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'Risk is King and Needs to take a Backseat!' Can social workers' experiences of moral injury strengthen practice?

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This paper considers the idea that moral injury may result from social workers being exposed to sustained ethical stress – the stress experienced when workers cannot base their practice on their values. It is suggested that a particularly salient feature of agency working which might contribute to the experience of ethical stress is risk aversion.

This paper is based on a study of one hundred criminal justice social workers in Scotland, who were questioned on their experiences of ethical stress and risk aversion. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analysed using standard multiple regression and inductive thematic analysis respectively. Findings demonstrated that how risk averse an agency was contributed in a unique and significant way to the worker's experience of ethical stress. Qualitative comments illustrated why this relationship might exist, but also demonstrated that a variety of views were held by social workers and that ethical stress was not experienced by all.

The findings are discussed in terms of moral injury and its links with risk aversion, bureaucracy, neoliberal hegemony, notions of 'underclass,' personal moral codes and professional integrity. Explicitly exploring these related concepts in social work education might impact on the new generation of social workers and strengthen the profession.

Abstract: 201 words

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Introduction:

Moral injury initially referred to shame and guilt disturbances experienced by combat veterans and it manifested in some of the symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder (Franfurt & Frazier, 2016). In recent years the concept has gained traction and there is a small but growing body of literature and research about moral injury, almost exclusively relating to the atrocities of war. A widely accepted definition of moral injury is put forward by Litz and colleagues (2009) and Drescher and colleagues (2011, p.9). They suggest that moral injury is a *disruption in an individual's confidence and expectations about one's own or others' motivation or capacity to behave in a just and ethical manner. This injury is brought about by bearing witness to perceived immoral acts, failure to stop such actions, or perpetration of immoral acts, in particular actions that are inhumane, cruel, depraved, or violent, bringing about pain, suffering, or death of others.* Boudrea (2011), writing from his own personal experience as a war veteran says that moral injury describes the wounds a person inflicts on him/herself when he or she inflicts wounds on another. It is the damage that is done to one's own moral fibre when one does the transgressing. When a person accepts these transgressions – a piece of his/her moral integrity is sacrificed, and this is the essence of moral injury.

Litz and his colleagues (2009) postulate a process model of moral injury. They suggest that the process begins with the experience of a transgression. This experience creates a dissonance or conflict in ones sense of self. If a person is unable to assimilate the experience into existing cognitive schemas of one's sense of self then shame, guilt and anxiety occur. This leads to withdrawal and a failure to forgive one's self and feelings of self-condemnation. Finally, the person will experience chronic thought intrusions, avoidance, numbing, self-harming, self-handicapping and demoralisation.

There is some tautological and conceptual confusion in the literature around moral injury. Some suggest that moral injury occurs when one experiences morally injurious events. For example Shay (2014) says moral injury "is present when 1) there has been a betrayal of what's right 2) by someone who holds legitimate authority 3) in a high stakes situation" (p. 183). Blinka and Harris (2016) also conflate process and outcome. Frankfurt and Frazier (2016) helpfully separate transgressive acts from the outcomes of

experiencing transgressive acts. They use Litz and colleagues' (2009) understanding of morally injurious behaviours as a definition of transgressive acts. Namely, transgressive acts are '*perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply help moral beliefs and expectations'* (Litz et all, 2009, p 700). Moral injury is one potential outcome of experiencing transgressive acts. This differentiation is consistent with the model proposed by Litz and colleagues (2009).

As indicated earlier, most of the literature and research pertaining to moral injury is related to extreme experiences in war or military occupations. We believe that the concept of moral injury may be applicable to experiences that are not as extreme or potentially acutely traumatising as experiences in war. In drawing on these concepts we wish to make it explicitly clear that we are not likening the experiences of professional social work practice to the horrors and traumatic events that soldiers may experience whether within or outwith the wartime rules of engagement. However, we do believe that practice in many professions can expose professionals to situations where they may experience transgressive acts, acts that go against deeply help personal or professional values. This exposure to transgressive acts may lead to the development of moral injury, albeit of a lesser order than that which is experienced in contexts of war.

We are beginning to see this non-military application of moral injury reflected in a few recent publications (e.g. Levison, 2015- teacher education; Reamer, 2014 – social work; Woods, 2016-undercover policing). Take for example Finefter-Rosehbluh's (2016) explorations of teachers' experiences of moral injury when engaging in reflective activities required, and mandated, for a professional development programme. The procedural format of the programme comprised quite rigid rules to be followed and Finefter-Rosehbluh found that the study participants reported strong feelings of discomfort when they were unable to do what felt 'right' due to the restrictions of the procedures. The author concludes that the teachers were suffering moral injury as a result of having to follow restrictive procedures when they felt the action was wrong. Di Franks (2008) found that when social workers had to practice in a managerial and

gatekeeping manner that was not congruent with their values, they suffered high levels what he termed 'disjuncture'. Fenton's work (2014a) extends the idea of disjuncture to include ontological guilt (the feeling experienced when a person feels they cannot act in accordance with their conscience) (Taylor, 2007), bringing both concepts together in a notion of 'ethical stress.'

It may be that ethical stress is a lower level of moral injury. Litz's and colleagues' (2009) process model of moral injury begins with the experience of transgressive acts. A social worker may find ways to overlook or excuse such transgression, leading to what Boudrea (2011) describes as sacrifice of a piece of one's moral integrity. We argue that such sacrifices may move beyond ethical stress and cause moral injury, especially if workers are exposed to transgressive acts over a prolonged period of time.

Thus far, then, it is suggested that moral injury can result from sustained managerial, formulaic and procedural expectations that constrain or inhibit value based, responsive practice. It has also been reported widely in the literature that risk preoccupation in social work is a powerful manifestation of managerialism, based on the neoliberal idea of managing the behaviour of risky people (Rogowski, 2015). Couple this to neoliberal ideas of service users as architects of their own misfortune, and the social work task becomes one of risk assessment and correcting individual behaviour. Any ethical impulse towards helping or building a relationship is undermined in this context.

Also, as Webb (2006) states, 'social work has sunk into a 'managerialism' that is increasingly afraid of the complexity of risk decisions and has become highly defensive' (Webb, 2006, p1). In other words, social work is afraid of complex risk decisions in case things go wrong, and therefore practice *defensively* in order to show that they have 'done things right' (as opposed to having 'done the right things') (Munro, 2011, P6). Such defensive organisational cultures appear to negatively impact on early career workers (Chenot et al., 2009) as well as more experienced workers (Jones, 2001; Preston-Shoot, 2003).

Given the above, then, it might be suggested that restrictive, procedural and risk averse practice contexts would be environments where moral injury might burgeon. We now turn to an empirical study which explores this connection.

Methodology:

This paper is drawn from the findings of a wider research project conducted across four criminal justice departments in four separate local authority areas in Scotland (Fenton, 2014a). The four local authorities were conveniently sampled from a possible thirty-two to provide a contrast between rural and urban areas and to provide enough participants for the study, whilst not creating untenable demands on the researcher's available time and resources. The authors had no previous employment with any of the four local authorities.

Using a within-stage mixed-model study design (Johnson & Onweugbuzie, 2004) the relationships between the experience of ethical stress and agency variables were explored. The agency variables, drawn from a review of the literature, were 'how we work with offenders', 'agency approach to risk' and 'ethical climate of the agency'. The research was operationalised via questionnaires designed to elicit both quantitative and qualitative data. 240 questionnaires were distributed to all basic-grade criminal justice social workers in the four local authorities and 100 usable questionnaires were returned, which is a response rate of 42%.

The questionnaire was designed in sections, each section concerned with measuring one of the variables. Likert-style questions were utilised to elicit the quantitative data, and each section ended with an opportunity for respondents to make comment as they wished. In this paper we are concerned with the variable 'agency approach to risk' and its relationship with ethical stress.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the authors' institutional ethics committee and from each local authority.

Validity

Validity is the strength of any tool or questionnaire in measuring what it sets out to measure (Fischer and Corcoran, 2007). The first step in investigating the validity of the questionnaire was to undertake a 'logical content analysis' (Fischer and Corcoran, 2007, p. 125), which is the explicit demonstration of the literature basis of each question in the questionnaire. For example, sample questions pertaining to the risk variable and the ethical stress measure were as follows:

Table 1 Sample Logical Content Analysis

Variable	Question	Literature Basis
Agency approach to risk	'Risk-averse' describes my agency well	Kemshall (2002), Webb (2006), Phillips (2009), Taylor (2007), Barry (2007
Ethical stress	I experience stress because I am not always able to help my clients in the way I want to	Kosny and Eakin (2008), Jones (2001), Preston-Shoot (2003), Fenton (2012)
Ethical Stress	When I have to follow procedures that don't feel 'right' it causes stress	Taylor (2007)

Post data collection, a test of 'convergent validity' was undertaken which is a measure of how 'scores on a measure converge with theoretically relevant variables' (Fischer and Corcoran, 2007, p. 14). The correlation between ethical stress measures and the other variables was therefore investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. The resultant score for the relationship between the risk variable and ethical stress was 0.717, which is considered a 'large' correlation (Pallant, 2010, P 134). From this, we can infer that those sections of the questionnaire had robust convergent validity.

The questionnaire was piloted with a group of nine social work academics and practising social workers and amendments made as suggested.

Reliability

According to Rudestam and Newton (2007), it is essential to ensure that any questionnaire is reliable, which can be ascertained by measuring internal consistency; a measure of whether the items in each of the questionnaire variable subscales are tapping into the same phenomenon. A Cronbach's coefficient alpha of 0.8 or above for a subscale is, according to Fischer and Corcoran (2007), a measure of good internal consistency. 'Agency approach to risk', and 'ethical stress' scales produced Cronbach's coefficient alpha of .872 and .817 respectively, demonstrating good internal consistency.

Analysis

Analysis of the quantitative data was carried out using SPSS (2007) for Windows, version 16.0. A standard multiple regression was undertaken between the three combined variables ('agency approach to risk', 'how we work with offenders' and 'ethical climate of the agency') and the experience of ethical stress, and results demonstrated that the combined variables contributed significantly to the experience of ethical stress. Beta values of the variables were then checked to ascertain which were contributing to the result.

In relation to the qualitative data, an inductive thematic analysis (Carey, 2009) was carried out on the 80 free text comments by the primary author. The process involved identifying initial themes, catagorisation of the themes, followed by a refinement of the themes and sub-themes. The second author independently performed an audit of the theme development, checking the links between text and final themes.

<u>Results:</u>

According to the results from the standard multiple regression, the perception of the 'agency approach to risk' was found to make a unique and significant contribution to the experience of ethical stress.

The statistical relationship between 'agency approach to risk' and ethical stress:

	Beta Value	Significance
Agency approach to risk	.341	.009 (p<.01)

In essence, the scale measured how risk averse the respondent viewed their agency, and there was a significant finding that that the more risk averse the agency is perceived to be, the more ethical stress or moral injury is experienced by the social worker. This variable had the strongest effect on the experience of ethical stress.

In terms of the qualitative data, there were 80 free text comments and most concerned risk, either directly or as an associated issue. Examples of comments dealing directly with risk were:

Risk is king and needs to take a back seat!
There is a major emphasis on risk assessment.

We constantly hear about defensible decisions

Public protection is seen as our utmost aim

Discussion:

Limitations

The central limitation of the study is that it was located within a very particular social work context – criminal justice services in Scotland. However, work with people who have offended in Scotland is part of the social work department and is bound by the same legislation, that is, the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968, with its central tenet of

promoting social welfare. The work is also framed by the Scottish Social services Council's Code of Practice (SSSC, 2016), British Association of Social Work's code of ethics (BASW, 2012) and the International Federation of Social Workers' standards of practice (IFSW, 2012). Findings also resonate with much of the literature on risk aversion pertaining to social work more widely so generalisation may be possible. Also, only four local authority areas were studied and perhaps a different picture would have emerged had all local authority CJSW departments in Scotland been examined.

There were also some limitiations in terms of study methods in that the questionnaire was lengthy and might have deterred busy social workers from participating in the study. Also, had time allowed for follow-up focus groups or interviews, rather than the reliance on free-text comments, a deeper interpretation of the data might have been possible.

Connections to risk aversion

The quantitative finding implies that social workers experience significant ethical stress when risk aversion stifles value-based practice. This would suggest that social workers, in the main, view values as important and central to practice but that rigid, risk averse contexts can inhibit their application. Analysis of the free text comments pertaining to risk can help illuminate why this might be. Comments were identified as having a relationship with two sub-themes: bureaucracy; and neoliberal ideas of 'underclass.'.

1. *Moral injury from risk aversion and bureaucracy:*

Broadhurst et al (2010) describe an ideological commitment to the technical-rational implementation of risk assessment and management processes in children's services, which unavoidably, and intentionally, involves instruments, procedures, tools, forms and structured formats; in other words, bureaucracy. The authors discuss the seductive potential of these technologies as leading to certainty and ensuring no mistakes are made. Littlechild (2010, p668) calls this the 'actuarial fallacy' as, of course risk decisions

can never be 'certain.' Munro (2011) in her review of child protection was also cautionary in regards to trying to achieve certainty, and explicitly condemned the over-bureaucratisation of children's services. It can be considered, therefore, that one manifestation of risk aversion that might well contribute to moral injury is bureaucracy. For example, one social worker in the study commented:

I am in a very bureaucratic environment where engagement (with offenders) is viewed very disdainfully

For the social worker who made this comment, the erosion of engagement led them to feel heightened ethical stress or moral injury.

Bauman (2000, p9) states: 'when we obscure the essential human and moral aspects of care behind even more rules and regulations, we make the daily practice of social work even more distant from its original ethical impulse.' Risk assessment, and risk averse procedures rely heavily on bureaucracy – doing things correctly to demonstrate that diligence has been shown and that the agency cannot be open to criticism. This leads to a preoccupation with the bureaucratic elements of practice, often at the expense of actual social work with people. Bauman (1989, P 15) notes 'how formal and ethically blind is the bureaucratic pursuit of efficiency'. Another social worker stated:

When I first came into social work, we were encouraged to look at the whole person.....more recent years have seen a major emphasis on risk instead and we are all about achieving targets

Bauman, of course, is very well known for his work on the Holocaust – and especially the distancing effects of bureaucracy. Overwhelming bureaucracy led to emotional and cognitive distance between decision makers and the horrendous consequences. In essence, Bauman draws on Arendt's phrase to suggest that bureaucracy removes decision makers from the 'animal pity' that it is part of the human condition to experience (Ardent, 1964 in Bauman, 1989, p 20). The 'animal pity' is the emotional and

visceral reaction that one human usually has when faced with another human in distress. Bauman discusses how the modern inclination to break processes down into discreet tasks means that people become only interested in the completion of their task well, and feel dissociated from the eventual, actual outcome. Such disassociation from emotion is problematic as it makes social work practice inhumane (Taylor, 2017).

Smith (2011) suggests that this technical-rational bureaucratic managerialism, has seduced social work into believing that the very complex and human problems it deals with can have reductionist, procedural and regulatory solutions. Evidence that it is *not* working, however, is often then absorbed into a redefinition of the task, which becomes the management of groups of risky people without the attempt to effect change. Technical-rational checklists, risk assessments, risk management plans and all manner of other procedures, then, are successful in surveillance, managing and reporting *and* in making sure the agency is safe from blame – 'the task is managerial, not transformative' (Feeley and Simon, 1992, p 452).

The last point above illustrates a social work practice where moral injury would not result. Workers might feel happy that they are doing a good job in the task-focused manner explored by Bauman, and managers, concerned with audits and paperwork might reinforce this. This would be especially true when dealing with matters of risk. For example:

I feel that social workers can be easily blamed if something goes wrong, so it is important to defend our practice.

The worker quoted above is one of a group who have no difficulty with the increasingly technical and bureaucratic approach to social work as the priority task is understood as keeping themselves safe from blame. The phrase 'if something goes wrong' identifies this comment as perhaps being influenced by a defensive, risk averse attitude.

However, *if* social workers have a concern with really trying to help people, to affect change and to work in partnership with service users, then they may well feel morally and ethically compromised. Getting close to people, building a relationship and practising in a value-based way is very likely to provide the impetus towards 'animal

pity' or, put in a less dramatic way, compassion and care for the people we are working with. What happens to those feelings when the social worker is not 'allowed' to be properly responsive – to take risks, to help and to get alongside service users? The current study and other authors (for example, Jones, 2001; Preston-Shoot, 2003) would suggest that, in those circumstances, social workers do become disillusioned and unhappy. This situation can also mean that a positive view of risk taking as outlined by authors such as Taylor (2017) and Carson and Bain (2008), is eroded, frowned upon or simply not allowed. We would suggest that social workers in this context are experiencing moral injury as their ethical and helping impulses and degraded within restrictive and distant bureaucracies.

The technical, procedural work involved with risk assessment and management is an acute example of the above distancing nature of bureaucracy and workers' feelings about it can be seen in some of their comments:

During weeks when there seems to be lots of deadlines, it can be stressful and you feel like you are letting clients down

Modern social work practice is increasingly shifting focus to 'box-ticking' and 'number-crunching.' Lots of time is now spent on recording events.

There is a major emphasis on risk assessment

We are hamstrung by the plethora of forms we are required to complete. We spend 80% of our time inputting data into the various IT interfaces we have to utilise to maintain records, to undertake formal risk assessments and to record key performance indicators in order that our funding can be justified/secured. Work becomes more risk led – with 'resources following risk' at the expense of valuable preventative work for those offenders at the lower end of the scale.

It can be seen, then, that risk aversion is intrinsically linked to bureaucracy. If the emphasis is on prioritising the safety of the agency as opposed to doing the right thing in terms of being responsive to service users, then documentation and procedure are the most important elements of the practice. Comments above suggest that that is indeed the context of the agencies in the study and, unsurprisingly, some social workers feel moral injury when they cannot respond in the way they want to.

2. *Moral injury from risk aversion and the neoliberal 'underclass' hegemony*

Another aspect of risk aversion is its congruence with underpinning neoliberal ideology. In discussion of the 'culture' of agencies, Shein (2010, p27) suggests that 'basic underlying assumptions' colour the culture of an agency, regardless of espoused values. If the basic underlying assumptions are informed by neoliberal hegemony then the idea of a social work service user as an individual completely responsible for their own misfortunes and simply requiring to correct their thinking and behaviour, fits very neatly. This construct of a service user fits very well with broader ideas around 'underclass:' a concept which has gained significant traction in the public's imagination in recent years (Jones, 2011).

'Underclass' is a notion highlighted by Murray (1990), an American sociologist, who suggested that there is an 'underclass' in the United Kingdom, comprised of unemployed, criminal people who neglect their children and whose behaviour is the main contributory factor to the raft of social problems experienced by some communities. This idea is challenged by authors such as Jones (2011) whose thesis considers how the 'underclass' can become situated within the public imagination through clever manipulation by the media, by politicians and by the establishment whose ends are served by perpetuating the idea that people are poor or in difficult circumstances through their own fecklessness, not as a result a societal disadvantage and oppression. This is, of course, in keeping with neoliberal ideology where 'poor

people, so the neoliberal view goes, remain poor as a result of bad choices and problematic behaviour' (Turbett, 2014, P12).

Fenton (2014b) demonstrated that younger, newer social workers were happier with hegemony-informed managerial, neoliberal social work practice and Gilligan (2007) found that the age group of students termed by the author as 'Thatcher's Children' were significantly more likely to define societal problems as the 'fault' of individual behaviour and poor choices, rather than as arising from wider societal problems. It is also the case that society's attitudes to poor people, for example, have hardened over the preceding decades (JRF, 2014). Many younger, newer workers and students, who have been steeped in over thirty years of neoliberalism, appear to have internalised the associated underpinning ethical assumptions of neoliberalism . Once these neoliberal ideas of an 'underclass' have taken hold then the social work task *does* morph into managing people and coercing them into changing their behaviour regardless of, or without taking cognisance of, the real barriers to change that might impact – poverty and inequality for example. In this world, ethical stress or moral injury is very unlikely to be experienced because workers feel justified in authoritarian, managerial and distant practice. So, for example, some of the respondents to the study said:

The stress in the job is more about resistant clients and managing the risk they pose

This (offending) is through their choice

The comments above, then, demonstrate that there is a neoliberal framing of social work by some workers that is congruent with the idea that there is an underclass group who just need to make better choices and change their behaviour. Notions of care, compassion, understanding and help need not feature. Moral injury, again, would not result for those workers.

Once again, then, when social workers *do* want to engage properly with people, they might find themselves thwarted not only by heavy bureaucracy, risk aversion and managerial practice, but also by the prevailing, neoliberal attitudes of some workers and by the underpinning basic assumptions of the agency:

Engagement with services users is viewed very disdainfully

I don't think within the team I work that there is a sense that humanising what we do is relevant

Those workers who understand social problems in a wider, critical sense as more complex than simply bad behaviour know that people have potential and good qualities that circumstances do not allow to thrive. Hennessey (2011) discusses the importance of social workers engaging with services users' 'inner worlds' as well as their 'outer worlds'. The 'inner world' consists of the person's thoughts, feelings, understanding, sense making, aspirations etc. etc. Neoliberal social workers may not see the necessity in engaging with service users in that way, which might be a reason why service users often say they are not listened to, whilst highlighting that being listened to is one of the most important features of the social work relationship. As Beresford (2012) states:

> 'Service users frequently report how much they value social workers 'listening' to them. This quality or skill of being able to listen is the basis for much else that service users value. It makes them feel that they are valued, that their viewpoint has merit. It is the starting point for an approach to practice based on 'co-production' – the social worker working with the service user to find out what will help – the basis for all good practice'.

Instead, if workers concentrate on services users' 'outer worlds' that is, their behaviour, then preoccupation with the 'visible' - risk factors, past misdemeanours, parents not attending appointments, not getting the children up for school, for example - can supplant any attempts to engage in what is going on in the service user's 'inner world.' Herein lies the clear link between 'underclass' thinking and risk aversion – to properly document risk factors and complete risk assessments, the focus has to be on behaviour

and objective measurement and observation. Relationship based, caring practice need not feature.

So, if social workers want to engage with service users and their 'inner worlds,' the distancing effects of neoliberal 'underclass' thinking and the prioritisation of technical-rational risk assessment and management can lead to moral injury.

Pressure is on to risk assess everyone, at the expense of getting to know, and work with, clients

Conscience pricks me when have to do lengthy admin tasks when time could be better spent working with people

Moral injury, moral health, moral courage and risk

It is clear from the exploration in this paper so far that not all social workers will experience moral injury. There is a group of social workers and students who do not find that managerial and bureaucratic imperatives and the erosion of relationship based, caring social work cause them any kind of ethical stress or moral injury. In fact some of those social workers actively embrace the emphasis on risk assessment bureaucracy:

I think it's a positive change in practice that work is based upon structured risk assessment tools

Structured risk assessment tools only add to the professionalism of my work, by giving a sound research base on which to base decisions

Does this mean that those workers are, therefore, uninjured and, thus, more morally healthy? From the exploration of the ideas so far, it would seem that moral health is *not* implied by lack of moral injury. In fact, moral injury would affect those workers and students who have a very robust value base and a strongly held commitment to ethics and social justice. Given that the value base of social work is so concerned with social justice (for example, BASW Code of Ethics and the IFSW definition of social work), it might be suggested that only those workers who have professional and moral integrity might experience moral injury. Moral injury, therefore, might indeed be an impetus for good.

Supporting the above suggestion, Weinberg (2016) found that the personal discourse used by a social worker influenced how they viewed a social work dilemma or paradox. The social workers worked with young mothers at risk of having their child 'apprehended' or received into care. Whilst some workers, who had radical/oppositional discourses and understood the oppression and restriction the risk-preoccupied procedures inflicted upon the young women, felt very troubled by some of the authoritarian actions they had to take and found ways to mitigate against that when they could. In contrast, workers who adhered to a reactionary, neoliberal discourse, that these young women were irresponsible and it was quite correct that they be held to account, had no difficulty in following procedure, reporting concerns or using coercion. These different discourses can be seen in the comments from the current study:

The issues we try to address to help reduce re-offending are often welfare e.g. accommodation, employment and substance misuse (Radical, oppositional discourse – an underpinning assumption that structural issues contribute to offending)

(clients need) to be encouraged to empower themselves (Reactionary discourse – clients need to correct their own behaviour)

Similarly, personal moral codes were found by Stanford (2011 p1520) to be the deciding feature of whether a worker would 'advocate for and protect' service users or 'control and dismiss them'. Empathetic and compassionate practice were features of the 'advocating' group's practice but did not feature in the practice of the 'controlling and dismissing' group. The 'advocating' group also had an understanding of social justice and a belief in the ability of people to change – once again, features missing from the other group. These features depend on a critical understanding of the policial and societal context within which people live and make choices, and on a critical understanding of neoliberal explanations of social problems which neglect this context. The newer generation of social workers, so used to neoliberal 'common sense' (Fenton, 2014b) may naturally engage in unquestioning compliance with that 'common sense'. Resisting, caring and advocating and building relationships will then feature less and less in social work practice; as Ferguson (2008, P14) said 'neo- liberal social work...undermines not only radical or structural approaches, but also 'traditional' relationship-based social work.' Morley and McFarlane (2014, p352), however, have a hopeful message from their study which found that explicit critical reflection in social work education can lead to the development of moral courage within students, helping them towards 'finding the discretionary space to work towards ethical, socially just outcomes for service users despite practice contexts that might be hostile to critical emancipatory aims'.

The above point seems to be a crucial one – social workers and students need the encouragement to relationship-build in a compassionate and caring way – thus allowing the experience of 'animal pity'. They also need an understanding of social justice (Stanford, 2011) and the ability to critically reflect (Morley and McFarlane, 2014), in order to develop moral courage and to want to 'work towards ethical, socially just outcomes for service users' (ibid). Wiinikka-Lydon (2016) made a convincing case that war veterans should be helped and encouraged to use their experiences of moral injury to critically reflect on the morality of war. Similarly social workers should be helped to

question and critique ideas that underpin a preoccupation with risk assessment and management.

Conclusion

The quantitative elevement of this study found that the experience of ethical stress, which we equate to moral injury, increased as perceptions of an agency being more risk averse increased. When examining the free text comments made by respondents one could see that that moral injury is experienced by those social workers who work in a culture of defensive practice but *want to* engage with service users, relationship build and help and understand service users as often in a context of social injustice. This is antithetical to the kind of risk averse, managerial and procedural practice often seen in risk preoccupied agencies and is, of course, completely congruent with social work values and ethics (BASW, 2012 and IFSW, 2012). Therefore, we can define those social workers as having professional and moral integrity. From the results of the current study, in particular the significant relationship between perceived risk aversion and ethical stress, it would appear that most social workers come into this category and are suffering ethical stress and possibly moral injury as a result.

Worryingly, the neoliberal direction of social work practice, and the possibly less critical newer generation of social workers (Fenton, 2014b) might contribute to an environment where using ethical stress and moral injury as an impetus toward courageous, innovative practice is increasingly more difficult. It may be that social workers in increasing numbers learn how to assimilate and adapt to a risk-averse, managerial world. To avoid this erosion of professional and moral integrity, social work education should, we would suggest, explicitly highlight and explore concepts of ethical stress leading to moral injury. As such, students can learn to *use* these experiences of moral injury to affect change in practice, rather than learn how to simply cope with them. This in turn should lead to a strengthened social work workforce and a strengthened profession.

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