are then reassembled into distinct ‘data doubles’ which can be scrutinized and targeted for intervention” (p. 606). The notion of a “data double” implies that human lives can be broken down and reconstructed into decontextualized information patterns that then become the primary point of reference for social workers who make important decisions that impact on people’s lives. An example of how data doubles manage to creep into case files in child welfare is provided by Anita as she reflects on new documentation practices that are now required from child welfare workers: “My case notes became so sparse. Extremely sparse – you know, ‘Attended home. Observed children. Children well. Discussed safety planning.’ That’s it.” Completely absent from Anita’s notes is any evidence of a person or persons with an actual biography or social context. As Parton (2008) comments, “the key purpose of the social worker [is] to gather information in order to classify clients for the purpose of judging the
nature and level of risk and for allocating resources” (p. 260). Anita, like many other social workers in child welfare, expected that the new models of care known as “differential response” would expand options for helping families. However, with time, she has become convinced that her objectives are more concerned with being named as parties in a lawsuit: “My whole sense now is, ‘well, we’re here to protect the [Children’s Aid] Society and the Society name’ and I’m thinking, where’s the child protection?”

Anita’s observations signal the ways that the new work practices expected of social workers under restructuring measures such as Transformation and Renewal are similar to Ball’s (2003) concept of “fabrication” (p. 222). According to Ball (2003), a fabrication occurs when people are no longer encouraged to have a rationale for practice in terms of a meaningful relationship to others but are required to produce “measurable” outputs and performances: “what works” (pg. 222). Elsewhere, Ball (2001) describes fabrications as a “version of an organization (or person) which does not exist – they are not ‘outside the truth’ but neither do they render simply true or direct accounts – they are produced purposely ‘to be accountable’” (p. 216).

Social workers’ accounts reveal that the focus on risk prevention within child welfare and primary health care shapes social workers’ practices originally aimed at advancing collectivised social welfare into fabrications of services that preserve the appearance of accountability in order to defend against institutional risks. An important facet of this process involves encouraging service users to become “rational” and “responsible” individuals who assume risks on their own behalf, thus freeing state actors from any prior social obligations. As the practice examples convey, this can be accomplished through forms of governing from a distance, as well as through documentation processes that render service users into virtual versions of themselves. The end result is a shift in culture where there are no longer expectations that one can turn to the state for assistance. Instead, there is removal of dependence on the social through patterns of self-governing that are seemingly independent and autonomous. As Davies (2005) explains, there is no longer an obligation on the “social fabric” to take care of the “disposed self” (p. 9). In primary health care, Sheila provides a description that exemplifies how the new expectations mean that any patient with a diagnosis of depression is required to be automatically enrolled in a standardized, cost-effective, six-session, chronic disease management group where the emphasis is on teaching people to manage their own symptoms through the expansion of personal coping skills.
social work role under this model of care is not even remotely about addressing the social context of problems, but rather, involves the monitoring and measuring of a person’s symptoms of depression according to “scientifically-based” scales. Lydia explains that she foresees similar chronic disease models developing in primary health care across the entire spectrum of health problems including palliative care, diabetes, chronic pain, obesity and low self-esteem. In these cases, prevention programs are used to target those patients with “lifestyle issues” that are seen to induce particular kinds of preventable illnesses. As a result, prevention programs based in primary health care target those who reside in neighbourhoods where there is a higher rate of industrial pollution, those deemed obese, smokers and others who are seen to be in need of health management skills. Meanwhile, in child welfare, prevention emerges as the form of governing applied to the “high-risk parent” who struggles with persistent low income, illicit drug use, involvement with sex work or any other forms of income generation where there is risk for violence and marginalization. As Shelly explains, in child welfare the new roles for social workers involve “expanding community capacity” – “you help develop tools with them, you help empower the community to call on each other and be responsible for helping to keep each other safe.” In the case example identified by Marie involving the mother who was a victim of gender-based violence inflicted by her ex-husband, child welfare remains a symbolic presence in the mother’s life, maintaining the illusion that they are there to keep the children safe. Yet, they simultaneously evade any responsibility around addressing the father’s abusive behaviour. However, by shifting towards a new emphasis on prevention, the government and agents of the state manage to distance and insulate themselves from legal responsibility should there be a crisis occurrence – “the moment at which risks become real” (Beck, 2006, p. 332). As Marie describes it, “abused mothers are left to fend for themselves”.

In this chapter, I describe the various ways that social workers’ practices under Transformation and Renewal have become increasingly limited to the realm of information-gathering for the purposes of preventing institutional risks. The focus for actual interventions in people’s lives is on the systematic predetection of risks and the training of individuals to better manage their life-choices and options. At the same time, the new interventions aimed at the “renewal” or “transformation” of communities patently ignores any measures that could expand social rights and equity measures. For example, since the cuts in social spending enacted by the Harris government, there is very little evidence that more recent administrations have improved access to affordable housing, financial security in the lives of families, the
availability of meaningful work at a living wage, protections against industrial and other environmental pollution, or levels of social welfare and disability benefits in the province. Instead, it would seem that within the context of risk management, systematic predetection and strategies of individual empowerment become the primary solutions to address poverty and other social problems (Cruikshank, 1994).

Noting the myth-like quality of systematic predetection measures, Castel (1991) suggests that there is a reliance on calculative reason, hyper-rationalism, and pragmatism: “it pretends to eradicate risk as though one were pulling up weeds” (p. 289). Despite the unrealistic aspirations of such a totalizing vision of regulation, Castel wonders if such shifts in technologies of governance might possibly represent the coming of a “post-disciplinary order” (p. 293) where the “way of thinking is no longer obsessed with discipline; it is obsessed with efficiency” (p. 295). The thinking alluded to here is based on the belief that prevention schemes are replacing intrusive disciplinary technologies of power because changing and regulating individual people is both difficult and expensive (O’Malley, 1996). O’Malley (1996) explains that assumptions about increased efficiency within emerging technologies of governance is seen to derive from the fact that prevention is more subtle in its operation and, therefore, less likely to generate the kinds of political resistance prompted by more intrusive measures. Also, prevention-based programs appear to be “incorporative rather than exclusionary, meliorative rather than coercive, statistical and technical rather than moral and individualized, tolerant of variation rather than rigidly normalizing, covert rather than overt and so on” (p. 191). However, the knowledge generated by social workers through their observations under the Transformation and Renewal programs suggest that it is overly optimistic to assume the emergence of a post-disciplinary social order where there is an emphasis on prevention of social ills. Many aspects of their practice stories raise questions about the idea that a more efficient and possibly less punitive form of regulation is replacing a disciplinary society. Following O’Malley (1996), I argue that a more likely scenario is one in which there is a dynamic interaction where intrusion and prevention measures work together.

Razack (2008) makes the point that since 9/11, governments in the United States, Canada, and throughout Europe have increasingly relied on notions of prevention in order to engage in pre-emptive punishment of selected communities. For example, in Canada, under the guise of national security, changes to immigration laws has enabled government agents to arrest, detain and deport potential refugees without due process. Although mainly Arab/Muslim
communities are targeted by notions of pre-emptive punishment, there are many other examples where refugees are conflated with terrorists. For example, during August, 2010, a Thai cargo ship – the MV Sun Sea – brought 492 Tamil migrants to the coastal waters of British Columbia. Canadian security officials acted quickly to detain the migrants aboard the ship. In subsequent immigration and refugee tribunals, the federal government has consistently appealed decisions to release the migrants, mostly women and children, on the basis that many are suspected of having ties to terrorist groups in their home country (CBC, September 15, 2010). Government actions in relation to this event represent a dramatic shift in federal immigration policy as authorities frame the arrival of migrants as a security threat rather than a potential humanitarian crisis. Noting a general pattern across refugee tribunals in Canada, Razack (2008) explains that even small openings in law, such as the ability to obtain ministerial relief after showing a record of stable residency in Canada, have now mostly closed. She observes: “It is the notion of prevention, the detaining and deporting of individuals before they have created a crime, that best sums up the post-9/11 changes and the increasing logic that law must be suspended in the interests of national security” (p. 30). A common paradox occurs across these developments at the federal level in Canada and in the new restructuring measures in Ontario’s child welfare and primary health care systems. On one hand, liberal democratic governments advance notions of equality and democracy as enshrined ideals. On the other hand, these same governments adopt exclusionary measures through either the portrayal of immigrants and members of other marginalized communities as risks which threaten the security, safety and the economic prospects of the nation.

Social workers’ narratives about changes occurring in child welfare and primary health care in Ontario reveal that shifts in the use of technologies for the management of risks to the population can be detected. At the same time, close attention to the political context underpinning new social work practices makes clear that within contemporary neoliberal approaches to governing, the punitive and the preventative act together in dynamic arrangements, whereby only some risks receive attention as significant problems. This assertion is grounded repeatedly in my research findings where there are “overlappings, interactions and echoes” (Foucault, 1984, cited in O’Malley, 1996, p. 192) of each form of governing woven throughout social workers’ practice stories. What seems to influence the deployment of any particular technology of governance is their appropriateness to particular ends. The technology that works in relation to a specific political struggle and the desire to
achieve a particular social agenda is the one that is deployed. From this perspective, the deployment of discourses of prevention through newly-restructured child welfare and primary health care in Ontario can be seen as a means not to expand or renew social welfare benefits, but as a way to continue the downscaling of social welfare measures under the guise of providing greater social security measures through early detection and eradication of risks. Drawing on Razack (2008), the deployment of discourses of prevention in these sectors can be seen as a parallel trend alongside the rise in broader security measures taken up by national governments. Both sets of practices can be viewed as the interrelated management of economic crises through the increased surveillance, marginalization and persecution of those racialized others who are identified as “risks” to population as a whole.

6.6 The “Already Said”
This chapter has highlighted how my research participants’ accounts reveal how social workers’ apprehension about making errors in regards to the assessment of risk continues to drive their work practices in newly-restructured child welfare and primary health care services. The risk of error entails a risk of social embarrassment, criminalization and legal liabilities for their work organizations. In addition, there are risks associated with employment loss, professional disciplinary measures and personal legal liability. As a result of their fears and anxieties about the possibility of error, I have argued that social workers engage in a form of ethical self-government known as “defensive social work” (Green, 2007, p. 400). At the heart of defensive social work is not the prevention of social risks, but rather, a focus on preventing future organizational risks. It is achieved largely through the neoliberal logic of auditability. In this final section, I explore an alternative form of ethical self-governance – one that can be seen as a form of resistance - undertaken by social workers as they navigate the continuing pressures of risk measurement in their workplaces. As Foucault (1990) explains, “[f]or a rule of conduct is one thing; the conduct that may be measured by this rule is another... [g]iven a code of actions...there are different ways to ‘conduct oneself’ morally, different ways for the acting individual to operate, not just as an agent, but as an ethical subject of this action” (p. 26).

During interviews with social workers, it became apparent that a dominant stressor in their work is related to their sense of failure as they attempt to navigate tensions between their desires to engage in “front-end” interventions aimed at the prevention of individual and social problems, and ongoing pressures to measure and manage risks to their places of work. In
response to having their sense of purpose diverted towards ends with which they were personally and politically at odds, social workers reveal a series of personal and spiritual exercises which seem to provide an emotional re-alignment with their sense of ethical selfhood in a context of risk measurement. In some instances, these exercises occur in the form of meditation undertaken during small breaks at work. Others report taking short walks around the block of their workplace, engaging in deep breathing exercises between meetings, conducting yoga at lunch, or even utilizing the time spent in a car while driving to a home visit with a client for the purpose of relaxation. These activities occur during brief, often unplanned periods of time that is re-appropriated from busy work days, and conducted for the purposes of emotional self care. Describing how she takes advantage of a few “stolen moments”, Anita explains that she finds ways to clear the swirl of administrative demands from her head as she drives through the city to meet with clients:

I love the fall. You see the leaves changing colours and I always do meditation when I’m driving to appointments...and just seeing these beautiful colours. Whatever the day brings me, I will come outside and the leaves will still be a beautiful colour and the sky will be blue / grey or whatever the cloud formation. It grounds me, centres me, helps me get through whatever insanity and chaos comes along...It’s that peace, I guess, that sense of grounding...this works for me and I just keep it up till I shut it all out and can be just in the moment.

Many social workers in my study lament the fact that unstructured time is increasingly unavailable due to the demands of restructured services. High volumes of cases, burgeoning administrative demands, and the expansion of surveillance and monitoring systems for tracking their time make the very idea of taking time out for the self seem remote and often impossible. Furthermore, despite the emphasis on “teamwork” under Transformation and Renewal, social workers in both sectors indicate that there are few opportunities for clinical supervision, guidance from formal mentors, or supports from peers. As social workers reflected on these glaring deficits in their practices, I noticed that they would frequently resort to the spontaneous utterances of phrases that seemed to provide comfort and re-assurance, while acting as a kind of guide for action. These phrases could take the form of small anecdotes or pieces of advice, often borrowed from people outside of the formal workplace; for example, informal mentors,
family members, and role models. Shelly, a supervisor in child welfare, feels anger and frustration at the way that her profession is drifting away from social justice towards the “emptiness” of risk assessment. Increasingly, she seeks out ways to challenge herself and other program managers to find methods to measure more meaningful outcomes in child welfare: “I know I have to work within this framework but that doesn’t mean that my interactions have to be defined by that. I can still shape how I interact with mandates and standards and expectations.” For inspiration, Shelly draws on one of her father’s favourite expressions which are intended to underline the importance of independent thinking and rule-breaking: “remember to always think outside the box”. In another example, Lydia, a primary health care social worker, observes how easy it is to begin seeing patients as one-dimensional – the sum-total of their symptom – when using standardized models of care. She seeks to counteract this tendency by drawing on a series of core beliefs that motivate her in her life and work: “I guess the most significant belief that I have is that there’s a phenomenal potential for good and evil in all of us, and our role is to create a context where what is best in people comes out.” In another example, Anita describes the endless uphill battle she faces in her efforts to introduce harm reduction approaches to agency directors who deem this model “too risky” for clients in child welfare. Explaining that she often turns to family members for advice when she feels frustrated, Anita offers an old Lithuanian saying borrowed from her mother: “You can’t teach a cow to climb a tree”. For Anita, this phrase helps her to understand why it is that her agency administrators are “too stubborn to change”. She understands that what her mom meant to say is that trying to “hit people over the head” is simply a waste of time and energy. Instead, her mother advises, “just sit there in the office and go, ‘yeah, yeah’, and then figure out how to work with it after...monkey around until it fits for you.” For Anita, “tree-climbing cows” and “fiddling monkeys” are catch phrases whose hidden meaning is an important source of strength. Similarly, social workers seem to rely on these expressions of advice borrowed from others as a source of comfort and guidance when faced with challenging conditions. Their expressions can also be seen as exercises on the self where they are deployed as a form of quiet defiance in the face of a determined course of action; a stepping away from standardized forms of institutionally-imposed risk measurement to embrace a form of ethical conduct that is both otherwise, and beyond the sphere of surveillance and audit.

It occurred to me that social workers’ exercises on the self are remarkably similar to Foucault’s (1984c) encounters with “the hypomnemata” (p. 363-367) found in ancient texts.
Although the precise meaning of the hypomnemata translates as a copybook or a notebook, Foucault explains that it also includes verbal expressions: “quotations, fragments of works, examples, and actions to which one had been witness or of which one had read the account, reflections or reasonings which one had heard or which had come to mind” (p. 364). Foucault describes these exercises as “guides for conduct”, a form of “training of oneself by oneself” (p. 364) through the collection of the “already said” (p. 365). The goal of mobilizing the “already said” is to overcome difficult circumstances, such as “mourning, an exile, downfall, disgrace” (p. 364), and to constitute “as adequate and as perfect relationship of oneself to oneself as possible” (p. 365). Mariana Valverde (2004) captures how this form of care of the self referred to by Foucault manages to challenge notions of abstract academic theories and intellectual property. In their place, it offers a “low brow technology for ethical self governance” (p.79). Valverde points to contemporary examples such as collections of 365 inspirational sayings, one for each day of the year, “folk sayings”, and the “handy tips” and little sayings popularized in self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous (p. 79-80). Foucault (1984c) was careful not to diminish such forms of self-constitution because, as he pointed out, they often provide the “raw material” (P. 364) for developing more systematic approaches in which we are given the means to struggle against a larger problem of living.

I suggest that the notions of care of the self identified by Foucault (1984c) and elaborated on by Valverde (2004) are similar to the aphorisms uttered by social workers in my research. At times, these phrases convey “consoling refrains” (Sinding and Aronson, 2003, p. 103) in the face of anxiety. For example, Marie contemplates those moments in her job within child welfare when she feels like quitting. She then shares how advice passed down from her grandmother through her mother provides her with much-needed solace and inspiration to hang in: “Be a fighter, just believe in yourself, and never give up hope”. Sinding (Sinding & Aronson, 2003) explains that consoling refrains play an important role in containing people’s regrets especially when they feel responsibility for an unwanted event. She adds that consoling refrains also counter those moments when people perceive themselves as someone they do not want to be. In Marie’s case, positioning herself as a “fighter” counters the idea that she could possibly be a “quitter”. Similarly, Lydia gives herself permission to break policies and procedures in situations with service users when she believes it is warranted. In order to contain any doubts she may experience in these moments, she draws on her mother’s advice to “always follow your heart” when faced with challenging decisions. Anita resists the tendency
to objectify service users by constantly reminding herself and others that “your clients are your teachers”. Valverde (2004) insists that such practices on the self fuse a strong link between the personal biographical stories in our lived experiences and the larger collective, political issues that frame those narratives. Similarly, Gramsci (1975/1996) wrote about the power of folklore as it is passed down through popular songs and explained that they conceive of the world and life in ways that contrast with “official society” (p. 400). He described such practices as “songs written neither by the people nor for the people that the people have nevertheless adopted because they conform to their way of thinking and feeling (p. 399). Drawing on these ideas, I argue that social workers’ use of these technologies of the self in the current context of practice represents practices that are potentially radically subversive. They represent a small but outright refusal to accept rigid measures of risk management in favour of alternative discourses such as those associated with faith, fate, uncertainty, and ambiguity.

Although social workers’ use of the already said can represent a distinct form of resistance to the rigid formats demanded by risk assessments, it is important to analyse how many of their small anecdotes, comments and borrowed reflections can also work in ways that reproduce or accommodate the logic of neoliberalism. One need only consider how the Mike Harris regime drew on the phrase, “the common sense revolution” to appreciate how the power of popular wisdom can be mobilized to shore up the case for neoliberal governance. Similarly, in the case of my research participants, small aphorisms shared during our interviews often draw from discourses that mobilize the “rational and responsible individual [who] will take prudent risk-managing measures” (O’Malley, 1996, 200). For example, Anita explains how she likes to motivate “hard to serve clients” by proclaiming: “I’m a firm believer in fate...You’re always offered choices along the way and whether or not you choose them at that time, sooner or later those choices are going to be offered to you again.” Anita’s tough-love approach can be seen to draw on discourses of rational choice-making and fate while reinforcing a form of rugged individualism so valorized by proponents of neoliberalism. Anne can be seen to mobilize a similar form of determinism when she shares a disturbing story about witnessing a school principal beating a child in the playground. On that particular day, Anne remembers that she was visiting the school to interview a child and just happened to arrive in the parking lot as the senior school administrator reached down and hit a child. After intervening in the situation, Anne attempted to launch a child welfare investigation into the incident. However, shockingly, she was advised by her supervisor that there was “insufficient
evidence to proceed”. When I asked Anne how she came to terms with this incident, she shrugged her shoulders, as if in resignation, saying simply, “It is what it is”. The catch-phrase that Anne uses can be traced back to United States Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld, who famously uttered the same expression in response to a reporter’s query about the morality and ethics of pre-emptive invasion of another country under the guise of national defence. Unlike Rumsfeld’s utterance of the phrase where he signals contempt for the question and disregard for the abuse of power over others, Anne enacts the phrase to signal her own sense of helplessness over a situation in which she has no control. However, similar to Rumsfeld’s utterance, Anne’s usage of the phrase, “it is what it is”, can be seen as a “buzzword” (Aas, 2004, p. 384) that dismisses the need for reflection. In this instance, the buzzword operates as a form of “power without narrative” (Simon, 1995, cited in Aas, 2004, p. 385). Aas (2004) explains that the lack of a narrative lies at the heart of the effectiveness of buzzwords. Their appeal rests on their ability to evade answering the question “why” – as in why a certain act was committed or why it should be responded to in a particular way or fashion. Comparing the buzzword to the small, byte-like pieces of information contained in risk-management approaches to regulation, Aas observes:

They are not instruments for understanding, but rather instruments for action...they are instruments that make it possible to act without needing to understand. Their success lies therefore not so much on the theoretical (narrative) level as it lies in their operationality. (p. 385)

Anne’s use of the phrase, “it is what it is” may work as a form of self-governing that offers her sufficient closure on an incident over which she feels utterly powerless. The phrase may also allow her to move past the incident and forward in a job in which she has experienced a “difficult circumstance” (Foucault, 1984c, p. 364). In this case, Anne experienced a significant betrayal of trust committed by both the school principal and her administrative superiors. Anne’s utterance can be analysed as either an alternative to faith or as an extension of it. It can also be analysed as an outright refusal to address with me how it is that she came to terms with this event in her life. Rather than dismissive of reflection, the phrase can be seen to represent the unspeakable. Nevertheless, Anne can be seen to claim space and capacity as a subject with agency operating within a context otherwise governed through risk management. At the same
time, by drawing on Aas’s (2004) analysis, it is possible to see Anne’s turn to this phrase not as defiance in the face of risk-management, but rather, as cynical resignation that has the effect of obscuring ambiguities, and possibly discounting alternative courses for action on her part.

Like many other activist social workers in my study, Anita’s and Anne’s aphorisms make reference to the anti-scientific realms of fate, determinism and chance. As such, they can be seen as positioning social workers away from the “science” of risk measurement. However, attention should be paid to the ways in which they also turn to the discourses of personal responsibility where the subject is expected to take ultimate command of their own life, and overcome all obstacles, regardless of any structural barriers imposed from elsewhere.

6.7 Conclusion – Critical Knowledge in the Minor Key
In this chapter, I explore how activist social workers respond to emerging discourses of prevention in child welfare and primary health care service restructuring measures introduced by the Ontario government. I began with a discussion about social workers’ experiences with the rise of risk management priorities in Ontario’s child welfare and health care services during the 1990s. Next, I examined government documents related to new forms of social and health service restructuring to reveal how the key purpose for social workers has shifted from intrusion into the lives of high-risk individuals to the prevention of risks to the “social”.

I discussed the accounts of direct service providers and supervisors collected for my research and revealed the ways that their day-to-day prevention practices continue to be shaped in many ways that do not defend against risks to the “social” but instead, focus on risks to the institutions within which they work. Drawing on O’Malley (1996), I argue that the shifts towards prevention appear simultaneously alongside other forms of governing in a paradoxical fusion of discipline and individualized risk-based techniques alongside discourses of a more collectivized social welfare state. Finally, I explored social workers’ utterances of the “already said” as examples of the ways that service providers and supervisors continue to shape their own conduct in response to pressures to defend against institutional risks.

Learning more about the small utterances of the “already said” (Foucault, 1984c, p. 365) on the part of activist social workers can contribute to our critical knowledge about how social and health service providers position themselves within the emerging context of risk prevention. Their positioning takes up aspects of care of the self as a commitment to “straying afield” (Foucault, 1990, p. 8), a rejection of ways of being which enact standardized and
efficient practices. I want to conclude this chapter by suggesting that it is possible to see these utterances as forms of self-governing which reverberate in the “minor key” (Stoler, 2009, p. 52). Ann Laura Stoler (2009) explains that the “minor key” represents a register that conveys the frequently confused sensibilities of people as they try to navigate forms of “collision and collusion” (p. 52) occurring between their public and personal lives. Rather than a space of clarity, knowledge in the minor key represents a “messier, unsettling space that spans knowing and not knowing, good and bad faith, refusal and acceptance” (p. 249). In the case of restructured child welfare and primary health care services, social workers’ positioning through their use of the “already said” reflects their desires for ethical selfhood as they messily navigate through the logics of neoliberalism. The idea that social workers’ ethical positionings can both collide and collude with the logics of neoliberalism supports the notion that regimes of power overlap, interact, and contradict each other (Foucault, 1990). As Foucault (1991b) explains,

[W]e need to see things not in terms of the replacement of a society of sovereignty by a disciplinary society and the subsequent replacement of a disciplinary society by a society of government; in reality one has a triangle, sovereignty-discipline-government, which has as its primary target the population and as its essential mechanism the apparatuses of security. (p. 102)

Emerging discourses found in Transformation and Renewal suggests that there are slim opportunities to expand social provisions with the aim of improving equity-based social agendas. In light of the ongoing presence of disciplinary and punitive regulatory measures aimed at the lives of many service users, social workers must be mindful of how their efforts to expand the spaces for collectivist social agendas can become a technology of collusion and used to justify the downsizing of social welfare and the shifting back upon the individual the responsibility for managing risks. Social workers need to be conscious of the fact that discourses of prevention reproduce forms of race, gender and class-based injustices under the guise of “harm reduction”.
Chapter 7

Conclusion

7.1 Introduction
My thesis began with the stated goal of exploring how activist social workers produce and maintain their sense of identity and ethical responsibility while managing the contradictions arising in their restructured workplaces. It was my intention to avoid flat, one-dimensional views of identity-making processes. Instead, I sought to find ways to grapple with the inconsistencies, contradictions and tensions that appeared in social workers’ stories about their work-lives. I chose to turn my attention to the historical specificity of the production of subject-positions taken on by social workers labouring in these restructured contexts in the Province of Ontario. Drawing on Foucault’s ideas about governmentality and feminist poststructuralist, critical race and postcolonial theories, I have adopted a perspective which views neoliberal restructuring as working diffusely through health and social service workplaces. My interest has been in examining the “technologies of governing” (Miller and Rose, 1990, p. 8) at work in these spaces. I have asked how it is through the “microphysics of power” (p. 8) that social workers come to experience, understand, judge and conduct themselves. A key aspect of my investigation has been the close examination of tensions and contradictions between the attachments, desires and aspirations of the activist social worker self and what that self must do every day to get by in her or his job.

My research suggests that the discourses of neoliberalism are never all-transforming, nor do they generate uniform effects in social workers’ lives. Activist social workers respond to emerging strategies of rule in their workplaces in multiple ways while constituting themselves through various competing discourses that are present in their lives. These discourses are shaped by broader social relations, their connections to families and communities, important life events, and other aspects of social workers’ biographical histories. Social workers’ stories about changes in their workplaces are consistent with the notion that neoliberalism is a “rascal concept”; that is to say, it is “pervasive, yet inconsistently defined, empirically imprecise and frequently contested” (Brenner, Peck & Theodore, 2010, p. 184). Brenner, Peck and Theodore (2010) argue that a critical interrogation of the modalities and pathways of neoliberal processes must take into account the problematic of variegation and
how these processes are “simultaneously patterned, interconnected, locally specific, contested and unstable” (p. 184). My research findings are in line with the concept suggested by these scholars. Similar to their position, I find that interrogations of neoliberal restructuring in health and social services must emphasize the cumulative effects of successive waves of neoliberal restructuring measures upon an uneven institutional landscape. Additionally, my research indicates that there must be an appreciation of subjectivities variously positioned within competing discourses which may be autobiographical, cultural and social in origin. The logic of neoliberalism in the workplace demands that social workers arrange themselves to be self-managing, entrepreneurial, and transformative subjects. Yet, at the same time, it is possible to trace within their stories those moments of “discontinuities” (Foucault, 1991a, p. 57) that manifest in their work practices. It is these moments of discontinuity that reveal the potential ways to slow down or perhaps even interrupt neoliberal processes.

In Chapter Two of this thesis, I discuss how governmentality studies have been criticized because of their tendency to neglect politics and to bypass social movements and their various histories of struggle (Larner, 2000; O’Malley, Weir and Shearing, 1997). It is by grounding my analysis in a detailed exploration of the work lives of a diverse group of activist social workers, many of whom identify deep involvements with social movements, that my research has been able to make visible the “messy actualities” (O’Malley, Weir & Shearing, 1997, p. 504) of emerging forms of governance. Key to this analysis is an emphasis on the historically-contingent aspects of restructuring measures as well as an examination of the individual negotiations of those measures as they are influenced by people’s diverse identities, desires and attachments. I argue that although social workers will be exposed to many of the same neoliberal discourses and feel many of the same pressures to accommodate those discourses, they do not necessarily integrate them into their work-lives in the same way. The analysis that I present reinforces the insight that it is not enough to understand working subjects as simply having been produced through regulatory processes; equal attention must also be paid to the ways that active subjects respond, negotiate and resist these processes.

In Chapter Three, I explore a series of dilemmas that emerged during my research as I sought ways in which to work with the tensions that exist between the Humanist self capable of reflection, and Foucault’s notion of the self as an effect through and within discourse. At the heart of these dilemmas is my query about how social workers make themselves up. This is a question which points to its own resolution in that it implies an open and an ongoing critical
interrogation of subjectivities in restructured health and social service workplaces. In keeping with Foucault’s analysis, my approach to methods in this thesis refuses to be limited or boxed in by the “truth” about social work subjects labouring under restructuring. Instead, I explore how and why particular discourses are taken up by different social workers and what are the historical contingencies of their knowledge. What, in turn, does this produce? My approach unsettles the taken-for-granted assumptions in social workers’ stories about their work lives. As a result, it becomes possible to see how the knowledges that they draw from, and their emotional entanglements with those knowledges, are constituted. My methods assume that both the researched and the researcher are equally capable of deconstructing the socially-produced “truths” within which our subjectivities come into being. It is my hope that my research demonstrates that we have a role to play in shaping our ethical positions and political identities. We can be accountable for the knowledge, ideas and feelings that we produce. However, I am left with questions about those ideas and feelings that are not as easily accessible or available for the purposes of interrogation. For instance, what do I make of those moments when my research subjects chose to respond in ways that are “beyond words” (Hook, 2006, p. 212)? Derek Hook (2006) describes the realm of “beyond words” (p. 212) as those accounts that are “routed through the logics of the body and its anxieties of distinction, separation and survival” (p. 207). According to Hook, these are instances where it is not possible to represent meaning because it is beyond consciousness and intentionality. This is a realm which evades discursive explanations because it involves “those habituated symptoms of avoidance, aversion, disgust or discomfort...those evasive structures of oppression that lie beneath discursive consciousness” (p. 208). In trying to come to terms with what existed beyond words in my interviews, I wondered about the narratives of those social workers who indicated interest but ultimately declined to participate in my research. Under what circumstances could, or would, these social workers share their stories? For those who did participate, how and why were they motivated and what was it that they were seeking as research participants? What was left behind in our interviews because it remained unsaid or perhaps unacknowledged? Was there more that could be said and, if so, could this knowledge be accessed through research methods? Hook maintains that it is critical to develop approaches for understanding the unconscious realm in our lives because these are dimensions of threat and anxiety that discourse analysis cannot adequately fathom. This is important, argues Hook, because we cannot properly apprehend what we have failed to adequately
understand. Finding ways to illuminate these gaps between the conscious and unconscious knowledge of social workers’ experiences may better illuminate the layered dimensions of tensions, contradictions and dilemmas faced in those bewildering spaces of restructured workplaces.

Throughout my research, the “defended subject” (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, p. 19) emerges as a key figure. As defended subjects, activist social workers display investments in particular discourses in order to protect those vulnerable aspects of the self against the discomforts that arise when working amidst contradictions and tensions. The figure of the defended subject first appears in Chapter Four as social workers grapple with the tensions that exist between the alluring qualities of discourses of change and their feelings of ambivalence, anger, resentment and betrayal over the perception of promises broken by the new government reforms in their work. I analyse how the discourses of Transformation and Renewal found in emerging child welfare and primary health care reforms are “sticky” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 11) and saturated with affect. As a result, these discourses contain binding properties which adhere to social workers’ various emotional attachments and their particular social histories. In other instances, such discourses can be repelled by social workers’ attachments and social histories. Consequently, my analysis highlights the various ways that different social workers endeavour to govern themselves as coherent beings within a work context that is found to be riddled with tensions. For some social workers, the production of a coherent self proves an unwieldy process resulting in feelings of ambivalence, shame and varying degrees of “moral crisis”. Although I discuss these moments of tension at the end of Chapter Four, my treatment of them is, in some regards, incomplete. A more comprehensive exploration would require follow-up interviews within a carefully-designed research project that allows for the examination of sensitive themes related to ambivalence, self-doubt and betrayal. How do social workers manage to protect their core sense of self as moral beings when that self rests on a historical legacy whereby social workers are positioned as being morally and racially superior? How do social workers manage their sense of integrity and ethical selfhood when they are left with a sense of futility because it seems that there is nothing left to do? In order to further explore these dilemmas, future research would be required with those social workers who occupy dominant social positions of inclusion. Additionally, further research would be needed with those social workers who identify as being “caught at the border” (Walkderdine, 2006, p. 13) between their commitments to communities with which they have strong affiliations and the
demands of their employment. I believe that these are important areas of future research. In particular, such research holds potential to produce deeper knowledge about the dimensions of painful workplace struggles that are often obscured or relegated to the “private” realm of social workers’ inner lives.

In Chapter Five, my analysis shifts from the emerging discourses of Transformation and Renewal to a focus on the themes of loss and mourning as they appear in social workers’ stories about work restructuring in Ontario during the 1990s. I was interested to explore how it is that social workers come to produce such varied and complicated accounts of loss, with some focusing on the devastations of the “Harris regime”, and others pointing to loss that is connected to a more distant history of pain and struggle. For many of the white, female social workers in my research, their experiences of loss circulate around nostalgia for former times when it was believed that the Canadian social welfare state contributed to social rights and equity. I argue that the mourning of this particular past is only made possible through the obscuring fantasies that arise from white privilege and the drawing upon of Anglo-Western-European histories. These forms of privileged mourning can play a powerful role in the constitution of social work subjects, enabling a “forgetting” of the past and the production of ethical and moral defences against complicity with neoliberal cuts, downsizing, and the re-organizing of public services. Mourning, in effect, becomes the basis of innocence. I discuss how innocence is frequently augmented by discourses of faith, salvation, rescue and love. It is within these discourses that social workers position themselves to be in intimate solidarity with service users who are impacted by the hardships that result from restructuring. Discourses of faith are also analysed as a form of resistance to pressures that demand that work be measured against narrow performance outcomes. However, my research also encountered and analysed other social workers’ accounts of grief that did not permit any form of “forgetting”. Their accounts of grief included a narrative of Canadian history that revealed the existence of violent colonization and racism. Working with the idea that social workers’ various states of mourning are constituted through their diverse positioning within Canada’s colonial past, I analyse how in liberal democratic governing there is always an overlap or a “persistent slippage” (Park & Kemp, 2006, p. 729) between progressive reforms and the “dirty secrets” (Dean, 2002, p. 57) of social exclusion. The discrepancies found in different social worker’s stories of grief exemplify those overlaps and slippages.
Throughout this thesis, I have referred to government documents available to the general public to describe recent restructuring measures in child welfare and primary health care. These documents have served as a backdrop for my analysis of restructuring and social workers’ lives. Viewing these documents as “texts” has enabled me to consider how discourses of Transformation and Renewal enter into the public realm and begin to shape meaning through notions of common sense. Similarly, from the discipline of Sociology, Dorothy Smith (1999) describes texts as becoming “active” (p. 135) through the act of our reading. Texts, from her perspective, perform a regulatory function in that they seem detached from both the historical context from which they emerge and from the living people who produce them. This detachment allows texts to influence and coordinate local and particular courses of action with respect to social relations beyond the text’s occurrence. While keeping these considerations in mind, I have resisted the idea that texts simply “make people up”. Instead, I have “read them” alongside and against my transcripts of interviews with activist social workers. I have searched for ways that emerging discourses can converge within, and collide against, social workers’ accounts about the changing context of their work. In Chapter Six, I draw upon these texts to explore how the emerging centrality of risk management through prevention has come to shape the work lives of social workers in child welfare and primary health care settings. I analyse social workers’ observations and reflections about their work both before and after the introduction of prevention. From here, I argue that social workers’ work practices continue to be shaped and squeezed by narrow, inflexible procedures that require that their primary aims and purposes be directed toward defending against risks to their work organizations. As a result, prevention is analysed as a particular form of governing that has two distinct outcomes. Firstly, it enables an increased penetration into the neighbourhoods in which many poor people live. Secondly, it provides for the increased dispersal of opportunities for social workers to engage in social and racial profiling and to identify “high risk” members of those same communities. As this systematic predetection is accomplished, these community members are targeted for social regulation through strategies of individual empowerment and corrective guidance on how to better live. I suggest that this approach for managing the population re-installs social hierarchies based on race, gender and class-based distinctions. In the final section of my thesis, I return to the idea that the adoption of faith, fate, and uncertainty on the part of social workers can be analysed as a form of defiance in the face of rigid regulatory frameworks intended to guide their practices. From their interviews, I capture those small
utterances of the “already said” – forms of spiritual and moral guidance passed down from others – that enable social workers to work at producing an ethical selfhood in relation to the various rules and values that underpin neoliberal workplaces. I argue that these technologies of the self, when mobilized within the current context of practice, can be considered both as potentially subversive and accommodating of the effects of neoliberalism.

There is an important point raised in my thesis and reinforced time and time again in social workers’ stories. The point is that emerging forms of neoliberal governing are unruly and exist in a state of constant conflict and tension between techniques of governing. Some of those techniques assure compliance, such as those processes through which the self is produced and modified to ensure economic survival. Other techniques of governing reveal opportunities for a “plurality of resistances” that are at varying times “possible, necessary [and] improbable” (Foucault, 1978, p. 96). As Foucault (1991b) explains, we need to understand governing power as a triangle of “sovereignty–discipline–government which has as its primary target the population and as its essential mechanism the apparatus of security” (p. 102). A second point emerging in my thesis is that activist social workers’ meaning-making processes are revealed to be socially constituted in ways that are both personal and political. They are the consequences of broader patterns of social relations but, also, of intersecting attachments, investments and identifications which arise out of what social workers desire for their work, families, communities, and the nation-state. From this vantage point, it is possible to see how different social workers’ positionings can variously collude and collide with the techniques and discourses of neoliberalism. As a result, I contend that what it means to be an activist social worker in the contemporary context of practice is difficult to pin down. Social workers’ positionings tend to reflect strong desires for ethical selfhood; yet, they also reflect the contradictions of a work world where there is little clarity. This is not to suggest that other previous social welfare contexts had clarity in ways that the present one does not. It does, however, point to the fact that despite their “transformed” and “renewed” forms, current child welfare and primary health care spaces of work can be messy and unsettling spaces where knowing and not knowing, belief and rejection, allegiance and betrayal can all co-exist in varying complementary and contradictory degrees. In this conclusion, I consider the implications of these claims in relation to the current challenges and opportunities that face activist social workers in Canada. I also consider various conceptual possibilities and proposals for moving forward with further research.
7.2 Revealing the Dirty Secrets of Liberalism

While discussing the impact of restructured conditions in the United States, Wendy Brown (2005) argues that neoliberalism has resulted in a serious case of political nihilism. Her commentary refers to what appears to be a demonstration of vast public indifference to scandalous events that include the misleading basis for the War in Iraq, George Bush’s installation as president by a politicized Supreme Court in 2000, and the constraints on civil liberties and increased surveillance of American citizens resulting from the “War on Terror”. According to Brown, these examples suggest that liberal democratic principles and basic democratic morality are dead in the U.S. The permeation of a market rationality means that “[a] fully realized neoliberal citizenry would be the opposite of public-minded; indeed, it would barely exist as a public” (p. 43). Many of the stories shared by activist social workers in my research resonate with Brown’s comments. They highlight the ways that successive waves of restructuring in child welfare and primary health care services in Ontario have worked in similar ways to undermine the idea that public values and institutions are indeed separate from the values of the market. By drawing on the observations made by social workers in my thesis, it can be said that the public sector has been re-shaped by the following processes and dynamics: 1) an emphasis on downloading responsibilities and shifting services onto the private realm and over to partnerships between the public and the private sector; 2) the creation of a culture of managerialism that inserts business practices and corporate values deep into the delivery models of those services that remain public; 3) the emergence of discourses of efficiencies which subordinate the value of service outcomes and ethical considerations to the values of rationalism and risk management; 4) the re-shaping of front-line service providers into technicians who deliver narrow, standardized, and rationed services; 5) the emergence of a performance culture that appears to increase accountability to the public but actually achieves a fabrication of services where accountability is measured against risks to institutions and funders; 6) a reconstitution of the public as a series of individual, self-responsibilizing subjects that results in the weakening of collective identifications in ways that render the public realm irrelevant.

In keeping with Brown (2005), I argue that what was once commonly known as the public realm in Ontario, at least in the sectors of child welfare and primary health care, has been systematically reorganized. However, far from the nihilistic indifference observed by Brown in the U.S. context, the social workers participating in my research continue to convey
strong emotional investments in the idea that inequality can be addressed and challenged through progressive social welfare policies and programs. By adopting a governmentality approach for my research, I have been able to probe more deeply into social workers’ subject-making processes in order to reveal how it is that our emotions and feelings interact with forms of self-governing produced under the neoliberal restructuring of services. By examining the hopes, dreams and aspirations of social activists, my research uncovers the existence of persistent and deep attachments to the ideas encapsulated by “the public” and “the social” on the part of activist social workers.

As activist social workers shared their observations about the cuts and downsizing of services in Ontario, their stories conveyed memories of and nostalgia for a “better time” in the province and the nation. In addition, social workers longed for a more progressive future for the country and for the global community. I have argued that the pervasive presence of these attachments in the form of both mourning and feelings of hopefulness represent a “counterhistory” (Foucault, 1997/2003, p. 70) to the imagined ascendency of a neoliberal system. I analyse aspects of this counterhistory for its potential to advance neoliberalism but, more importantly, for possibilities of resistance that slow this advancement. As Clarke (2004) argues, [d]ominant strategies do not occupy an empty landscape. They have to overcome resistances, refusals, and blockages” (p. 44). I argue that social workers’ commitments to social rights are part of the “grit” (p. 44) that keeps neoliberal restructuring from running smoothly. Clarke suggests that projects that seek alternatives to neoliberalism should start with these forms of obstruction to incomplete rule, “rather than throwing them in as a gestural last paragraph after the ‘big story’ has been told” (p. 44-45). He makes the point that future research should focus on beginning, rather than ending, with practices that counter neoliberalism, and that doing so can pry open further spaces for theorizing resistance to the dismantling of the public realm.

Although I am in partial agreement with Clarke’s (2004) suggestion to start with counter practices in order to research how neoliberalism interacts with our lives, other findings from my thesis suggest that caution should be exercised before moving forward. As I discussed in Chapter Five, the urge to turn back to the public realm is not without its problems. In particular, when white social workers turn back to the liberal state in order to address social inequalities, I have argued that this urge springs from nostalgic memories of the “golden days” of social welfare – a time when it was believed that there was clarity of focus and purpose in
relation to the advancement of social rights. My analysis suggests that nostalgia for such clarity requires that one possess class and race-based privilege and the ability to obscure the political struggles that have been faced by others within historical systems of oppression that are rooted in colonialism, racism, sexism and classism. Analysing activist social workers’ desires to turn back to the state as the arbiter of the public realm highlights how liberal democracy is significantly impoverished as a solution to social inequities. As Thobani (2007) forcefully argues, the Canadian social welfare state has been able to constitute itself as “compassionate” and “caring” as it simultaneously marginalized from the national community those whom it excluded (Thobani, 2007). Yet, for many “caring subjects”, the commitments and claims of universality, reason, reform, progress and equality present in liberal democracy remain the most unquestioned and compelling options in their pursuit of alternatives to the current context of practice. In the end, despite significant obstacles posed by neoliberalism, my thesis research suggests that activist social workers’ persistent attachments to liberalism might be the most difficult challenge facing those of us who desire new pathways to social justice and equity. This is particularly significant because of the power those attachments have to potentially reproduce historical exclusions. Also, our continued investments in liberalism as a pathway to justice foreclose other possible social arrangements. It seems to be a particularly urgent matter to devise future research projects to explore the experiences and knowledge of those social workers who practice from the margins of liberalism. Social workers whose lives have not benefitted from the so-called “golden years” of social welfare in Canada may be in the best position to shed light on alternative configurations for building more inclusive social welfare futures in Canada.

An additional point highlighted by my research is how emerging forms of neoliberal governing are able to capitalize on our deep attachments to liberal democracy. In Chapter Four, I analysed how the ongoing presence of managerial discourses are overlaid with various discourses associated with “transformative change”. These discourses include teamwork, partnerships, and collaboration mobilized to produce a discursive repertoire that is associated with social workers’ desires for progressive reforms. The result can be a confusing and bewildering state of affairs. Consequently, many social workers struggle with feelings of ambivalence as they continue to project their fantasies about progressive change onto a work terrain that is rife with contradictions and tensions. I have analysed how the Ontario government, under the guise of “transforming” and “renewing” public services, has been able
to advance policies which roll back redistributive measures to produce large social inequalities. At the same time, these policies direct the remaining publicly-subsidized social and health service programs towards “empowering” individuals to help themselves and their own family members and community members. What can be seen, then, is the privatization of social needs. Analysing similar trends in the United Kingdom, Stuart Hall (2005) suggests that the New Labour government there was engaging in the “double shuffle” (p. 332) of defending its massive departures from social democratic values by rhetorically “spinning” its verbal continuity with them. According to Hall, the taking up of discourses that are imbued with notions of progressiveness, such as “modernization”, has enabled a “silent revolution” (p. 325) in governance where there is a seamless connection made between Thatcherism and the policies of New Labour. By combining economic neoliberalism with a commitment to “active government”, government ministers were able to step back from the now-unpopular themes of competition and constraint, while still endorsing the principles behind them. Hall argues that as a result, the neoliberal project is a difficult regime to characterize:

[It] is a hybrid regime, composed of two strands. However, one strand – the Neo-liberal – is in the dominant position. The other strand – the social democratic – is subordinate...The latter social democratic part always remains subordinate to and dependent on the former dominant one and is constantly being ‘transformed’ into it. (p. 329)

Hall’s (2005) observations and my research findings are supported by Foucault’s insight that power does not only manifest in sovereign or disciplinary forms, and that the social rights implied under social democratic regimes are not simply defences against vulnerability and marginalization. Social rights can themselves become tactics of governing and domination. Mitchell Dean (2002) calls this the “dirty secret” (p. 57) of many contemporary liberal forms of governing. As emerging forms of neoliberalism work with, rather than against, many of the discourses aligned with liberal democracy, it will be important for critical social work research to analyse the “secrets” underpinning these arrangements.

There exists rich scholarship in critical race studies on the paradoxes of liberalism from which Canadian social work studies can benefit enormously. For my own research, I have gained important insights from Sunera Thobani’s (2007) scholarship which explores how
Canadian subjects are inscribed as distinct human subjects with specific national traits at particular historical junctures. Her analysis reveals that these characteristics have been actively appropriated by nationals and simultaneously closed off from other human beings. Important insights can also be gained from Eduardo Cadava (2006) who explains that acts of removal, dispossession, extermination, and discrimination have been committed in the name of democracy and freedom for hundreds of years. Cadava draws on civil rights leader Frederick Douglass’ famous speech, “What to the slave is the Fourth of July?” to analyse how the United States of America, a nation that defines itself in relation to social democracy and human rights, can nevertheless produce millions of people who are not granted citizenship and who lack civil or human rights. In another context, Barnor Hesse (2004) has elaborated on how, at the end of the Second World War, the establishment of the United Nations was based on defending against a Eurocentric concept of racism which highlighted meanings associated with the policies of fascist regimes while foreclosing anti-colonial critiques of Western Imperialism. Hesse concludes that Western democracies only came to object to colonialism when Europe itself was the focus of Nazi colonialist procedures, and even then, it seemed that the newly-minted concept of human rights had no application to “non-whites” living in the colonies or in the racially-segregated United States. What these critical race scholars have been able to convey is how a premature celebration of “progress” in the areas of advancing social rights in some areas risks obscuring the continuities of colonial and imperial power in others (McClintock, 1992, p. 93). Their examination of how seemingly progressively-oriented projects can simultaneously advance the rights of dominant group members while subordinating the rights of others provides important lessons for activist social workers seeking to understand the obscured dimensions of neoliberal governing and its effects on practice. Key to these insights is an understanding of the various ways that the legacies of colonialism intersect with emerging technologies of governing. As Stoler (1995) explains, the history of colonization is never a coherent story or a shared legacy that has impacted similarly on all who have experienced it. Instead, argues Stoler, discourses of racism are historically-layered and each new plane exposes the presence of earlier discourses that re-emerge in new political contexts. What is needed, she insists, is an approach for rewriting histories that reflects both the “fixity and fluidity” (p. 199) of racial categories, and also attends to the ways that people re-work and contest the boundaries of those shifting cultural categories.
In his comprehensive examination of how race and culture intersect, Goldberg (1993) provides important insights into how the particularities of racist expressions and practices emerge in different socio-historical contexts and manage to shape differentiated effects across place and time. Goldberg insists that there are similarities between racist practices and expressions from one place to another and across times despite the presence of their differences. He suggests that it is these broad resemblances which enable comparisons to and solidarity with the struggle against various forms of racism. The emergent identities and practices suggest principles by which an effective antiracist commitment and political ethos may be formed. However, Goldberg cautions that whatever general principles are articulated, they will always be vulnerable to interpretation and revision in keeping with local prevailing conditions. His keen observations have strong relevance for health and social service providers as they respond to emerging models of “transformative” care that are governed through “community” and the sensibilities of local conditions. For example, Goldberg discusses the transformative possibilities signalled by initial opportunities to address institutional exclusions in the United States for black people in the 1940s and 1950s (p. 219). He notes that a prevailing social context characterized by liberalism resulted in the standard of equal treatment that translated into a melting-pot model whereby assimilation, not transformation, became the goal for change. Later, with the civil rights and counterculture movements of the 1960s, this standard gave way to a new model of integration. Despite their transformative origins, Goldberg explains that these later manifestations enabled a standard whereby the focus shifted from liberation to one of merely alleviating racial conflict and tension or improving “race relations” (p. 219) via intergroup management. Rather than social transformation, such strategies result in the reproduction of racist values and practices while simultaneously fostering appealing notions of cultural diversity and the celebration of cultural distinction. As I reach the end of my thesis, Goldberg’s insights help me to think more deeply about how it is that new restructuring measures enact the “double shuffle” (Hall, 2005, p. 332) which is elaborated in my research. I draw from his analysis an articulation of how technologies of self-governance, such as liberalism, can work to mobilize social work subjects who are both desiring of social transformation and simultaneously positioned to contain and restrict resistance to dominant social arrangements.

In the context of neoliberal restructuring, I have found instances of resistance within the “grit” (Clarke, 2004, p. 44) that surfaces in social workers’ stories about work. Yet, as my
analysis shows, often the potential for this resistance is blunted because the social and historical dimensions of oppression are either obscured or outright denied. The analysis available in the critical race literature on liberalism, race and culture enables me to better understand how, as social and health service providers, our desires for freedom can and do produce outcomes that are contrary to those desires. As Dean (2002) explains:

Governing in the name of freedom is a plural, pragmatic and heterogeneous task. It concerns how to use the full range of governmental and sovereign technologies, from persuasion, encouragement, seduction, enticement, obligation, petty humiliation, shame, discipline, training and propaganda through to violence – in its different forms – and the symbolic and threat of violence, in a manner which can be reconciled with the claim, always understood nominalistically, to govern liberally, to govern in a free political culture, to govern in the name of freedom, to respect individual liberty or to govern through freedom. (p. 58)

It seems that moving forward with a research agenda, as well as any discussion about possibilities for practices and strategies of resistance in the current context of practice, must take into account the paradoxical arrangements posed by Canadian social workers attachments to liberalism. In the final sections of my thesis, I provide some reflections on additional concepts that may be useful in this regard.

### 7.3 Social Transformation through Incorporation

In my thesis, I have taken up Foucault’s (1994a) notion that the multiple and interactive processes of governing people do not work against a sense of individual freedom but rather through the desires and aspirations for freedom. Foucault believed that although there would always be disciplinary programs, in addition to harsher forms of governing more in line with sovereignty, most of us will encounter and voluntarily take up a variety of “techniques of living” (p. 89). As he explains, such techniques are,

used for the constitution of a permanent relationship to oneself – one must manage oneself as a governor manages the governed, as a head of an enterprise manages his[her] enterprise, a head of household manages his[her] household...as exact a
mastery as that of a sovereign against whom there would no longer be revolts... (1984c, p. 363).

Stuart Hall (1993) explains that these insights became obvious to Foucault late in his scholarship after he recognized that it was not enough for the Law to summon, discipline, produce and regulate. Foucault came to see that there must also be a corresponding response produced on the side of the subject. This shift is found in Foucault’s (1990) *The Use of Pleasure*. Here, he begins to work with the forms and modalities by which the individual constitutes and recognizes him/herself. Included in these forms are the regimes of self-regulation and self-fashioning and the technologies of the self involved in the constitution of the desiring subject. Hall notes that this is significant as it is the first time that Foucault refers to the existence of some interior landscape of the subject. This insight saves his accounts from the behaviourism and objectivism that characterized his earlier work. Foucault now recognizes that a decentring of the subject is not akin to the destruction of the subject and that the centring of discursive practice cannot work without the constitution of subjects. In other words, it is never enough to elaborate a theory about how individuals are summoned into place in a discursive structure. One must also always keep a theoretical eye on how subjects constitute themselves through those discursive structures.

My thesis provides some tentative pathways into thinking about the mechanisms by which individuals as subjects do or do not identify with positions to which they are directed by dominant discourses in their workplace. For example, borrowing from Ahmed (2004), I elaborate on how it is that some emerging discourses of work become “sticky” and “saturated with affect” (p. 11), and how these processes can be bound to social workers’ deep attachments to those things that are associated with the discourses or work. I also demonstrate how “stickiness” can interact differently from one social worker to another due to their particular social histories. I show how this results in varied positionings, some of which hold strong potential for revealing the effects of paradoxical arrangements in restructuring. I also discuss and analyse how the discourses of mourning play a key role in the constitution of social workers, enabling them to be positioned as “defended subjects” (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, p. 23) who are protected from a sense of complicity with the effects of restructuring. I examined how the adoption of faith-based discourses, as well as discourses of “chance” and “uncertainty”, can constitute social workers in ways that are at times defiant and resistant to the
discourses of neoliberalism. At other times, these same social workers can be seen as constituting themselves to accommodate those same discourses. In each of these instances, I have been able to explore both the technologies of governing through which social workers fashion, produce and perform these positions and why they never do so completely. As Hall (1993) explains, these are the “agonistic processes of struggling with, resisting, negotiating and accommodating the normative or regulative rules with which [individuals] confront and regulate themselves” (pg. 14). Although my thesis suggests possibilities for understanding how as beings we are contingent, outstanding questions remain with regard to how it is that we can become changeable. This question will be central to my future research endeavours. How is it that we can assist activist social workers, both those in the field of practice and in the classroom, to incorporate the tracings of “counterhistories” into their ways of being and their performances of work practices? This question seems particularly important as emerging forms of restructuring discourses reveal mercurial capacities to mutate and transform. Old patterns of restructuring stubbornly remain in place just as new patterns fluidly emerge to take up new directions. How, therefore, do we better prepare social workers to respond to the paradoxes and tensions characterized by the “double shuffle” (Hall, 2005) of new governing arrangements in their workplaces?

Goldberg (1993) suggests that a standard of practice called “incorporation” (p. 220) is able to withstand the insertion of dominant values because it extends practices that can undermine and alter those values “from within” (p. 220). Key to incorporation, according to Goldberg, is the dual transformation that takes place both in the dominant values and in those with identifications that fall outside dominant interests; in particular, as the latter insists on more comprehensive incorporations into the body politic. Importantly for activist social workers, incorporative undertakings require that social subjects confront and critically engage the contingencies of the various identities that constitute them. As Goldberg explains:

They require that social subjects strive reasonably to represent the values of their self-ascribed identities in a vigorous but open contestation and will be prepared to revise their commitments, even deeply held ones, to alter their values, ultimately to transform their identities in relation to the critical pushes and pulls of the incorporative dynamic. (Goldberg, 1993, p. 221)
Goldberg’s reflections on incorporation as a form of self-governing for social transformation call to mind some of the ideas that Foucault was working on in the last years of his life. In Chapter Six of my thesis, I wrote about how Foucault discovered these ideas by drawing upon ancient Hellenic and Greco-Roman texts, and how consequently, he was able to think about governmentality from a different perspective. Foucault described (1994a) this new perspective as, “the government of the self by oneself in its articulations and relations with others (such as one finds in pedagogy, behaviour counselling, spiritual direction, the prescription of models for living, and so on)” (p. 88). Foucault had come to see that self-governing was a form of “cultivation of the self” (Foucault, 1994b, p. 99). Referring to a passage cited by ancient philosopher, Demetrius, Foucault builds on the idea of an athlete:

Like a good wrestler, we must learn only what will enable us to bear up against events that may occur; we must learn not to let ourselves be thrown by them, and not to let ourselves be overwhelmed by the emotions they may give rise to in ourselves. (p. 99)

Bronwyn Davies (2005) argues that if research is to contribute to an effective counter-movement to neoliberalism, we must learn to work on ourselves at the level of both rationality and desire. Her argument resonates with Foucault’s notion of the “good wrestler”. According to Davies, resistance requires an openness to the range of discourses through which we and others are constituted and, especially, how those discourses work at the level of reason and logic. It is equally critical, argues Davies, that we learn to know how discourse works on desire. According to Davies, this is necessary because desire is fluid and ever-changing. It is therefore difficult to track in terms of how it constitutes subjects. She explains:

Desire goes beyond rationality and, to a large extent, is part of the mysterious, the poetic, the ineffable: in a realm not readily pinned down with words, not readily amenable to logic and rationality...In various humanist guises, desire has been used as an indicator of who we “really” are, as signifying an essence that is “natural” and personal, as independent of social influence. But desire is spoken into existence, it is shaped through discursive and interactive processes...Desires are constituted through the very language and patterns of existence through which we are subjected – made into members of the social world. (p. 13)
Foucault’s insights into forms of self-governing that rely on cultivation of the self along with Goldberg’s (1993) notion of incorporation, and Davies’ (2005) emphasis on rationality and desire, suggest important possibilities for learning how to make adjustments to our subjectivities as activist social workers in the current context of practice. Their ideas help us to see how it is that who we are becoming now is historically contingent. It is only by peeling away the layers of taken-for-granted assumptions that it becomes possible for social workers to see and reflect on the contradictions and paradoxes of our practices. As we peel away these layers, we become aware of our implication in the processes of child welfare and primary health care restructuring. We are also challenged to consider how the processes we are implicated in actually have a material impact on the lives of service users in Canada. This is not a neutral process. Rather, it is one that can be emotionally painful and professionally challenging. It leads to a difficult state of affairs. Foucault (1991c) explains that this state of affairs becomes very difficult because we no longer know what to do: “the acts, gestures, discourses which up until then had seemed to go without saying become problematic, difficult, dangerous” (p. 84). By coming to understand how we are constituted by and through workplace discourses and seeing more clearly the paradoxes of our practices, social workers are better positioned to critique those practices and our complicity with them. This is necessary in order to find different personal and political alternatives for re-configuring what it means to be an activist social worker who is genuinely engaged in the process of caring for and, about, others as human beings. This goal will require a constant and courageous questioning of who we are becoming now.
Appendix A: Invitation to Participate in a Study Letter

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Invitation to Participate in a Study

Activist Social Workers in Restructured Organizations: An Exploration of Knowledge, Identities, and Work Practices

During the 1990s, Ontario witnessed a period of changes including cuts and restructuring in health and social services that have been described as a “steam-roller” effect. For many activist social workers, new commercial models of service provision and the introduction of more technical approaches to social work practice contributed to a troubling sense of lost ethical purpose within social welfare and health care systems. Hopes and promises for positive social change seemed to diminish as work became an endless series of stressful encounters with more troubled and complex caseloads.

Recently, the Ontario government announced new plans in different sectors of social work practice that would seem to signal a change in government policy. The glaring monuments of prior downsizing and reform measures – huge case loads, long wait-lists, and “cookie-cutter” approaches to care - are to be remedied through the “renewal” of primary health care and the “transformation” of child protection services. Primary health care is said to become the site for new collaborative, multidisciplinary teams including social workers, and will deliver expanded access to comprehensive, patient-centred services with an emphasis on health promotion and illness prevention. Ontario’s child welfare system, the largest employer of social workers in the province, promises to offer more “flexible” and “tailored” programs that emphasize early detection of risks for children.

In this study of activist social workers employed within primary health care and child welfare services, I will take up questions about how both front-line workers and direct supervisors make sense of ongoing changes in their work. I am particularly interested in exploring how social workers make sense of contradictions in their practice, especially when tensions exist between what they imagine themselves to be as potential agents of social change and what they have to do every day to get by in their jobs. The study aims to find out how new government plans in these important sectors of social work have impacted on social workers’ identities, sense of purpose, and their day-to-day practice realities. The study results have the potential to shed light on the changing context of practice and will be used for future research, training and education of social workers in Canada.
If You:

- Self-identify as “activist” in that you use a feminist / anti-racist / anti-oppressive approach to practice and believe that advocacy and social change are an important part of social work
- Have worked as a social worker as a front-line service provider and / or supervisor in a social service or health care setting for ten years or more, and are currently employed in either primary health care or child welfare
- Have ever been troubled by tensions or contradictions in your practice of social work due to the impact of changes in funding or service delivery models
- Are willing to take part in the study or have questions about it, please call or email me at: (researcher’s contact information)

What Would Participation Involve?

You will be asked to take part in two (an initial and a follow-up) confidential semi-structured individual interviews with me. With your permission, the interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed for analysis. The interviews will each last about 90 minutes and will be at the location and time of your choosing. The interviews will be designed to allow you sufficient time to reflect on:

- What life / work experiences influenced your decision to enter social work
- How you have been affected by changes over time in your particular sector of social work
- How you experience and make sense of possible tensions and contradictions in your work
- The kinds of knowledge and skills that you bring to your efforts in navigating the changes of work

If you decide to take part in the study, your anonymity is assured (including your agency affiliation). All information you provide will be treated as confidential. You may decline to respond to questions you do not want to answer. You can withdraw from the study at any time without consequences at any time, and in the event of your withdrawal, you can exercise your right to remove your data from the study.

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the University of Toronto Ethics Review Office. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the Ethics Review Office at: 416-946-3273 or ethics.review@utoronto.ca

Thank you very much for considering participation in my study!

Kristin Smith M.S.W. / R.S.W. / PhD Candidate.
OISE/UT – Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education
Phone: (researcher’s contact information)
Appendix B: Follow-up Letter to Participants

OISE
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University of Toronto

Dear

Several weeks ago, you received an invitation to participate in a study tentatively entitled, Activist Social Workers in Restructured Organizations: An Exploration of Knowledge, Identities and Work Practices. I am following up with you now to ask if you are willing to participate in my doctoral research study. Your participation would involve up to two individual interviews with me at the time and location of your choosing.

My study will explore the ways that social workers manage changes in their work place. I’m especially interested in talking with supervisors and front-line staff who approach their work with “activist” or social justice principles, and are struggling to find ways to make changes when there are all kinds of tensions and contradictions in their daily work lives. I hope that by exploring social workers’ use of knowledge, sense of identities and daily work practices in these organizations, we can contribute to creating better supports and new strategies for making progressive social change together.

I understand that your time is very precious and limited and I do not want to create any unnecessary pressures on you. For your information I have attached the initial study invitation which contains additional information about my study and what it would involve from you should you decide to participate. However, if for any reason whatsoever, you decide to decline, feel free to just ignore this email or let me know by replying to this email. If you do wish to participate in the study, let me know by replying to this email.

Thanks very much for considering my request. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at (researcher’s email address) or give me a call at (researcher’s phone number). All communications with me regarding this study will be kept strictly confidential.

Kristin Smith
Appendix C: Consent Form

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Activist Social Workers in Restructured Organizations: An Exploration of Knowledge, Identities, and Work Practices

Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in a study conducted by Kristin Smith, PhD Candidate from the Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education (SESE) at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE/UT). If you have any questions about the research, please feel free to contact Kristin Smith at: (phone number) or (email address). You may also contact the faculty advisor for the study (Dr. Kari Dehli) at: 416-978-0506 or karidehli@oise.utoronto.ca.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
The purpose of the study is to understand how activist social workers in primary health care and child welfare make sense of and navigate tensions and contradictions emerging from ongoing changes to their work settings related to the restructuring of public services. Participants’ responses will inform conceptual analysis and provide directions for training, education, and research on the changing context of social work practice.

PROCEDURES
If you volunteer to participate in this study, I will ask you to take part in two individual interviews (each lasting approximately 90 minutes) over a period of four months. Interviews will take place at the location of your choosing and, with your permission will be audio-taped and transcribed. As part of the interview process, I will share copies of your transcripts with you, and invite your views on emerging themes. When the study is complete, I will offer you a summary of the results.

CONFIDENTIALITY
All information obtained from you in connection with this study will remain strictly confidential, including your agency affiliation. I will retain the data in a secure location for the duration of the study (approximately 24 months), and I will ensure full and secure deletion of all data once the study is complete. A security code involving numbers and / or pseudonyms will be used to protect participants’ anonymity for the purposes of transcription and the publication of findings.
PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL
If you volunteer to be part of this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. In the event of your withdrawal, none of the information generated by you will be used in the results. You may also choose to decline to answer any question you do not wish to answer and still remain in the study.

RISKS / BENEFITS TO PARTICIPATION
Possible risks related to participation in this study are that you may, as a result of sharing information about your work, experience feeling uncomfortable, embarrassed, anxious and upset. In order to minimize these risks, you will be encouraged to share only information that is comfortable for you. You will be encouraged to contact the researcher or research supervisor at any point during the study to discuss your experiences or any concerns related to participation in the study.

You may benefit from the reflections and discussions about your changing work experiences during the individual interviews. Additionally, your contributions may lead to a better understanding of the dilemmas and tensions in restructured social work. Your participation in the study has the potential to shed light and contribute to the future training and education of social workers along with further research on the strengths and challenges of practicing under the changing conditions in Ontario.

COMMITMENT TO ETHICAL RESEARCH PRACTICES
This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the University of Toronto Ethics Review Office. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact: the Ethics Review Office at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or call 416-946-3273.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT AND INVESTIGATOR
I understand the information provided to me about the study, Activist Social Workers in Restructured Organizations: Exploring Knowledge, Identities and Work Practices. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

________________________________________  ______________________________________
Name of Participant                        Date

________________________________________  ______________________________________
Signature of Participant                    Date

________________________________________  ______________________________________
Signature of Investigator                    Date
Appendix D: Participation Results

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Activist Social Workers in Restructured Organizations: An Exploration of Knowledge, Identities, and Work Practices

Research Participation Results
(January 05, 2009)

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Appendix E: Interview Guide

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Activist Social Workers in Restructured Organizations: Exploring Knowledge, Identities and Work Practices

Interview Guide

Individual interviews conducted with participants in the study will explore the following broad areas for which the questions below will serve as a guide:

- Participants’ life and work experiences that informed their decisions to pursue social work as a career, and how they have defined work roles
- Participants’ experiences with new forms of restructuring and how they make sense of changes in their work, particularly when tensions exist between the identities as activists and day-to-day work practices
- The kinds and sources of knowledge and work practices that participants bring to their work practices under restructuring; the sources of that knowledge and how it shapes their performances of work

Attention to each of these areas of focus will be determined by participants’ own emphasis as discussions unfold.

1. Events and experiences over your life that informed your choice to become a social worker and how you have defined this role:

Can you recall and describe any life-events, significant influences or experiences growing up or as a young adult that informed or impacted your decision to become a social worker?

How have you defined your role as a social worker over time?
- your sense of purpose; aspirations; challenges; fears; rewards.
Have you ever experienced any tensions in this role? If so, how have you managed those tensions?

2. **Your experiences of restructuring in health and / or social services:**

   Describe how conditions of your work have changed over time.

   Can you talk about how these changes have affected you?

   Have you experienced any new or emerging tensions in your practice related to recent changes in your work?

   How have you managed these tensions?

3. **The kinds and sources of knowledge and work practices that you bring to your work and how this shapes or influences your performances of work.**

   What kinds of knowledge have you drawn on to deal with tensions and conflicts in your practice?

   Can you talk about where you have learned or obtained these forms of knowledge?

   Are there any particular work practices that you draw on to manage the changes in your work?

   How has this knowledge or different work practices affected your sense of identity as a social worker and the ways that you perform your work?

**In Conclusion:**

What does being a social worker and doing social work mean to you now in the changing context of work?

What kind of advice would you offer to new activist social workers starting out now?
Appendix F: Follow-up Interview Guide

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Activist Social Workers in Restructured Organizations: Exploring Knowledge, Identities and Work Practices

Follow-up Interview Guide

1. Additional probes re: biographies: How to you explain or make sense of your various identities – social locations: gender; sexual orientation; race / ethnicity; age; (dis)ability; socio-economic status; other...

2. How do you understand your day-to-day practices to be affected by tensions; how do you reconcile those tensions?

3. Are there any ethical concerns that have emerged for you in your practice in recent months?

4. Do you have any inner struggles, discomforts, self-doubts, or conflicts about your roles at this time? If so, how do you come to grips with these struggles?

5. What do the terms “collaboration”, “teams”, “partnerships”, “change” and “community” mean to you?
Appendix G: Pen Portraits

Pen Portraits of Seventeen Activist Social Workers

Adika
Adika is a 38-year old man who is married to a woman. They have a young son with a developmental disability. Adika has worked in a domestic violence unit within front-line child welfare services for the past 12 years. When he was in his early twenties, he emigrated from his home country, Ghana, to live in a large urban centre in Canada. At first, Adika hoped to follow in his father’s footsteps and study law but when confronted with financial barriers and the isolation of living as a newcomer in Canada, he was forced to take a different path:

I dropped out of university during my first year due to monetary reasons. I could see that my original goal wasn’t achievable considering finances, considering I was a first-generation immigrant here, considering I didn’t have any support, no family, nothing. I was a young guy and didn’t know much about the system so the process was completely out of my reach.

Gradually, Adika was able to connect informally with other newcomers from Ghana. He obtained advice about how to apply for subsidized housing. Adika began to notice the common threads of hardship facing the people he met at church and with whom he sat on committees. Many of them faced language barriers, lack of affordable childcare, poor employment opportunities and discrimination and other systemic barriers resulting from racism. He describes how, over time, his fantasy about what it meant to live in Canada was shattered: “…when I came to Canada, I was surprised to see people living on the street. I couldn’t believe that I was in Canada! I didn’t expect that in Canada, it was so unsettling”. This knowledge and a strong desire for change is what prompted Adika to enter social work as a career.

Carrie
Carrie is 28 years old and for the past six years she has worked as a case manager in child welfare at Six Nations of the Grand River. Before that time, she worked in a group home for troubled youth. Carrie identifies herself as Aboriginal and she frequently invokes the phrase, “I’m an Indian”. She also notes that her paternal great-grandparents emigrated from the Ukraine to Canada during the 1930s.

When I asked Carrie about any early influences that led her to social work, she shared some painful stories about her mom’s life. She was with her mom each day during her agonizing death from cancer when Carrie was only 19 years old. Carrie was raised by her mom and identifies her as playing a major role in the development of her identity. She struggles to put words to what this difficult loss meant for her life:

She bled to death at home. It was very traumatic. And I think that helps me because you know when people say I am young and yes, I don’t have kids, but I can say I have a lot of life experience for being so young…
Carrie shared memories of harsh forms of racism that she encountered during her years in high school at a time when Aboriginal kids were segregated in grade 9 and put into separate classes. This policy was rationalized because of the belief that elementary schooling on the reserve where Carrie’s family lived was of an inferior quality. She explains how the emphasis on difference, the elevation of white students’ achievements, and the marginalization of those with whom she had previously identified all led her to distance herself from her own community. Carrie was aware of the dynamic where excelling at school meant certain rejection. She describes being taunted: “…you’re not Native anymore, you speak like a white person.” By grade eleven, she was known by the other kids as simply being “white-washed”.

The theme of not fitting in anywhere combined with a desire to erase the past circulates in Carrie’s work-life story. She describes her efforts to be seen as modern at a time when many members of her community are reclaiming their spiritual and cultural traditions: “I wear eye contacts and dye my hair and I wear make-up”. Carrie experiences tensions between herself and some of the older, more traditional women she works with in child welfare on the reserve. She recognizes that Aboriginal social workers are treated differently by white social workers at the main agency in town. She understands that to be a Native Services Branch worker entails being defined as one of the “outcast people”. However, she notes that her own capacity for upward mobility has improved recently. She believes that she possesses desirable characteristics because of her ability to “pass as white”. As far as workers who “look Aboriginal” are concerned, she confides that, “they just aren’t taken seriously”. When asked if she thinks this will ever change, Carrie makes a sweeping gesture with her arm and says, “…the whole Government of Canada… (laughter)…It always looks good on paper (laughter)”.

Anne
Anne, a 55-year old Mohawk woman, is a member of the Turtle Clan. She is a deeply spiritual and traditional woman who is proud to be a mother and grandmother. She has worked in front-line child welfare services for several decades. When asked about any early influences that encouraged her to become a social worker, Anne is silent for a moment. She then asks me to read an excerpt from a poem called The Cattle Thief by Indigenous poet, Pauline Johnson (Tekahoinwake), written in 1900:

Give back our land and our country, give back our herds of game;
Give back the furs and forests that were ours before you came;
Give back the peace and the plenty! Then come with your new belief,
And blame, if you dare, the hunger that drove him to be a thief!

(Johnson, 2002, p. 104)

Anne’s identity as a social worker is deeply tied to her sense of responsibility to her family and her community, and to her central role as a mother and grandmother. She refers to her work as
a “second family”: “…it’s not something that you just pick up and try on and discard or anything like that. It’s just something that’s so much a part of you”.

When asked to reflect on the changes that she has experienced in child welfare over time, Anne says, “…people are just anaesthetizing themselves…we’re just skimming the surface. Band-aiding. I used to call it band-aiding broken arms. But now we’re band-aiding broken necks”. Anne explains that many of the kids on her case-load simply fall through the cracks, especially when they reach their teens. She is angry about the differences in resource allocation between reserve and off-reserve communities “just 20 minutes away”. In her own community, there are no resources for youth who struggle with multiple issues including addictions, pre-natal care needs, the need for AIDS education and management of STDs:

…you’ve got to remember that all the statistics that they write about our Native kids is true, suicide, drugs, alcohol, there are identity issues too, you know…All those losses, cultural losses…So what are they doing to address it?

On managing the changes in her practice, Anne notes that her identity as a front-line worker helps: “I’ve stayed connected to my community more…I think as a manager I’d have a more difficult time…I’d have to be more aligned with the authorities…But as a front-line worker, I’m more free to be practising but still maintaining the mandate and the laws…I would never go beyond front-line ‘cause I would find it to constraining”.

Kathy
Kathy is a 45-year old child welfare manager with a First Nations Branch. She identifies as a Haudenosaunee person, as a Mohawk, and as a member of the Bear Clan. Kathy grew up in a large traditional family with extended family members throughout many communities. She jokes, “There’s four, maybe five thousand of us!” As a result of this large extended family, Kathy was raised, and raises her own children, within a shared or collective parenting model where care-giving is provided by many female relatives. Her parents were very traditional: “My dad was a hereditary Chief. This meant an openness to others; learning to be responsible for others’ welfare”.

When asked to describe how she sees her role as a social worker, Kathy says, “I don’t see social work as a job, I see it as part of our culture, of who we are, what we are and it just comes natural…I don’t see this as a job, I see this as my responsibility. And we’re a society deeply entrenched in responsibility. The work I do here is no different than that”. Kathy also emphasizes repeatedly during our interview that she sees the most important part of her job and the most prestigious position in her life as being a member of the Mohawk: “That is my most sacred gift...none of the other stuff matters.”

Kathy reflects on some major changes occurring in her community such as people pulling together to fight a large land claim dispute with the government of Canada. She says,

I’m seeing things happen in this community that I never thought I would see…the reclamation, first time in my life ever, first time in the history of the community that everybody came together as one.
She has learned from her parents and grandparents some of the history of these current struggles: “…our traditional system was in place until 1924 at which point the RCMP came in and removed our Hereditary Chiefs at gun point…and imposed the elected system”. She understands the damaging impact of colonial rule on what had previously been a completely self-sustaining community and she is grateful for a “history that refuses to die”. As she explains, “…this history, this history travels with us…and we grow up knowing it, our kids grow up know who we are, what we are”.

**Anita**

Anita identifies as white and is 52 years old with parents who came to Canada from Lithuania after the Second World War. She has a male spouse and adult kids. Anita describes her upbringing as decidedly “working class” although she’s careful to point out that her life as a professional social worker positions her solidly in a “middle class” lifestyle now.

Anita cites her mom as being a huge influence in her life, describing her as,

> …she’s a mentor, she’s a friend, she’s more than just a mom, you know, who would always say ‘don’t ever let anyone say you can’t because you’re a woman, never depend on a man’…as far as I can remember, probably from 3 or 4 years of age and on, she was always saying never depend on a man; learn to do for yourself, don’t let anyone put you down, tell you can’t because you’re female, you’re a woman.

Anita attributes her mom’s wisdom to her experiences growing up in a rigid class system and learning the importance of never letting anyone stand in her way. Anita feels some ambivalence when she talks about her parents’ experiences during the war. She knows they were forced to do things for the German army that left both of them feeling ashamed. Anita feels anxiety about this part of her family history, in part, because her mom and dad refuse to talk about it. Sadly, her dad became an alcoholic as a way to cope with whatever happened to him, and as a result, Anita was raised by her mom. Anita tells herself that her parents, like many others, had few choices during this horrible period when refusal meant that soldiers would “probably put the gun to your head and you’re done”.

Anita entered social work based on a commitment to try and make the world a “kinder, gentler, place” for people. She describes her surprise upon learning that she had been accepted to a School of Social Work after her first try at writing the entrance exam. She thought of her mom and chastised herself for having any doubts. She insists this was an act of fate; it was meant to be: “…this was my path in life”.

**Theresa**

Theresa identifies as a white, 57-year old primary health care social worker. She immigrated to Canada from Western Europe with her parents when she was eight years old. Her family was deeply religious and she was raised in the Christian faith, although, she left the church when she became an adult. Now, she has a male partner and has worked in health care for over two decades.
Theresa talked about how the experiences of being immigrants had such a significant impact on her family, but especially her mother:

She became afraid and anxious…they didn’t speak the language…I think that frightened my mother and I think, which is not unusual for an immigrant family, that a dynamic gets created that women are generally more isolated, they don’t speak the language, they don’t learn the language as quickly as their husbands will…because of working in the home, and that creates anxiety. And it created a lot of anxiety for my mom around interacting with the world. And a lot of that anxiety got done through me as her child.

Theresa remembers worrying a lot about her mother as a kid and shares that these struggles had an especially painful impact when she became a teenager. She thinks that her parents viewed the world as a hostile place and as a result, they tried to control her with overly-rigid rules. She was rebellious, though, and her outspoken attitude prompted conflict with her dad. Now she feels grateful for their influence on her life as a social worker, especially their sense of social justice:

If somebody needed a meal, my parents would give it to them…my mother would make this big bowl of soup and everybody would eat out of ladles because they had no place to go…Family members always came to our house.

Theresa recalls that her parents insisted that you must always intervene on behalf of the poor and they believed that this is what it meant to live a good, Christian life.

Rita

Rita is 46 years old and identifies as white. She works as a supervisor in child welfare. She is a mother to three children and she has a male spouse. Rita was raised with economic privilege but lived for many years with financial worries due to a long period when she was raising her kids as a single mom. Rita was also raised within the Jewish faith and practised traditional Jewish customs. However, she has not practised these since her mother died when she was a teenager. When asked about some early influences that drew her to social work, Rita shared that a primary motivation came about as a result of witnessing, as quite a young child, a terrifying assault on her sister by her sister’s husband:

I witnessed my brother-in-law, at the time I thought, kill my sister. In the end, she wasn’t killed but for me as a little girl, that’s what I thought, right…I had witnessed, (pause), it was a horrendous, horrendous assault.

Rita’s work life has also been influenced by painful memories of having been sexually abused by an older brother. After a lot of work in counselling, she found strength to deal with these experiences. She feels that she has unique insight into how complex child abuse can be as a result:

…he’s 10 years older than I am and I got to the point where I was able to confront him. And what was hard about it is because I knew he loved me too and cared a lot about me and protected me in a lot of other ways and so I was all messed up.
Rita also shares that she was profoundly affected by losing her mom to cancer at age seventeen. She describes this loss as one of the most painful events of her life. She credits the support of both of her parents for helping her get through a difficult childhood, saying, “…there’s not a part of me that doesn’t know how much I was loved by my parents and I think that provided me with such a solid ground”. Rita also believes deeply in the power of strong, school athletics programs and the support of good coaches, especially for kids who are experiencing trouble at home. She brings these experiences to her work as a social work supervisor: “Everything I’ve done has pretty much saved my life” – and as a result she believes that she knows what people need to feel better in their lives.

Joy

Joy is 60 years old, identifies as white, and lives with her male partner who has a chronic and disabling mental illness. She has three grown children and has worked in child welfare for over thirty years, first as a front-line service provider, and later as a supervisor.

Joy’s deep religious faith provides the backbone to her sense of purpose in social work. Although she has attended several different kinds of Christian communities, her faith is more personal and private now, and she guards this part of her life carefully. Another influence was her mom’s unpopular decision to be the “only mom on the street to go out and work” when she was growing up. Throughout her life, her mom’s sense of independence and autonomy has been inspirational to Joy. Joy was devastated when, at age twenty-four, she lost her mom due to complications from Rheumatic Fever:

It never dawned on me that she would die…I just remember when I first heard it I just screamed and screamed with pain. I’ve never felt pain like that and it’s amazing how emotional pain can be so much worse than physical...that was a terrible, terrible loss to me...It was just a total vacuum. How could I fill that gap? I think that was the hardest part...it took a year before I began to not feel really, really sad about it.

Joy entered social work as a career after having immersed herself in a variety of social justice movements across Canada. Her work with First Nations communities brought a keen sense of consciousness that others faced social and economic barriers that she did not as a white, middle-class Canadian. These experiences were described as very “humbling” for Joy, who says that she began to feel herself to be “very small in the world” – “you think you know a lot and then you find out that you just don’t know anything at all... I think I went into it at twenty wanting to be really strong, wanting to advocate, wanting to help people, thinking I had a lot to offer, not realizing people had so much to teach me…”

For Joy, being a social worker means challenging herself to reach out to people - “reaching out to them in a real way that is going to benefit them and not belittle them, not to take away and to help them achieve what they need to do”.

Hannah

Hannah is a 36-year old, white, child welfare supervisor with several small children and a male spouse. Both of her parents came to Canada before she was born, her dad from Scotland and
her mom from England. Hannah felt devastated when her parents separated when she was seven years old. Following this, there was a very harsh custody and access dispute and due to her father’s persistence and economic power, he gained full custody of the children. She recalls sadly how her dad made it impossible for her mother to see the kids, and because of his abusive behaviour, she lost contact with her mom for almost four long years. At one point, Hannah ran away from home because she was afraid of her father and, as a result, she came to the attention of child welfare authorities. But, instead of providing help and assistance for her to reconnect with her mom, the social worker blamed Hannah for causing problems for her dad:

She didn’t listen to me; she didn’t care about what I had to say. She basically just told me that I should go back to my father and said, ‘what, are you nuts for leaving?’ and all that kind of stuff. Once, I remember she took me to a mall and said, “Well, here, go buy yourself some ice cream because I’ve got some errands to run”. I’m like “What?” And she handed me a pocket full of change. I used my own money and gave her back her pennies. And I thought from that moment, “How did you help me? You didn’t help me at all. You were manipulated by my father the same way that I had been for almost thirteen years”.

Eventually, at age thirteen, Hannah was re-united with her mom and lived with her for the rest of her childhood. Hannah explains that it was from an early age that she was very aware of things that were not right in this world. She knew this needed to change and that is why she went into social work.

Sheila
Sheila is a white, 44-year old primary health care social worker who lives with her female partner. She and her sister were raised by a single mom and she recalls vividly the social stigma attached to her family during the 1970s. Sheila didn’t know any other kids who were from “broken families” but at the time, she felt a great deal of pride in her mom who worked hard to provide a good home for them.

Sheila remembers in high school when a peer suggested that she was a “socialist” because of her outspoken opinions and strong beliefs. Later, she became involved with community organizing and was viewed as a “rebel” in her small rural community. In her various jobs as a social worker, Sheila has felt tensions between doing social change and empowering people versus pressures to not disrupt power. She manages these tensions by developing connections to social justice movements outside of her work:

I look at the big picture...I’m aware of government debates...contextualizing helps, I mean having an eye to the ground and an eye to the future. It’s that sense of idealism...how are we going to sustain it over the long-term because that’s so important, you do not want to lose it. I try to recognize that change will unfold. It’s not going to happen overnight.

Shelly
Shelly is a 38-year old, white women who is a mom to two kids. She has a male partner. Her mom’s background is English and her dad is Scottish: “We’re from the European settlers”.
She works as a child welfare supervisor. Shelly explains that an important part of who she is relates to her position as the youngest child in a family of seven children. As the youngest child, her role in the family was to become a mediator in her siblings’ conflicts. She became known as the “neutral” body in the family because of her skills at helping others talk things out.

When Shelly was older, she had a chance to travel and see how others lived in the world. This had an important impact on her outlook:

…it wasn’t until that moment, when I was really exposed to poverty and destitution, that there was this whole world that I was completely naive to in that respect. That really opened up my eyes to other people’s life struggles. I was twenty-three…I don’t think that I talked for about forty-eight hours when I first arrived in India…I didn’t understand how there could be all these different levels in a society.

After returning to Canada, Shelly enrolled in a social work program so that she could work to help other families overcome oppression. She decided to work in a unique, community-based program where her office is located right in the neighbourhood where families are seen to need the most support. She remembers feeling overwhelmed at first by the amount of work she needed to do to gain the trust of members of the community. On one occasion, shortly after their move to the neighbourhood, Shelly describes how she arrived at work one day to find a bag of human feces that had been left on the front porch of their office. She knows that this reflected a strong degree of hostility on the part of some neighbours about the presence of a children’s aid society office in the neighbourhood. She recalls feeling like this was a pivotal moment:

…so now I’m out there, I got the bag of poop and I’m standing there looking at it. So then I make a sort of public point of it, going loudly so people will hear, “Okay, I got it…you shit on my step and I hear you!

Shelly explains that she and her staff use this event as a motivator for them to begin building better relationships with all of the neighbours, and she believes that the fact that it did not happen again became a measure of their success: “…we have come a very long way from that time.”

**Frank**

Frank is a 38-year old white man who works as a supervisor in child welfare. He is a third-generation Canadian of Western European heritage. Frank tells me that he comes from an extremely privileged background and often jokes, especially during anti-oppression training at work, that his is the only “flower of power” that gets “all coloured in”.  

Frank explains that a major influence which led him to social work came from experiences he had while travelling with a Christian mission as a teenager. First, he had a chance to go to

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[6] Frank is referring to a popular anti-oppression training exercise in which participants are asked to use coloured pencils to shade in flower petals to signify their sources of power and privilege based on systems of social hierarchies.
Australia - “I thought I want to go the farthest distance…the other side of the world…” - and then later, he spent time in Kenya in East Africa in order to do development work. Frank feels that his experiences with missionary work paved his pathway into social work and, while he is no longer affiliated with Christian groups, his social work is deeply tied to what he perceives as a “spiritual connection” to helping others.

Working with the many opportunities to help others in child welfare has been very satisfying for Frank. He explains,

…it’s incredible the opportunities that you get. You have the opportunity to actually go to somebody’s house and, let’s face it, well-trained therapists in their offices don’t get any of that; they get cancelled visits and maybe one meeting with a person. Whereas in child welfare, you go to meet somebody and they’re staring you in the face...in their home, or here, anywhere. You have all kinds of opportunities to ask those questions, those probing questions…you can ask them, “What can I do or be for you”?

**Lydia**

Lydia is 48 years old, identifies as white, holds three Master’s degrees, works in primary care, and is married to her female spouse. She also lives with an invisible disability. Lydia shares that both her parents escaped horrendous poverty in their own families and she is proud that they managed to obtain an education. She says, “My mother and father both believed that education is the cure for poverty and that the most important thing you can do is try to help kids get their education.” Her dad was a school principal who often advocated for the kids who “came from the wrong side of the tracks, like he did”. Her mom cleaned houses for a living.

Lydia recalls meeting a social worker for the first time when she was nine years old and immediately deciding that was what she wanted to become:

I think as a child, I was idealistic and I believed that you could change the world and that was a good thing to do. You know I had a very rigid sense of what was right and wrong and that we had to help the poor people.

Although there were moments in her life when she shied away from the helping professions, especially during adolescence when she went through a difficult period of loss in her life, she later became determined to work to “help poor people join the middle class.”

Lydia credits learning about the meaning of life and helping others to her Christian church involvement:

I think in my whole life there were questions about the meaning of what it means to be a person here and what our roles and sense of collective responsibility were…I think that was the place for some searching. Sometimes, I found the answers helpful, sometimes not. I do profoundly believe there are forces for good…I believe in God, I guess. No, I do believe in God, but I see God as a verb, not just a noun…it’s something we should do every day.
Lydia explains that her most profound learning experience was with a social justice organization she joined in her thirties. This was a group made up predominately of Christian lesbian women where she was exposed to feminist teaching and anti-racism education. She used this opportunity to “come out” and consequently transformed her life. More recently, Lydia turns to poets such as Black, American, feminist, Audrey Lorde for inspiration: “I try to see myself as an ally of the marginalized, I guess. I guess that’s the way I would want to identify myself and it doesn’t matter how they’re marginalized.”

**Didi**

Didi is 40 years old and grew up in a white working class family in southern Ontario. She is married to a male partner, has two young boys and works in primary health care. Her dad left school when he was 16 to join the army. She recalls that for most of her young life, her father worked two jobs, both with very long hours. As a result, she remembers almost never seeing him at home. Her mom has a grade 9 education and also worked long hours in a factory. Didi believes that her mom’s and dad’s hardship shaped expectations for her own life-trajectory from the time she was very small: “I always tell people that the expectations that I grew up with were that I was to graduate high school and I was not to be pregnant before I did that”. As she grew older, the idea of “moving up in life” through post-secondary education became more important but Didi recalls how difficult it was for her to find the confidence she needed:

…it took a long time for me to feel like I had the confidence to go into university…I was an overweight kid and that has all kinds of impacts when you’re a teenager. But I had a friend who was very, very smart and she was the one who basically said, “What do you mean you can’t do this? This is crazy, you can do it” And it sort of started the ball rolling.

Eventually, Didi obtained her Master’s degree in social work. She explains that it was a very meaningful decision to select a program of study at a school known for its critical social work perspective. She used the knowledge gained there to better understand her own life, her parents’ hardships and the lives of others who struggled on the margins:

It was a model that said, ‘We’re going to change the world’. So my early experiences were very much like, ‘this is possible, anything is possible, and huge changes are coming!’

Didi reflects on how difficult it was for her mom to identify with her career choice, having few references beyond the hospital where her own mother had received elder care services. She recalls how, when she first got a job at a hospital, her mom thought this was the “be all and end all! It was probably the job I liked the least out of everything that I’ve done, but it was the only one my own mother understood (laughter).”

A major role model for Didi was her husband’s grandmother, a woman who managed to obtain her Master’s degree in the 1930s: “She had to lie and convince them she was single because you couldn’t go to university if you were female and married.” Didi reflects on a life of work performed by this woman who taught English as a second language to immigrant families for
forty years: “I think about her and I talk to my kids about her because I think she was this really amazing woman that did so much for her community and all of the people in her life.”

When Didi reflects on her own work, she seems saddened by the fact that there seem to be few spaces in which she can do social justice activities anymore:

I think that advocating piece takes time and it’s the first to go when you’re booked at work with back to back patients. You now, you can bring the analysis and the framework but in terms of actually going out there to bring about change...it’s harder to do that when there isn’t a spare minute in the day.

**Sylvia**

Sylvia is 49 years old, identifies as white and lives with her two children and her male partner. She refers to a very privileged upbringing with her parents who worked in Canadian foreign aid offices around the world. As a result, Sylvia lived for a time in a variety of countries including Nairobi, East Africa and Mexico. She shares that her life’s work has been heavily influenced by her father’s experiences in childhood. Having grown up in desperate poverty, he credits the Salvation Army for saving his family from even worse circumstances. As a result, he has devoted his life to giving back and has always made it a point to involve his own children in these endeavours. She smiles when she adds that her dad even chose her middle name after the “Sally Ann”, because he felt so indebted to their charity.

Sylvia tries to teach her own kids the importance of helping others, and she is always seeking out projects so that they can raise their awareness about global issues. She wants them to know it is possible to make a difference in people’s lives. She has involved her kids in raising money for an orphanage in Eastern Europe, as well as various environmental organizations here in Canada.

Sylvia shares a story about her cousin’s daughter who died from an eating disorder and how this tragic event mobilized her to become involved in developing services in this area. Although it is no longer a problem in her life, Sylvia has also struggled with episodes of severe depression. She managed to deal with depression with the help of her family and a good counsellor. When I asked what part of her life was most influential to her decision to become a social worker, Sylvia reflected for a few moments and said she has learned, through all her own hardships, that people need someone to “journey beside them”:

...witnessing is definitely part of what we do. I think, yes, how much it shaped me. I mean there are times when I work very hard to balance my days. They’re not always in balance...like the day I had yesterday was not at all. But I have so many times when I feel so privileged to do the work that I do, and when I see the impact of doing work like this and how it can change peoples’ lives, it’s just enormously gratifying.

**Pauline**

Pauline is a 59-year old woman who lives with her male partner and works in primary health care. She has several grown children. She describes herself as “white, depending on where I’m living”, is of Spanish heritage and was born and raised in a small country in South America.
Pauline explains that she was raised in extreme privilege and that her family home was supported by a team of servants who worked around the clock. She recalls her first encounter with racism in her family when she witnessed her grandmother’s reaction after Pauline returned from playing in the park with the daughter of one of the servants:

...my grandma saw us. She was on the veranda and we were coming in. I was holding her hand and my grandmother said, “Riva!” And she turned a bit. And I didn’t understand, but she had to enter the house through the back door. So I remember feeling something very heavy, hurting, and confusing at the same time. I didn’t dare ask grandma why...I already knew in my heart that she was very racist and I didn’t want to inflict more pain on my pain. I was stunned. It was painful to see a woman that I adored be so cruel.

Pauline discusses how racism has become such a dominant factor in her life, having experienced the fluidity and intersection of race and class privilege first hand during her immigration to Canada:

I put my foot on the floor off the plane in the country I came from and I go way up high according to class, so high, it feels uncomfortable to me. And then, as soon as I come back to Canada, I start to feel the difference.

Pauline explains that she chose to become a social worker based on the difficulties she encountered when she first came to Canada. She found the culture shock and isolation to be intolerable and developed a sleep disorder. She sought help, but found that it was hard to find a health care professional who could understand what she was going through: “I said to myself, I want to become that worker that I couldn’t find!”

Social justice activism has been instrumental in Pauline’s life and these connections shape how she views her role and sense of purpose as a social worker: “Well, I’ve always belonged to a social movement. I think life as a professional in this field, if we do not belong to one we are like a person without a North Star.”


